



A BAY SURVEY

by owen mould

The clock is ticking down the last minutes of the day and as we ease on into the Witching Hour, the long wail of the through-passing train comes wavering over the estuary and through the fogs that seep around the dripping houses. There have been several trains tonight, indicating some kind of ferocious activity down at the Port. The great cargo ships unload entire freight cars at the docks of one of the largest sea ports in the world only a few miles away -- as the seagull flies. The trains then hook up and pass through the Jack London Waterfront at night, blowing a "Keep Clear" signal as they trundle south 3rd Street. Where they go after that is anybody's guess. Maybe down to the Oakland Airport or the warehouses and factories all along Fremont and Hayward and on to distribution centers in San Jose or East out to the Valley past the windmill clusters of the Altamont hills and beyond to Livermore and Pleasanton and Modesto, Water Capital of the West.

Or maybe, this train swings around the lower end of the Alviso slough that marshes out the south end of the Bay to swing up past Great America theme park and then through the ravaged Silicon Valley towns of Sunnyvale, Los Altos and Mountain View. From there we continue north to the great salt flats of East Palo Alto and the University there on the western side. They have a deli there in the shopping center where the owner makes a jet black thing called a Fred Steak. Costs about \$30 a pound for this flesh and people have been known to fly up from Brazil and down from Canada to fetch a couple Fred Steaks to feed a special occasion.

Leaving Fred and his deli behind, we sail on up through the surreal artificiality of Redwood City, once an expanse of orchards and past the peninsular Foster City, once the marshy home of egrets and now a set of semicircular streets arranged concentrically around an emptiness that is entirely bordered by liquor stores, auto body shops, tile and linoleum stores and the San Mateo bungalows tucked up at the base of the peninsula ridge which separates the urban sprawl on the east side from the long watershed of the Crystal Springs reservoirs.

If you were to take a jaunt that a way, you would pass under the disapproving outstretched finger of Father Junipero Serra, whose statue looms over freeway pointing at god knows what. Perhaps the mists that crawl over the forested coastal ridge.

If you were to descend to the reservoir itself and sneak past the barrier fence, you would come to the Pulgas Water Temple, which is a Greek-style

temple built over one of the outflows into the reservoir, and which sports a greensward and regularly-spaced trees set about a rectangular mirror pond, which --- this dark night -- would reflect no stars or moon for the mists are heavy.



Zigging our zag back to the Bay side, we approach Burlingame and South City, with its name set Hollywood style, in big block letters on the side of the mountain, and little Brisbane, City of the Stars tucked off into a hollow in the hills there. And we pickup our train on the Amtrak line chugging north past the bulk of San Bruno Mountain where kit foxes and deer and azure butterflies once roamed as recently as 1988. Not anymore, for the Developers fought a long battle for the rights to destroy the Mountain, chopping down the forest that grew there to build a gated community for the wealthy on the northern slope while they made the south slope a rock quarry. The Developers tried to level the entire mountain behind Brisbane and turn it into a golf course, but the good people of Brisbane

would have none of that nonsense and so they put a stop to it with a 200 year moratorium on building.

With a great wheeze our train pulls into the now abandoned train depot dug into the side of Potrero Hill -- the last train stopped there about 2001 or so -- and we use our wings to lift off and sail south over the present Caltrain Depot in China Basin south of Market so as to gain altitude and head north again over Soma and the imposing City Jail at 7th Street with its slit windows shining in the fog. We bank over the Powell Street cable car turnaround and scoot past the sleeping pigeons at Union Square and zip over famous Harrington's Bar and Grill and the equally famous -- but not so chic -- window where they used to sell sausages to people on the go across the street. Through North Beach and past Specs and a couple homeless poets asleep in the alley we bank to the west to skirt between the Marina and the bulk of Russian Hill to see if any friends are working up late at the SF Art Institute. Nope, not even a performance artist is cavorting in the nude down there on this chilly night.

So we zoom past the Presidio without checking in on our favorite Greek deli in the Richmond -- best gyros this side of Chicago -- and track the Bridge into the well matriculated hills of Marin. The little brooklet in San Anselmo is gushing in the darkness, a regular torrent sweeping down and all the friends are asleep there. So we bank to the East through San Rafael somewhat north of the old Portuguese fishing villages of Sausalito and Tiburon, Peninsula of the Shark. The fishermen are long gone from there, leaving trendy art boutiques and expensive homes perched on the hillsides. There is a great Mexican restaurant there,

however. But we are not going to tell you where it is just yet, for the food is cheap and its good.

From there its a quick hop over the water to the industrial zone of Richmond with its factories, chemical processing plants and Chevron oil refinery. Then its down through Albany with its Solano Avenue and through the packed avenues of the Berkeley flatlands. Nothing happening tonight at Gilman Street, where the brightest and the darkness of the punks still hold forth with slashing guitars and heavy beats.

It is not long before we are back in Oaktown, slinging around the Tribune tower with its newly (in the last five years) repaired clock and then we are back over the water looking down on The Island, home to some 70,000 people, several opossums, at least two families of raccoons, one flock of Canadian geese and a motley gathering of egrets and storks.

Its misty, its wet, its cold and we're tired after all the travel. Time to pop into McGrath's for a quick one if the lights are still on.

(Excerpted from 2003)



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