

## IS IT JUST TIMING THAT HAS MADE IT SUCH A DARK HOUR?

BY ANDREW BERARDINI

### 1. CALIFORNIA. SAY IT SLOWLY NOW, SOFTEN THE EDGES AND LET IT DRAWL OUT.

### A SHARP LATINATE GROWN SMOOTH IN THE OCEAN LIKE BROKEN GLASS POLISHED BY THE SEA.

2. It is a buttery avocado spooned onto your tongue, oranges tumbling out of a sack onto the linoleum floor, a gaggle of jetplanes swooping over the giggle of bikini clad girls on the beach below.

3. California. It's a little prayer, a poem, a psalm, the punchline of a country ballad, the destination of all prison songs. It is a dream, sort of. Utopic gold at the end of the Manifest Destiny rainbow.

Or, even if not gold, it still glitters like it. This, perhaps, is enough.

4. To Okie farmers dusted out of land by bankers, the word was like the tinkle of rain on thirsty fields. When they said California it was like teeth breaking the skin of a freshly plucked plum, its juice dribbling down their chins.

5. An island surrounded by craggy cliffs, California is inaccessible to outsiders. It's population consists of black Amazons who wield weapons made of pure gold. They are ruled with the fierce and careful love of their leader, Queen Califia. She does not take kindly to outsiders, particularly to Adams come to interrupt their paradise of Eves.

6. Whilst I sat next to my father's Wolverine boots and he patted my head with his workman's hands, thick as rawhide and as graceful as potatoes, he told his toddling son that the word California comes from the mixture of cali which means hot in Spanish and the Latin fornax, meaning furnace. Hot Furnace. He is a native son of California and so am I, both born in this furnace.

A nice slow heat, no less intense for its soft torpor.

7. They came here looking less for what was here and more to avoid what was not. Cruel winters and crueler fascists, starvation and poverty, corruption like a gangrene they were doomed to inherit. They might have ended up in Argentina, where their brothers and sisters went instead. But Argentina comes from a Latin word which in English is the unrhymeable silver. But they were not attracted to the smooth clarity and cool beauty of silver, they were attracted by the hot soft element cooking in the furnace of western promise. They came looking for gold.

8. The family of my father were bootleggers and jewelers. They poured whiskey for decadent moviestars and weary travelers and they fingered jewels and precious metals, a magnifying monocle wedged in front of weary eyes as they bent over fine handwork.

My grandfather the bootlegger and vintner sunk one too many whiskey-soaked dollars into the promises of gambling and glory, wine and fortune, ending his life a pauper. My great-grandmother, his mother-in-law, lived next door and refused to say a word to him for the last years of her life for all the money he lost.

Bereft of inheritance, my father went to work polishing jewels and winding watches, but by the 1960s, gold had left the Golden State or rather had transformed. Just as raw ore becomes shiny bricks and woven necklaces, gold had become a whole lot of other things besides jewelry and well-sold

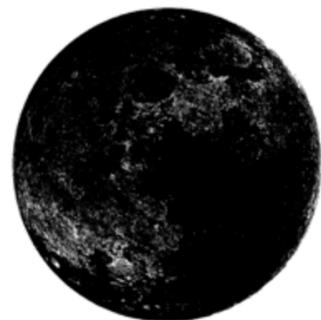
records: it had become had become stucco single family homes and arcing highways, movie studios and aerospace. So, my father bought himself a brand-new house in a brand-new suburb named after a railroad magnate who had never come there and took a job in airplane and space-shuttle factory, churning out dreams of jet-powered travel and American domination as fast the assembly line could spit out the fusillades and bombs that would sometimes nestle in them.

He worked in this factory for forty years, retiring to concentrate on television and decay. Though he has only ever rarely been on an airplane, he will never go on another.

