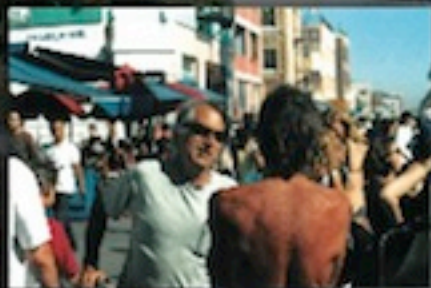


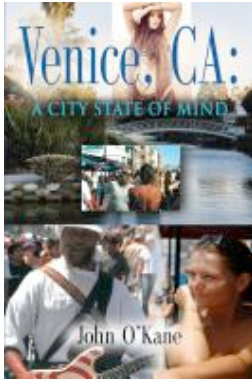


Venice, CA:

A CITY STATE OF MIND



John O'Kane



This book is a reminiscence that celebrates Venice, California's heyday as an alternative community and what survives from it in the present. Many wonder how much longer this city's creative state of mind can persist as gentrification threatens to transform this legendary bohemian Mecca into merely another beach resort for the propertied. The author discusses these threats, but finds in the consciousness of remaining alternative residents a spirit of resistance to these pressures.

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John O'Kane

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INTRODUCTION. VENICE, CA: A CITY STATE OF MIND

I arrived in Venice in the 80s just before the rash of retrospectives about the 60s started to appear. I was fascinated by that era and eager to learn how Venice might fit into the family of “alternative communities” that thrived back then.

I figured Venice must still harbor seasoned rebels, cells of collagists and Beat poets howling with image and word power. Perhaps some ageing, acid-dropping spirits carrying tattered copies of the *Port Huron Statement*, Mao’s *Little Red Book* or even *Prairie Fire*, that mystofesto from the remnants of the student movement. Street chatter did suggest their kin could be hanging at the Comeback Inn, famous watering hole for locals on West Washington Blvd--renamed Abbot Kinney Blvd in the late 80s--about to be fashioned out of existence. There had to be happy hour heroes there waiting to have another go at making a better society. And there were, though they were hardly preparing to man the barricades. And their raps on the world, like their sartorial slants, seemed like dead languages.

Yet first impressions are not always reliable in Venice where appearances can play fast and loose with your imagination, sending you along winding and foggy pathways that make you wonder where you are until some perceptual high-tide elevates your senses.

Reading Lawrence Lipton’s *The Holy Barbarians* was a big boost. Published in June 1959, this book is a fascinating portrait of Venice’s Beat culture from the mid-to-late 50s, its core bohemians who spawned “Venice West,” his name for the geographical confines of this experiment. An early example of the New Journalism made famous in the following decade by Tom Wolfe, Norman Mailer, Joan Didion and many others, his book inspired me to track its surviving characters and give shape to my impressions. It was a privilege to access Lipton’s passion for Venice and meet the characters who established this marvelous space.

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Reading about these characters while living here was illuminating since many residents seemed to reincarnate them, speak and act like they had taken over their vision. Venice's past was breathing in the present! I'd uncovered remains of a sort of tribal network that thrived with the material fossils, the surviving canals and buildings from the original city of 1905 created to reflect the European source. I kept plowing away. And the more I dug, the more tools and nutrients I discovered to continue the venture.

I passed some early profiles to Lawrence Ferlinghetti who said they seemed lost in a time warp. I began to think about this notion and how relevant it is for looking at the larger issue of experiencing Venice. We all live in the present, the moment, and occasionally look nostalgically back to the past, or get primed to break on through to some future moment, fantasize about what might be. This is normal enough. But what isn't so normal is when our desire to be in the past or future is so strong that it impacts our ability to function well in the present.

In a Venice haunted with images and fossils from its rich history, armchair archeologists who try to absorb the past into their lives are common. They're the opposite of tourists who consume morsels of the past in service to "progress." And the pressures are great in our society to treat the past as yesterday's news or an outworn fashion. The path to psychic freedom and health supposedly comes from learning how to effectively repress the past and get on with transferring experiences into new and better memories. The path to healthy citizen consumer comes from accepting the idea that today is the first day of the rest of your material life, and you'll be retarded in your beliefs and abilities to make good connections if you don't continually go for the zero APR and get rid of last year's model of car, or version of the past.

What if you don't buy this script and choose to live in the past and present simultaneously? You'll stick out from the crowd for sure. But as your numbers dwindle and more folks accept the winning fashions, you may begin to suspect your allegiances. And what if you're a patriot to boot, having made a pretty good go at grasping what our long-haired founders meant in those enigmatic documents? Plus there's likely to be an acute remembrance of things past, and a sense of

what happens to rebels who venture too far down sectarian paths. So you may decide to lose yourself, or at least travel between different moments in the warp of time.

Bringing an awareness of the past into your present may enrich it with a longer and deeper view of life's significance; allow you to mother a rich array of inventive compensations for the fashionable existence that's pegged to brevity and shallowness.

Many in Venice have simply chosen to live as outsiders and misfits in conditions not of their own making, while expressing philosophical and lifestyle differences from mainstream society. They're authentic throwbacks to times when living outside the system meant something, when youth and youthful sympathizers couldn't find themselves in the options available and were forced, in Paul Goodman's apt phrase, to grow up absurd. This is hardly an easy choice. But however difficult, many try to hold on and preserve their links to the past even if their actions may not always escape absurdity.

And absurd behavior is likely since they believe *society* is warped, stitched together with distortions and imperfections that verify its flaws, making escapism attractive. One of the great ironies is that these absurdists turned the signs of progress most take to the bank into the proof of regress. Society was looking better and better, if measured by the surplus of material objects. But what were the hidden effects of giving them such importance in your life? In a society moving at warp speed, exponentially fast, chaos becomes ever more immanent as Alvin Toffler claimed in *Future Shock*. All that's solid was melting into air as individual survivors submitted to an orgy of transactions in the mushrooming consumer marketplaces. They felt this deadened the spirit and vaporized values, vaulting them away from themselves and their origins. So they pulled back from the forward rush, imagined times and occupied spaces better suited to their visions, and sought out communities of shared values.

But as the times have changed, the pressures to go with the flow have increased, leaving fewer survivors, and they're forced to reside in society's cracks. Many keep the faith, but many others get lost in the cracks. Some navigate between the two, doing the best they can. It's a challenge to survive under these circumstances.

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The warped society has many powers of persuasion to control citizens, and many toxic distortions to pollute the lives of those with weakened constitutions. But the best warpers learn to separate themselves from the influence and perform their lives through innovative networks that constitute a society within the society.

The Warp and the Woof

Since this warp has taken its toll on many residents who tend to lose themselves in networks that fail to register on the dominant radar, they're difficult to locate, which helps explain why so many believe that alternative Venice barely exists. But again, what we see here is not always what we get.

From the experience of living we learn to match figures with backgrounds and rely on these pictures to keep us well-grounded. Rorschach tests and others exist to police deviations and remind us when we slip away from firm ground. Venetians are no strangers to therapeutic devices since they're very aware of the potential for slippage. But everyday life here can frustrate the "normal" matches many others expect. This explains the popularity of palm reading, a ready-made remedy for coping with mismatches that gives residents a better grounding in what matters. And in this climate you often need the ability to be both therapist and patient, and flip back and forth between the two, to fully grasp the behavior of the varied characters and learn to identify them as they blend into their habitats.

These skills will help deliver the real numbers. By the time I plunged into this project the alternative community seemed not much bigger than it was in Lipton's day when a core group of 20-30 artists and writers flourished through a circle of cafes that supported openings and readings. Two in particular: The Venice West Café at 7 Dudley Ave, started by Stuart Perkoff in 1958; and the Gas House at Market and the Boardwalk, founded by Eric Nord in 1960. The prominent personas included Perkoff, Frankie Rios, John Thomas, Saul White, Wally Berman, Tony Scibella and Lawrence Lipton. Frankie Rios, who lives in Hollywood, is the only survivor of the core group of poets. Other notables missed this seminal moment by only a few years.

Philomene Long joined the community in 1963 and remained prolific until her death in August 2007.

And there are many others, including younger and lesser known writers and lifestylists surfing the ripples from these receding spiritual waters. John Maynard's book on the literary scene of Venice West gives us a revealing portrait of the complete core group as well as a glimpse of the recent generation.

