

# FINDING OAKLAND



BY

KYLE KIMBERLIN

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OAKLAND**

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**Kyle Kimberlin**

NEW POETS IN AMERICA SERIES

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Finding Oakland  
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*For my brother, Joey*

## FINDING OAKLAND

“because here we were dealing with the  
pit and prune juice of poor beat life itself  
in the god awful streets of man.”

Kerouac

In my heart, I have come back to  
San Francisco, which sprang up  
on the edge like a condemned man's  
last meal, where patience and action  
are futile. I have come to kneel  
where only prayer is valid.

In the Steinhart Aquarium, my brother  
longed to swim in the cool peace.  
In a dream I saw him on the BART,  
plunge beneath the bay, searching  
for water. But he rose up,  
finding Oakland. He stepped  
from the train, saying “we are  
like men who have lost their legs.”

In a dream I saw him walking  
south on Mission Street, turning  
into an alley and a dark pawnshop.  
Like poor Raskolnikov, the price  
was just too high. The fog  
lingered about the hills, anointing  
the housetops, hanging from street lights.

Then Jesus rose up through the steam  
in the street, parting the traffic,  
leveling light on everything.  
Dragging the curtain torn in two.  
An army of angels marched  
down from Bolinas,  
swinging the broken chains.

## THE BLUE RAG

I saw Joey myself  
walking up Page Street,  
San Francisco in June.  
I just stood there, holding  
my blue rag, listening.

The road along the river  
turns again and again  
along a high dike. Mosquitoes  
rise up, seeking cattle.  
We sat there in the heat  
with music and Joey sleeping.

In the presence of pancakes  
the air is sometimes tired.  
So world just spins  
around us. At the still point  
of these most desperate times,  
is love.

So we cry out in our music  
now we're falling through  
the shame. If these cuts  
were any deeper Lord, we  
could not take the blame.

Time itself died later  
that night, crushed  
by a fruit truck  
on old highway 4.

## DOLPHINS AND THE DEAD

Remember San Francisco,  
windy sunny hillside  
and your hair floating  
with the grass.  
Your back to me  
in black leather.  
The sun so bright  
I moved  
into the shade of your body.

It was different on Goleta  
pier. The sunset ignited  
the sea, rose and gold.  
The dolphins danced and cried,  
the whales turned to see  
the trees bow down  
where the mountains knelt.  
Then there were songs  
to fill the air.

## LIVING PROOF

I hear my brother  
breathe tonight  
from the bottom  
of my sea.  
I swim in deep  
hospital dread  
the gurneys a concert  
of scuttling claws.  
And he tries  
slow and shallow  
on a hard table  
with rough sheets.  
Each effort lifts  
infinite silt  
to swirl and drift  
and bury my shell.  
The pain is coming  
thru in waves.  
His breath  
From a conch  
is crying.



## THE FISHERMAN

is walking to the sea  
at dawn in the purple  
of a storm that passed on.  
He turns to move on rocks  
down to the water  
at the base of the pier.

Seals sleep like dogs  
in the wet sand, dreaming of men.  
But a man will sleep in a moment  
dreaming of waves that rise up  
like lions digging graves  
for the dead.

In the shadow of these cliffs  
the day stays dark and cold  
with a westerly breeze  
on the back of his neck  
and his net too small for stars.

So I am sleeping peacefully  
dreaming of mountains and snow  
while he fights his line  
for the rise and fall  
of silent seas and angry boats.  
His life is a small fire  
built to cook fish.

## OLD MEN

Strange I can hear the fog horn  
miles away so clearly so close  
and not you, so many miles away  
maybe laughing in the City  
where the houses touch like old men  
holding each other, maybe weeping  
in all the lights of it.  
All the rocks touch softly  
from the Rincon to Fort Ross  
and we have half a moon tonight for hope.

I notice we speak mostly like madmen  
in the dark, late over coffee  
or at sunset or in some last  
lost hopeless house of pancakes  
in the still and desperate air.  
I have seen the noonday devil  
walking in the daylight, high  
and shadowless sunlight saying  
*need them cakes to feed that jones.*

Being a poet is the saddest thing,  
to dream of the sea at Bolinas.  
That and all the other cooler  
places, until someone prays for you  
and me in some lost and lonely room.  
Since the end is never told,  
I dream of the sea at Bolinas.

