

WARREN CHANG

Entrance to Highway 1, 2010
Oil on Canvas, 30 x 30 in



courtesy: the artist

PAUL SKENAZY

Between the Rows

They found him sleeping early one morning in his bag. His exhale sputtered out, leaving traces of spittle on his lower lip. One hand partially covered his eyes and nose, the fingers spread softly over his face like he was playing hide and seek with the two stray cats who lived more or less permanently in the garden. The cats were curled near the man's face. The pepper plants were already in white flower. The man's palm was cupped softly just above his wide lips, a contented rumble coming out of his mouth.

They saw he had constructed a makeshift pallet out of two planks aligned side by side and set over another single one he'd wedged into the soft earth between the rows of vegetables to keep the slabs from collapsing down into the trough. Smart, they thought, when they woke him and watched him deconstruct his bed and return the boards to the stack beside the back wall of the garden. At the meeting that night, a couple of the men who found him remembered noticing bits of dirt at the edges of some boards the last few weeks; a couple of others admitted ignoring the indentations they'd seen along the line of peppers and eggplant. It seemed he'd never strayed from those two rows, whether from a passion for nightshades or the fit of the boards no one was ever sure. But now that they'd discovered him sleeping in a little later than usual, the random clues added up, and they realized he had been sleeping in the garden for some time now.

They might have done the same themselves, probably, except for the law. The law was the City Council, whom they catered to with bittersweet thanks for the privilege of their food and lodging—the Welcome Garden, the Gimme Shelter two blocks away. The law said they worked in the garden, slept in the shelter, sold the vegetables and flowers they grew on Wednesdays at the farmers' market on Saturdays and from a cart at the gate. The Council left it to them to decide how to divide the money. They had a common pot, with a wage scale for the ten or so regulars, the fifteen or twenty others who appeared when they needed food or cash, and the still more vagrant many who would wander in, pretend to do their time, and drift off quickly with their pay. The Council rented the empty land for them by remitting the owner's taxes. It donated the tools, helped them build the storage shed in back and the rickety fence and sign in front. It paid for a quarter-