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## Nowhere: Blank Verse Concerning Small-Town Life in California

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NOWHERE:  
BLANK VERSE CONCERNING SMALL-TOWN LIFE IN CALIFORNIA

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English and Comparative Literature

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

by

Daniel J. Scarpa

May 2013



The Designated Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

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by  
Daniel J. Scarpa

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND  
COMPARATIVE LITERATURE  
SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY  
May 2013

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ABSTRACT

NOWHERE:  
BLANK VERSE CONCERNING SMALL-TOWN LIFE IN CALIFORNIA

by Daniel J. Scarpa

I wanted to explore the process of using place – specifically, small towns in California that I visited - as inspiration for the writing of a book of poetry. This has been done in the past, most notably by poets such as Kenneth Rexroth and Gary Snyder. I was inspired by these poets and several others and my own experience in these often overlooked small towns to create a collection of syllabic blank verse poems that touch on their economies, practical reasons for isolation, and unique micro-cultures. While on the whole, I am pleased with the way the collection turned out, I think that if it were to be formally published, readers would benefit from seeing photographs I took during my trips in order to fully appreciate the content.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have to thank my thesis committee: Sam Maio, Persis Karim, and Alan Soldofsky for their helpful feedback and dedication to teaching writing at the graduate level. Without them, this project would likely be an indiscernible mess.

I also have to acknowledge the people of the towns I invaded. I slunk in, often on a Sunday afternoon and often anonymously, took down my impressions, and slunk back out. I hope that if any of them ever read this, they will find me fair and maybe even forgive me.

I also have to thank my wife, who put up with me spending nearly every weekend of the first few months of our marriage intentionally driving to the middle of nowhere.

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## Introduction

*Nowhere* is a book of poetry based on my travels to some of California's "smallest" places. I first became interested in small-town California watching my younger brother play high school football. He attended a very small private school (twenty students in his graduating class) in Fullerton, CA and, in order to field a team, they had to find equally small schools against which to play. This led to trips to places like Maricopa, a once-flourishing mining town in the Central Valley; Trona, in the heart of Death Valley (their football field is sand); Warner Springs, a well-off community of isolationists (the police took the day off to watch the game); and Big Pine, a tiny mountain town with one restaurant and one motel. I knew then that I wanted to write about these places. I didn't know how or in what form and to be frank, I lacked the skills to do them any kind of justice, but I knew that if I could someday do it right, I could pique others' interests the way mine had been by these tiny pockets of population with unique subcultures evolving with minimal influence from the culture at large.

What strikes me most about the places I've visited are the voices I heard. To that end, I chose to write dramatic monologues in blank verse from the points of view of characters I fashioned out of a conglomerate of several people with whom I either interacted or simply observed.

Each of these places has a story. Some of them are mysterious, some of them are centered on a dying industry of one kind or another, and some of them are even home to people who purposely live away from the masses, but I am not interested in divulging – or even knowing - well-kept secrets. I am simply interested in writing poetry that sheds light on California's most isolated and anonymous places. Even if a reader only thinks



about Moss Landing or Clyde for the time it takes to finish reading the poem, the town has entered her consciousness. It may lay dormant there forever, but the chance exists that something fruitful may come of it; as an artist, that's all I can ask my work to do.

Our biggest cities are popular tourist destinations and have served as the backdrops for countless films, novels, and other media. Even if one has never been to Los Angeles or San Francisco, one has undoubtedly seen images of the Hollywood sign or Golden Gate Bridge. Residents of the state are mostly also intimately familiar with popular vacation destinations where, those who can afford it, take their boats or skis. But what about little side-of-the-road towns with one restaurant and two cops? What about places with only a dirt road leading in and out and where you're more likely to find old pickup trucks with freshly chopped wood in their beds than anything even resembling a coffeehouse? They're out there and someone needs to give them a nod before they're completely gone.

I've been to several of these places and have an undying curiosity about them. What are their histories? Their secrets? Their points of interest? Many of them were created by corporations and populated with workers for their factories, mines, or plants. Most of these opportunities are no longer in existence, so what do the people do now? What is the culture like? I attempted to relay the experience of being in these places and observing them firsthand. Aside from the aforementioned Southern California towns in which I watched my brother's football games, preliminary research has dug up the names of towns all over California, some with populations in the single, double, or triple digits. Port Costa (population 190), Knightsen (population nearly doubled in the last decade to 1,568 residents and 1,500 horses), Moss Landing (population 204), and Point Reyes

Station (population 350) are all within a two-hour drive from San Jose. I made these trips and observed these nearly empty streets first-hand and often saw the opposite of what I expected to. I saw not desolation, or poverty, or backwardness. I saw the human condition played out in microcosms. I saw history painted on walls. I saw people who have made the choice to avoid the rest of us, often with good reason.