The café network is not as extensive as it was, but alternative Venice is larger than the individuals who make these scenes. It includes many drawn to the natural and pop culture attractions, plentiful during alternative Venice's ascendancy, and their cohabitation over time helped forge a base of beaten visionaries. The mass expanded, adding to the visible core, from a national zeitgeist that sensationalized the dropout life, but also the huge success of Lipton's book. His remarkable story brought hordes of fanatics and voyeurs in search of fantasies the media did so well to stoke. It made the original band into a bigger group than they could ever be, endowing them with so many layers of cool they combusted into beatniks!

Invented by Herb Caen in 1958, a beatnik is the entertainment stereotype of "Beat." It was immortalized by Maynard G. Krebs in the TV series *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis*, a goateed bongo-playing deadbeat who spouted clichés, like "daddy-o," that infected popular conversations like an epidemic. This persuaded budding beatniks from the Dubuques of the land to tune out mom-and-pop's noise and drop into the carnival for a while. Venice could hardly avoid becoming a scene. And scenes certainly do bring suspicious characters.

The scene erupts through migrations of the young driven to feed their heads with fantasies and fulfill ideals denied them. It brought assorted believers in the strains of "alternative" who proselytized others as the scene mushrooms. Venice absorbs the migrants and hip invaders, leaving them irrevocably transfixed.

Philomene Long and John Haag are two of the most significant migrants. Philomene arrives on a West LA hilltop convent in 1958, prepped to immerse in the catholic word. Already keen on words thanks to her Greenwich Village roots, she finds this one word failed

to touch all of her spiritual parts. But since the issue was hush-hush, and not open to negotiation, she sought salvation elsewhere, in the words of Beat writers. What better way to escape the airy abstractions of catholic beatitudes than to join a community of poor and meek seeking to inherit a patch of earth. She *descends*, like many reflective catholics, down the 405 FWY with all deliberate speed to Beat Venice in 1963, living and writing steps away from the original Venice West Café, breathing the echoes and vibes of what that site meant in her unrelenting rage against the expected.

John Haag graduated from Harvard in the late 50s and headed to Italy in search of something different from the sterility of Eisenhower America. He read Lipton's book while there in 1960, enraptured by the world it presented, convinced our sunny slum-breeding "Italy" was the utopian wave of the future. So he comes here the same year, hangs at the Venice West Café, writes poetry, and witnesses Venice's evolution into a more socially aware alternative community.

He takes over the Venice West Café shortly thereafter, keeping it going until its demise in 1966 as a happening-space for patrons feeling the winds of change. The literary scene continues to flourish but a growing group of civil rights and anti-war activists begin to infiltrate the café. John taps this fervor and helps organize the groups and movements for battling Venice's first waves of developer madness.

Now there's no question that this scene included many who had few clues about society, and they likely passed perception-pollutants into the air faster than pre-oil-crisis gas guzzlers poisoned Pasadena. And the core group was simply too meager to balance the scales. But the swarm of beatnik lookalikes, play-along hipsters and copycats of this or that style brought pools of potential warpers with them, primed to redeem their experiences into an enduring legacy.

And they changed once they arrived. The space was bewitched with forces that performed like a catalytic converter. Toxic motives could be temporarily suspended; polluted perceptions could become perceptual enhancements. Many migrants talk of coming to Venice for a brief stopover and remaining for the rest of their lives, unable to move their bodies away, inspired by the city's special blend of

pleasure-seeking and creative exertion. This kept them alert and resilient to the warped society's pressures.

It's the large base of these bewitched citizens that's truly fascinating and defines the important texture of alternative Venice in recent times. It's to them that I've devoted most of my attention. I see this mass as the lifeblood of alternative Venice, what's helped shape an exciting variant on the bohemian idea.

Bewitched Bodies

Bohemians are admittedly a select breed. They pride themselves on advanced insights about art and life, shaped through their living arrangements, that the Joes and Janes will never get. Actually, can't get. If they start getting it, the cream of the core must redefine it or lose it! But Venice is the perfect lab for tempering exclusion and privilege. It's after all on the cusp of the dream-factory and rock-n-roll capitols, known for stories and sounds folks can get into. Bonded by different substances than other bohemian metropolises, it offers the spectacles and quick answers so many crave, even if they have few questions. It's like trying to compare James Joyce to Ray Bradbury. The latter was actually a struggling writer here in the 40s and 50s.

This Venice is about what's popular and palpable; the images and sounds of the dream-factory and music industry that gratify in-your-face emotional charges, and their fusion with the beach culture that privileges fun and physical appearance. It's about opening the doors of perception, the very phrase and idea that defined Venice's most famous rock group, to the soft parade of delights that drew script-surfers, nude sun worshippers and waitresses waiting for their break on through to the other side of whatever. It's about getting it all now!

This mindset can be seen in a few of the city's maverick celebs. Like Dennis Hopper, the counter-culture icon. In a fairly recent documentary, *Venice Lost and Found* by Brad Bemis, he says that he migrated here because of the energy, the feeling created by the natural and cultural attractions that pushes you to create and go beyond yourself. Or Gregory Hines, brilliant indie actor who came here in the early 70s precisely for the electric link between nature, pop culture and

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lifestyle. He felt that a special breed of person is drawn to the ocean, one desiring to live creatively and contemplatively, seeking the quality life that eludes so many out there in the “rat race.”

How true. As a seaside community Venice entertains life exposed to the natural elements 24/7, all the sand, water and sun to soothe and inspire diehard dreamers, closet hedonists and creative artists desiring to live in the cracks of civilization. And cracks are easily exposed at the very edge of the continent. Life can flip into an experience that's the stuff of art. You can simply strip away the frames and play act your way to the sublime through sensual spasms. It's lure enough to bring waves and waves of replacements to these shores.

Soaking up rays drenched in salt and sand while taking in the infinite panorama of water had to give you extra insight into variances, if not the way things ought to be. Edges flirt with abruptly altered states. At the caw of a seagull you could fantasize about that vast waterworld where awesome creatures threaten everything we know as civilized. This point of no return had to mess with your head, even if you didn't swim or surf. At the extreme it might seduce you into experiencing what it's like at the edge of life, pull you across the threshold to another form of existence.

This is not about fantasizing suicide, a southern California twist on the Golden Gate Bridge plunge, but the potential for positive transformation through natural forces. They push you beyond yourself, get you hyped up like those Dionysian dancers invading ancient Greece. They can also get you to plumb the depths.

There's a B-Movie from 1961 starring Dennis Hopper, *Night Tide*, which approaches documentary. Driven by the desire for adventure, Hopper becomes obsessed with a young woman who moonlights as a mermaid taking sea-plunges to stay in touch with her roots. He discovers her secret and stalks her in the canals and back alleys of the Venice slum, stroked to access the mystery. However unreal this seems, the activity of plunging into water is part of the culture. Plus the city was built on a swamp and we've become acclimated to the sense that our foundation, our grounding, is unsettled and mushy, that we're always on the verge of sinking to another reality. The entire area had to be filled in and firmed up before the houses and piers and

canals, doubling as drainage and homage to Venice Italy, could be constructed in 1905. And since we have four remaining canals, it's doubtful we'll ever get rid of that sucking sensation. But life began in the subterranean ooze, so the urge to revisit it is natural for Venetians who want to get in touch with who they are and where they came from.

These forces breathe through you, help play your head games as you sleep. They haunt your pad with the eerie feeling the walls barely exist, that your living space is part of the enveloping ether and you're at one with the surroundings.

They could help you experience life poetically even if you never deferred your weekend warrior training to get brainwashed by all those lit crit lecturers at the CCNYs of the land that Allen Ginsberg pelted with potato salad. They could give you profound insights into the seasonal rhythms even if you couldn't make heads or tails out of *The Wasteland* without Cliff Notes. And if you could string together your share of coherent sentences you might outline that Great American epic. If that desire should begin to flag you could revision your everyday life and explore new lifestyles, activities that this power propels in all worthy citizens...

