MARE ISLAND

BROOKS RODDAN
Advance Praise for Mare Island

"Bombing along the highway at the north edge of San Francisco Bay, as we moderns are wont to do, the turnoff to Mare Island passes in a blink, and most of us don't think twice. But Brooks Roddan takes the exit—and finds himself in a sprawling, ghostly monument to the American Empire. Slow down now and walk with him on this provocative meditation on power, impermanence, and the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves.

—Jay Harris, Former Publisher of Mother Jones

"The haunting images and elegiac prose simultaneously elucidate and disorient the personal and political past, present, and future of a once important, now abandoned, military site. This precious little volume's poetic fragility encourages one to drop everything and head to Mare Island before it too disappears."

—Jim VanBuskirk, Librarian and Author
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Acknowledgements

The author is grateful to Lincoln Park Golf Club for providing the occasion for his first encounter with Mare Island; to Lea Ann Roddan for her belief in the project, her encouragement, and her eye for the right image; to Tom Meyer for his distinguished service in both the US Navy and the art world; and to those who shared their memories of Mare Island or were honest enough to say they didn’t know Mare Island existed.

Finally this book is dedicated to all the men and women who served at Mare Island, and to the workers who build the things we use in our lives.

Foreword contributor Thomas V. Meyer is a San Francisco native. He served in the U.S. Navy on board the USS Bennington in the China Sea, and as Communications Officer in the Twelfth Naval District in New York City. Mr. Meyer co-founded Grapestake Gallery in San Francisco and is an art dealer and fine art advisor.
foreword

No matter how much you might know about Mare Island—and it’s surprising how many Bay Area residents know little or nothing about it—the place is essentially mysterious, a kind of Stonehenge of the American Empire.

Founded in 1854 by the legendary Admiral David Farragut and closed by an act of Congress on April Fools’ Day, 1996. Mare Island was for over one hundred years the shipbuilding center of the western world. As many as 50,000 men land women lived and worked on Mare Island at any one time, building almost every kind of naval vessel imaginable, from the first submarines to the swift boats of Vietnam.

To be able to see Mare Island today as it once was—a vital cog in national defense, a bustling nerve center of naval experimentation and progress during two world wars and numerous international conflicts—takes far more imagination than to see it as it is now, or even how it might be someday in the future. For there are attempts to repurpose Mare Island—there’s a college campus, some new housing, light manufacturing of different types. But it’s the past that’s intriguing, that’s guaranteed to prompt so many questions in the imagination of anyone venturing off Highway 37 near Vallejo and into Mare Island, not the present or the future.

This little book is a narrative in words and pictures of one man’s unexpected encounter with Mare Island. The author walks along, taking just enough time to be led by the place itself, letting questions of his own past come to him unbidden, watching the country he loves become a super-power right before his eyes. It’s a modest act of preservation, mercifully free of the Technicolor romantic notions that often accompany historic documentation.

Tom Meyer, San Francisco, California 2016
I was driving around on a Saturday morning in early March, on my way somewhere, I can’t remember where, it doesn’t matter whether I remember or don’t remember where, when I first saw Mare Island. This kind of wandering was good for me then; I didn’t have time for it then like I do now.

I remember this: I’d been reading a book about The Veda’s, how they thought of the sky as the ocean and the ocean as their heaven. There were no fixed places in Vedic culture, and no trace of building survived their civilization. If they had a Parthenon it was, as one admirer wrote, ‘made of words’.
I pulled off the road, got out of the car and started walking. Walking’s the best way to see things, especially when you’re not sure what you’re seeing.

And what was I seeing? I wasn’t sure, though I knew that what I was seeing had once been important, and was now a ruin, a modern ruin.

What I was seeing looked so American. All the signs were in English, everything had been left behind in both slow motion and in such a big hurry.
Because the buildings were empty there was an odd transparency to each one of them, like each one was imploring me to look inside, promising to turn the past inside out so I could finally see what had happened. But the opposite happened instead—the more open a building was the more it concealed, the less inclined I was to make up a story about it.

But the place I was seeing, that I knew nothing about, fit into the image of strength I've always had; it looked like a place where my dad worked, but had some control of. With my mother's love I'd bought into the belief system.

Since I didn't know what the buildings had been made for, what their purposes had been, it didn't matter whether they'd been used well or misused. It only mattered that they were empty.

And emptiness can be quite thrilling.
It’s all very strange, the buildings are empty but alive, there’s none of the numbness that surrounds state capitols or other official civic buildings. Even though they’d been abandoned and are in various states of dilapidation, boarded up, fenced off with chain link, I could still imagine everyone who worked inside them going home for the weekend and coming back first thing Monday morning.
Commodore David Farragut established Mare Island Shipyard in 1854. 513 ships would be built at Mare Island before it was officially closed, April 1, 1996.

Farragut’s the man who said, “Damn the torpedoes and full speed ahead,” perhaps the most American of all American sayings.