

## Scenes from Central California

### 1. San Joaquin

All along the interstate  
are those forgotten numbers,  
99, 41, 65,  
that lead to purgatory –  
that place between places:  
Quiet symmetrical rows mesmerize  
the passing driver like an old movie projector  
as canals crisscross the horizon,  
stretching a thin film of water  
over the dehydrated earth;  
the smell of citrus and almonds,  
pesticides and shit,  
lingers in dusty nostrils.

All suffocating beneath that ceaseless,  
toxic, yellow haze

An army of ladders,  
moves in and out from the tops of trees  
from dawn till dusk,  
harvesting our prosperity;  
parched fields  
fertilized by the blood and sorrow  
of those with backs doubled-over,  
soaked in sweat,  
yearning for  
that rusted water tank  
under vigilant eyes  
of tinted, air-conditioned windows.

When the last rotten fruit falls,  
the orchards are overcome  
by sidewalks  
by traffic lights  
by the cancerous grid of cement and asphalt,  
erasing the land and its anonymous history,  
here where the sun knows no mercy  
and the rain never falls.

## 2. Suburbia

When we were six  
they took off the training wheels.  
We tentatively wandered down the street,  
occasionally looking back;  
our parents waved from a shaded porch.

Soon we were fearless,  
our world was limited only  
by sore calves and night skies.  
We'd ride past manicured lawns  
ten streets from home –  
houses all the same –  
occasionally stopping,  
for Sunday school  
and videogames.

Then we passed a test;  
they gave us a card – a letter and seven numbers.  
We drove as far as a few dollars would take us,  
past city limits,  
on two-lane roads,  
and endless foothills,  
occasionally turning around,  
for teenage romance  
and final exams.

We got letters in the mail,  
"Congratulations..."  
Our mothers cried.  
We sold our memories  
after one last laugh  
and said goodbye,  
started driving  
in different directions –  
Never planning on looking back.

### 3. Water Park

Can you see?  
That barren hole,  
those dry bones,  
those once flooded ruins.  
The generous lakes  
and meandering rivers  
have given up –  
Exhausted. Defeated. No more.

Remember their cool relief on a summer afternoon,  
six weeks away from homework and stress?  
I don't.

But now,  
for a limited time offer –  
escape the thirst,  
the migraine inducing heat,  
and come relax  
in puddles of piss and sweat.  
Push and shove through crowds  
of greasy, sun-burnt backs  
and ice chests of putrefying bologna sandwiches.  
Rent a pair of sunglasses  
to ogle skimpy bikinis  
and glare at crying children.  
Enjoy the lukewarm, chlorinated pools  
that used to irrigate the fields.  
Drink watered down beer to forget.

Only thirty dollars an hour.

#### 4. Ash Tree

Burnt.  
Pockmarked.  
Scarred  
by the memories  
of nine generations  
the dead leaves  
of your final autumn  
barely cover  
your exposed roots,  
mangled and lifeless.  
The barren vein of sand  
that gave you life,  
long purposeless,  
is paved over.

What was it like,  
before all of this?  
Before the first railroads  
and avenues,  
that parceled the land  
with symmetrical efficiency,  
Before the rivers  
were taken captive  
and became slaves  
to insatiable warehouses,  
Before the first farms  
withered up and blew away  
filling the sky  
with poison,  
Before the first developers  
devoured the remains  
and painted them gray,  
Before they built mansions  
to hide and say nothing was wrong,  
Before the city was in flames.

What was it like?  
When water fell from the sky  
and spring returned,  
When the Sierras  
unmasked by black smoke  
gave birth  
to dreamers.