Amuse

The amusement scene brought tourists attracted to beach spectacles. The coastal stretch was originally designed as a variant of Coney Island by founder Abbot Kinney. Replete with piers and state of the art carnival delights, this area drew huge crowds and secured the city's reputation as a pleasure haven. The early model included theaters and lecture halls for the endowed and educated, fare more familiar from the European formula behind Venice's larger concept. Some of its spirit remains, though the high culture couldn't survive the 20s, which witnessed Kinney's death and the rise of mass culture. Arias and lectures were replaced by street theater and the spectrum of circus entertainments, "lower" forms servicing tourism.

Lower at least in the eyes of most beholders who thumb down the chainsaw jugglers and snake handlers in a climate where hawking

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wares is the drama that usually matters. Even quality street theater is sparse these days. There's no question that the Boardwalk scene, always a commercial staple of Venice, is becoming more and more about money and product. Its west side has traditionally been the locus for soap boxes, quality performers with a social conscience, and emerging non-commercial artists, while the east side has mostly been a string of shops with tourist paraphernalia. Unfortunately this split may soon no longer exist if new residents are successful in lobbying the city to remove the west side.

The key issue however isn't the alleged inferiority of the pop amusement scene, but lifestyle experiences in its cracks that redefine what culture means by offering consumers ways to make sense of their immediate environment. It's about hanging with mates in spaces and times of your own making; converting carnival distractions into stimuli on your own terms.

There's something like a pleasure-drench here that strokes folks to evade the rules and play for the quality cultural experience. Like the nature-drench it keeps them pitched to the everyday rhythms that help shape alternatives and warp back at the system. Pleasure was a central plank in the value challenge mounted by the counter-cultures of the 50s and 60s. The art of pleasure for pleasure's sake, the ability to fearlessly take pure fun to the edge, stare into the void open to all sensations, could help you finally exorcise that dreary work ethic and especially the guilts it might trip you up with. To just have fun and disaffiliate from a system that so many agreed sucked, had to be redemptive. Unfortunately sympathies for dumping the work ethic have disappeared faster than work itself in our new world order.

The dropout experience is seductive. Not long ago I found a scrunched up sticker on the sidewalk out front, perhaps discarded by someone ambling toward the beach: "All play and no work? Sounds like a plan." But if this is your normal state, can you keep your head clear and focused? How creative and redeeming is this experience today?

Poets and artists claim their visions come from the muse, an inspirational power that compels them to create, using their imaginations to reorganize play and work. Others who aren't quite

there yet, but whose heads, hearts and eyes are in the right places, are susceptible to be amused by the carnival climate's powers. It's interesting that the word amusement includes the muse, quite appropriate for Venice where the entertainment scene over time has customized the link between fun and creativity. It permits dropouts to acquire at least linguistic parity with the poets and artists, some of whom tend to be less than thrilled about it, believing the muses will simply never be able to truck with the mass's amusing distractions.

The amused can hardly avoid being stroked, but unlike the poets and artists they're probably not fully aware of it, inspired to merely live in the moment. They're like roving performance artists who improvise sublime states without putting on airs, dangling fans here and there. They have no gallery or publisher in mind; no higher aspirations. Thriving on pure purposelessness suits them just fine.

In *An Essay on Liberation* Herbert Marcuse, writing about the late 60s dropout generation, suggests how many escaped what they believed was a conformist system that denies authentic pleasure: living like works of art outside the grips of the hidden motives and purposes of the moneyed world; refusing participation in the networks that keep it going. He adapts Immanuel Kant's idea that art means nothing outside of itself. It is a purely formal alternative to a market-driven society that distorts values; a purposeless power that gives its possessor options for discovering new purposes. Marcuse's dropouts in other words were possessed with the desire to find better alternatives and live as purposeless receptacles striving to shape their own destinies.

Many here may or may not be able to grasp larger purposes. A purposeless existence is not exactly a charmed activity here these days. The rebate-generated trust fund lifestyles monopolize the purposes and especially the pleasure scripts. Those with the best share of surplus endowments tend to define fun. The trademark on "authentic pleasure" is owned by those who get the most toys in the end. Venice's nude beaches for eroticism's sake have been replaced by porn players occupying high-end beach condos motivated to eradicate the threat of prurience for the sake of it.

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But no matter how concentrated this monopoly becomes in the waves of gentrification, as long as the stroked remain there's hope that Venice's special conditions can work their magic on them. In fact the more the highly-motivated gentry gobble up space and show how far removed from the mass they are, the more attractive the dropout option becomes for those who play toyless. Since closing this gap is not realistic, why worry! Just live in the moment and pass the torch of inspiration to others who await the catalysts that usually arrive. The whole is infinitely greater than its magical parts.

Yet if a creative, purposeless existence can still be had, what is it all about? If there's no purpose in it, then the flights of amusing fancy might lead only to the eternal weekend of satisfied selves. It's one thing to trash a work ethic that's part of the problem. But what's next? Doing nothing is not the same as experiencing nothingness, embracing the void to figure what false messiahs are messing with your head, and how, before filling it up with new questions. Bringing your being to bear on the essentials of existence is lots of hard work. And if efforts fail to produce something, then what? To exist in society is to perform on some level and contribute to the conversations of progress. And this means product.

What redeemed all of this back then was the numbers: so many others doing it together. And the everyday was experienced in a kind of extended slow motion, the sense that false starts could be canceled and time would permit plenty of constructive replacements. So refusing work and doing nothing in the sun was about making progress in the cracks of civilization as a temp, storing the advantages up for later when who knows what would be happening. Not like today when refusal tends to elevate the work ethic by making those just hanging out look like mere slackers!

The positive dropout experience survives here because pleasure-seeking thrives with alternative lifestyles. Seekers have a shot at escaping the pleasure scripts that go with self-satisfied me-first states of mind. They can keep their senses open to new possibilities even if this initially means skinny-dipping uncharted waters and becoming mediums with messages they might not want to decode. It's like some chord combusts from the ether and makes the mass of head tunes and

dissonant ditties into a symphony where everyone can toot their own horn at the same time.

There are residents around these days who model “alternative” by following Abbie Hoffman’s advice, concocted in the chaotic heat of 1968 and central to the Yippies, to just “do it.” You compensate for your lag in consciousness by forcing the issue, pretending that something exists. If you talk about it over and over and act like it does, that the revolution has arrived for example, reality will catch up!

Perception Politics

So goes politics. There’s a strong desire for a fairer and more humane existence here, something close to a utopian mentality that transcends anal partisan formulas. The city’s had a homegrown party since 1968, the Peace and Freedom Party, which runs left-liberal candidates for office in a mostly symbolic protest against the status quo. Many of the key political activities in the community are linked to its direction, which is a loosely populist one. It pushes issues that challenge excess corporate power and its marriage with government, and is mostly concerned with the negative impact of all this on equality and democracy.

Though its support of candidates makes it similar to other top-down parties, it’s really about encouraging greater citizen involvement consistent with Jeffersonian democracy, which is firmly rooted here. More participation should produce greater vigilance, and eventually the ability to live a democratic existence through force of habit.

I haven’t devoted much attention to Venice’s everyday politics. The *Free Venice Beachhead*, the city’s alternative newspaper founded in December 1968, is the authoritative voice. This excellent free paper is devoted to issues of social justice and giving ordinary folks, citizen reporters, a venue to express themselves. It fuses the best of committed journalism with direct democratic practice. I like to think of the *Beachhead* as fulfilling I. F. Stone’s muckraking mandate to expose the tendency for power brokers and politicians to stretch the truth.

My concern is how residents live politically in the sense of eagerly creating and taking charge of institutions that impact their lives

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but which flower outside the establishment. An independent mind creates the citizen awareness for potentially ending politics as usual. Free from outside influences, citizens learn to be democratic by managing their own affairs and acting equitably within groups. They force a freer existence by doing it; opening the doors of perception and letting it happen!

Venetians did this through collectives like Free Venice, a group committed through direct action to resisting social, political and economic control over citizens' lives. It originated in protest against a planned freeway through the city in the 60s, becoming the shell for fighting against police harassment on the Boardwalk around the same time and opposing LA's development policies. It spawned a number of organizations for feeding folks' heads with good ideas: the Free Venice Food Co-op; the Free Venice Ecology Community; the Free Venice Theater at the Pavilion; the *Free Venice Beachhead*, among others.