I explored these towns' histories, economies, cultures, and landscapes. But unlike writing prose nonfiction, through poetry I was able to interpret my observations without holding myself to standards of reporting only objective facts. I allowed myself, to a limited extent, to fictionalize the experience of being in these places.

I had to, for mostly financial and time reasons, limit the scope of my poems to Northern California towns within a few hours driving distance. I mapped out several places to visit in the summer of 2012 and continued the trips into the fall. The thesis was written as an experiment wherein I drove to these places and saw what they inspired me to write in an attempt to create a correspondence between rural California and the urban and suburban environments in which the rest of us live.

Beyond attending small-town high school football games, I was further inspired to write about these places during my move from Orange County to San José in the summer of 2010. I've driven back and forth nearly a dozen times since then, and I am always intrigued by the small towns and rural unincorporated areas of the San Joaquin Valley. I-5 is one of the most-traveled highways in America, and seemingly no one uses it to make a short trip. I've noticed the same vehicle at several points – often hundreds of miles apart - on more than one occasion. At some point in the middle of another long drive, I began to wonder about the massive expanses of land on either side of the highway. I wasn't even

sure they were inhabited. If they were, then by whom? What kinds of lives are led in, quite literally, the middle of nowhere? Most of us only think of the off-the-highway stops for travelers to get gas or food, and we lose sight of the people living in these places. They, along with landscapes and a multitude of unexpected finds, are the crux of my work.

The California landscape has been written about extensively, but few poets of whom I am aware have taken my approach. Gary Snyder's "Night Highway 99" from *Rivers and Mountains without End* is exactly the kind of poem I strove to write. Snyder uses several devices at once – imagism, a clipped monologue, and references to specific points of interest. The poem finishes with powerful lines that celebrate the sweat and work ethic of the communities dotting Highway 99 along the eastern border of the state: "Tiny men with mustaches / driving ox teams / deep in the cedar grove." Snyder's book celebrates nature, as does my project, but I wanted to focus more on humanity than Snyder did. I want my thesis to make its readers think about things they may not otherwise contemplate. I want it to "instruct and delight" as Horace said all good art should do, but more than that, I want to grant voice to forgotten (or, perhaps, never thought of in the first place) people and places. *Nowhere* has the potential, I feel, to be my offering to reawaken voices like Snyder's and bring poetry back to the earth, back to its roots.

Recently, poetry about California landscapes has interested me, and comprises a core of writings from which the idea for *Nowhere* stems. Kenneth Rexroth's "Autumn in California" is striking to me because, though it was written in 1939, it does not appear dated. Its staying power stems from its vivid description of California's landscapes. In the

poem, he covers the coastline, the deserts, and the mountains, and he uses Autumn to unite them all. Rexroth's poem is a representation of California's geographical diversity. I view *Nowhere* as evolving from "Autumn in California." I believe that each of these off-the-beaten-path places deserves its own poem. Rexroth's appreciation of California geography is similar to what I want my poems to communicate.

Like Snyder's poem about highway 99, Gary Soto's "Making Money: Drought Year in Minkler, California" exemplifies the kind of poem I feel I included in my thesis. Soto creates a gritty portrait of an economically-depressed California town rather cleverly. He frames the poem with a man named Rinehardt debating the model year of a now-useless Buick. The scene is painted in just a few words, and while describing the car, Soto also describes the man with one of the smartest turns of phrase in American poetry: "...the fenders sloped / like the shoulders of a fired worker / out of beer." Those lines capture the desolation, hopelessness, and isolation experienced in Minkler. Soto almost didn't need to continue. He does, of course, completing the narrative of Rinehardt's bet with his son. My interest in this poem is its use of narrative, imagery, and again, monologue. The more of these kinds of poems I read, the more I thought that, in order to capture the humanity of these places, I should put the poems in their residents' own words as dramatic monologues. I'm not as interested in delving into people's personal lives as I am in revealing a singular community of interesting people. Rinehardt, I suspect, is a composite of sorts. That is, the feeling of being in Minkler, California can only be communicated via this man performing these actions. Interesting as well is the work the title does. "Drought Year" implies that Minkler's economy is weather-dependent. In the urban world, weather is merely backdrop. Unless it's severe, we hardly notice it.

Soto captures perfectly the desperation attached to the farmer waiting for rain.