## WHAT DO THESE STONES MEAN?

When we reached the barricades  
we could smell the smoke and one  
man began screaming at the police  
about his children trapped above,  
then about Joshua and “After the  
fire a still small voice,” but I  
just sat there, watching their guns  
with a box of food in my lap.  
When they made us turn back  
he said, “Aha, I am warm,  
I have seen the fire.”

Everything was burned up anyway,  
except a pile of stones and the big  
white church. There was the Mother  
of God of the belltower, and a big  
sign that said, “Israel passed over  
this Jordan on dry ground.”

So I prayed they would ring  
the bells, then we could all climb  
up and stand together, like Saint  
Patrick and those martyred with him,  
impaled on lances by the Tartar Khan.  
We could carry than sign in procession  
and defy the hot red wind,  
like Aaron’s rod, with flowers.

## IN TERMS OF ENERGY

My grandfather's coffin was blue  
steel, the August sky. But I've forgotten  
the flowers. What colors were they?  
Were there bees in the summer heat?  
One thing followed another into  
the distant afternoon, to where  
old women stood and would not sit  
so that chairs went empty.  
We left him there, turned away and left  
no stone, and men in coveralls  
were moving in. My face was in  
the shade, not deep like this today.  
Just a begrudging difference of light.

My father's dear mother is living  
proof, even at rest. Such gentle  
eyes can hardly rage.  
She lives in the hospital in the flattest  
place I've seen. The days chase their shadows  
on pale yellow walls. Lying  
in her bed, she grows powerful  
trying to smile. I blame the doctors  
and generations of pain.  
These roots do clutch.  
Her room is a cavern, with one wall  
of overwhelming light. She ignores this,  
which creates a shade tree and a parking lot.

The dog is sleeping by the gate  
her head in the dead leaves  
waiting for the quiet man  
who lived in the roses next door.  
He called my Professor and left gifts on the porch:  
tomatoes and lemons in small paper sacks.  
The dog always barked, but everyone  
loved him. When the red and blue lights  
rolled for him across our shutters  
and drapes, all the lights  
on the street agreed. In terms  
of energy, the best that we could do.

## HIGH TIDE LINE

I know the place where the sea  
ends at last. I trust it,  
the beast can come no nearer.  
It is turned back by the dunes  
the city builds with tractors  
in winter, and by the homes  
of those who searched  
for Disneyland and failed.

But I should go down  
and check, make sure it isn't creeping  
up, to wash me away in my sleep.

## ELEVEN O'CLOCK

and in my mind  
a bowl of pale  
green pears  
their hidden undersides  
gone bad

This is the problem  
with mind

I should have been sweet  
I should have loved you more

## TARGETS

This morning it is cloudy.  
In summer heat the sea  
turns to steam and gathers  
the valley into my shack.

The orchards move closer  
their blossoms crying.

This is their last stand  
straining to the heard  
to save the valley  
from shack stone steel.

The dolphins and seals  
like the oil crew boats  
on the greasy sea  
turn their smallest targets  
to the land.

## ALL CREEKS DRY

I went to find a creek  
today a stream a ditch  
any water moving  
They gave up the habit  
with the end of spring  
No reason to cut earth  
batter rock carry mud  
another year

Most died of boredom  
In the trickle of summer  
its not worth the trouble  
Some went in glorious  
illusions  
any reason to live  
is a reason to die

A few by their own hands  
The act prepared  
in the quiet heart  
alone with the sound  
of flies only  
Draining mostly through  
small holes punched  
in the dust



## THE DISHWATER SKY

This morning  
Dawn came sunless  
Soapy, pale  
Iron shaved on sour milk

I saw a church  
Squat, steel gray  
The steeple plucked  
By large quiet hands

I heard the choir  
Pitched high and clear  
A new song etched  
On unstained glass

When I was a small boy  
Though I was a bold one  
Daddy got a new shirt  
Gave me his old one

You woke very early  
Pain climbed the silence  
Laughing pink over hills  
To stain your old cup.

## WHAT WE CAN DO

In daylight we have known  
this kitchen warm,  
alive with smells: rain,  
coffee, the ocean wind  
and things baking after school.