Living free is merely doing what's necessary to avoid and cancel society's power trips and rituals of exchange. This can be done for example by acting as if money doesn't exist. Shuck the spending spree and start bartering for valuable experiences. With no middle man or substance to dispense division, cooperation and free dealing among equals can have a chance. The idea of giving can catch on since so many will be receiving. Once you shake free from the habit of depending on money you'll start to spot the layers of hidden agenda folks sport when they value themselves so highly. Above all avoid freeloading, what the free marketers will say such withdrawal tactics amount to. And they'll use it against you since there's no free lunch.

Skills like this likely won't get the parasites off your back in the foreseeable future, but then the freedom which matters is not about taking over the state or other central authorities. It has to do with learning how to cope with these forces as individuals in creative formation. These are the weapons of a constructive anarchism that surfaced among the Diggers in the early 60s. Emmet Grogan and others in the San Francisco Haight were onto something. If you can't immediately get rid of capitalism then the next best course is to do everything possible to break the bonds of exchange this system forges

by exchanging things at will and feeding folks. Like the Venice chapter of Food Not Bombs, an organization devoted to doing just that.

The original Diggers hailed from late 1600s England. When the landed lords began fencing in the open range the former serfs depended on for survival, the latter just worked it anyway! Our lords have a lot more firepower for sure. But the same mentality reared up in Venice and remains to this day. Many renters, some early victims of a relatively mild gentrification craze, took to squatting in vacant buildings marked for destruction by the city to repress the mushrooming population of “freeloaders.” These residents, wanting to form shared communities, were loaded with substances to get at the system.

Nowadays the freedom fighters who are Grogan’s spiritual kin have their work cut out for them since the diggers you mostly see are dozing the closed-off range as if money might soon vanish. If you squat in one of the few vacant buildings around these days you’ll find yourself in County well before escrow closes. And since the low-rent practice of grabbing Boardwalk space to do your own thing brings a feeding frenzy from LAPD’s finest, this art form and the strand as we know it are threatened with eminent extinction. Yet the Digger philosophy is about meeting the challenges that a lean and mean, shock-therapy capitalism poses for a more humane society. Horizons are always shrinking, ranges opening and closing, when capital is in the picture or hiding behind it. So it’s a matter of matching movements with a bit better savvy.

Free to Re-Fuse

Since this Venice is about the indie-spirit in every domain of life, the freedom of the many to refuse what mainstream society expects of them, and to create alternatives in the void, partisan politics as usual is not the main focus. As the Digger and anarchist persuasions stress, change occurs through local collectives, at the small city-state level for sure, but not at the larger societal level. That large of a unit is virtually impossible to change democratically. It’s too warped and powerful.

While they agreed that society was a drag, they mostly wanted to get out of it; spiritually compensate for it. What motivated them, and kept them out of politics, was the belief that no big overhaul of society or large-scale engineering of people's lives would matter, whether the game was capitalism, socialism or communism. At issue was the whole technocratic organization of the industrial system that shaped life with the best knowhow and very rational and standard formulas that contain answers about improving existence.

But what kind, and at what cost? All the fruits of civilization to that point were channeling folks through a clockworked society that lagged behind on the human scale. They were free, especially to buy products, but what do these creature comforts mean if you're missing the keys to existence? Alienation came from being tracked through processes that left you trapped in iron cages you could never really see.

Replace the Republicans with the Democrats and what do you get? Norman O. Brown believed the real fight was not on the level of politics at all, but about putting an "end to politics." Since solutions that embraced elections and parties only brought more of the same, merely the replacement of elites, we need to replace politics with poetry. Brown sampled Blake, Nietzsche, Sartre and others to claim that poetry, art, imagination, and the creator spirit are what life is about. They are the "real revolutionary power to change the world."

This sounds quite appealing. We can all use a bump in visionary power to sidestep the traps that plague mass society. Nietzsche, an eminent presence throughout this era, felt the onus was on the person to step up and super-size themselves through the apocalypse, be an "overman" and transcend the middlemen's hang-ups. Freedom is about finding the best words and visualizing the most sublime states that access truth, what the masses miss.

This is not exactly a new "solution." Poets driven by the desire to commune in the full rejection of industrial society have been at this game for some time. The danger is that their idiom can become exclusive and even celebrate racial and class superiority, like T. S. Eliot did in the early 30s and Ezra Pound a few years later. And while the tribe muses, the developers and venture capitalists can become the

new overreachers, avant-garde property managers on a mission to create lofty communities for their tribes.

This is a problem that Venice hasn't escaped. Since the most recent spike in property values in the mid-to-late 90s this community has attracted phalanxes of troops for the speculation wars. Brokering a revolution engineered from office towers across the land, they've invested the city with a futurist pulse. They brandish demolition permits and prepared instruments for the speedy conversion of hovels and A-frames. Dozers dot the land, orchestrating new wave sounds of creative destruction. The avoidance of politics might encourage these changes by default.

But the attraction of the poetic solution is legitimately fueled by the fear of what alternative political scenarios can lead to, some form of socialism that brings bureaus and bosses who will privilege the distortions of a leveled mass society at the expense of the creative spirit.

Philomene Long, while not uninvolved in community issues and more political in the months before she passed, was a passionate believer in this idea. She felt politics occupies a zone that rarely intersects with creative ones since it's about the logical satisfaction of needs and desires, and these pale before those spawned in the unfettered ozone, where the muse works her magic. She was fond of mentioning that Venice had a street named Ozone located a few short blocks from the Venice West corridor.

She believed in universals that stream whatever the historical misfortune. Venice is a place where we can transcend the circumstances we have no control over because it is essentially a "state of mind." It will survive the exit of the last anointed man or woman, the final nails in the condo-coffins from developers if they succeed in turning Venice into just another upscale resort, and any of those bad things the "philistines" always do to culture. But then this idea must also be stateless, capable of merging with other mental masses or physical spaces in what Hemingway called a moveable feast. This is his phrase for the Parisian bohemian experience of the 20s that would never end because it tapped the intensity of the irrepressible human adventure.

This power pervades Venice, penetrating lifestyles and strata that Nietzsche's overmen would likely never see, but which enlightens the poetic undermen hyped to experimental heights by the popular carnival. If they could remake society into a more equal one, socialism as a word would drop from the lexicon and the creative would express themselves in languages a broader cross-section of folks could understand. Here the pure and anointed have no monopoly on a muse rising like irrepressible swamp vapor. Visionaries and legislators can be at least in the same chapter, working to shape a significant city-state, a truly democratic republic.

Alternative Venice at its best and pure was the constituent life force of a free and equal America many have reflected upon over the years. Its contemporary incarnation is about a mass of very civilized "savages" reclaiming it by living as if they're on the cusp of its realization, making what might be a last stand, but refusing to give up...

After a discussion of "method" in Chapter One, the book divides into basically two parts. Though it does not pretend to document the past, the first provides a brief and selective history of Venice that focuses the transition between its celebrated resort days and the post-WW II era when the alternative culture matures; and the transition between its peak years and current times which have witnessed the challenge to it from the forces of gentrification. I also discuss the origins and larger story of the alternative culture and how they relate to the Venice scene.

The second part focuses the spaces that have special relevance for the geographical identity of Venice West and profiles those who currently inhabit them. I look at a café in this corridor, the South Beach Café; Sponto Art Gallery, located on the very site of the original Venice West Café; and an apartment in one of the original "Venice of America" structures, occupied by a long-time Venice West member and poet. I also profile several activists at work who personify the alternative political mentality of Venice, struggling to challenge the forces working to eradicate it, and how they cope within the worlds that remain despite the increasingly unfavorable odds. And finally, I

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offer a sort of alternate tour of the city, a look at its special constellation of spaces and street scenes that are neither strikingly popular nor immediately evident to most folks who descend on the city these days. But it is in these places where we find traces of the Venice that matters, thriving in the conditions that threaten it.

CHAPTER 7. FERTILIZING THE WASTELAND

Venice's extended family of free spirits will remain and thrive as long as they have each other, and the haunted spaces flourish. Much depends on how they meet their makers. If successful they can join mates who've passed to the other side and linger in these spaces. But if these meetings start to be bummers--we have no control over the fickleness of fate or the power of deities--and the master spirit banishes them to another space, the group will approach extinction. This is especially a problem since demolition appears to be getting the edge over retrofit, and there are fewer and fewer alternative bodies arriving on the scene to fill the gap.

