

Evolution of Words · *Dianne Nelson*

I TRIED TO SEE THE CITY as he must have seen it—a miracle of light, the rain-wet streets opening from Battery to Sansome and finally down to Grant. Judd hadn't slept in four nights, and so, when he left his parents' house on the fifth night and walked downtown, the city must have spun with music for him. He was seventeen and sleepless and that close to what his mother would later call "release."

We cried at that. Release. The idea of Judd walking in Chinatown the fifth night, change in his pockets, the on-and-off rain a passage into something we had no knowledge of. He liked it there—Chinatown—the piles of foreign newspapers, the boys with braids, with needletracks dancing up their thin arms. San Francisco was a waking dream that my cousin Judd walked through tirelessly. He didn't want a car. *Leslie Prada and Her Topless Love Act* was something he had to see on foot, next door to The Condor, across from Dutch Boy Paints, and only a half block down from El Cid's *He and She Revue*. "Get a job and you can have a car," Judd's parents told him, but he continued to walk from Nob Hill to Lands' End in tennis shoes and tee shirt, with the long dark hair that before he was buried, my uncle—Judd's father—would insist on having cut. No one knew where my cousin's spending money came from.

For months afterward, I looked for answers by trying to recreate the scene of that shadowy fifth night, the world in rags. Even fish sleep, their bodies like silvery, shot arrows lining the Embarcadero and Baker's Beach, and spreading outward on waves to Sausalito. Fridays were open buffet at Song Hay, and Judd could have been there that last night, but the restaurant was so busy that the cashier couldn't remember just one boy. An attendant at the Ginn Wall Parking Lot may have seen Judd, but there was nothing distinctive about my cousin's face, and in the darkness at the corner of the lot, a slouching boy in a denim jacket was the least of things to notice. With a Chamber of Commerce city map, I tried to reinvent his path, tracing the cold hard steps he might have taken past the Greyhound Bus Depot and maybe on to the Flower Terminal where the chrysanthemums must have glowed, to him, like an eerie experiment set in white rain. North or south from there, perhaps unable to hitch a ride to Sonoma, crazy and breathless and stinging with enough life to ground three people,

my cousin turned, wherever he was, and finally headed for the nailhead lights of the Golden Gate Bridge.

That's where I stopped reimagining the scene—the place where Judd put on his Walkman and stepped into air. No one knew how he got past the attendants at the tollbooths. Magic, determination—my cousin wanted to fly, the music pounding in his ears, the rough wind making its momentary promises.

I kept quiet as long as I could, and then, before the funeral, I told his father not to have Judd's hair cut, please, leave him the way he wanted to be, but I was a day too late. Hyberland's Mortuary had already taken army clippers to his head.

Judd's mother, entranced, made endless pots of coffee, and it was not until months later that she said it: "release." Sitting at the kitchen table, our hearts turned liquid and we finally caved in. And now, years later, there are other words we can't get past: "winter," "midnight." Even "water" hits us like a clap of thunder.