A collection of poems, especially all dealing with similar subject matter, is just that: snapshots of its composition. Each poem should conjure intellectual and emotional responses from its readers. The best collections present emotional and intellectual complexes on the macro and micro levels. I hope I have applied what I've learned from my influences to individual pieces and *Nowhere* as a whole; the poems' emotional and intellectual highs are crucial to its success. I also hope that I have captured the grittiness of the off-the-grid existence some choose to live. Mostly, however, I hope I've written well and have done my subjects justice. Poetry belongs to its reader far more than its writer, and by turning these poems in as my thesis, I relinquish the control to determine how they are interpreted.

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Soto, Gary. *Where Sparrows Work Hard*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh, 1981. Print.

Proem: American Ruins (Lost along the Capillaries)

Cities mainline humanity via asphalt-  
and-concrete hypodermic syringes.  
Cars carry us like so much opioid, the  
numbered veins, heavy, on  
the verge of collapse. We all share needles.

The stability of architecture  
betrays itself. Traffic and inanimate public  
transit: symptoms of addiction. Our best  
attempts can no longer manage.

Auxiliary veins, their numbers obscure,  
lay nearly bloodless. Artery branches  
spiderweb out like windshield cracks. They feed  
their metropolitan hearts. Capillaries  
branch out further still and dig rivulets  
into dry earth-skin. They wind along coasts  
or around mountains. They stretch forever.

Here, forgotten organs that the mainline no  
longer serves slowly cease to function. Some  
maintain their crumbling artifices; others  
make no such charade. Some embrace thrust-  
upon identities; some warn you  
to stay out at night. Some charm, some deflate,  
some have nestled into isolation  
with deliberateness beyond anything  
geography wrought. Out here, lost along  
the capillaries, exist sole cultures,  
irrespective and insulated, lone  
and somehow multiple. Industries dead  
decades ago: demolished sugar plants,  
factories up in smoke, refineries  
in bloom, used-up oceans and discarded  
dust. These capillary-towns rise from their  
shed exoskeletons, not quite vanquished,  
but paling in the shadows of their hearts and  
reduced to American ruins.

## California

I dreamed your funeral, conspicuous  
and friendless. Your right arm tattooed: symbols  
incomprehensible - "Stop the congress-  
created dust-bowl" - "No water + no  
jobs = higher food costs" - "Food grows where  
water flows" - You are earth, carved with pavement;  
a decade of lies. You are a weakened immune system;  
a sickness making no attempt to fight  
gravity. I am sleeveless in a wind  
blown desert, begging for one nostalgic  
sip. Strip malls slice you in half, you have lost  
us who call you home. You are little more  
than irrigation's victim; a canvas  
for bullets flying north and south. You are  
fruitless; malnourished. Normalcy replace  
dead poverty creeps into the middle  
class destroys new paint equalizes us  
Poverty replaces dead normalcy forces  
us to sun, sin, or rain creates  
a time vacuum sucks us into our own  
oblivion, sucks us into nothing.  
Your mountains, beaches unpopulated  
refuse to yield kingdoms anymore dry  
up untangle themselves from purposes  
for which they were never meant. Men fat-less  
and draped in holy cloth scream into the  
void proclaim proclaim proclaim nothing at  
all nothing nothing gather soldiers for  
the coming war I stand chest exposed and  
unprepared to let you go abandon  
you leave you cold, empty, and full of holes.  
Night-vision goggles tossed uselessly to  
the curb, entire neighborhoods up in smoke  
stacks emanating churches blown into  
the mouths of not at all innocent babes

Your apocalypse, California, not  
the one you lied about many have called  
for warned against. There is no hydrogen  
here, napalm machine gun belt oil only  
discontent a hierarchy of a  
lack of needs death by summation. Are you  
sure you're ready to be empty? callous  
greedy against us who made you fat? You



are grinding to a halt. Half-life is no  
life at all encroaching upon you and battling  
your supposed infinity.  
We are watching you fade, submerge, kick and  
scream, not get your way. Clutch the elite – they  
are your last hope not your saving grace nor  
anything you wish memories - all you  
have left there is ever was or will be  
You asked for this, California: you are  
not some monster devil we must chase down  
with torches some indefatigable  
entity to suffer endless reboots  
more of a raving maniac under  
our boot-soles easily ignored I am  
driving away putting you behind me  
going someplace I can exist in peace  
rest easily think about something else  
demons in my car your law-books eardrum  
slashing movie-theater-popcorn sky  
I miss the rain and snow definable wake  
up and have no idea what time it is if  
I'm still home alive. I tried to warn you,  
California, but listening  
is far from your strongest, best-tailored suit.

