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Nature's Haunted House

Photographs by Luke Jaffar

A View from Bixby Hill. Sometimes I go up on a hill that overlooks the concrete box of the San Gabriel River where the river flows into Alamitos Bay in Long Beach. From there, you see nature. Wetlands drained for oil production lie below, as do tracts of houses and the congested asphalt ribbon of the Pacific Coast Highway. Most of what I see had been owned by the Bixby family of Long Beach. The Bixbys farmed, grazed sheep and cattle, and raised draft horses from 1878

BOOM: The Journal of California, Vol. 4, Number 3, pps 95–102, ISSN 2153-8018, electronic ISSN 2153-764X. © 2014 by the Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Rights and Permissions website, <http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintInfo.asp>. DOI: 10.1525/boom.2014.4.3.95.

“Haunted places are the only ones people can live in . . .” —*Michel De Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life.*

until the suburban boom of the 1950s. In the 1920s, the Bixbys began pumping oil from their wetlands and hired renowned landscape architects—Florence Yoch and the Olmsted brothers, as well as Paul J. Howard, William Hertrich, and Allen Chickering among them—to lay out four acres of sophisticated gardens surrounding the Bixby homestead.

The Bixbys weren't the first to cultivate their hill. They were preceded by a Yankee *Californio*, a former Mexican governor of Alta California, a Spanish “leather jacket” soldier, his heirs, and during the preceding 3,000 years by Native Americans whose descendants know the hill as the place where human beings emerged into a world bounded by shoreline, river, floodplain, and foothills. Mingled there in time are *mestizo vaqueros*, Chinese laborers, Belgian tenant farmers, Japanese lease farmers, and Mexican ranch hands who fleetingly possessed a portion of what nature around Bixby Hill yielded to them. Those sojourners persist in the hill's cultural and natural present as a midden of shells, family stories, photographs, an *allée* of trees, gardens, a house, some barns, and records in a ledger.

The hilltop—what remains of historic Los Alamitos—was the Bixbys' home, the headquarters of their business, and a place where personalities are still interwoven with the landscape. Preserved from further development in 1968, the hilltop remains an earthen umbilicus into sacred time for the native community. It's also a richly layered site for interrogating the past and challenging what might be made of it by today's visitors.¹

From my perspective, no part of what I see from Bixby Hill is privileged over any other solely by its relationship to nature. The view from the hill has always been from nature and into nature. To decompose the view into parts more or less natural imposes values to which nature is indifferent. No place, I think, is more than any other place.

The View from Graywood Avenue. All of us have a capacity for topographical inwardness, mapped on the brain's

hippocampus by aptly named “place cells” with the aid of a class of memory proteins we share with rats, fruit flies, and even snails. Other brain structures—called “grid cells”—seem to provide a framework for integrating motion with position. Rats have that same framework. With this apparatus—subtly joined to brain centers for pleasure and avoidance—we each navigate our own affective space in which location, impression, and recollection are recorded and coordinated. Projected onto environmental landmarks, affective space is externalized as Jérôme Monnet's “vernacular geography” to make wayfaring habitual and capable of being shared with others on the journey.

“The city and my body supplement and define each other,” wrote Juhani Pallasmaa in *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*. “I dwell in the city and the city dwells in me.”² Neuroscience tells me that I inhabit my place and quite literally, my place inhabits me.

My place is Graywood Avenue on land that was once the Bixbys' until it was turned to sugar beet production in the 1890s, then to truck farming, and to a grid of tens of thousands of small houses on small lots after 1950. My place is presumed—because suburban—to be uniquely featureless, anesthetized, standardized, and denatured.³

Graywood Avenue in fact is complex, enmeshed in narratives, and a zone of contact with nature near at hand and global. Because we do not know everything there is to be known about nature, negligent observers overlook its appearance and effects in places like mine. Nature's appearance on Graywood Avenue is profoundly ordinary. Its effects are habitual and reciprocal. They're in the touch I give it and expect to receive in return. Nature on Graywood Avenue is pitiless, yet I welcome its inhuman contact and appropriate it into my affective space.

The Paradox of Nature. The materials of Graywood Avenue were so meager at its beginning in 1950—just earth, air, sunlight, and too little water—but from these essences was assembled a landscape for my life and my neighbors' that



has satisfied so many of our desires. Embedded in that landscape is the paradox of nature on Graywood Avenue.

