

Bread

San Francisco 1969
The blues in seven stanzas

1

Everywhere there is one thing at first, one thing to be remembered. In San Francisco it was bread, sourdough batards in a paper bag. Oregon smelled of wet moss. San Francisco then smelled of bread. It doesn't now. We never had good bread before. We bought frozen dough and baked it at home.

The second first thing is where to live there, which was an apartment building two up two down, or two front two back, as you want to think about it.

We had the lower front overlooking 19th Avenue with bay windows and if we stood in the bay we could see one way Golden Gate Park where we went on our bicycles on Sundays to the museum where the air smelled of eucalyptus, and could see the other way to the intersection where on other days the Judah streetcar took us downtown or at night to the ocean and the Surf theater which is now a Korean minimart. On Sundays it didn't smell of bread but car exhaust because 19th Avenue was a major street going to the park where we went with our bicycles to get away from the exhaust smell.

2

The second first thing is always where to live. If you are people like us you worry about where to live. There were people living there then who didn't worry but we weren't such people and we found a place which was a very good place.

We had two rooms with French doors between and bay windows in each room to look out of except on Sundays when we didn't look out of them because of the car exhaust. We went out instead to ride our bicycles in the park instead of look at it because in the park it smelled of eucalyptus not car exhaust or bread or wet moss.

In our apartment there was a Murphy bed with no bed in

it and a tiny kitchen with a cool box beside the door where the steps were down to the gangway where the garbage cans were. The cool box was a cabinet set into the outside wall where people used to keep milk and ends of sausage which they didn't want to spoil before they ate them before there were refrigerators or at least refrigerators in apartments like ours.

Now there was a refrigerator. The garbage cans were in the gangway between our building and the next one behind a door to the street which was a narrow wooden door beside the garage door. The garage cost extra to park our car which we almost never used because there were a bus and a streetcar which cost almost nothing.

The Murphy bed and the French doors and the garbage in the gangway and the door and the eucalyptus in the park on Sundays where we went to the museum together in this place where there was good bread all cost \$125 a month and we were rich because we both had jobs which we weren't supposed to because there then jobs were not cool but we weren't cool although we wanted to be.

Our car which was parked in the garage. We didn't drive now because of the bus except to Mt Tamalpais when we got tired of the fog. I got an apocalyptic headache from that because I hadn't driven a car in so long. If we took the bus and the streetcar downtown instead there was no fog there either.

We went to the wharf which smelled of bread and fish. The bread was best on the wharf at the end of the cable car line that cost one token that cost 25 cents. But we could afford that on Sunday because we had jobs. It was because of the fish that the bread was better there so it was worth 25 cents

3

I wanted to get a job in publishing because I had a college degree in how to write and I supposed that meant I knew how to write and could get a job in publishing that I wanted.

The publisher was a publisher of textbooks which was why it didn't need to be in New York at that time when publishers were relocating West where they could have horizontal buildings with lots of grass and outsourcing all their editors.

If you wanted one of those editor's jobs of which there were none you had to be a proofreader first and so you were given a proofreading test which was full of trick questions about Daniel Webster when they meant Noah Webster which wasn't a proofreader's test but a line editor or a fact checker but there were none of those either, probably. I decided then that I didn't want to work for a textbook publisher anyway so I got a job in a hardware store instead. The employment agency called but I was happier there in the store I said and they didn't call again. This was not the first or the last time someone thought I made the wrong choice. Sometimes they were right and sometimes not. I think you ought to be wrong sometimes or maybe most of the time to know how to write.

4

So I got a job at Brownies which was a hardware store. The original Mr. probably Brown was probably a man of the 1920s and the store which was his probably was too, to go by what was in the store.

Brownie's was at the corner of Sacramento and Polk on the edge of Chinatown on the edge of the gay district on the edge of Nob Hill on the edge of city hall and the Geary theaters where Joel Cairo wanted to go in *The Maltese Falcon* but the police stopped him.

What was in the store was old stuff for the old buildings there which of course weren't old to begin with but got old along with the store and the stuff to fix them with. What's this? someone said. An old Chinese man with a beard of two hairs who had been scuttling through the aisles in a squat was looking between his knees at something in the lowest bin.

What's this? someone said. A gay man of free and open face who came here often held up a bronze gizmo which rattled when he shook it. What's this? someone said. A slim woman with sunglasses in her hair. We knew. We always knew. Here's one, I said. You see yours is broken here. Here, it's supposed to work this way. Here it is.

Brownie's old horde, crusty dragon's gold, is stolen now for a new shop across the street.

5

Two Jews who met at Wanamaker's owned the place. Mutt and Jeff they were, but decided to go into business for themselves anyway. Cornell was tall and slim and spoke a clear, precise German. Arndt was small, darker. His infrequent German was also darker.

They squabbled. Cornell aloof, exasperated. Arndt dark, aggrieved. They did not socialize.

The store was open nine to six. We arrived one half-hour early and were given two half-hours for lunch with fish and chips on the street where I read *Ulysses*. After a while some Japanese bought the chip shop. They served fish sticks.

The senior man who was shop steward was unassuming, vague, friendly but closed, who got Monday to Friday. He was closed weekends but not the store. Next senior was a woman, the aunt-like Mary.

The man just above me was a Jamaican, The Jamaican lived in Berkeley and knew literary people. We went there to a party there, sat and said nothing there, went home to Sunset where it was foggy there and we still didn't know anyone except the cat and the people upstairs a little. The cat's name was Ruelle. I don't remember the Jamaican's name. He was roundy and ironic. I was least senior and had to make do with Thursdays. I read *Ulysses* on my lunch hour which was two half-hours really. I sat on a bench and it was almost

Christmas. For lunch I ate fish and chips or some of that good bread. For the other half hour I sat in the basement of the store with the pipe-threading machine under a bare lightbulb and read *Ulysses* there too which Cornell thought was daft. Arndt didn't care. I don't remember their first names unless they were Mister but I don't think so.

6

Everybody at Brownie's was good to know but I didn't know them because that summer we ran off to go here and there in the car as we always did except to get away from the fog. On the way home the fan belt broke in Barstow and it took all day to fix.

It took all day because it was a serpentine belt which went everywhere and a lot of the engine had to be taken apart to get it on. Barstow was not very interesting if you lived in San Francisco.

When we got home I got a new job which I didn't like. No one there was good to know. There was only the floor manager who raced whippets and the owners, who were man and wife. They squabbled. The neighborhood was full of old Italians who wanted to bargain down the price. The Marina District. Not on the edge of anything.

We still went to the wharf on weekends now which smelled of bread and fish. The bread was best on the wharf at the end of the cable car line which cost one token of twenty-five cents.

7

I bought a detective's trench coat and a Webster's third dictionary with a chart of proofreading symbols because I thought I had found out maybe I didn't know how to write very well yet and it would be good to own a very big dictionary.

I bought a good Nikon camera with two lenses which I

still have but it's no good now because there isn't any film for it which is a shame because it was a good camera once.

Still, everything was good there then anyway. It was even good to wait for the bus on the corner of Stanyan and Haight before sunrise with the dealers and addicts and not blending in because I was wearing shoes which I was wearing because I was going to work and you can't go to work barefoot. There was something wrong with my regular bus. That was why I was standing there with shoes on. It was because of the shoes one asked me

Hey, man, you got any bread?