## Moss Landing

We had the same rough year as everyone else. We aren't special – not in that way. I own a boat and my wife can cook – that seemed a good enough reason to us. We're the only place to spend the night in town, but the same customers keep paying our bills. Mostly people hiding (from what I couldn't tell you (bad for business)) – not the maritime enthusiasts we thought we'd attract. My wife faithfully cooks (the grease mixes with her own) breakfast every dawn, and I faithfully offer discounted slough tours, which guests faithfully detail in the journals we leave in the rooms. I say it every time, but people don't believe in seasickness. *It won't happen to me.* I'm real tired of cleaning vomit off my vessel. I was anyhow. Several days pass without even the (most remote, least mathematical) possibility (these cold months, I do little more than taste the salt from my beard) arising. My hose looks lonely and unused. My wife won't (among other things) bake her own scones anymore. Some guests tip. It's hard to begrudge the ones that don't. Sometimes I go way out – beyond the shoreline – so far that the smokestacks (white plumes letting the devil run) disappear – I bring the keys to the place with me. I clutch them and stare at the roiling ocean. I'd like to throw them keys far as I can, watch 'em sink like a stone, get one last bowl of cioppino, and leave the whole foggy town (shiny prism of mine) in my wake.

## The Whale Condition

You bloated machine ever starved, ever feeding, ever churning, displacing a system you did not design. You do not know, nor ask, what process created you.

We watch you, rollicking while you rise and lumber, mouths agape, filtering the salt water chaff via iPhones, Instagram, and telephoto lenses. We marvel at the kinetic cost of fueling you.

You breach, surely ignoring gravity and your own sedentism, and make waves roll into the hull of the embittered ingenuity that carries us, like psychic currency, out to see your sea.

I understand, finally, what Ahab saw in you; you circle and circle and never catch yourself. He longed to know what you know, to harness the fury you own but cannot realize because your very survival predicates your gluttony.

I watch you rise and eat, move and consume, zodiac the intruders who promise to come back, to catch a breach next time, they say, and you will return every summer to eat and unwittingly entertain.

It occurs to us privileged few watchers, perhaps simultaneously, perhaps autonomously, that we lack bristles to separate krill from so much refuse.

## The Krill Condition

...and what purpose do you serve but a dust-  
and-gravel road, once well-traveled, baking in  
the briny sun? The behemoths' least precious  
resource, you martyr yourselves for  
the (greater? Common?) good of consumption.

We don't concern ourselves with what it means  
to be harvested, to exist solely  
for the survival of others. Words like  
tribalism, barbarism, enslaved  
do not come to mind. We don't consider  
cosmic orders or Marxist metaphors.  
We don't see the red tide the echo  
that gives away your position. Instead,  
we marvel at its beauty. We use it  
as evidence for our religions; we desperately  
require proof. We don't wonder why you ask no  
questions, why you're content with immobility,  
stuck in baleen.

Nature's caste system must be so easy  
to accept. I wonder if I am not  
much more than krill, riding the swells, waiting  
to go belly-up in the belly of  
some rough beast, my hour to never come 'round.

## Garage Sale

I purchased a weathered copy of Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl* with a wrinkled dollar bill (the salted air hung heavy, invaded my olfactory sense, stung my picked-at scabs) and never read it. The cardboard neighborhood nearly buckled.

“I don't know who lives in a single house on this block anymore.” I judged the peeling paint, the wood chipped under the weight of the over-seasoned air. I looked through the folded, yellowing pages, wondered what this journal, its horrific, wrenching passages must have meant. “I'm glad to be leaving, but I'm not sure what I'll do in the City. My son and his wife, they live in one of these fancy apartments downtown. They say they never hear their neighbors. The walls are solid concrete, six feet thick or something.” A pause, then, “This damned house will never sell.”

I stared at the aftermath of goose- stepping creditors, shades forever drawn.

## Power Plant

Sea lions gather loosely on the docks,  
clustered like so many locust. Their heat  
maintained via circular hellos. They  
float into the slough, six dozen or more.  
We thermo-regulate with massive stacks  
pluming cotton into the bright morning:  
The barrier between medicine and  
human fingers, I can't help but believe,  
lies somewhere between the power plant and  
the writhing, slick overpopulation  
rampant on the dock. Their barking does not  
threaten, inspires little more than laughter  
from the champagne-sippers who asked for a  
table near the window, so they could share  
their glimpses of some inverted version  
of animal life before the wind changed  
direction and white smoke obscured the view.

## Captain

His right knee bent ninety degrees; too much  
air whistles between his tongue and his teeth.  
His hair salt-stiff and his binoculars  
blurred, his heavy boots offset the tourist  
weight in his vessel (wooden and creaky,  
he spots wildlife like a traffic cop  
spots speeders – intermittently, only  
when he feels like it) which seems lighter  
(find a couple friends or I won't go out; it's  
simply not cost-effective) this year.

