

DAVID L. ULIN

Elegy

California, 1980

Andrew Molera State Park. I didn't know it was the almost perfect midpoint of the California coast when I visited in late May 1980. It was also the almost perfect midpoint of my time living by the Bay. Just days before my roommate was due to leave San Francisco and return east, we drove south, through Santa Cruz and Watsonville, to Big Sur to spend a weekend camping at the sea. What we saw first were naked women, two of them, walking the trail back from the beach loose-limbed and jangly, like the beating of my heart. I was eighteen and mostly inexperienced, but I knew enough to look them in the eye. Down at the water's edge, my roommate suggested we get naked also; the idea made me uncomfortable, but I didn't want to say. Instead, I peeled my jeans as if I were shedding skin, averted my gaze as he did the same. Then we smoked a joint and wandered the rocky shore, sporadically crossing paths with other walkers, all of us as bare-assed as if we were newly born. This was not a nude beach, not specifically, although the overall sensibility was *When in Rome*. I felt titillated but not physically, more in the sense that I was crossing into adulthood . . . or at least adulthood as I imagined it might be. Later in the afternoon, we stumbled upon a couple having sex behind an outcropping; by then, we had already put our pants back on and were on our way to pitch our tent. I don't recall much else, just this small sequence of images, all of them taking place over an hour or two between the trailhead and the waves. Oh, and one other thing, one more sensation: that this wasn't who I was, not quite, not exactly, no matter how I wished it might be so.

Fort Mason. I had a job working for Greenpeace, three evenings a week, canvassing Marin, the East and South Bays, going door to door to ask for funds. The office was in Fort Mason Center, which had only recently been turned over to the National Park Service; before that, it had been an army post, going back to the Civil War. I would take

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View from Bernal Hill, San Francisco in the 1980s. Photograph by Mimi Plumb.

Photo on 27 September 2020

the Fillmore bus, get off in front of Marina Middle School, walk the dozen or so blocks to the office where we would gather like a squadron about to go out on patrol. We would pile into a brown VW bus, listen to the Dead or Public Image Ltd., drive out of the city, stop for dinner, and hit the neighborhoods. The higher end, the better: In Mill Valley once, I was invited into a party, given beer and joints for my fellow canvassers, as well as a \$150 check. That was a night's work, more than one; in certain neighborhoods, I'd be lucky to scrounge up sixty or seventy bucks. Around 8:00 or 8:30, we would meet back at the bus and return to the city where

we would add up our donations and cash out. Then I would head into the cool San Francisco night, fog drifting in from the Bay, and wander in great looping arcs from the Marina through Cow Hollow, across Pacific Heights, the Western Addition, Alamo Square, and Hayes Valley, before angling southwest to the Haight. Some evenings I would take Fillmore the whole way, others Divisadero, clinging to the shadows in the darkness like a ghost. What I liked about San Francisco was that it had a history, although I didn't know it, which left me suspended, in some sense, between the present and the past. That, and the fact that I understood there

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was no future for me in this place; that like my roommate I, too, would be leaving; that it was unlikely I'd be living here again.

Marin Headlands. Earlier that year, perhaps in April, we spent a Saturday afternoon climbing in the Marin Headlands. Was this the same day we went to Green Dragon Temple in Muir Beach for tea and lunch? We did not sit zazen or read the sutras, but I can still see us pull up before the square construction of the zendo, piling out of the car as if the journey was much longer than seventeen miles. For as long as we stayed—an hour? maybe two?—I imagined what it might be like to live here, to stay behind when the car left and shed the concerns and ambitions of the world. Even then, however, I knew that I would never be able to sit still long enough. Maybe this is why we ended up circling back to the Headlands, all that dirt and grass. We spent an hour or two crawling over the concrete batteries dug into the hillsides, the residue of two world wars. And yet, was this so different from where we had just been? No, just another place for turning inward, not toward stillness, silence, but to ourselves, our fantasies. That day, I felt like a ten-year-old again, wanting to fit myself through the narrow gun slits, to sit inside, protected, hidden from the city and its claims. Later, I would read a book, Jim Paul's *Catapult*, about two friends who get a grant to build a medieval siege weapon and shoot stones from the Headlands into the sea. In a way, what Paul is describing is its own form of meditation, its own mechanism for stepping outside time. This is how I felt a lot during those months, as if time had slowed or slipped or grown elastic, as if there were time enough at last. That this turned out (how could it not?) to be another illusion is, of course, the point—not just of memory but also of all these sites and artifacts, which I could not, which I still cannot, move beyond.

Old Waldorf. Our first weekend in the city, a group of us took blotter acid, ended up in Golden Gate Park. Many hours later, we crept out of the park and meandered from the

Haight through Hayes Valley, the Civic Center, deep into the Financial District, where there was a club on Battery called the Old Waldorf, owned by Bill Graham. Battery, batteries, the city and its defenses, military or cultural, through which time moved as liquid essence . . . or maybe that was the drugs. We went to the Old Waldorf often, that or the Mabuhay Gardens on Broadway, where we heard SVT, Vital Parts, the Dead Kennedys, Jim Carroll Band. We were in the middle, on the seam between two eras, wannabe hippies (we weren't old enough) lit on fire by punk. My last night in the city, ten weeks after that trip to Andrew Molera State Park, I stood atop the Stockton Street tunnel with my best friend and his girlfriend, smoking cigarettes after one last show. Below us: the crush of Sutter Street, its delis and massage parlors; while up there the three of us, we lingered, shrouded in the fog of leaving, aware that our time had come. Who had we seen that night? It could have been anyone—Jorma, Carroll, even Jerry Garcia who played, when he was in town, once a month in North Beach at the Stone. The next morning, I packed the last few items in my backpack, locked my apartment, and left the keys in the super's box. The air was chilly, overcast I want to tell you (although that may have been internal weather), and I remember shivering a little as I stepped onto Haight Street and waited for the bus to take me to the Transbay Terminal on Mission and Howard, where I would start my journey home.

Sutro Tower. I had a dream once, during the months I lived in San Francisco, of dancing underneath the Sutro Tower, that vast three-pronged transmission standard that overlooks the city from a hill not far from Clarendon Heights. I could feel the buzz of all those broadcasts, all those voices, all that electricity pulsing through my body, lines of energy. The closest I ever came to making something like that happen was one night at Twin Peaks, where a group of us came to drink and get high and dance to the boombox someone brought. The Grateful Dead or the Dead Kennedys, Jerry Garcia or Jello Biafra, Sutro, sutra, Freddie Mercury. When



Dogpatch, San Francisco in the 1980s. Photograph by Mimi Plumb.

Queen played Oakland in July 1980, the singer came to party in the Castro, just over the hill from where I lived. That summer, everybody looked like Freddy: tight jeans, bandannas folded neatly into rear pockets, close-cropped haircuts, mustaches. “Terminal” was still a word we might use to describe a bus station; it had not yet become a harbinger of fear. A decade afterward, Mercury was dead, like so many of the men in that neighborhood, who I’d encountered on the sidewalks or when I took the bus. I don’t mean to offer

up an elegy, but I want to remain clear about what I remember, which is this: I remember something that felt like abandon, the sensation that anything I could imagine might come true. I remember grace, or better yet elevation, from the Headlands to the tunnels to the hills. I remember feeling that time had erased itself even as I understood that time kept passing, that it always would. I remember that as much as I wished otherwise—Green Dragon Temple, Greenpeace, Andrew Molera State Park—I was just a visitor here. **B**