

Writing Los Angeles

*A Literary Anthology
E-Sampler*

EDITED BY David L. Ulin



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List Price: \$40.00

ISBN: 1-931082-27-8

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FROM *Holy Land*
by D. J. Waldie

Chevron's real estate division decided to auction off the street names in its new subdivision as a fund raiser for the YMCA.

Several city council members bid successfully for a street name of their own. One city official paid to have a street named after his daughter.

I paid \$200 to have a street named after my family.

The street is a cul-de-sac at the border of the city. There are eighteen houses on the dead-end street. The houses there are more than double the size of mine.

Behind them, beyond a high cinder-block wall, is a trailer park built on a landfill in the city of Long Beach.

My mother came to Southern California in 1943, while my father was serving as gunnery officer on the destroyer *Bradford*. The *Bradford's* home port was Long Beach. My mother worked there as an escrow clerk in a bank.

The *Bradford's* duty throughout the war in the Pacific was to serve as an escort ship for carrier operations. The *Bradford* directed fighter aircraft,

monitored radar, and screened carriers from Japanese submarines and torpedo planes.

The *Bradford* also collected downed Navy flyers whose planes were too damaged or low on fuel to reach the carriers from which they were launched.

The crew members of the *Bradford* never lost a pilot they were sent to find.

In two years of bitter fighting, no sailor on board was killed in enemy action. In the battles for Iwo Jima and Okinawa, where kamikaze aircraft sank or damaged more than thirty ships, the *Bradford* was unharmed.

The war ended, and my parents stayed in Southern California.

They stayed a continent away from my father's mother in New York City.

They bought a house on a street that ended, for a few years, in bean fields.

Don Rochlen, the publicist who promoted the new suburb, told reporters from Los Angeles newspapers that the house lots in the new suburb were made small by design so that the streets could be wider.

The houses are close enough so that you might hear, if you listened, a neighbor's baby cry, a father arguing with a teenage son, or a television playing early on a summer night.

Most things here are close enough for comfort.

FROM **“L.A. Glows”**
By Lawrence Weschler

The day of that infamous slow-motion Bronco chase—actually, it was already past sundown here in New York as I sat before the glowing TV in our darkening kitchen, transfixed by the unfurling stream of bob-and-wafting helicopter images, hot tears streaming down my cheeks—my eight-year-old daughter gazed for a while at the screen and then over at me, at which point, baffled and concerned, she inquired, “What’s wrong, Daddy? Did you know that guy?”

“What guy?” I stammered, surfacing from my trance, momentarily disoriented. “Oh, no, no. I didn’t know the guy. I don’t give a damn about the guy. It’s that light! That’s the light I keep telling you girls about.” You girls: her mother and her. That light: the late-afternoon light of Los Angeles—golden pink off the bay through the smog and onto the palm fronds. A light I’ve found myself pining for every day of the nearly two decades since I left Southern California.

FROM *The Slide Area*
by Gavin Lambert

The drugstore is fairly empty, at the soda fountain a group of girls sip chocolate malts and a Filipino workman eats a hamburger. Everyone else is watching the Countess Osterberg-Steblechi, who pays no attention but very slowly revolves the paperbacked crime novels on their stands. It is the fate of the Countess to be stared at, and one cannot be surprised. She is like a balloon blown up into roughly human shape and ready to burst. All swollen and sagging contours except for her face; her beaky nose and sharp hooded eyes remind you of a falcon. She has hair that looks like a wig but is really her own dyed red, and wears a piece of garish linen printed all over with flowers and cornucopias like old-fashioned wallpaper.

Each time I see this great aristocratic wreck, I have the impression she has *got inside* her shoes, her dress, her hat if she wears one, by mistake. And she cannot get out. She is trapped, any movement could be fatal. She waddles dangerously up to me now, a paper-backed novel in one hand, a crocodile leather bag in the other.

‘Dear child, have you read *The Case of the Black-Eyed Blonde?*’ I shake my head as she holds up the book

in front of me. ‘How strange, nobody has. I looked at the first page and nearly fainted with excitement. Are you coming to tea with me Sunday?’

‘I’d love to.’

She wheezes with pleasure, but the strain contracts her face. Now it looks like the moon after an explosion, the features are blasted fragments. ‘There may be a kind of jumble sale, I hope to raise a few hundred dollars.’

‘For what?’ I ask, though I know the answer.

‘For myself, of course, dear child. I wish I were not so heartrendingly poor.’ She scratches her nose with a jewelled and freckled finger. ‘Are you sure you haven’t read *The Case of the Black Eyed Blonde?*’

‘Absolutely.’

‘Then I shall have to take it on trust. With an opening paragraph like that I think...’ She breaks off vaguely, fumbling in her crocodile bag and giving the assistant a quarter.

The assistant says: ‘Thirty-five cents, please.’

She takes an alarmed step backwards. ‘You mean it’s one of the expensive ones?’

‘It’s thirty-five cents.’

The Countess replaces the book in the Westerns rack. ‘Much too expensive,’ she says firmly, ‘when no one knows if it’s really good.’