O captain, my captain! The last guest must  
have filled the journal in my room, and I can  
barely follow the playoffs on that  
tiny television. O captain, my  
captain! Your deterioration surpasses  
only your futility. O captain,  
my captain! Your keys on a jailor's ring.  
O captain, I see you saluting from  
the shallowest part of your quicksand-slough.

## The Saddest Ocean

The waves a reaching fog, a purposeless  
swelling ash, its late afternoon lull an  
impotent welcome to nowhere, a mask.

I sit on a rotting deck sharing a  
brutal red wine. My Styrofoam cup not  
of this, or any other, earth I've seen.

I inhale the surf, a cold narcotic  
amnesia. I'm convinced we'd weep right here  
if we knew how, send streaks down salted skin.

We don't know how, so we curl on plastic  
deck chairs, multicolored and outdated  
and watch the paper mush crash on the sand.

The coast a rough tear duct, the evening  
frozen and opulent and translucent.



## Clyde

Every time someone gets sick, you wonder if it's the arsenic. They (the same "they" who poisoned and ignored us in the first place) the concrete keeps it at bay, that the levels will never be lethal. I don't know if cancer (that jagged, unfair force) affects us disproportionately. How could I know? I like the park the Navy built for us. It's just a little asphalt over some grass, but I walk it every morning. Dead center, there's a bench – the park's highest point – and I sit and look out at the oil refinery. I like to be up predawn so I can see the lights – it looks like Oz. Some months ago, I used an old bike lock to attach the pumpkin Steven used to use on Halloween to the bench. I use it for my cigarette butts. I'll empty it when it's full. The most recent generation of kids turned out aggressive. They'll fight (I use that term as loosely as possible) at a moment's notice and feel entitled to things like parking spaces and homes without working for them. The refinery (the only supplement I can take) blazes until the sun matches its intensity. So few of us cross the tracks. I don't wonder what's over there; where I come from is where I am, and I am home. That's what people don't understand. You can leave a place, but you're only as good as where you come from.

## School Bus Stop

A baked-wood shell shielding a rickety  
bench like an entrapment clause. Envelop  
the developing over charred earth. Do  
successes begin here or does the S,  
gone forever, render tabula  
rasa, a specious-seeming concept, bunk?

On a Sunday, I imagine children,  
heads down, tugging at their worn pants-pockets  
fighting the urge to wonder what's beyond  
their one-road-in-one-road-out worlds. They don't  
know that thoughts can kill. Their innocence, when  
lost, will surely drag these antiquated  
streets with it. They will lay waste in the name  
of progress or give in to the urge  
to preserve the only thing they can own.

## The Only Train Stop

Cross-hatched over gravel,  
this lonely, cracked  
monument stands not in oppression, not  
in spite of its own poison foundation  
but in celebration of the rubble  
that rises, grown over with mutations  
subtle and slow. Not at all like empty  
locomotives spitting sulfuric rain.

“This is the only train stop,” someone who  
doesn't remember when that statement turned  
into an anomaly wrote, “in Clyde.”

They don't come from far; they don't come from wide.

## The Path over Contaminated Soil

The Navy dropped it in the bucket – the path  
that suppresses the death-fumes of the steam  
engine. Ignite the asphalt; kill the weeds and  
everything else. Nearly six full decades  
since industry populated  
our vastest expanse in a day, clockwork,  
and depopulated just as quickly.  
Follow the locomotive barreling  
into fiber-optics and away from  
flesh and blood. Watch it set the golden hills,  
once so effervescent and new, aflame.

## Station 18

### I.

Sundays off – nothing ever catches fire here anyway, where everything started as a boy scout project and where we speak for parking spots – no need for labels or enumerations or street signs. Divide us if you have to, but you will not conquer.

### II.

My name's plastered on half the buildings in this town. I was the boy scout who thought that we should remember the railroad. Reflect on those noisy days with something that might approach nostalgia, if we could allow such a thing. My name, letters missing, paint fetal, a decaying monument. My body at rest in station 18, long waiting for youth to pass, nothing to burn.

## A View of the Refinery

At night, from this lacquered bench, the new oil refinery lights up like Oz, and it's nice that this old pumpkin bucket provides a place for my cigarettes. I'd hate to litter over paved layers of stifled, suffocated, cemented history.

Would you call time spent here, waiting for earth and paper to burn, wasted? Would you call me (though I own no phone) rebellious for refusing to engage in your culture? I am alone but not lonely. I am home. I am impoverished but wealthy.