Yet we must at least try and preserve these spaces since they can become rent-free hotspots for the lingerers to reach out and touch someone. And since these resident specters have something important to say, these spaces can help us commune with the past. Even if these conversations might not be very clear, they have the potential to become useful links to a valued history.

There are no guarantees, however, since these spirits can speak in tongues that are difficult to translate. So we have to compensate by being more sensitive to their needs, and above all learn how to spy various clues. And they're not exactly piling up. But as the demolition permits continue to breed like Santa Ana termite swarms, we sense the droning discomfort.

We could perhaps use a high-tech boost, an upgrade of those 3D glasses from the 50s that might expose the multi-dimensional existence of these spirits. And if vendors on the east side of the Boardwalk would start selling them, instead of those cheap sunglasses, we could begin to see the skeletal traces and spiritual emanations that matter.

A few steps southeast from the back of the Cadillac Hotel, just across Speedway, are some not very conspicuous clues. At first they seem like little more than splats of gray paint a careless handyman let drip when making some improvements to the building, the Ellison.

They're concentrated on the narrow cement strip that runs along the building and separates it from Speedway, but they also spill onto this alley. And they're directly below one of Philomene Long's closets that nurture more skeletal traces per square inch than any other Beat enclave in the city. These splats are clues for grasping the meaning of more haunted space. But this gets ahead of the story...

The Mad Woman of Paloma

Philomene is the most famous resident survivor of Venice West. It's fitting she lives a short block from one of its key sites, the Dudley corridor. She's lived in this sector since arriving in 1963, and even over on Park for a while near Larry Lipton's house. So it's no surprise she's passionately devoted to the history that breathes through it. We often ramble into the wee hours about whether it will survive the haunted folks and spaces. She's hopeful.

"Venice has been a special place ever since Abbot Kinney created it from the swamp...the inspiration's out there...all we need to do is let it happen!"

"But what if the time comes when no one knows what's happening?"

"There will still be hotspots that flare through the ignorance...it's in the air and land!"

We owe much of what remains of Venice West to Philomene's discoveries and continued creativity. She was named Venice's Poet Laureate by Councilman Bill Rosendahl during the city's 2005 Centennial. Her acceptance was a manifesto for poetry as a power to see better and live committed to what really matters, but especially as *the* power for keeping a healthy slant on Venice's past and present.

I'm walking to her place along Speedway, eager to launch into the weekend with stimulating conversation. My notes are in order, and I'm prepared for all contingencies. I've even swung by Henry's Market for Shyla's veggie burger special for ballast in case the language gets liquefied. I approach the final steps below her window, carefully arc my way around the gray splats while paying close attention to traffic on the right.

When I turn left at Paloma there's a line working the intercom so I follow the crowd into the Ellison. Surprising Philomene has advantages. Sometimes I even lie in wait across from the entrance to hitch a code-free pass up the stairs. Dropping in on neighbors is a valuable custom that distinguishes the small-town element of this community. Though Philomene relishes this spontaneous quality, she prefers advance notice since it gives her time to close the closets and straighten things up. She's always apologizing for her messy place.

She surely doesn't need to, but I sense she's feeling the pressure to clean up her act. In fact her son chipped in recently during a stay. Perhaps overcompensating for the fallout from their blissfully-beaten anti-nuclear family experiment, he repaid the favor by finding a slot for everything, leaving her with a waste-free folder-rich upgrade that appears to have set her writing schedule back several weeks. Perhaps she's learned that too much method can be maddening.

I walk softly to the stairs. I never take the elevator when I'm in the surprise mode. The sound might tip her off. Plus a detour up the stairs offers another angle on this architectural wonder, one of the city's first structures. I've learned that keeping the spirit of early Venice close helps access Philomene's frame of mind and prepare to grasp her free associations. I knock on the door, visualizing her panic from having to do many things at once. I hear rushing footsteps and a sonorous "Who is it?"

"Guess who!"

She opens the door, looking like she hasn't a clue, and I glimpse her state in the brief moment before her memory returns. She seems preoccupied. Philomene thrives on good conversation but relishes her solitude. She's become quite adept these days at shifting in and out of moods.

Her look changes slightly, like she's about ready to snap out of it. But she's angled in the door frame like it could go either way, perhaps needing an extra push from someone. Her hair prophesies the dilemma. Like an unkempt eucalyptus on Rose Ave ready for the gentrifying shears, her locks are multitasking.

Beatress Beattitude

“Are you ready for some...”

“...thought you were coming after you ran...got this deadline, some literary mag in Spain wants me to go on and on about sex and orgies here in the 60s...am so tired of seeing my Aunt lying in that bed...didn't have a chance to get any more wine...Illuminate's at it again!”

“I brought what you left at my place...want me to come back later?”

Her gestures pull me across the threshold into the light streaming through the beach-facing windows. It disorients me. But as I angle inside it paints the mounds of memorabilia in clear relief.

“This place is transformative...can't imagine you ever leaving!”

“The muse is here!...many very creative people in Venice's history have spent time...”

“...it reminds me of the Sailhouse Lofts over on Main and Marine...those balconies facing inward to the courtyard...*some* are keeping the look of early Venice alive!”

“The look maybe, but creativity needs sacrifice and struggle.”

“The muse can't be accommodated in million-dollar closets?”

“No...the rich are welcome in Venice too, it's just that to create you must be in touch with the spirit and...what's really meaningful gets deadened by the material possessions and lifestyles you have to maintain to keep them.”

“Isn't that an outmoded idea? Don't you also get deadened by not having enough, from always having to do survival things to stay even with the game?”

“Yes...it's one of the tragedies of what's happened here...but being slaves to material objects makes us more insensitive to the things and people that matter. We can't have a quality life without freeing ourselves from them...it's not about choosing to be deprived, just living more selectively...’Blessed are the poor and meek for they shall inherit the earth’, one of my favorite beatitudes.”

The final syllable leaves her wide-eyed and glowing with satisfaction, like she's solved a perplexing mystery. How apt in this

shrine for the preservation of the past, renewal space for many who've never stopped believing beat. Sappho's words on the near wall: "The sounds of mourning do not suit a house that serves the muse; they are not wanted here."

"If you get your head straight about what really matters in the everyday scheme, learn how to stay away from material objects and pleasures, you're home free and richer in spirit than the rich?...a lack of worldly things gives you more privileges spiritually?"

"It's dedicated poverty."

"Will the victims of poverty, the good people who wanna get out of it, have a clue about what all of this means?"

"Well...Christianity, with its power and wealth, keeps many poor people in its clutches, encourages them to accept their deprived states and love their masters...but the truth is out there!"

"Where? How do they find it?"

"Well, every once in a while there's a breakaway, some want to bring things back down to earth and practice those great ideas in the gospels, turn their attention to this life but not deny the other one either. It's Liberation Theology, the rage around the time when I went into the convent in 1958, revived through the inspiration of Pope John 23rd."

"It's interesting that he died in 1963, the same year as JFK, a catholic president who was telling youth to help others and serve their country, and also the year you dropped out of the convent? Those must've been fertile times for dedicated poverty!"

"I think there was so much going on then that escaped our ability to grasp it."

"It was then when altruism seemed to be the natural gospel, not greed and me-firstism...community and sharing and spiritual betterment seemed right."

"Yes!...looking back it's hard to imagine how that happened and...compared to now it's like...well this seems like another planet!"

"The world of the poor and deprived seemed to inspire many then. I think of Kerouac's fascination with hobos and 'negroes'...but wasn't this 'slumming' sort of like tourism? It seems they barely broke bread with them before finding the freeway!"

“It was right, maybe not pure, but people were trying to bridge worlds!”

“It’s interesting that dedicated poverty was happening in good economic times and when consumerism was becoming the national religion.”

“That’s what they saw through, what motivated them...but the media confused the messages. There was a core that refused the hype and did its best to ignore the false signs and.....that’s where Zen came in...get your own house in order, don’t force anything that...”

“...didn’t this get trendy too, a way to drop out and turn away from...”

“...yes, but the energy created from the practice of living directly and genuinely in the moment produces a smile of understanding, a sudden intuition, a wordless transmission that reveals both the problem and the solution!”

I imagine this power and see another quote on the wall. It’s over by the calligraphy made by Zen master Maezumi Roshi for her marriage to John Thomas. From Tan Taigi: “Many mosquitoes bloated with blood during Zen meditation.” I picture waves of energy radiating from a squinting monk that spread out everywhere and empower all subjects eager to strive for some purity of resolution...

