

On the Sunset

The avenues run
like an abecedarian:
Irving, Judah with its trolley,
on through Rivera, Santiago, Taraval
Ulloa, Vicente, Wawona, Yorba...
water rises over Upper Great Highway
then the 48th Avenue, then 47th, and so on.

The grid
points towards Asia
from the seawall
in the fog
you might think you see
a Shinto gate
rising in the black, white, and grays
of sumi ink
out of an ocean
shackled in plastic handcuffs
wracked by tsunami
floating dead fish and
offshore oil rigs.

It's getting warmer.

Each incoming wave
with its chariot of salt
its foam horses
eats a few more
feet of sand, or asphalt.
Crosses what was once
the barrier of highway,
small dunes, tuberous seaweed,
ice plants
blooming pinky purple.

Eventually the tidy yards
of pastel stucco houses
lemon trees, pots of basil,
clusters of calla lilies
and tended roses
all float like buoys
that mark only absence—
warning bells disintegrating
in a sea of sharks and mermaids

suddenly thrust ashore.

The last librarian has a journal
but she doesn't keep it.
She has a computer
but no electricity.
For some reason
one weak outlet
still works
enough for an electric kettle.
She has flashlights. She has
"the captain
must go down with the ship."
But no one
has asked her to stay,
the librarian
in the once elegant now
leaking library
set by a park, a soccer field,
a formerly crowded neighborhood
often under renovation
as money flowed or stalled
from City Hall.

But City Hall
has moved to Sacramento
soon enough
the small plane trees
arranged outside it
like so many peaceful
protestors
will find themselves
leafless, reflected
in brackish standing water.

But maybe not just yet.
The flat parts of the city
flood
while the hills
rise
as if they themselves
were huge
ocean-going vessels
liners or destroyers.

Candles, canned goods, a camping
cot, two changes
of underwear, another shirt,
another dress, a coat, and
an umbrella.

The last librarian
takes inventory of herself.

If she lacks something
she can wade a block
to Mr. Vishnu's store
and buy it
for a good price.

Mr. Vishnu

The preserver
of the universe
has been incarnated
nine times.

There is one more time
coming.

Mr. Vishnu
has run a convenience store
just a block from the library
for many years.

It is small on the outside
but inside
it is vast
its spacious aisles
contain a universe of things
from antacids to swimming pool noodles
propane to lipstick
instant ramen to pregnancy tests.

The truth is
no one
has ever entered
Mr. Vishnu's store
and exited
empty-handed.

You find
either what you went in for—
and at a very
reasonable price—
or find
something else you really need.

Remember those soft fabric sandals
your grandmother wore—
black strapped or in
beige florals?

There is a bin of these.
They are all your size.

House dresses, temporary tattoos, Mexican
toilet water, the 7 Powers of Africa candles,
fish food, bamboo stalks, cumin,
altar-sized Buddhas, plastic flamingos,
we could go on and on.

But it is better to visit.

Except now
it is impossible to visit
as the water rises
cutting the neighborhood
off from the mainland.

Mr. Vishnu keeps a wooden rowboat
and two sets of oars
in a back room.
But he has not left yet.

The last librarian is his
only customer these days.

He no longer uses
the anti-theft videos,
the monitors where
if you considered shoplifting
your best self would appear
and you'd
put the item back.

Mr. Vishnu
used to need an extra pair of arms
for all his stocking and
restocking.
But now when he is alone,
which is
most of the time,
he blows a giant conch shell
to the waves.
But even "om"
can't keep the sea back.
Nothing can.

When his cell phone still worked
his wife would call
five times a day
and yell at him
to come home.
Then she took the kids
and went to Merced
to live with her sister's family.
This is not a good sign.

They should never have been parted.

Before the water rose

he'd go home every night

and she'd rub his feet

tired out

from running about

the enormous store

and serving customers.

Now...

it's not a good sign.

Sasha

My name is Sasha. I am a library.
I mean, excuse me, a librarian.
What passes for a spinster
in the twenty-first century.
That is to say, I've danced in bars
with women and men
and taken
some of them
home. That was
when I had an apartment
in a hillier neighborhood
than this.
But never married, and given
the current circumstances,
unlikely to have children.

My last name? Unpronounceable
with its Cyrillic syllables. My grandfather
tried to anglicize it, but it just
ended up unpronounceable
in a slightly different way.
He came to San Francisco and
drove a cab. Complaining—
or was it boasting, about how much
the family cost him—birthdays, name days, saint's—
every party requiring a present and
every present requiring cash.
He was rich in relatives.
And I was named
for a grandmother, an aunt, and
a favorite cousin.
So just call me Sasha—that's for
Alexandra. And no, I wasn't
named for the famous library
that burned in the ancient world.
But I think about it. I do.

I probably think about it
more than I should.
But there isn't much to do
in my library these days—

no patrons, no circulation,
no internet.

Just the salt water lapping
creeping higher.

I'd say about another step
on the entry staircase
a week. The ocean
takes the stairs
unlike an impatient child
one at a time.