

MITCHELL UNTCH

Highway 5 to the 218 on through Bakersfield

I roll down the window of our car
and press my face to the wind,
set the banners of my hair sailing
as I watch telephone poles flip by,
the cactus loom like empty coatracks,
miles of thick mountains brown.
Clouds are everywhere reshaping the ground,
shadows and sunlight exchange places
as if lining up for a group photo.

Bolts of light pull up like weeds through
cracks in the floorboards of retired shacks.
Spidery homesteads of empty hammocks
swing in long stretches of windowless rooms.
Like film that's been overexposed,
storefront signs hang by a nail,
soured by too much light. Abandoned,
no James Wright here. This is any mile.

We zip through junctions, past road signs to Cedar Mill's
off-ramps where antiques live out their past lives—
washbasins, blue and white chipped china cups
hung with delicate fingers, rimmed with conversations,
further, tented fruit stands, seasonal berries
that struggle to keep their own skin, undocumented,
handpicked in their warm woven wooden cradles.
Lures: half-price turquoise two exits away,
restrooms, gas stations, turnarounds.

There is nothing on the radio, nothing on the air.
The road opens up like a river opens wide.
Four lanes will get you to where you're going
faster than two with a crossover in between.
Wind snags the windshield, the canvas
on the hood of our car sounds as if someone
is trying to rip the lid off a coffee can.
I glance at my watch as cows kneel knee-deep in grass,
backs sloped like half-smiles.

Though there is no one else on the road,
I suspect there is someone looking at us
through a kitchen window's wide-angle lens,
a widow perhaps wiping dishes,
watching our rubbery shadow drive by,
one of few moved to where she is
to get away from where we came.

I wonder who lives where nothing is,
who or what inhabits the spare?
Where paths to doors turn out like roots,
and trees, ghostly vessels that wait to bloom,
wave us on, wave us through
God's country like no other,
making it possible we were never there.

Mitchell Untch has been a Pushcart Prize nominee, and a finalist for the C.P. Cavafy Award, the Poetry Society of America's Cecil Hemley Memorial Award, and the *Atlanta Review* Poetry Contest. His poetry has appeared in many journals, among them *Nimrod International*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Poet Lore*, *North American Review*, *Illuminations*, and *Baltimore Review*. He lives in Los Angeles.

PETER RUDOLPH

Islesford Abstraction: View, 2014
Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 48 in



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