“That’s a tall order!...but doesn’t the world stay as screwed up as ever...the caring mind just gets a reprieve from the whole mess that society...”

“...if you care it shows and your attitude will urge others to follow...the right course comes from just accepting...you’ll possess the truth and it can’t be violated.”

You do feel possessed when you enter this space. It’s like entering church in a sense, with the large wooden cross, and nuns everywhere. The liturgies are thought waves created from the intense desire to communicate that saturate the many journals and binders of poems, papers nesting with flyers and yellowed newspaper clips, the surplus of books yet to find their resting place. They can incense you at random with a eucharistic power to make meaningful patterns.

Many who’ve crossed this threshold speak of succumbing to conversational rapture where new words and phrases pulse them

through the night. There have been some epic rap sessions. Like those between Philomene and John Thomas, who died in 2002, a philosopher-poet who arrived here in the heyday of Venice West and could never leave. His ghostly voice remained on the message tape for years after. Fielding calls from the tribe of visionaries who refuse to pass? Perhaps those random traces of sooted sea breezes on the wall over the bed are really stains of his thoughts and feelings.

When possessed by this space you do feel it's bigger, like the late night polemics and yearnings have stretched it out, played with your perceptions, jujitsued the actual cubic volume into a cathedral...

"Would you say your philosophy is a mix of Zen and catholicism, similar to Kerouac's?"

"Yes, well...like many catholics Kerouac was driven beyond the simple and ordinary, inspired to do extraordinary things, but would retreat into himself and return to Lowell and his mother. Maybe transcendence gets confused in a philosophy that's been made over into something quite ordinary, and after a while you need to get a better perspective and so you embrace the East, leaving as much of your baggage behind as..."

"...which is what you've done?"

"Yes...but I have less baggage because I was in the convent and worked through and out of Catholicism. I left in 1963 because I couldn't take the brainwash that there's only one way to be saved and all that. But I've carried many positives with me and I'd like to believe I've married East and West successfully, though I'm definitely more Zen."

"More than the Beats as a group, or Kerouac?"

"He was a special case!"

"Do you see yourself as a member of the Beat family, or do you have serious issues with..."

"...as far as the values and philosophy, yes, for the most part. I write about many of the same things, but they were a womanizing boys club, and especially the Venice clan. Bob Alexander, the high priest at the Temple of Man over on Cabrillo during the 70s was the worst...the scene was full of men taking advantage of women, treating

John O'Kane

them like property, and not many could get up the confidence to resist...”

She suddenly looks exhausted. The energy of the space seems to evaporate with her final syllable...

Philomene’s poems are passionate testimonials like those of her male mentors, especially Ginsberg whom she knew well and used to drop in here. Her love affair with Emily Dickinson is a plus. Not exactly a Beat but a fine muse for Beatresses everywhere when it comes to dodging literary rules in a flip-off of male privilege. It’s poetic justice that she’s the only resident survivor of Venice West. The last word from a woman who can enlighten us about this special past. I’m trying to think of a question that might restore her energy when I hear a tap, tap, tap on the window facing Speedway. Philomene turns around to welcome a surprise visitor.

“It’s Illuminate!”

Beaten Birds

It turns out those gray splats below her window are not smatterings of paint after all but weathered dollops of pigeon doo-doo. On any given Sunday these birds flock to her second-story ledge, finding ample nutrients to get them through the day. They’re always up there but on Sunday they converge on Philomene’s space like strafed fighter pilots who’ve spotted the carrier. This is when tourists are thick as thieves and the fuming SUVs carrying them are particularly foul. They disperse more freely during the week, returning to the ledge only after their radar encounters a few aggressive hotspots left from the weekend.

This is good and bad news for us residents. With most getting their fill at Philomene’s for Sunday dinner, there’s less of a chance to be splat on our strolls to the beach. But avoid the Ellison since they might be vengeful from having their space violated. The gray matter seems to drop faster than the force of gravity, dunging all targets at random.

Over the years she’s given pigeons sanctuary in a climate that’s becoming increasingly hostile to feces-specific species whose very

existence irks the clean-up committees. They've flourished alongside the seagulls and other fairer fowl that are making the grade better these days. Though no wimpy wasters themselves, seagulls are more photogenic and get more respect. Their size and mannerisms dwarf their droppings and even create the impression they're on a higher link in the chain of being.

"But how can you be so excited about these birds!? Does anyone really care that..."

"...they have authority....were some of Venice's first residents. Abbot brought many from Italy and set them free along the shores and they homed in on this street, Paloma."

Philomene knows her bird types. She's been strain-spotting since 1963 when she shed her convent habit to find Venice, which fortunately led to her salvation through words in the family of disaffiliated writers rooted here. And one of the benefits from her mastery of words is the uncanny ability to see what many don't through the cracks and crannies in our everyday worlds. She has a special gift for picturing species as they evolve. She's convinced there is such a bird as the Paloma Ave pigeon. For as long as she can remember this special breed has appeared on her ledge pecking away with the desire to communicate.

"What's so special about that type of bird?"

"It's different than the rest. It pecks away with personality and hangs around longer, even plays house and does the family thing for a while. Ma and Pa Paloma, as I call them, have been here for a long time, bringing their share of marvels into the world. Many sit and stare for hours like they're ready for anything to keep the flow going. They have a dove-like innocence about them...pigeons are really low-brow doves! So I read them poems...they love Poe and Dickinson and...it's amazing how they take to words! One I call the poetess really gets into it, like she understands the meanings!"

"How could you tell?"

"It was her pecks, blinks and nods and a glint in her eyes like a child has when it begins mumbling. It made sense, like maybe she found language...perhaps pidgin English!...but then she began to get these twittering cheeps from the rest and started to withdraw, avoiding

eye contact. After a while the other birds pecked away at her until she flew away.”

“So is this the fate of sensitives who try to survive these days in a flock of hostile forces?”

“For the ones who stay around and seem to want something special, and perhaps have a little passion for...humanity!...they have trouble.”

“Have Ma and Pa Paloma ever popped a pure dropout?”

“After the poetess left they persevered for several hours on a dark and cold and rainy day on the ledge and delivered a creature that seemed to be at such odds with the surrounding gloom that I named her Illuminate, a truly beatified bird!”

“Perhaps she was nervous about what awaited her beyond the cracked shell so she took her sweet time to make a break?”

“She refuses to peck...her head’s just not into what the hustling herd takes seriously, I guess...or maybe she’s autistic.”

“Or maybe she’s just getting her act together and could care less about what sort of birdseed there might be on those bigger art-condo ledges over on Main!”

“She certainly doesn’t seem competitive!”

“It seems you and her have a bond...she obviously won’t bite the hand that feeds her, but you must see something we don’t.”

“Most here could care less about much that matters, and so it keeps me hopeful to find humanity in places they ignore. It says we’re immune from nothingness if beings from the lower depths--I guess it’s really the higher and flightier echelons!--can also refuse to fit. Illuminate captures something of what I feel the alternative spirit was all about before Venice became a circus.”

Many dismiss this pigeon play with predictable putdowns: she’s starved for companionship in a poetry-shrinking community and must consort with wild life; this is what happens to those who pursue the purity of the word in a world muddied with figures and graphs; the Beats, what do you expect from those who view the 9-5 drill as the curse of death!

But these naysayers have a stake in Venice’s gentrification and measure progress differently. If they had their way they would likely

refigure the breeding balance at the expense of pigeons. So they're not apt to be reliable observers of Philomene's behavior even if able to make sense of it. The widening gyrations in lifestyle are an unfortunate sign of our times. The center, a middle ground where folks all over the spectrum can hash out their differences, doesn't appear to be holding. This is all the more reason to appreciate what Philomene means to this community. Her ability to spot the right signs is one that many of us need in these moments when alternative life forms are fading and messages are getting confused.

Fertileyes

What she sees around her and how she puts it in perspective is what matters. It figures that she's attracted to animal life. Many poets and artists have played with the spectrum of life forms to comment on the state of civilization. If society's looking pretty dreary why not turn back the evolutionary clock and seed suspicions about linear progress?