A cynic would object, “There’s no nature there. The ground is covered with tract houses. The air overhead is a petrochemical byproduct. Your water flows from conspiracies designed to obscure that you live in a semi-desert. Pavement marches to your horizon in every direction.”

Graywood Avenue is an asphalt and stucco fraction of the nearly uniform grid of Los Angeles, but nature is never absent. I walk down Graywood Avenue and nature’s reciprocal penetration always manages to break through my self-absorption. The tracks of snails glisten on the sidewalk. The stink of an irritated skunk lingers in the morning air. A coyote and I sometimes pause at the end of my block and watch each other before the coyote lopes into the Edison Company right-of-way. Mourning doves, mocking birds, scrub jays, and house sparrows accompany me, either in person or as a fugue of their calls interweaving overhead.

A woodpecker was working at the bark of a backyard elm for several days this spring. I’d never heard that before. Mitered conures flock over my street. They’re immigrant parrots from the south. I’ve seen hawks perched on the dishes of my neighbors’ satellite television receivers. My walk is often punctuated by the warning cries of juvenile crows.

The young crows are giving advice to other crows that I’m passing through their nature just as the crows are passing through mine. My suburban street is utterly commonplace but it’s also common ground for the crows and for me where nature is shared at every scale to shape our behavior. I live nowhere but in nature’s suburb, just as much the crows’ as it’s mine. I’m offered every opportunity to be wrapped in everyday nature there.

The Place Where You Are. Bixby Hill and Graywood Avenue, otherwise so different, share a characteristic of authentic places. They both enfold specificities of landscape, history, and memory and have the capacity to be what geographer

Doreen Massey calls a “locality.”⁴ Rightly experienced, the localism of the hill and the avenue isn’t a refuge of nostalgia or a bunker of communal exclusion. The hill and the avenue are meeting places. I turn there with a tropism for the “sensations, expectations, daydreams, encounters, and habits of relating . . . that catch people up in something that feels like something.”⁵ The something that feels and the something felt reside together. The crows experience me. I experience the crows. We make a world in that encounter while it lasts.

In recent years, the crows have brought news of a world beyond Graywood Avenue. The crows have been infected—and as carriers, helped infect me and some of my neighbors—with the West Nile virus. The crows died from it, recovered in numbers, and died again in each following spring, ever fewer as the crows, the mosquitoes, the virus, and my neighbors and I edged toward an inevitable balance of living and dying. The local isn’t self-enclosed or estranged. It’s penetrated by what’s outside. It’s risky. The local is engaged in ways that compel me, following the example of the crows, to ignore the insufficient dualities of the domesticated and the wild that still frame what we mean when we talk about California and nature.

Humans in the landscape have mixed the categories. Beginning 13,000 years ago, indigenous people actively changed California’s ecosystems to suit the demands of their desires, resulting in changes that marked their cultural systems as changes marking ours.⁶ It’s tempting to see only epitaphs in our contemporary California landscape, but was the outcome of any human settlement ever more than “history turned into nature?”⁷ That’s what it means to live in a place in the company of other people.

A Sense of Place. *Farewell, Promised Land: Waking from the California Dream* is an elegy for the state’s manhandled landscapes with photographs by Robert Dawson and text by geographer Gray Brechin.⁸ Near the end of the book is a panorama of the Gerbode Valley, a ten-minute drive from the northern end of the Golden Gate Bridge. The significance

of the valley for Brechin is what’s missing from Dawson’s photograph—the rows of houses and grid of cul-de-sac streets that were to have been built in the 1960s until, with the help of the Nature Conservancy in 1972, the land was purchased and made part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. The photograph of the Gerbode Valley shows undulating hills, grass sweeping up to their summits, and the meander of a dirt road. What’s significant to me is that everything pictured in the photograph had been touched by human intention, perhaps (for all I know) not through greed or ignorance but love. By setting this land apart, nature has not been made to triumph over the history of the Gerbode Valley. Rather, a community has adapted a historically conditioned place for its use. For the houses to remain absent, the valley will forever require the presence of a community on its periphery.