I flick another butt, a relic of a bygone era (it wasn't cliched to say so then). I contemplate youthful innocence, though I remain unconvinced it's the right word. Its truest antonym is guilt. Did I claw through those decades just to emerge guilty? Have I reached the end?

## Arsenic

Vegetation stops almighty progress  
(exemplified by the rumbling railroad,  
rambling and rattling into the knickknack  
night); arsenic defeats vegetation  
(never mind the casualties, the broken  
and stuck); pavement defeats arsenic (the  
solution and the silencer - we've swapped breath  
for sleep, innocence for consciousness).

Almighty progress subverted us long ago  
– quaint, antiquated, backward – do  
you think we can't hear you? Victim is a term  
of endearment no more than criminal.  
We don't boast many of either. We plant  
this flag in the name of independence; don't  
tread on me, we learn to say. We see your  
tiny cars and snicker. We remain unaware  
(with no desire to change) of  
your ideas about war, peace, unity.

My pumpkin bucket my bow-and-arrow,  
my burnt-out cigarette stubs my warpaint.

Clyde Community Center

Marion Morrison's face beams with pride  
in front of intentional decay - "small  
is unique" - siphoned into the push-up  
contest military funnel – spark the  
hills and let the children go forth.

To what end? The question must be answered.  
To no end? Here come the barbarians  
to call us outdated. Their wild god  
unmerciful. We can stand no firmer  
than this: feet volunteered for cement blocks,  
we coaxed time into waiting, but we will  
never show. Ignoring the bulletin  
board, where pride shines bright, is no solution.



## Byron

I show up every Monday and give my identity away. I change into the same clothes as everyone around me – and we are all the same. We're all, as we've been told, at our last stop before jail. But we're so lucky, they say, because we are getting a buzzword opportunity to rectify and rehabilitate. Those are their favorite words. It's the only way I'll graduate, they say. No one wears shoes here. We don't play sports because no one will compete against us. We leave our worn standard-issue sneakers out by the front lawn, piled and identical, in case the need to run arises. I get it, my identity back on Friday, but there's less of me there each time. When I get home, my friends want to get stoned, party in a foreclosure. I agree halfheartedly. I'm disinterested. Am I rectified? Is this rehabilitation? A house, massive and alone, stands mere feet from where I spend my weeks. I wonder why I can't live in that house; mere feet represent miles and miles of advantage. If that were my house, I'd never pay this place with its automatic gates a second glance. I'd likely not even know the sad ilk of teenager brought here. I'd be safe, ensconced in my buffer zone of sheer square-footage.

Delta Vista High School

From behind the automatic gate,  
enjoy views of amber plains and in  
the distance, the faintest hint of deep blue  
ocean. Words like idyllic come to  
mind until you notice the nondescript  
pile of identical shoes that further mar  
the brown-spotted, straw-covered front lawn.

We wear them to run. We circle the lawn  
and the vast expanse behind the buildings.  
We never go anywhere. I'm certain  
this is a metaphor, meant to teach us  
something, meant to awaken something deep,  
something dormant far too long. I run out  
of breath before I can grasp it, collapse  
into a worn-down patch. Teach the free man.

## Port Costa

The signs warn me, but I fish on. License  
not required, it's an infinite supply.  
Rod-and-reel, almost anything is bait.  
The signs warn me – certain species of fish  
so full of chemicals – a dismal “eat  
this, not that” graphic. Deplorable. I  
feel the stinging in my stomach, my fingers  
turn pink. I'm swollen and shedding great husks  
of myself. I sweat and drool and the thud  
in my chest won't slow down. Sturgeon, bass, the  
like. They used to export wheat right here. Now,  
Ya Sa Polaris displaces water  
unfit for contact with human skin. So  
I'm told. So many of us desperately  
remain. Trains slow down here – what with the park  
and gate-less, unfettered crossings. It's a  
good place to catch out, but we always come  
back for the free fish. Anything is bait.

## Carquinez Strait Regional Shoreline

Pedro Font once traded here for a fish he had never seen. A sturgeon, which an earth-colored sign now advises not to eat, citing lethal subatomic levels of letters, dashes, and numbers.

A massive tanker – Ya Sa Polaris - displaces its minuscule counterparts.

## Port Costa Post Office

Stray dogs pant their ways through warehouses-turned-cafes, wineries, local honey stands, and antique shops. The wheat gone, Port Costa slumbers, dreaming of shipyards and threshers.

The post office, underused mouth agape, receives little. Even here, word travels too fast, reaches too many. Even our ghost stories magnetize. The span of time, this century-plus, we sit motionless, immobile, unable to contain this corner of ocean and forest. Pant on.