For Philomene, whose mind is flush with words and the means to overlap and separate their meanings, it makes sense that diverse beings should share the same space. She's primed to welcome them. Birds of course are plentiful along the ocean, and you can see her most any twilight hour happily hugging the edge of civilization, zoned into the natural cocktail, the roaring immensity and celestial light show. This sensual bath bumps her visionary prowess to discover the correspondences that most of us miss.

"Illuminate seems like a perfect pupil for you. With lots of time on her hands she must have that make-do-on-my-own-terms mentality found among all serious dropouts."

"She's receptive, a blank slate, though scratched up with some genetic surprises!"

"She must be a natural for the hunt and peck method...not exactly the hip-techno way to get noticed these days, but..."

"...well, if the medium's still the message!"

"She could get one of those manual typewriters like Stu gets once in a while at Marina Appliance on Lincoln. Don't you have one over there in the corner?"

“Yes, I love thinking with that machine. Strange, it makes me more creative. I often feel like a robot with my computer...it’s always going down and...actually, I love to handwrite things when I can.”

“If we use the old machines regularly maybe we can imagine the worlds of their users. There’s actually an upright on the back cover of Lipton’s book.”

Illuminate’s head-bobbing away on the ledge, stretching and jerking what could be a chain of pipsqueaks, alliterations and nonsense rhymes, apparently hunting for something. Replaying the hunt for the right letters and words might be exactly what humans need who want to express the fleeting and unknown. In a land laid waste by keyboarded haste, playing with a different medium might free up new messages. She might be a perfect role model if we’re tempted to jump back into the rat race. Hopefully she’ll remain here and keep breeding.

“Can sensitives like Illuminate survive long against these pressures, and especially with Venice’s changing winds that seem to be licensing the animal instincts?”

“They fly away eventually, off somewhere...never see them again...but there’s always more. The other day I looked out on the ledge and noticed Illuminate was gone, then another strange one appeared who had that starved look and familiar mannerisms, so I started reading poems and it really got into it. Pa Paloma arrived, followed by a few hopefuls, and I just kept reading and reading. Afterwards they chirped nonstop for several minutes.”

“Do you think Illuminate will come back?”

“She always has!”

Inspired beings yearn to test alien skies. Hopefully she’ll return to Philomene’s encampment. This would be a good omen. If a bird can survive such adverse conditions and keep pecking along, there’s hope for all beaten beings trying to make it in the new Venice order.

Fecal Force Field

Philomene loves these pigeons as if they were her children. But she’s also concerned with what they mean to those whose mentalities are blocking quality renewal, especially gentrifiers on their clean-up

missions. And since she doesn't hold out much hope for politicians to renew the city, she's become a believer in the power of symbols to shape an awareness of what the stakes are.

It's no secret that the sanitizers detest these wasters. But they tend to feel the same way toward most beaten beings and underbirds: those who have untended plants, refuse to get designer haircuts--or any other kind--at the salons on Kinney Blvd, let weeds overtake grass in their yards, neglect to bathe daily, let the dustbunnies flutter and consume their pads, commit unforgivable sartorial sins, beach-gaze at mid-day when the ticker-tape is still moving...

What can be done in the face of such prejudice? If the gentrifiers, like the best televangelist rappers money can buy, want to force all wasters to be free and see the light, suppress the evidence of their existence, then how do these birds express themselves?

For Philomene this is about controlling the rap on waste. Many are convinced our fair city has become a wasteland, but there's no consensus about what it means. It's hard to imagine her and others who believe passionately in Venice's quality renewal having a good sit-down with the players who view waste as mostly a matter of appearances and refuse to change what matters. The battle lines have been drawn.

The gentrifiers do their thing, rarely mince their words and use their power and resources to remake Venice into a squeaky-clean beach resort. They won't rest until all those who can't freely pay their way are gone. Those armed with words and images mostly lack the political savvy to envision an alternative plan, or the power to implement one. They see the obsession with clean-up as the problem since the gentry's removal strategies are really people-displacers. Dehumanizing policies are actually behind the streaming lines of architectural standardization and polished surfaces.

No one wants garbage-strewn streets. And you'll not find many ecstatic about bird-family droppings, especially from pigeons. Though not all residoo is treated equally. Deposits from canine companions the size of baby stud horses (laws of property beckon body guards) are on the rise among up and comers to our shores. Yet these droppings, and despite their greater visibility, are not noticed. It's like they're a

natural part of the landscape. This hypocrisy complicates the fight, and gives sanitizers an unfair boost.

They get one too from the examples of “successful” improvement in areas around Venice, especially that of Santa Monica. Our northern neighbor provides the model for material progress that improving communities feel pressured to embrace. And this city does indeed offer many amenities. But when a hot place like Santa Monica out succeeds others around it there’s bound to be unintended consequences, and this has certainly proven true for Venice.

As Santa Monica sends more and more of its unmentionables across the Navy Street border, for example, we’ve had to spend more time devising ways to pass them on to Mar Vista! Our waste piles are a boon for the brown-bobbing shadows that dutifully spear and swab while their masters are at the ticker-tape parade. They can even consort with their nanny natives. They’re also a godsend for the homeless. Our nooks and alleyways are still a sushied smorgasbord compared to Santa Monica’s.

By the way, you can always tell when a hood is on the up-and-up, turning that proverbial corner on the waste problem. The receptacles become aesthetically pleasing, even get padlocks to make sure only members use them. Planners know the truly wasted deposit suspicious packages. And owners of the newer condo complexes, no weepy wonks when it comes to stratification theory, pitch in with monitors and roving security squads.

A big barrier to quality renewal is the sanitizers’ obsession with wasted surfaces. The right façade is everything. Visionary homeowners spare no cost to erect better looking fences and maintain them, getting the best substances for whitewashing graffiti-waste away. Our taggers are no substance abusers though, usually finding a way to waste these efforts. Some get stroked by the muse and make their angry etches into meaningful messages, even murals.

The graffiti wall, as I mentioned, was the result of this simmering passion. A section of wasted material became the target of serial scratchers for several years, becoming pasted over and over with new messages. Unfortunately it was dozed some years ago as wasting

gibberish. In the face of such odds, Philomene and others realize they need to get more inventive.

“What if,” she said one night, “suddenly Paloma Ave pigeons were everywhere, breeding so often that no one could miss them. These masses of beaten birds perched throughout the town could become the masters!”

Then it hit us like a lightning bolt. We could actively breed pigeons and place them all over town. Unlike Hitchcock’s aggressors, these peckers would have good values and educate us in being more humane. We could mount a public relations effort to change their image as degenerate dung droppers into carriers of special insight about dropping out. Eventually many might come to reject the idea that a beaten-looking community is automatically wasted.

But Philomene knows better than anyone that what most would likely see in this breeding explosion is merely more feces and flies, and this will likely spur an increase in vigilantism to make them extinct. And since there’s only so much she can do to protect her beloved beings, she’s enraptured by their symbolic power. As we’ve seen, she holds out little hope for a serious renewal of Venice through absentee powers. She loves T. S. Eliot as a poet and thinker, but rejects his idea of the wasteland because it relied on an outside redeemer and is too pessimistic. It’s a change in consciousness from the bottom up and within the community that propels her. She’s an optimist who believes people can make things happen themselves.

Doo-doo is a powerful symbol for grasping how a wasting community can renew itself. It’s a substance voided of life yet full of its potential; an end-product that can sprout new product from the dead ground. Fertilizer makes the world go round. You don’t need to be from Iowa to know how those big round splats in the field--cow pies--can do the persistent bidding of good folks committed to rebirth and crop yields.

Visualize Illuminate and other pigeons piling up special power below Philomene’s ledge. As the breeding process gets going it will increase and become a special sign with mind-changing potential, even foster creative acronyms. CRAAP, concerned residents against airport pollution, is already into the act.

John O'Kane

Since those closer to the crap and privy to its material conditions, like pigeons, can more easily spread around its magic, consumerism may become an ally. With all the eateries these days upgrading menus for the trustfunders, there's been a bump in the quality of street droppings from our fowl friends. At Mao's Kitchen, where the cultural revolution is as faded a memory as their two-dollar commune pancakes, dumpster drippings--especially after peak dining hours--come with more protein and less cholesterol than the power breakfast at the Café 50s. This could lead to subversion from within.