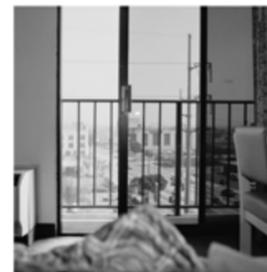
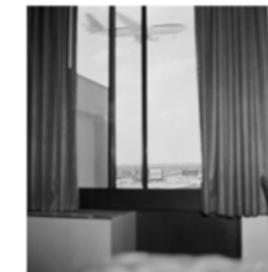
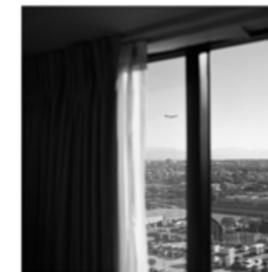
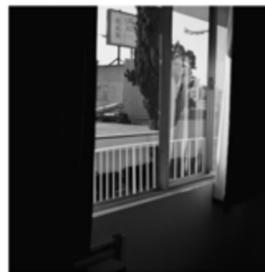
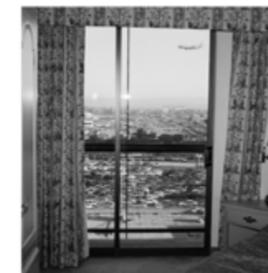
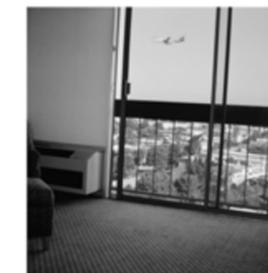
9. I've never had much affinity for gold, even if I do for some things that are golden. I like the golden skin on a lover's belly, kissed by the sun as I run my dark hand over the expanse of skin. I like the golden hue of California light as it settles down through the smog, shimmering many weird colors that peek out from behind the downtown skyline of Los Angeles as the sun heads ever westward.

Lovers leave and sunsets fade. But with both gone, we are still here standing on the shores of a continent, waiting for new dreams and new dreamers to come our way.

Pure gold, I'm told, never tarnishes.



OUT THE WINDOW (LAX) 2001-2005



**12.** Life thrives on lightness as it thrives on sun. We need it. Many countries have cities like puncture marks, as if the glass and steel obelisks grew like rare crystals from the earth and reached ever skyward. This the triumph of the earth and its heaviness over the sky and its space, its light, its air.

California has these skyscraper too but they are few and sort of quaint. We admire them from the freeway, but never consider them anything more than a sculpture to mark where the traffic is thickest, a warning to travelers that downtown is a place where the gravity is heavier, the sun less available, a place where movement appears faster but actually moves slower. California for all its smoggy faults, its plasticisms and pretensions, is lighter. Though some try, we are too Californian to deny the space and grandeur of the sky.

**13. PICTURES FOUND ON THE SEAL OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA:**

**MINERVA, THE ROMAN GODDESS OF WISDOM AND WAR.**

**A CALIFORNIA GRIZZLY BEAR (THE OFFICIAL STATE ANIMAL) FEEDING ON GRAPE VINES.**

**A SHEAF OF GRAIN.**

**A RIVER HARBOR.**

**A WEIRD BIT OF ROCK STICKING INTO THE PICTURE PLANE.**

**FIVE TWO- AND THREE-MASTED SAILING SHIPS, WHICH EXCEPTING ONE HAVE THEIR WHITE SAILS BILLOWING FULL IN THE WIND.**

**THE SNOW-CAPPED SIERRA MADRE MOUNTAINS.**

**A GOLD MINER.**

**MINERVA, BOLD, POWERFUL, BEAUTIFUL.**

**AND THE GRIZZLY BEAR,** busy munching on wine grapes, look off into the distance. The miner, obsessed like Bogart in Sierra Madre notices nothing but his obsession, head buried into the earth. He ignores the green fields, the cool water, the brilliant white of the ship's sails.

If you look closely, way in the back, just peeking out over a hill is a little building. It is found only by those who can look harder than others, who see beyond the warrior goddess and the promise of gold, beyond the blue water lapping at the beaches. It is painted white, the prismatic color, the rebounder of pure light. Nobody knows for sure why it's there, though many have explanations. Cross state rivalries, historical inaccuracies, a gang of San Quentin prisoners quietly adding their signature. I like it as a secret. It is on every official document, including driver's licenses and state IDs. It is in the purse and pocket of every citizen who lives here. It is on the birth certificate of every child, including my own.

**14.** I left home for freedom. Traveling so fast over the land, I left behind California and its dreams, tires like zephyrs, the flickering gas stations and truck stops more luminous than stars. I left in airplanes, window blind closed to all the land being left behind. I left on trains, heavy metal wheels slipping over the continent on infinite tracks, heading east and north and sometimes south, every direction but home.

I always came back alone, my plane ticket riddled with punctuation errors, my heart left behind in some foreign port, growing dusty on a distant shelf, someone else's souvenir. California is an imagined country but I love and fear it. It is here I learned the separation between reality and the imagination is permeable, so much as as to not truly be separate, but intertwined like the limbs of lovers.

Though California flickers with ghosts and shadows of collapsed fantasies, the light failing like a broken projector, it is still no more yielding but a dream.



