

ANNA WEBER

To My Student Leaving for the MFA Program at UC San Diego

I'm not jealous. Of course I'm not jealous. But I do worry. I'd like to tie a bit of ribbon around your neck; make a nice little bow and double-knot it, just to ensure that it stays secure all the way from Bumfuck, Alabama (where I'll still be—but I'm not jealous), to La Jolla, California, where I picture you—somewhat ridiculously—writing poetry on a beach, in between catching waves. Or at least listening to perfectly harmonized songs about surfing. Or eating avocados while wearing a pair of Mickey Mouse ears, or whatever else it is they're always telling us that Californians do in those commercials that urge the viewer to pick up and leave their doldrum life in Middle America and move west—come on, you pioneers! Come out to the land of movie stars and Technicolor sunshine and progressive thinking. Arnold Schwarzenegger wants to know when you can start.

No, I'm not jealous at all. I just want to keep track of you, to make sure you're okay out there among the orange groves and traffic jams and Valley Girl accents, the way I picture all people in California talk, based solely on my repeated viewings of the movie *Clueless* in sixth grade. I worry that you won't fit in, don't speak the language. I consider

forwarding you an article from BuzzFeed: "17 California Slang Terms: How to Speak Like a Californian." I worry that you'll hate your MFA program. That you'll blame me for encouraging you to devote your life to poetry—who gives advice like that? That you'll feel like a dumb Alabama kid who doesn't know shit, a stupid southern stereotype that the rest of the country likes to hang its problems on. You'll catch yourself every time you start to say y'all. Swallow that lump back down and eventually lose it altogether.

I worry that, like me, you'll be sad and drink too much that first year. Maybe date a real asshole, mistake meanness for genius. But instead of crying at a nameless Indiana bar like I did, you'll be lucky enough to stumble down to the ocean at night, just to prove that you can hold off on throwing yourself into it. The waves at that hour carry no one, but at dawn, hordes will appear, seal-slick wet-suited bodies entering the sea for a cleansing en masse. Everyone has something to atone for, even in California. Somewhere out there, a Kardashian is doing sunrise yoga on a stand-up paddleboard. Something will circle—sharks, or perhaps just shadows: the sky's few early morning clouds. Light refracted. Listen: if I tied the ribbon to you too tightly, it's only because I worry it won't be enough to save you if something—anything—pulls you under.

Anna Lowe Weber, originally from Louisiana, lives with her husband, daughter, and son in Huntsville, Alabama, where she teaches creative writing for the University of Alabama in Huntsville. She has an MFA in poetry from Purdue University and has had poetry featured or forthcoming in *Rattle*, the *Florida Review*, the *Iowa Review*, *Salamander*, and *Ninth Letter*, among other journals. Her poetry has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, and her poem "Spring Break 2011" was a finalist for the Rattle Poetry Prize.

CAROLE RAFFERTY

Alcatraz from Taylor and Union, 2018
Oil on canvas, 20 x 20 in



COURTESY STUDIO SHOP GALLERY IN BURLINGAME, CALIFORNIA