But no matter how improved the waste or how much it accumulates, this noxious life-force has to circulate. Fertilization needs a vehicle. The compost below Philomene's window teems with possibilities, but it's merely manure until activated. Digestive tracks get it all going, but the tire tracks keep it going. So on Sunday, when the traffic is especially thick, there's the potential for pigeon power to get transported around town.

Unfortunately these vehicles are mostly SUVs and land-roving domiciles, the choice of tourists or those taking advantage of a respite from the rat race to stalk property. This means the delivery paths will be limited. Once this crowd creeps along Speedway and gets its fill of the bazaar, they're off on the popular arteries. East on Rose to the 10 FWY and up to Brentwood, site of OJ's deed; north on Main through Santa Monica; down toward Windward and beyond to Venice Blvd and the 405 FWY; or south on Pacific through Marina del Rey.

Ironically, while these fuel-inefficient vehicles pass this powerful substance on, too much of it will likely disperse outside Venice where it will get diluted. A few nodules might drop along these getaway paths but they likely won't juice the inspired locals who keep a low profile until the tourists have made it back to wherever.

So we owe a debt to those who've learned to kick the benzine habit and amble around on foot, as well as a critical mass of bicyclists. Many of them hang around Philomene's hub where the Venice West vibes remain strong. Whether fully aware or not, they're ready and able to sponge up the residoo and carry it throughout the field of barren and barely visible locales and walkways where the waning but

unforgettable Venice alternative spirit hovers. Here many are ready to rediscover their own community.

Power to the Pigeonry

Philomene feels the city's pigeon prejudice, and knows how difficult it is to force changes in perception. She hardly expects to find anything remotely resembling pigeon-under-glass at Tony Bill's gastro-gourmet restaurant on Market. But then her culinary tastes are well below market anyway, so she'll likely only be surprised secondhand. If the truth be told, she is secretly hopeful Papa Joe will soon add a Paloma wrap to his menu at the South Beach!

But this prejudice is deeply rooted in our institutions. Preoccupied with words, Philomene's fond of referring to the official books, like the dictionary and thesaurus, where the learned find the handles to define what's important. Just consider the meanings associated with her beloved birds: stoolpigeon, pigeon-holed, pigeon-hearted, pigeon-toed, pigeon-post...a rash of frames that deny our fluttering friends the qualities necessary to be socialized. They're slow, clumsy, and can't even feel, or relate to others emotionally with the organ--the heart--that clearly separates the civilized from the barbaric. They're figures for stereotyping. If you're pigeon-holed you can't be authentically identified. And they're synonymous with dupes. Stoolpigeons, marvelous story plants to texture the dark and unpredictable crevices of street life for Hollywood in the 40s and 50s, can't be trusted. And their abbreviation is even worse: stoolies. That adage has never been truer: you are what you do. Pigeons are doo-doo, forever tethered to a stool.

These meanings seem clear. We want these creatures to stay put or be downwardly mobile; get away from us and find their hole in the wall, or ledge at the Ellison if they're fortunate. But just as doo-doo is not mere dead matter but power-packed potential for sprouting new life, these definitions are merely the beginning. They're the most common ones but not the final answer. As Philomene says, when you find a word in the good book it's defined by other words, which are defined by still more words. We follow this trail eager to pin down the

meaning of the word we want to clarify, but eventually realize how far we've strayed. We may even end up in a meaning space that's nearly opposite the one that set our search in motion, one with less popular meanings.

So stoolpigeons, per the linguistic fates, share meaning with tricksters, who can manipulate circumstances to their liking and play fast and loose with appearance and reality, qualities traditionally associated with magicians and creative artists.

And sophistry. This is not surprising since the Sophists were hair-splitting equivocators and poetic word wizards from just before Socrates, flighty characters who despised reason and arrogant logomachos claiming to possess the absolute word. They were skeptics, moral relativists, postmodernists of their day, adjuncts to society who roamed around with soap boxes challenging the endowed chairs of authority soon to be occupied by Plato's fraternity.

Ironically one of its key spokesmen was a tricky-tongued character named Hippias. It was likely birds of this feather that Plato had in mind when he argued that poets should be mere functionaries that praise great leaders and coddle the gods. Free and loose tongues can threaten the political state, and surely its real estate.

Just consider the definition of a pigeon's neck, not the most delectable or eye-catching bird part for most. It can be associated with diversity and difference in the good book. And it comes packaged in French for cultural reinforcement: *gorge-de-pigeon*. Illuminate's neck does seem especially long and flexible, capable of quick and varied contortions.

Even those despised stoolies can get associational relief. A stoolie can double as an informer doing work for the man, and a freelance sleuth investigating the truth.

Much depends on what happens in practice, what word pairings and combos the wordsmith uses, and under what circumstances. He or she may have a coherent intent, or be driven by impromptu urges. Unexpected meanings lie in the network of language that complicate or even challenge the user's intentions. This is really only language doing its work. Prejudices and official definitions can therefore lose their power and authority through slips of the tongue that erupt from

the shock and awe of the warped society. And these slips might catch waves of meaning that flip into moments.

Perhaps underbirds can lift themselves up through the same system that denies them; their weak power can expand through a playful twisting of meanings that disarms their stronger masters. And if they're continually assaulted with slurs and insults, even degraded to the status of their lowly stools, there's bound to be a moment when they say they're simply not going to take it anymore. So if they're good patriots, have a heart, mind their own business without hurting anyone, and are far from witless, these assaults will likely only backfire.

A sort of piling-on principle, to crudely paraphrase that famous German philosopher who used his share of bird metaphors in quest of the gray truth, might come into play. This is where quantity can become a quality force. When too much of a bad thing accumulates, whether it's foul odor or vile insult, it can convert to its opposite. Excreta that piles up on the street, or in any other space, can become fluid spiritual excretations, passes of meaningfully-loquacious vapor that smell like roses, or even strongly suggest an entirely new attitude toward cleanliness. And it's certainly not too much of a leap to say that a greater presence of pigeons and beatens just might begin to change mentalities on the street, even eventually undermine gentrification.

Think of the possibilities. Overdosing on circus and carnival might make you more than a devout debauchee. It could lead to a fixed boost in the hang-loose attitude that allows you to go at ordinary everyday activities more relaxed and perceptive. It might even put such a permanent smile on your face that it will infect everyone in your immediate circle, and each one of these charged-up agents might pyramid the spark to others...

Philomene's philosophy makes sense. We could do worse than look to the underbird world for salvation. This is where the energy lies that can topple top-down systems with barely a whimper. There's no need for outside help from evangelical redeemers or big bang politicians. Only indigenous visionaries like Philomene who can shepherd the flock toward a better consciousness from within.

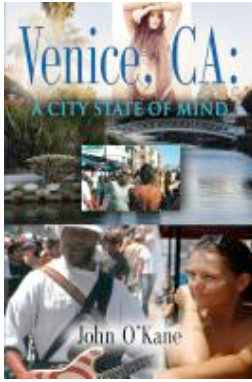
John O'Kane

This dropout ditty has been criticized by benevolent activists because it allows the powers that be to have their way with the flock. With so many drugged out on mind-games, so they say, business proceeds as usual.

But it seems that Philomene's philosophy models a solution to the wasteland. Her words are soluble, her rhyme schemes stretchable, and her politics playfully non-partisan. She's way beyond sectarian hair-splitting. Her openness is what immunizes her from a maddening take on her beloved city, and perhaps full-scale madness.

And if we could all monitor her brain waves and act them out, we'd likely be protected from having to live with democratic centralism, or the LA City Council's makeshift version of it. Once juiced-up we could get more active in community affairs, and possibly even return to the days when the alternative culture controlled Venice. Our special kind of anarchism might get revived with a face more human than ever. We might even become catalysts for bringing some variant of humane socialism in through the back alleys and swamp waters. But will enough juice get loose in time to reach the dwindling numbers?

Much depends on whether Illuminate's feces start to fertilize the fallow consciousness-fields so that the alternative community can be renewed from below...



This book is a reminiscence that celebrates Venice, California's heyday as an alternative community and what survives from it in the present. Many wonder how much longer this city's creative state of mind can persist as gentrification threatens to transform this legendary bohemian Mecca into merely another beach resort for the propertied. The author discusses these threats, but finds in the consciousness of remaining alternative residents a spirit of resistance to these pressures.

Venice, CA: A City State of Mind

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