FROM *David Hockney by David Hockney*
by David Hockney

When I got to Los Angeles I didn't know a soul. People in New York said You're mad for going there if you don't know anybody and you can't drive. They said At least go to San Francisco if you want to go West. And I said No, no, it's Los Angeles I want to go to. So it was arranged; I was going to have an exhibition in New York, at Charles Alan's Gallery, and I said I'd paint the pictures in California. Charles said It's crazy, you know you won't even be able to leave the airport if you can't drive; it's madness. So he phoned up this guy who was a sculptor there, who showed in his gallery, called Oliver Andrews.

...

We went up to the licence place and they said You fill out this form. And the form had questions on it like What is the top speed limit in California: 45 miles an hour, 65 miles an hour, 100 miles an hour. Well, you can guess, you don't have to be too smart or even to have read the highway code. And all the questions were like this. I just picked the answers using common sense. And they said You made four mistakes; that's allowed. Where's your vehicle? I said How do you mean, where's the vehicle? They said You take the driving test

now, the practical bit; you passed the first part. I said Could I come back tomorrow? They said Come back this afternoon; you get three goes for your three dollars. If you fail you can come back. Oliver was amused that I'd inadvertently passed the first part of the test, and he showed me a bit, and then said You might as well have a go. And they gave me the licence.

I was thrilled but frightened. I thought, that's all you do and everybody's zipping about you? I went and bought a Ford Falcon in the afternoon, which cost about a thousand dollars; first car I'd ever had; and I was very scared driving it. I thought, I'll have to practise; and I just drove anywhere. I got on a freeway the second day and I daren't move off any of the lanes and I went all the way to San Bernardino on the freeway, sixty miles inland. I thought, I'll turn round here, if I can find where you get off. Then there's a sign: Las Vegas 200 miles. And I thought, wonderful, I'll practise in the desert, and I drove all the way to Las Vegas, and drove back at night.

FROM *Autopia*
by Cees Nooteboom

I had taken a room in Beverly Hills and did not go out because of the myth prevalent here that you can't walk outside without the alibi of a dog. I was alone with the twenty-two eyes of the television set and a remote control in a severe draft of air-conditioning. Sometimes I would tiptoe down the stairs like a mouse to retrieve something out of the North Pole of the refrigerator. Perhaps it was autumn; in the mornings I heard the quiet gardener in my sleep, raking hard, dry, tropical leaves, but when I looked outside, the sun was standing over the swimming pool like a ball of fire, and high palm and eucalyptus trees stood motionless in the light.

On the third day, I ventured outside. I walked, which was crazy—not because it is dangerous but because it does not make sense. In a city with streets longer than fifty kilometers, the measure of one foot is absurd, and so is the use of one's feet as a means of transportation. But I did not know this yet, and I walked out the door with the idea of going to the city center. The street curved, and there were big houses on both sides, each with its own garden. In front of the houses stood big, silent cars. The street led to a larger, straight

one with even bigger houses, bigger gardens, and bigger cars, but there was not a person in sight. It was silent, too. Every now and then one of those big machines would glide past me with creatures in human shape sitting inside, but there was no one on the street—no milkman, no cigar shop around the corner, only me with my steps, and a lot of them.

I don't know how long I walked along like that. After a while I came across a Hollywood billboard with an image that evoked visions of a seedy cinema back in Holland and black-and-white movies with Humphrey Bogart, but where I stood there was nothing but a very broad road with lawns in the middle and palm trees as high as cathedrals on either side. A black woman stood at the bus stop that curiously had appeared there, too. This was the first human being I had seen since I stepped outside, because you never know about those shadows in the cars.

FROM *Straight Life*
By Art Pepper

The club Alabam was the epitome of Central Avenue. It was right off Forty-second Street across from Ivy Anderson's Chicken Shack. There were a lot of other clubs, but the Club Alabam was really one of the old-time show-time places, a huge room with beautiful drapes and silks and sparklers and colored lights turning and flashing. The bandstand was plush and gorgeous with curtains that glistened. The waitresses were dressed in scanty costumes, and they were all smiling and wiggling and walking around, and everywhere you looked you saw teeth, people laughing, and everybody was decked out. It was a sea of opulence, big hats and white fluffy fur. And the cars out front were real long Cadillacs with little mudguards, little flappy little things, shiny things.

The band had two altos, two trumpets, a tenor, and a rhythm section. On the show was Avery Parrish. He was the one who wrote "After Hours" and made that famous, and when he played the whole place rocked with the music. There was Wynonie Harris, a real handsome guy, light skinned with glistening eyes and

the processed hair, all shiny with every hair just perfectly in place. He had a good blues voice and just carried the audience away. The walls would start shaking; the people screaming and clapping. Every now and then they'd get up and start wiggling in the aisles next to their tables. Moke and Poke were on the bill, far-out comedians. When they came on they'd do this walking step, laughing, one right behind the other, moving in perfect synchronization. After their act they'd run into their dressing room, rip off their clothes, and throw on silk robes and come back and do this walk around the audience; every now and then, when they were walking, if the audience was really good, they'd have it so their joints would flop out of their robes, flopping in time, in perfect unison, and the chicks would go, "Ahhhhh!" And we'd just be shouting in the background, playing these real down-home blues. I'd go in there and play and get so caught up in the feeling that I never had a chance to think about anything bad that might be happening to me or to worry at all. It was such an open, such a free, such a beautifully right time.

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List Price: \$40.00

ISBN: 1-931082-27-8