The empty Gerbode Valley, the cultivated hilltop of Rancho Los Alamitos, and the prosaic lawns of Graywood Avenue require communities with an equivalent sense of place to make them inhabitable by our daydreams, our bodies, and ourselves. It’s only aesthetic sensibility that separates localities and disparages some of those places by denying inhabitants the meaning of the space they occupy. There are better and worse places to be, of course, but embodied knowledge, essentially critical, may arise in any of them. “This is,” anthropologist Kathleen Stewart writes, “the ordinary affect in the textured, roughened surface of the everyday.” From the embodied knowledge of the everyday comes “politics of all kinds with the demand that some kind of intimate public of onlookers recognize something in a space of shared impact,” writes Stewart.⁹

A sense of place isn’t the acquisition of an idiosyncratic sensibility but a communal achievement that requires something from all those who dwell in common. I have to call it a “moral imagination”—the sympathetic imagination by which I write myself into the story of my place, inhabit it as my home, and negotiate a way from the purely personal there to the public.

The everyday is expectant, arriving laden with a burden of history and unfolding into moments of joy and tragedy.



Proportions of Heron to Concrete. A few years ago and a few miles from Graywood Avenue, a crowd of 300 gathered on the west bank of the San Gabriel River in Lakewood and waited to take a walk. The mayor made a speech first. Afterward, a park supervisor showed slides of California native shrubs and trees. Then the audience turned out on the mile-long trail that city officials dedicated that day to the enjoyment of nature. But what nature was that?

Both banks of the San Gabriel River are public land. The trail under Edison Company transmission lines meanders on the west bank. A park with picnic shelters, baseball diamonds, an equestrian center, and bridal paths fills the east bank. Most of that is under power lines, too. It took thirty years for the city of Lakewood to assemble this green corridor that edges rows of modest tract houses, so the riverbanks have a mixed look. Mature eucalyptus trees tower eastward; newly established elderberries are clumped along the trail.

The walkers looked down from the trail into the river. Water ran in the “low flow” slot down the middle; concrete

on either side glared. Two egrets—white plumes against white concrete—stood motionless at the edge of the slot as the walkers passed above them. A pelican skimmed to a perfect water landing. After a moment, it rose in company with a heron that was almost lavender in the winter light.

Is that nature? And if it is (as I think it is) what should the proportion of concrete to heron be?

The channel of the San Gabriel River (like the Los Angeles River) is supposed to be where nature dead-ends, but only if nature is only to be found in the kind of place where John Muir, nineteenth-century prophet of wilderness, would worship. Nature in my neighborhood was never so misplaced. Nature is here, like the patient heron in the flood control channel, and it only requires a greater intimacy, like the riverside trail, to begin to restore us to it. For decision-makers, urban planners, and us, the proportion of heron to concrete should matter less than the intimacy.

In writing about nature in Los Angeles, the city she adopted as her hometown, historian Jenny Price collapses



the clichés of dream and nightmare, suburb and wilderness that obscure Los Angeles like smog. For Price, “our foundational nature stories should see, but also cherish and sacralize, our mundane, economic, utilitarian, daily encounters with nature—so that what car you drive and how you get your water and how you build a house should be transparent acts that are as sacred as hiking to the top of Red Rock Canyon in the Santa Monica Mountains and gazing out over the Pacific Ocean”¹⁰

“**Nature is a Haunted House . . .**”¹¹ I have an intense recollection of a day in late summer. I’m very young. I’m playing hide-and-seek in our house with my brother. It’s the time of the evening that still seems bright, but shadows begin to fill. The house is small—less than 1,000 square feet—but because I’m small too, this diminished space seems large to me. I’m standing in the doorway to the bedroom I would go on sharing with my brother for nearly twenty years. Then the last of the light goes from the room as if precipitated

from the air. A presence is in the room, wonderful and terrible. My knees actually knock out of fear. The uncanny room is ghost-ridden, but it’s because I’m haunting myself.

The ordinary is not emptied of possibilities by familiarity or domestication. The everyday is expectant, arriving laden with a burden of history and unfolding into moments of joy and tragedy. Manners of knowing are lived into being there. Sometimes they produce terrors; sometimes consolations. The ordinary never lacks trajectories into and out of the sensuous matter of what is being lived. Nature is interleaving everywhere, necessarily complicit and implicated and authoritative.

