

THE GATHERING

The old man had been tending the Sacred Fire since before dawn, each branch and limb of oak an added prayer. The rising sun etched the hills of Gaviota in gold, and oak trees cast long shadows from the secret groves where families camped. The fragrance of camp coffee and bacon mingled with the murmurs and coughs of people starting their day. When the sun rose above the hills and sparkled light on the ocean below, a young man, bare to the waist and wearing a deerskin skirt and seagull headdress, raised a conch shell to his lips. His breath blown into the conch released a deep cry that echoed through the hills and acorn groves. When the people came running up the hill, laughing and talking, another conch sounded from the hills and the people entered into silence around the fire, waiting for the song that would give form to the gratitude at the center of their prayer.

CHUMASH MAN

“Shoo-mash,” he says
and when he says it
I think of ancient sea lion hunts
and salt spray windswept
across my face
They tell him
his people are dead
“Terminated”

It's official
U.S. rubber-stamped official
Chumash: Terminated
a people who died
they say
a case for anthropologists

Ah, but this old one
this old one whose face is
ancient prayers come to rest
this old one knows
who he is

“Shoo-mash,” he says
and somewhere sea lions still gather
along the California coast
and salt spray
rises
rainbow mist
above the constant breaking
of the waves

THE DOLPHIN WALKING STICK

He says
Sure, you look for your Spirit
Symbol your totem
only it's more a waiting
watching
for its coming

You listen
You listen for the way it
feels deep inside

Sometimes something comes
that feels almost right
the way that swordfish
kept cropping up with
its long nose

but no
and so you wait
knowing it is getting
closer knowing
it is coming

And when that dolphin
jumped out of the water
its silver blue sides all shiny
and glistening with rainbows
against the white cloud sky
and the ocean so big
and deep
it went on
forever
I knew it had come

My father rests his hand upon
the dolphin's back
the dolphin's gaze serene
above the rainbow band
wrapped around the walking stick

He leans upon his brother friend
and walks across the room
 As he walks
strings of seashells clack softly
as when ocean waves tumble
rocks and shells and
the gentle clacking song
follows each wave
as it pulls back into
the sea

The sea

So long ago
the Channel Islands filled
with Chumash People like
colonies of sea lions
along the shore so many
people
it was time for some to
make the move
across the ocean to
the mainland

Kakunupmawa the sun
the Great Mystery
according to men's ideas
said

Don't worry
I will make you a bridge

the rainbow will be your bridge only
don't look down
or you will fall

Have faith

So, the chosen ones began
the long walk across
the rainbow
they kept their eyes straight
toward where the mainland was

and all around them was the ocean sparkling
like a million scattered crystals
so blue-green and singing
lovely and cool
some looked down
and fell
into the
deep
to become
the dolphins
they too
the People

My father turns to look at me

Someone told me that story
long before I ever heard it
 It's those old ones
he says pointing up to the ceiling
as if it were sky

They sent the dolphin to me

I always loved the sea