

FINDING OAKLAND



BY

KYLE KIMBERLIN

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OAKLAND**

BY

Kyle Kimberlin

NEW POETS IN AMERICA SERIES

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Finding Oakland
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171 Second Street
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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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