

Thirteen

1

That summer my father brought me into the new country out of Ohio, driving our maroon Plymouth wagon stuffed to the gills across the Arizona August desert almost as far as Coyote Wells before the blowout; having to unpack it all onto the shoulder to reach the spare, then pack it all up again, *one eighteen in the shade* he'd tell people later *and no shade* on the way to Pacific Beach to rejoin our estranged mother and wife, to try it again. Now, as I reimagine climbing Tecate Pass, Crestwood, Laguna into the cool wind and boulders, I can almost feel that bloodrich spirit, still innocent but on the verge of falling into something else.

2

A couple of weeks later, that summer of '54, climbing a sundrenched hillside near Ramona's house with my parents checking out the want ads for a place to salvage their marriage, rounding a bend in the redbrick steps we suddenly faced a black fist-sized tarantula crouched against blazing orange iceplant ready and able (I knew from the movies) to jump with those hairy legs and horrible mouth directly into our wide eyes. As my father told us again how back in Toledo during the Depression the dock workers would unload deadly banana spiders along with the fruit, we edged around her up to the house — one of those faintly idyllic pastel pre-war bungalows. Thankfully they decided we couldn't afford it. Coming down she wasn't there but her red eyes were on the back of my neck for weeks. The place they did take was up off 101 on Moreno just south of Balboa, more like what we were used to back east, a one bedroom apartment in a brown two-story building, except that sunny afternoons down in the patio by the pool, scorpions the size of giant crawdads danced among the white legs of umbrella-topped tables catching cockroaches in their bright red claws.

3

That fall I started high school, part of the first freshman class at Mission Bay. Caught up in having new friends,

a new school, a new life set to the new rock and roll music
— doves, D.A.'s and drakes, tee shirts and jeans with no belt,
cars chopped, channeled, lowered, dechromed and primed,
motorcycles chasing jackrabbits over the hills,
and girls everywhere: dancing, walking, laughing,
teasing, at the drive-in, at the beach, in class,
after class, at the games, at the hop,
hanging out like us looking for something to do —
I wasn't exactly oblivious to my father's absence
but had grown so used during their long estrangement
to having him around only part time
that his taking a job up north in Pasadena
seemed like only more of the same, though some weekends
we took the train to L.A. to meet him for family-style
outings: Hollywood, Chinatown, Olvera St.,
Angel's Flight — until he finally gave up
on the California life he'd come to hate
and went back east to the woman waiting there.

We went back too, after the school year
and my mother's several tries at seeing other men
had run their course. By the time I returned in '64,
replete with wife and sons of my own, it was too late:
the smog and stucco and wall to wall people had wiped it out.
But now, looking back I know that the rest of my life
— my own botched marriage, career and relationships,
the 60's and everything since then, was prefigured
by that breath of fresh air in Pacific Beach,
the spirit of freedom, kinship and hope shared even
under the shadow of the Bomb by those of us
coming of age that year I bought my first razor.