But in this 4 a.m. darkness  
home from the hospital to bathe,  
I smell fear, the washed countertops.  
The cupboards hang open breathing  
cold light, our breakfast.

A tiny ceramic Santa still  
clings screaming to a candle  
on the table. We try to speak  
and the sky tries to rain.

His hair, colors of sand,  
bends beneath the lights and tubes  
he thought would make different sounds.  
Like a whisper, not a ping.

Her hands move gently,  
but trembling, to fill in the blanks  
of our uninsured lives. Hands  
that know the true cost here.

My tired eyes search these empty  
halls, meeting a small white face  
still wrapped in warm blankets  
fresh from the wash.

## END OF DAYS

In the few cold moments  
since my death  
I have seen my people  
going by. Now I understand  
returning home  
and remaining away.  
We fished orange salmon  
from a bridge arched in pain  
and rose at three to watch  
the moon in the shadow  
of the earth.

My mother and father  
sleep in their armchairs  
and rise up singing hymns.  
The sharp November air  
has taken the house  
the grass is gray  
and the birds are gone.  
No hope of snow and no  
forgetting.

My only brother  
his face to the window  
is singing  
to the miles and the time  
behind and forgotten  
the words we must say  
so we don't give up.  
His words rise like clouds  
with thunder and trembling  
becoming San Francisco rain.

The birds which are gone  
had wings of wet lapis  
and the voice of the choir  
of heaven. But even I, who was  
dead, know the true cost:  
the quiet lost, the fear  
of telephones, or light  
beneath a door. All we can do  
is love, hold fast, let go.

## BLIND FALL

Today I learned to fall  
and be caught up. He gave  
his angels charge of me  
now this is all I know  
of faith. Falling, I was blind  
and this is all I know of life.

One of the angels loves  
her cat. She told me  
names of animals and names  
in stone. Forgotten, misbegotten  
names. Now this is all  
I know of death.

In the car today, the radio  
preacher said have compassion  
passion and love in distant  
mountains. Turning the corner  
by Cottage Hospital, giant  
banners said babies trashed here.

Caught up in love  
I hate these things the most.  
Driving home, people were  
laughing in their cars.  
And this is all I know of time:

One of the angels has been raped.  
Another, a forgiven thief.  
This poem is just eternity  
recovery and grief.

## IN THE MIDST OF BEINGS

An old woman, my neighbor next door  
was haunted by the ghost  
of her father, silhouette of gray  
with tiny stars. He followed  
from Ohio with his frayed  
brown coat, which appeared  
in her closet there again and again.  
Her father, many years dead  
fetched it home from the Goodwill  
and came to California. He plays  
with the lights, the locks and radio.

I have met angels in restaurants  
eating burgers and I've seen spirits  
of smoke in the summer hay.  
So I have seldom been alone.  
Solitude is a screen door in sunlight.  
Dust floating there is a thing  
like flesh. The fear is beyond me,  
these changes in light beyond vision  
then a small sound. I scream  
at the ghost with this hand in my hair.

But you have seen me dance.  
I believe in my soul and the stone  
rolled back. I believe in you  
and feathered things alive in the sky.  
I believe we will survive.

## THE STARRY NIGHT\*

I love the light that rises up  
curved like the moonlit head  
of a wave, turned in upon itself  
delicate as a shell  
in the Starry Night.

I have seen the surf at night  
rise up and break in praise  
of God, a sea of white buffalo  
pounding the stubborn world.

But on almost any night  
my thoughts are moving slow  
and hooded, dark  
and grazing things.

My pasture is green.  
Bright fish eagle clouds  
drop words on far hills  
brewing thunder forever.

\*after the painting by Vincent Van Gogh

## TO ROBERT BLY

I have been reading  
your poems  
about snow.

The grass is half  
covered  
and all that moves  
in the bitter cold  
is white  
sorrow  
in the moonlight.

I must believe this;  
we have no  
weather here.  
I can reach  
down  
into the darkness  
and draw up  
perfectly nothing.

## THE GRAVEYARD AT CHROME, CALIFORNIA

I can hear voices whisper  
sweet names  
a century gone from this flat  
and barren place.  
Great bowl of grass  
where children played  
in the tall and yellow

fields burned here in summer  
raise smoke  
but no pain

Their little graveyard  
on a hill  
in silence and heat  
keeps secret how  
the children died

My valley is false  
lying by the ocean  
like a house with three walls  
The hills to the north  
are painted on paper  
with no way in or out.



