

## The Bulldog Cafe | Tristan Eisenberg

At the end of a very long day which had been filled with both work and school, neither of which moved me closer to the past, I found myself sitting at a bar which had just reopened after a twenty year long closure. In the many years since it first opened in the 1930s, it had been: a bar, a Mexican restaurant, an Italian restaurant, and a strip club. Not unlike the career of a character actor, buildings in Los Angeles tend to play a variety of different parts. Despite the versatility that most of these buildings embrace, few maintain the character of this particular establishment. It was not shaped like a cube or even a sphere, but an enormous barrel. It was a barrel.

I sat on a stool that looked out an enormous window, staring into the crowd that had flooded in. While sipping on a cocktail with an overcomplicated name, I caught the glimpse of something hiding behind the crowd. A doorway was tucked behind the collection of hip, theater types. When I first heard about the reopening from a friend, all he mentioned was the barrel, but hiding in that backyard was a familiar building from my past. I pushed through a set of french doors and made my way to the mysterious structure. After moving through a crowd that presumably just escaped a black box theater down the road, I stood in front of the doors of this extraneous building. My eyes shifted from the painting of an ice cream and tamale on its glass doors, and up to the top of the building, which was in the shape of a bulldog's head. A pipe stuck out firmly from between its lips, and a puff of smoke emerged from the bowl.

The Bulldog Cafe previously sat at the end of a manufactured Los Angeles street in the basement of the Petersen Automotive Museum, the very same smoke billowing from its massive wooden pipe for twenty years. The Petersen was a home away from home when I was a toddler. Every weekend my father would fling me into his sidecar, and we would race off to some strange place that he discovered on one of Huell Howser's various Public Broadcast television shows on California landmarks. Howser

spoke in a loud Southern accent, often howling at his cameraman Louis to move the camera closer in on some oddity in a museum. I don't know what Howser talked about in that episode, but I imagine that he was hollering at Louis quite a bit. The museum was divided into three stories, and the deeper one went, the deeper it became less a museum and more a simulacrum of a Los Angeles long since gone. Unfortunately, this dreamy iteration of the museum was sent to the landfill in the twenty-tens. If one were to stumble into the Petersen today, they would be inundated by white walls and cars without context. It wasn't always like this. In the nineties, the museum was a time machine into a smattering of Los Angeleses that no longer exist. On one Sunday, I experienced what it was like to crash a car with Laurel and Hardy in the twenties, to get your kite stuck out in front of your house in the fifties, and grocery shop in the forties. The Petersen was devoted to the history of the automobile, but used Los Angeles as the vessel to visually contextualize this past in massive, full scale dioramas. Before we began our visits to the Petersen, our Sunday adventure was often at the Museum of Jurassic Technology, which still houses an exhibition on miniature trailers of the twentieth century. I was always fascinated by these tiny automobile-adjacent displays, and so upon first stepping foot in the Petersen, my fascination grew into obsession. While I was charmed by the peculiar room of miniature trailers, the displays at the Petersen overwhelmed me, and scared me. Standing face to face with lifelike statues of long dead Angelenos broken down on a perfect recreation of an early Los Angeles road, surrounded by weeds and nothing but the vastness of a motion picture matte painting behind them. The sky of these dioramas reached on forever. The Bulldog Cafe that sat at the end of the Petersen's basement was the focal point of the display. I walked closer to it, admiring the paintings of an ice cream cone and a tamale on its glass doors for the first time. The dog towered over me. At the time, it seemed like it was the size of City Hall. Now, I know it was no more than twenty feet tall. The windows into the cafe were covered from the inside with brown paper, hiding the countertop and stools that I imagined were collecting dust inside. On this first visit, I stepped onto one of the bulldog's large, scuffed paws that had sunk into the floor and pressed my face against the glass, hoping to catch a glimpse of what was inside.