In another photograph in *Farewell, Promised Land*, a backhoe is raking through the muck of a California streambed while an overseer looks on. Without the caption, it’s impossible to tell if this is an image of environmental destruction or redemption. It happens to be attempted redemption, but not knowing for sure is part of what it means to be aware in the nature we’ve made, and alive to the results of putting in



the landscape all kinds of people, including working people, immigrant people, undocumented people, and some people who may never form a moral imagination at all.

The writer Barry Lopez considered some years ago what's needed to make a home in California in the way the Bixbys did on their hill and my neighbors have on Graywood Avenue. Lopez insisted that a site becomes home only when you become vulnerable to the place where you are. Lopez's meditation on vulnerability was instigated by the place where he grew up—a tract-house neighborhood in the San Fernando

Valley. In questioning his suburb's presumed distance from transformative encounter, Lopez discovered that “always when I return, I have found again the ground that propels me past the great temptation of our time, to put one's faith in despair.”¹² From a place usually disregarded, Lopez had welled up something like redemption.

As histories turn into the nature that receives and reciprocates touch, a kind of intelligence emerges within the affective space each of us embodies. A specter, it ghosts through a space of “affinities and impacts that take place

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in the moves of intensity across things that seem solid and dead.”¹³ The solid things melt into reminiscence and day-dream in that movement. The dead pick up a conversation with the human spirit that haunts them. Some music comes out of the sky as birdsong, and pervading nature (which does not care) makes room for a self and a place in humble, loving attendance on each other. **B**

Notes

All photographs by Luke Jaffar.

- ¹ The Bixby family’s stewardship of Rancho Los Alamitos is a remarkable record of continuity as both a home and the center of a thriving agribusiness from the late nineteenth century into the middle of the twentieth. Preservation of Bixby Hill and its layers of rancho history were made possible by a gift from the Bixby heirs to the City of Long Beach of the 7.5 surviving acres of Rancho Los Alamitos in 1968. See *Rancho Los Alamitos: Ever Changing, Always the Same* by Claudia Jurmain, David Lavender, Larry L. Meyer (Berkeley: Heyday Books, 2011). For more about the rancho’s place in the dialogue of place, conservation, preservation, and community in Southern California, go to the Rancho Los Alamitos website at www.rancholosalamitos.com.
- ² Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2013), 43.
- ³ The social historian James Howard Kunstler famously denounced the tract-house suburb to an audience of “new urbanists” as the place “where evil dwells” in 1999. (Kunstler, “Where Evil Dwells: Reflections on the Columbine School Massacre,” a paper delivered at the Congress for the New Urbanism, 6 June 1999.)
- ⁴ Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 146 et seq. Massey argues for a transitive conception of locality. “Instead then, of thinking of

places as areas with boundaries around, they can be imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings, but where a larger proportion of those relations, experiences and understandings are constructed on a far larger scale than what we happen to define for that moment as the place itself, whether that be a street, or a region or even a continent.”

- ⁵ Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 1.
- ⁶ For the premodern shaping of the landscape around Bixby Hill and Graywood Avenue, see the chapters “Political Ecology of Prehistoric Los Angeles” by L. Mark Rabb and “The Los Angeles Prairie” by Paul M. Schiffman in *Land of Sunshine: An Environmental History of Metropolitan Los Angeles*, William Deverell and Greg Hise, eds. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005).
- ⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 78.
- ⁸ Robert Dawson and Gray Brechin, *Farewell, Promised Land: Waking from the California Dream* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).
- ⁹ Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 39.
- ¹⁰ Jenny Price, “Thirteen Ways of Seeing Nature in L.A., Part I,” *Believer*, April 2006, accessed 2 June 2014 at www.believermag.com/issues/200604/?read=article_price#.U4oEhldV8E.
- ¹¹ Emily Dickinson, *The Letters of Emily Dickenson*, L 459a to Thomas Wentworth Higginson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986). In full, Dickinson’s letter reads “Nature is a Haunted House - but Art - a House that tries to be haunted.”
- ¹² Barry Lopez, “A Scary Abundance of Water,” *LA Weekly*, 9 July 2002, accessed 1 June 2014 at www.laweekly.com/2002-01-17/news/a-scary-abundance-of-water.
- ¹³ Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 127.