## LITTLE CHICO

A little past bedtime  
the tired old creek  
crawled up to my back door  
and asked me for water

He is an old man  
born in the forest  
in the snow melt and mud  
born to battle the canyon  
and married to rocks

I gave him a glass  
with gray cubes  
from the freezer

Now his just sits there  
with his hat in his lap  
by the fountain  
in the mall

I washed his glass  
and went to sleep

## LETTERS OF YOUR NAME

for Kim

Kindness is important  
here, where the children have seen  
beyond life.

Ice has its own time  
and music, but melts  
when your hair catches light.

Mercy because of your amazing  
face, and grass  
can simply hold the dew by force.

## LIFE IN THE RAIN

Last night I said my life  
was once shattered  
like a small glass thrown  
against a wall.  
You said you are moving  
up to Oregon to learn  
life in the rain.

Some creatures love to go  
out in a storm  
in thunder of love cast up  
to the sky, finding  
the world clean. Even I  
have been north in winter.  
My soul was a tree, down  
covered with snow. Look up  
as it falls in dim light.

I'll stay here, with my painted  
hills, my steps, my candles melting  
quickly, and burning out at last.  
This is the land I was promised  
writing these poems doomed  
by the drought. They were planted  
in April, too late for snow.  
I hold them outside the window  
looking in. beyond lies the forest  
with deer by the roadside  
and life in the rain.

## IN PASSING

I have spent these hours  
in silence watching darkness  
take this blue canyon  
a little traffic  
and the town lights  
in the valley

A pair of mice eyes  
like black seeds watched me  
pass on a steep trail pushing  
my little light to the end  
of this road

I wonder what you've known  
together what nights in quiet  
canyons lights passing quickly  
to rest in distant places  
these thirty years

At sunset I saw a hawk  
on a fence post far below  
spread his wings and climb  
beyond the light

## SOLSTICE

I thought I heard  
the summer die.  
It was a small sound  
and hollow.

He sat here with me  
under this sky made of steam  
with a tired smile  
and his hat on the floor.

We only said good morning  
and that was always early.  
But there was one day  
of rain,  
one shower at midnight.

I hope he will forgive me  
his sad sad death.

## THE CRITIC

I saw an angel in the street  
He grabbed my arm to speak

He read a poem I wrote myself  
shook his head  
and walked away

## BLUE

I saw your face in my coffee  
at the bottom of my old blue cup  
small sea or eye or universe  
of painted clay and the beans  
crushed with conviction  
maybe faith  
the grounds flung aloft  
caught by wind.

In a dream I saw you bringing  
light to me, a lantern of blue  
like music to a drowning man.  
And we ride in my blue car  
gathering treasure on the sea  
floor 'til we wake.

Awake, I am contrite, prodigal  
and smaller than my tearless  
silent heart, which I give  
to you, for your hands in flight  
your eyes like flooded caves  
of bottomless muddy me.

Now that the shrouds are turned  
from red to blue, I have to say  
I love you and this light  
too bright, sun too deep  
longing, sorrow and joy too great  
for the time and place of man.

Despite these mists and mysteries  
though we have no debts  
no promises to stay or hold  
my soul is full of the distance  
between us and the wind  
has turned. So your joys  
are my sorrows,  
your sorrows, my grief.



## THE DEAD SHALL BE RAISED

The moon set at midnight  
but left some random, incidental  
shine – a muted glow – for us  
in the last abbreviated dunes  
licked and nibbled by the sullen sea.

The wind has turned and something bad  
with a firm, final authority  
the resolution of great arguments  
crawls on its haunches from the creek.  
A swelling stench in the early dark.

Something is wrong with a mouth  
kept shut, silent, unknissed.  
The mouth of this creek  
kept back from the sea  
or the mouth of a man alone.

It is life itself which brings  
the soul to the lastness of a beach  
gouged and healed by every cycle  
of tides. The soul slips over  
trembling down the alluvial gleam;  
many mansions of luminous foam.

The pull of the moon  
must have caused this smell  
or some judgment for turning back.  
Oh faithless creek afraid of death.  
It must not know the dead shall be raised  
as a pounding surf  
or left to corruption in the living world.

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