**EVERYTHING GROWS HERE.**

**15. IT'S ALMOST SUMMER. OR RATHER, THERE'S THAT SUMMER FEELING AGAIN. THE SUN SHIMMERS AND BECKONS ALONG THE WESTERN HORIZON TOWARD PERPETUAL TWILIGHT, ITS PENUMBRA RAZING THE SKY INTO SWIRLS OF BRICK RED AND SOFT LAVENDER, HALLOWEEN ORANGE AND PALE OCHRE, LIPSTICK PINK AND BURNT UMBER. WE CRAWL EVER CLOSER TO ITS FIRE, JUST NEAR ENOUGH TO FEEL THE LICK OF ITS FLAME. OUR EYES SWEEP ACROSS THE PLAINS AND DESERTS, UP THROUGH THE MOUNTAINS, FLYING OVER SNOW-CAPPED PEAKS, FOLLOWING THE CURVE OF THE SKY AND CONDENSING THE CONTINENT INTO THE CONFINES OF A SNOW GLOBE. COLLECTING ARTIFACTUALEVIDENCE OF THE RUMORED AMERICAN DREAM, WE CAME LIKE TRAVELERS FROM AN ANTIQUE LAND WHO'D SEEN TOO MANY SHATTERED VISAGES COLLAPSED IN THE LONE AND LEVEL SANDS. LAYING CLAIM TO ALL THE WESTERN PROMISES, CALIFORNIA ROMANCE AND EDGE-OF-THE-WORLD POSSIBILITIES OF THIS COASTAL CITY, WE DREAMERS PUSHED NO FURTHER. WE HAD ARRIVED.**

**UNSURE IF WE HAD BEEN CHASED OR WERE CHASING, WE RUSHED TO THE COAST AT JUST THE RIGHT ANGLE SO THAT SOME OF US BOUNCED OFF THE WATER AND FELL BACK AGAINST THE MOUNTAINS. THE TRACKS OF OUR FOOTSTEPS WERE SWALLOWED UP BY THE SAND, BUT BY THEN WE KNEW LINEARITY HAD RUN ITS COURSE. IN CHEAP, BROADCLOTH BUSINESS SUITS AND WITH TATTERED SUITCASES IN HAND, WE TURNED OUR BACKS TO THE WAVES. WE ONLY MADE IT AS FAR AS THESE TUMBLING TUMBLEWEEDS AND PRICKLY PEARS, THESE DESERT GHOST TOWNS AND ABANDONED MOVIE SETS MADE TO LOOK LIKE GHOST TOWNS WHERE PHANTOM SILVERSCREEN GUNSLINGERS PATROL THE DESOLATE MAINSTREET OF CRUMBLING SALOON FACADES.**

**DURING THE LONESOME CRAWL ACROSS THIS GRAND CONTINENT, WE HAD SUNG EVERY SONG, REPLAYED EVERY KNOWN MOVIE ON THE SCREENS OF OUR BLINKERED EYELIDS, RECITED EVERY POEM AND RETOLD EVERY TELLING OF HOW WE DISCOVERED THE NEW WORLD.**

**EVERY MEMORY HAD BEEN REPEATED AND EMPTIED OUT, UNTIL ALL THAT WAS LEFT WAS THE FLICKERING IMAGE OF WAKING DREAMS, HOLOGRAMS DANCING IN THE FLAT LANDS THAT STRETCHED BENEATH THE BRIGHT AND BITTER BLUE OF THE DESERT SKY.**

**WE KEEP MOVING, BUT THIS TIME IN CIRCLES. THE SUN DAZZLES US WITH SWARMING SPECTERS AND MIRAGES – POOLS OF WATER REFLECTED IN THIRSTY EYES. ALONG THE WESTERN RIM OF THE LAND OF OPPORTUNITY, GOD'S SHADOW SEEMS TO FALL ON THIS CINEMATIC WORLD IN THE SHAPE OF CACTI AND JOSHUA TREES CAUGHT IN A SLOW-DANCE TRANCE, ARMS FLUNG TO THE WINDS. WAVERING IN THE SUN'S RAYS, OUR HALLUCINATIONS ARE SO RIVETING THAT WE CAN'T LOOK AWAY. WE ALL COME TOGETHER AT THE NEXUS OF A GREAT TEEMING MIRAGE, ALL OUR PATHS JOIN WHERE THE SAME PAINTED VISION PLAYS ECSTATIC ACROSS OUR EYES.**

**THE APPARITION OF ART IS ALWAYS TANTALIZINGLY OUT OF REACH.**

**COMING AND GOING, WE WANT NOTHING LESS.**

**FIN**