## Spreckels

Silence defines us, and we were built on sugar. It grew as far as the Okies could see but soon enough, like everything else, became cheaper without human hands. They built us a park, and it remains used little by those who are left. We are an island in a sea of careful crops; we've lost our sugar king but remain in the shadow of his industrial complex, Steinbeck, and a new cookie-cutter tract. Fourth of July, our lone spectacle, shrinks.

## Spreckels Memorial Park

The gravel base-paths like some foreign symbol,  
alien in origin. Windowless  
cubes next door, the Veterans Building will  
never rot, never crumble, never host  
again. But we still turn out, year after  
year to decorate for Halloween, to  
stitch baseball uniforms, to build iron  
crosses into unholy dirt. We fill  
the sunken tennis court to pray for  
stars who will lift our anonymity  
veil. That's not what we want. We want to walk  
our dogs, engulfed in all this cropped farmland,  
invisible. There is nothing to see.

## Claus Spreckels

I built the railroad. You could ride all the way from Fresno to Stockton on my back. Southern Pacific money-grab be damned.

I asked for beets. Others might use the word “demanded.” I built a factory in exchange for acreage insufficient. I threatened to pack my money and move to Woodland. This town, my namesake, handed out ultimatums in the thousands. Growers, over their heads, pledged. I became their king.

For eight decades I reigned. My empire grew. Eventually, I jumped ship for good.

Grow sugar-beets, lease my land. It is mine, after all. Take a house, these tools, and build my legend for me. Anyone can learn to farm. Put down the railroad spike and dig. I made mistakes: I expected honor, loyalty, support. I did not believe these imposter farmers so industrious to buy my land from me, part and parcel, until all that stood was a streaked concrete skeleton, writhing and unfit for storage.

The earth shook and signaled a boom. Winter came early, froze me out. Lesser men would have stolen away some night. Lesser men worked my fields. There is always another, I said and enough believed me. They must have had no choice. They must have frozen, too.



## Sand City

We are seaside. We are *not* Seaside. We have our own city hall – one story, no windows, and it doubles as a police station - and two cop cars to call our own. You can stand atop our park and call the Pacific your own. You can climb indoors. We are not Seaside. The only roadsigns say Slow. We desalinated and went green long before you knew what it meant. We gather every August and celebrate our own tiny sanctimony; a colony of artists – we sculpt, we paint, we support a McDonald's and a Burger King. Call us Little Sur or whatever – we are the real City – just don't call us Seaside.

## Slow

It wraps, this subsidized tar, around the coast and along the Pacific. It weaves through this city like a worm. It carries what no one dares call a disease or spade, but we know that bi-coasters will find us soon enough. We know that solitude is unsustainable. We know what we know.

Heed the signs, those mustard triangles so innocuous, so self-serving. They warn. Slow. They've seen many a motorist so distracted, so enveloped in the swirls of scenery that they lose control: the one thing they thought they had they relinquish.

## Knightsen

This is a thousand-horse town with nary  
a place to sit. We don't rest. We feed, bathe,  
breed. We don't have nail salons or ethnic food  
or bars that serve wine. We raise horses. We  
don't travel or feel the need to do  
much but eat, sleep, and work. In that order.  
Words like municipal don't apply here.  
Call it freedom or ignorance. Call it  
what you will. If you've never watched sinews  
snap, I fear you will never understand.

Knightsen Elementary School

From the window of my classroom, I can  
see the flattest miles I'm certain ever  
seen. I wonder how long it would take, how  
old I would be before I could finish  
walking them. How long would it take? How old  
would I be? An old graphic map, shaded  
spumoni with zigzag creases, cannot  
tell me where I am. Where are these places?  
These foreign words marked with stars and bullets? I  
  
may never know the flat world outside.

## Westley

Where the L-shaped road meets its crook, signs for  
farmers' markets mark downtown. Otherwise,  
I'd never have found it. I drove for hours  
deeper and deeper into what I had  
to assume was a valley. These were one lane  
roads that I knew writers didn't use. These  
were for hauling out the living some  
claw out of the earth. My odd-sized mismatched  
radial tires funneled smoke behind me.  
Somewhere, I saw the convoy of white trucks,  
designed for maximum efficiency,  
corporate logos plastered on the sides in  
sea-foam green. And there, the illusion broke.

## El Paisano Supermarket

I take my cracked hands and my dented car  
every day to buy jerky, cerveza,  
and licorice. I Western Union what's left  
of my cash to the woman I hope is  
still my wife. I sometimes buy cards and mail  
them to the address that I hope is still  
mine. Even in late fall, the sun is still  
strong enough that I need a hat. I pull  
it as far down over my eyes as I  
can, its bill a perfect tube. I only  
can see what's directly in front of me.

