

SUSAN STRAIGHT

Photographs by Lucy Puls

Foreclosures

Susan Straight is Boom writer-in-residence for 2011.

The empty houses I see everywhere—foreclosures that happened to my friends and neighbors and family—left me for many mornings bereft. That is the word. Reverse mortgages gone wrong, refusals to renegotiate bad loans given to people who kept getting turned down for regular loans, and again and again, people who lost their jobs—teachers, air conditioning salespeople, pest control men, custodians, contractors, landscapers, day laborers. My neighbors and relatives—gone.

Five on my own block, twelve more on my way to work. Yes, I counted them, because I was so shocked at the boarded-over windows, like blank eyes, and the milkweed and foxtails standing in the front yards, tall as purposefully grown crops. And then the countless others I saw while driving around southern California—all those homes that were no longer home broke my heart.

I became obsessed with looking at them. In my inland community, as in Lucy Puls's haunting, elegiac farewells to rooms once lived in, the houses range from contemporary mansions to old wood-frame bungalows. Foreclosure, toxic loans, bundled mortgages, underwater, short sale, repo—such clinical, bloodless words, an entire language now familiar to Americans, and it doesn't matter whether wealthy or not. Abandoned is the word. The empty shell.

Rich, poor, in the middle—wholesale blind-eyed windows for everyone because of “robo-signed” foreclosure papers, because banks so often lent inattention and indifference. Recently, a couple trashed their sumptuous custom-built home in a brand-new tract northeast of San Diego; they had been foreclosed on, and they stripped the house of fixtures, bashed holes in the walls, destroyed the rock façades, filled the pool with uprooted trees and bushes, and even took off the garage door. The house had resembled a castle, the drawbridge gone now.

But down my street, no one had bought beyond their means. The longtime owners lost their jobs. These were two-bedroom homes built in the 1920s and '30s and

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Marquette 24, 2009



La Canyada 18, 2009



Idola 10, 2009

'40s, and my neighborhood looked like every other older community in a California city—narrow streets lined with bungalows and stucco cottages, gravel or cement driveways, fruit trees and porches and palm trees wearing shaggy girdles of ivy.

I peeked inside the house next door to me, and it looked exactly like some of Puls's photos. Hard living had made the carpet into earth, and the haunting of pictures left clean rectangles on the dirty walls. Curtains like gauze shrouds.

All over southern California, people left behind black plastic bags in driveways and rooms, like slugs piled upon themselves. Inside had to be clothing, pots, toys—things I'd seen held, worn, and loved. Choices made to leave them behind.

I felt a feral conquering was just at hand. In the dead brown yards, where sprinklers were turned off and the lawns and tended shrubs withered, the neo-native, invasive plants of California began to assert themselves in the winter

rains. Filaree with tiny purple flowers and corkscrew seeds; wild oats like shivery spangles of green and then gold in the wind; tumbleweeds big as Volkswagens that were no longer parked there.

Then an entire shadow corps began to descend upon the homes—mattresses on the porches (pillows stolen over and over off my own porch furniture) and homeless men sleeping on back steps. Wild cats inside the crawl spaces. New industry—the caretakers of the discarded—came in trucks with men who hauled off dead trees, cut man-high weeds and drained black-water pools. On the next block, a squatter sold off a rock wall, stone by stone. Who bought them?

Next door, the century-old avocado tree lived because I watered it over the fence; the foxtails were so lush they sent thousands of sharp gold spurs over the sidewalks, a few always attaching to my dog's paws. Sometimes, I took the dog up a cement walkway, past the filaree gone to seed,



Longbranch 120, 2009

saying the word in my head—filaree! My favorite wildflower in the vacant lots of my 1970s childhood, when no houses around me were ever empty, when California was building mile after mile of modest ranch houses like mine and all were filled with children. My dog and I walked around the

porch so I could see into a side window, see the inside of the house where my neighbor lived for thirty years, a woman who bought Girl Scout cookies from my daughter, just so that I could remember the built-in china hutch from the 1930s, from the last Depression, from a different time. **B**