

Steve Hetland

City's Edge

I live at the edge of L.A., at the smoggy end of the Valley, where the grass grows brown and the mountains are rising. In Sylmar.

Every day I walk with my dog, Allen, in the fields and hills behind my house. I take my camera sometimes in case we see anything but mainly so my parents think I'm still working at it, taking pictures and submitting them. Usually we don't see anything anyways, the same half-buried station wagon that I once tried to renovate or a rabbit sometimes. Though less of those now than a year ago, before they put in the landfill. They started with the road, which took them a week. It connects to the main road about two hundred yards south of my house, runs straight across the field, turns right to climb the hill and left to disappear over the top. Since then the trucks have been coming and going all day long, the ridge on the hill has grown a hundred feet in grassy, green steps like the Andes, and the rabbits have become few, thin and rat-bitten.

One day when Allen and I were starting out on one of these walks, a blue glint at the foot of the hill caught my eye. We made

for the glint on a path that led in its direction. Allen walked alongside but off the path a few feet, where he could catch more burrs. We passed the station wagon with the green patch still visible on its roof. The renovation ended there ten years ago, put on hold until a new can of green spray paint could be bought or found. We walked further and Allen stirred up a rabbit. They both bolted but the rabbit was too near its hole. "Knock it off," I yelled and Allen trotted back, his tail wagging spryly.

Once over the slope that had partly concealed it, we could see that the blue glint was a car. We left the path and made our way across the field and its thin, dry bushes until we reached the car, an upside down 'seventy-three or -four Chevelle. Its sides were wrinkled and its roof compressed so that on the passenger's side there was only six inches or so of window. It tilted forward so that the front of the hood touched the ground. I looked up the hill. The divots started all the way at the top where the road turns left. A bright white dump truck was climbing the road just now. Its pistons hammered the air with cartoonish volume.

I walked around the car once then put my head in through the driver's side window, which had about a foot and a half left to it. The upholstery inside was torn and cigarette burnt. The dashboard had lost its glove compartment and radio. The last ones to drive it had turned the air on cool and the fan on full blast. It must have been a warm ride. I saw their mistake. They were recirculating the air instead of drawing it in fresh. It's hard for the brain to think on recirculated air.

I pulled my head out, called Allen, who had wandered off somewhere, and we left the Chevelle, but not before a final look. It was strange to see, with its dark, complicated underside skyward, warming in the sun.

Walking back, I remembered something. I remembered waking up the night before to a rumbling and thinking for one disoriented moment before falling back to sleep that the hill was

erupting.

The next day Allen beat me to the car. When I got there, I found out why. The smell of rotting flesh nearly knocked me over. I ran to the rear of the car and tapped the trunk. I ran around the car once then stuck my head through the window. I reached in for a lever just above the steering wheel. I pulled but nothing happened. I got up and ran around the car once more. Trying the lever again, I pulled until it gave and I heard behind me the trunk slap the ground. I stood up and went to the back of the car, moving slowly now. I peered around the edge into the trunk. It was big, dark but empty. A beer bottle rolled across the ground away from it. I looked up the hill a little ways where Allen was sniffing and pawing a dead rabbit.

On the third day I brought my camera. I took pictures of the car from every side. I took pictures of the car with the hazy valley in the background and I took them with the hill in the background, while bright white and yellow dump trucks climbed the hill. One I took while Allen sniffed the bug battered grill and one I took from up the hill a little ways where I could get the entire bottom of the car. Afterwards I sat down and rested a while but I couldn't pull my gaze from the car. The dents and scrapes on it that at first had seemed so random now didn't seem so. They seemed designed, as if each mark had to be just where it was. I got up and took more pictures, most of which were duplicates of ones I had already taken, except for a few of the interior.

On the next day I experimented with different lighting. I woke up early to get a few with the sun rising to the car's rear and orange on the bumper. Then I came out later, as the sun was setting and reflecting blue off of the metallic flecks in the car's paint.

On the fifth day a Santa Ana was blowing. The sun was bright and the wind dry and sharp with sand. I couldn't keep my eyes from blinking as I crossed the backyard. This time I had along a tripod and a hand held shutter control that connects to a cord. From

our backyard, we stepped into a field covered with trash as it usually is on Santa Ana days. We walked past the wagon with the green splotch. I stopped and focused my camera on it but I didn't shoot. It was doorless and hollow, as if the fifteen years alone in the field had eaten at it, turned it into bones. In another fifteen the dust and wind will probably have finished burying it. I walked on with Allen at my side but two feet off the path. We arrived at the Chevelle and I set up the tripod. I tested a couple angles before settling on one, low from near the front tire aimed at the driver's window. I connected the cord and satisfied myself one last time that the focus was correct. I straightened up and looked off at the valley. The sky was smogless but a bit tan at the edges with dust the wind had blown in from the desert. I yawned and stretched. The wind caught my hat, blowing it to the ground. I turned around and gazed at the mountain. A bright pink dump truck was climbing the road. Over the ridge a truck must've just dumped a load from a school or something because the wind had just caught a flock of papers and had sent it over the edge. I laughed. It looked gaudy like a movie set of Krakatoa or Vesuvius erupting confetti. I picked up my hat, straightened my tie and got into the car. With just a foot and a half of window on the driver's side I had to squeeze. I kept crawling until I was cleanly in, my head at the passenger's side. The air inside was still, even stale like any other old car which yet surprised me somehow. I felt broken glass on the back of my head and a jagged wrinkle of the roof on my shoulder blade. I bent my knees to get my legs out from under the steering wheel, then raised my feet to the car's floor. With my feet still up, I slid my torso along so that I was vertical under my feet in the driver's position. The blood pressed against the inside of my head. The wind whistling over the car's bottom just above me seemed loud. I took a moment to catch my breath then I reached out the window with my left hand for the shutter control, which the sun had warmed. After another pause I heaved up with my arms, straightening my back at the same time

until my butt touched the seat. I held myself up entirely with my trembling arms until my legs could get a grip. My ankles reached under the bench seat and pinched it like a kid's legs do to a bar to hang upside down from. The bottom of the seat was sharp against my ankles. I slowly raised my hands, brushing pieces of glass from my palms off on my shirt. The tie hung down over my face. I gripped the steering wheel and turned my face until bulging eyes focused on the camera lens. I smiled. Something clicked, then cracked. I slammed into the roof as the seat had pulled loose from the floor, my legs still pinching it. My neck was kinked so that my head was pressed into my shoulder. I could no longer see the camera but judging from the slack suddenly in the cord I guessed that it fell over. I squeezed the button several times, taking pictures of what I wasn't sure, the ground maybe or the sky or the back of my head scrunched below my body. I let the shutter control go and tried to move but decided not to, thinking I'd wait just a little while instead. I felt weak, not exhausted or hurt really, just weak. I closed my eyes and listened. Far away a truck shifted gears. Yes I'd wait a while, I decided. I'd just wait until someone found me.