## Westley Hotel

I tow my charcoal smoker down the main  
drag every morning. It's mostly for show. I  
never turn it on. I cook my meat  
indoors. I locked the doors to the upstairs  
rooms years ago. No one's asked to stay here  
since. One post-internet explosion though,  
and something called Yelp, and drivers from San  
Jose, Modesto, Sacramento, are  
all here. The rest of the world is at their  
fingertips. My smoke is pluming again.

## Muir Beach

My grandfather built this house with his bare hands, so the legend goes. I'm sure he did not intend on his descendents only leaving it to threaten idle tourists stopping too long to fiddle with their global positioning systems. I know they came to hike or bike or see magic in the overlook, but too many of them means deer won't drink from my stream, shadows wont pattern themselves correctly, one-lane roads won't open up for me. I polish my shotgun, not to threaten or peacock or challenge, but to remind myself that this, all of this, I share but not with them.



## Overlook

I could have fallen. I could have opened my arms to the crashing waves. I could have swan-dove into the whitewash. I could have marred the beauty so many traveled to enjoy. These cliffs, their faces beaming west, are not armor. They offer little more than aesthetics, but what a sight they are.

The further I drove, the further away humanity seemed. I knew every turn held some man-made ecosystem, but if I couldn't see it, I told myself it wasn't there. The climb to the overlook required gears I didn't have. And when I reached the summit, on tread-less flattened tires, the lack of parking made me rethink where I had been. I watched a family eating lunch. The adults couldn't take their eyes off the cliff; the children looked only at what they held in their hands – benign minutiae.

## San Geronimo

Have I reached the age, please say I have not,  
where my golf game matters? Where I even  
have a golf game? Where weekends mean little  
but a handicap? How deep into the  
Marin Valley am I willing to drive  
to watch a tiny snow-colored spheroid  
respond to my movements? Am I this torn?  
When I go home, back to the City or  
the south or east bay, will I have come  
away, absconded with anything like  
memory? I sit at the Two-Bird and  
shut out the thoughts of hitches and slices.

Lost Hills

“*Our nada who art in nada, hallowed be thy nada.*”

- E. Hemingway

Spread out like a void, empty connective  
tissue hosts other worlds briefly - as long  
as it takes to stop for gas or a smoke.

Somewhere deep and hidden, insect armies  
buzz and hover, men occupy shacks, room  
eight deep, arrive via hand-me-down paint  
and metal. Capitalism cracks the  
whip. Hack, machete fruit (never see, eat).

If only they knew that artificial  
breezes passed children of fortune north, south.

“Can you imagine living here? I can't.”

They can't understand the implication.

Halfway between *Los Angeles y San  
Francisco, California* slips the void.

## Friday Night in Trona

Heat oppresses well into the evening. (Grass refuses to grow here.) Dust swirls among the sons and grandsons of dried out, lined men. (Greenery stubborn - the broken down chemical plant still piping hot death into the sky.) They were Okies first, then Mexican immigrants, slowly crawling far from home, attempting to claw livings out of the Earth. (Everything is dull and dulling, the sun a piss shade of yellow stationary, threatening.) The children left to deal with massive uncertainty crash into each other on a sandy grid. Their eyes and open wounds unprotected. (Is this the swirling drain, humanity's landing spot, scrubbed out civilization?) As I watch, I can hear Tom Joad whimper, high-pitched and unpolished, and give up. (Bang.)

## Girl Texting in the Rain

November gray is not makeup for your  
sadness. Forlorn eyes focus on bubbled  
words that pop indiscriminately and  
without significance. What freezes you  
in place like slowly poured concrete before  
you reach anything at all like shelter?

Messages fire into space every  
second – through whom do they neutrino as  
they tunnel screen to screen, from raindrop to  
raindrop to hurricane to blizzard?

## Sideways City

Coffee in the morning (pills at night to sleep)  
triggers my body to flip the switch, signals  
my brain to scream or smile or weep; my pen  
a worthless spade – I dig up kitsch.

I'm on borrowed energy, enchanted by the  
song of electric graphite, still awake at  
dawn. Events rehashed, canted, and not a  
detail among them, so I build this  
sideways city - insomnia's pawn.

Memories forgotten, corroded by  
the fire shining like a polished scythe and  
onomatopoeia. What's left of my humanity  
dangles from wire strung  
from my edifice, egomania.

I keep my blinds turned upwards to blot out  
the vengeful sun; this darkness banishes  
the thought of anywhere at all to run.

