

Text by Gabriel Rojas after Alexis Smith's "Same Old Paradise"

"Same Old Five Cent Paradise"

*After Alexis Smith's "Same Old Paradise" (1987)*

Valencia

Cara Cara, Tangerine, even the odd

Blood, with raw knuckle rinds,

I saw them scoring the San Joaquin Valley

In vermilion strokes. Passing them now,

Beneath a Navel sun looming over paradise

Found, I am reminded of the valley winds

Blown warm and dusty down from hay-colored

Hills, ripe with citrus grove and grapevine,

the tannin peace of late summer twilight

That dripped from my window and landed

In my lap. Passing them now,

I find myself staring at the scenes spilling

From the brim of my rearview mirror,

Too vast for stolen looks

Through a soiled spyglass;

I couldn't tell barnyard from birdshit.

Passing them now, glass and eyes

Wash themselves in reservoirs

Deep and dry

With windswept soil.

I press this paradise upon my memory

And see

Marooned mountains banded in purple dusk

As the desert shouts with growth

Against red-roofed casitas.

Smith's orange trees,

Ever ripe behind the glass,

Plead to be picked

And packed,

And peeled,

To let drip those sticky sweet

Summertime memories

Over parched lips

And stained teeth.

Portrayal's power:

That nostalgic trick of the light

Molded by desire. The same

Power that passed from mouth to mouth,

Down from dust clouds,

Swapped like stories around fires made

Of orange crates – they could smell the trees

In the embers, a new life ripe

For the plucking, heavy and soft

In California sun: desert pearls.

Pamphlets, postcards and posters

Depicting five-cents scenes

Of maternal hills, golden and warm,

Were kept as scripture to keep spirits

Singing on the road,

A Canaan of sights and sounds

Neither seen nor heard but

Blossoming from subconscious soil

And tended by an aching hope,

A land as real as hunger pangs.

How many miles had they walked

Barefoot under orange-blossom shade?

Could they see the leaves change?

How many lives had they lived

Within a thrice folded scrap of paper?

How many times had they looked

Back, sweat beaded on their sun-scarred brows,

Among children sick with skitters,

Calloused hands white from scraping spilt flour

Off splintered floors,

At the land promised to them with work and pay,

Trying to see the mountains

Behind grease and crease?

I had gone North during fire season.

At all hours the sky glowed a sore red,

A sky rubbed raw by waste.

Past sunrise everything had the same sooty pallor.

And yet I could still see sundried hands,

Skin pulled tight over split knuckles,

Picking in the sleet, same as they had ever done.

*My grandmother used to pick for 50 cents*

Space moves slowly on the Five.

Slow enough to see the orchards yield

To thirsting yellow fields of razorgrass,

To see the reservoirs run dry and the valley

Scarred with river beds littered

With windfallen fruit and calf's hide.

You could see

Their bent frames bright

Against the vacant countryside,

With flannels of every shade

Peeking from beneath the ash,

Their eyes pink from the sleet.

*My grandmother's smile hides journeys*

But the Five flowed on regardless.

I don't think many had the time to look

Or cared much at all.

The pictures will fill the gaps.

Perhaps I had seen the San Joaquin Valley

In bloom, once, at a time so lost

As to be reshaped by want

Of the California Dream

Kept in the secret names of Kerouac's Valley,

That which had sustained my elders now tired

And bent, spent and sore from the sun.

Everything is in the process of being lost.

Mismemory lies, mends

The tears wrought by time,

Drapes scenes in selfish simulacra.

There is not here.

Better to fret for the gentrification

Of long gone communities.

Better to mend the Hollywood hills

To hide the homeless.

Better to drink the valley dry

And sell it back.

5 cents to recycle.

Their there is not here.

Instead they painted the groves and gardens

A ghastly orange beneath their neon sun,

Mistaking the icons of spring

For the life buried beneath

Cracked asphalt streets and false names.

Keep your fucking Dream.

The mural sleeps spattered in

Streetlamp shadow, tucked

Under the glass,

Dead leaves at its base;

You know

I never did see the road twist like a viper,

Only a rattlesnake clubbed

Beneath an orange tree.

My paradise isn't here.

And there may have never been

A here there.