The paper was thick, and no light was inside, so I closed my eyes and began building inside the bulldog. It was not just a countertop and some stools, but a massive portrait of thirties Los Angeles. Much like the rest of the automotive museum, I pictured a scene made up of wax Angelenos in period attire. I did not know where the original Bulldog Cafe was located, but I guess it that it was somewhere downtown, not far from Bunker Hill. Artists and oddballs that filled those Victorian mansions would wander down the street to have a coffee inside the canine building.

Upon first opening the doors, the first guest to occupy my imagined version of the cafe was a painter. My father would often tell me stories about John Fante's life in Bunker Hill, of which I had little understanding of, but the alternative Angelenos of the earlier twentieth century who littered these stories lingered in my mind. The wax painter was sitting at the bar with a tamale on a plate, and a little sketchbook shoved under his arm. Every figure in the rest of the museum was detailed in the same manner, with pens sticking out of pockets and gloves hanging from back pockets. An older lady sat in a booth, wearing a sweater and a puffy dress. Her arm was outstretched towards a taxidermied tabby cat standing on the table. She held an ice cream cone in her hand, and it looked as though the cat was about to take a lick. A single phone booth sits in the back of the cafe. A young man with oil splashes all over his pants and work jacket stands inside. He is wearing coveralls, with a cigarette tucked behind an ear. His right hand is on the telephone as he yells into the receiver. In the left hand is a cup of coffee, about to spill onto a teenage girl standing outside the booth. She is holding a lollipop in her hand. It's all so loud Louder than anything else in the museum. After opening my eyes, I was once again faced with the papered over glass. Still, as I wandered away from the cafe, my tiny shoes bouncing off the faux gravel below me, I could not get the image of those Bulldog customers out of my mind. While standing in the recreation of a majestic car dealership, with floor to ceiling windows, my gaze drifted from the stunning early automobiles that surrounded me, as my eye caught another puff of smoke rising from the bulldog's pipe.

The bulldog and the imagined scene that filled its

hollow insides, remained on my mind for the years that followed. On occasion, we would return to the museum, and I always rushed from the first few floors of the museum to the basement. The escalator descended into the Los Angeles of my dreams, to the people dancing inside of the bulldog, dreaming of nothing but ice cream and tamales.

Years later, I found myself reading a superhero comic book that was stuffed into one of my father's bedside drawers. The covers featured a masked man with a rocket strapped to his back, and a Bettie Page lookalike in his arms. Below them, and the flurry of his explosive rocket pack, was a familiar bulldog. The Bulldog Cafe, complete with smoking pipe. All that wondering about what went on inside that cafe, and now, as far as I knew, I held a first-hand account in my hands. My fingers quickly flipped through the pages of the book, my eyes glazed over much of the action and romance in favor of the mundane moments inside of the cafe. The hero sat inside with a coffee in front of him, and tossed a nickel to the owner. An ice cream for my girl, he requested. A kindly old mechanic took a call from the pay phone that I knew was hiding behind that brown paper in the museum. He even spilled a coffee all over the hero's girlfriend, not unlike the painter and the little girl. It was confirmation that everything I imagined for that bulldog was true. It was history.

As I stared at the bulldog, a decade after my last visit to the museum, all I could think about was what was inside. The payphone, the counter, the tamales, every little detail ran back through my head. A film from the thirties that was never made, but I was sure would start playing the minute I pushed the doors open. I ran over to a bartender and asked to look inside. She was happy to unlock the doors, and mentioned that it was available for rent, if I was interested in hosting my next birthday party inside. The glass doors clicked open and she fumbled for a light switch. The lights finally came on. It was empty.

The pay phone had never existed. The counter was never there. It was empty when it was at the museum, she told me. Just a frame, with nothing inside but the machine that pumped smoke from the pipe. I moved my hands along the wood paneling that now ran across the walls.

As I reached the back, I noticed a picture. It was the real Bulldog Cafe. It was Washington Boulevard in 1934, and in the back of the photo, through the glass door, was a man sitting at the counter licking an ice cream cone.

