*She's really swell
because she likes church, bingo chances
and old-time dances….*

*Oh reality, it's not for me,
and it makes me laugh;
fantasy world, and Disney Girls,
I'm coming back.*

This (from 1971) isn't just nostalgia; it's full-scale regression. It is to the work of the soul what drowning is to surfing: an impulse to dive under the water and stay there.

* * *

Nostalgia, the Jungian analyst Mario Jacoby writes, "is predicated on separation." In *Longing for Paradise*, he links nostalgia with "an unresolved parental tie," a desire to return to what never really was. We long for what is missing precisely because it *is* missing. Consider Brian Wilson's first truly personal song, "In My Room:"

*In this world I lock out all my
worries and my fears
in my room
in my room.*

There's safety here, and comfort; the room substitutes in some way for mother, for lover and, ultimately, for God.

But paradise is always being lost. Losing paradise is the human condition: it's what growing up is all about. All of the loss, all of the sadness of these lives—Dennis's alcoholism and addictions and drowning, Brian's retreat to his bedroom, to food, to drugs—could be traced one way or another to this wounding, this longing, whose roots are in the spirit. We are moved by what we love, pulled by a kind of gravity towards this beauty, this truth we find in what we hear and see. It's a road. And always it asks: what are we to make of this? Where is it leading?

So, too, on a larger scale, could we say this of America, symbolized not just in the patriarchal Uncle Sam but in that maternal icon of liberty in New York's harbor, her torch lit, her raised arm calling out to the tired and poor. The very country is born of nostalgia. Why else is *Gatsby* one of our greatest touchstones? That green orgiastic light,

forever receding, is a precise metaphor for where nostalgia wrongly leads us. Wrongly, because of a mistaken assumption—an adolescent's assumption—that getting the right girl (the right house, land, job) will finally satisfy our hearts.

"Medicine may be bitter," the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh writes, "but it will possibly heal our sickness."[11] The medicine for nostalgia is a deeper nostalgia for a home without boundaries. This is what Dante discovers as he moves from his attraction for the beloved Beatrice to a vision of the divine Mother (and from there to the Trinity). It is what Dostoyevsky's Alyosha discovers as he throws himself upon Mother Earth and rises up a spiritual fighter.

Nostalgia involves, I suspect, a melting into the other, or more likely having the other melt into oneself, which is closer to a kind of narcissism. This same narcissism may lie behind the notion of America as a melting pot, as it is a desire to deny a real otherness, to *see* the other person, and instead to have that other vanish into me, into us: my race, my religion, my beliefs. Behind this lies a simple refusal to grow up.

Oh reality, it's not for me is the Beach Boys' siren song, indicating where in fact their work so often comes to a halt: in the face of time, of death, they are all too ready to retreat to Disneyland. Yet, as Thich Nhat Hanh has written, "Reality may be cruel, but to see things as they are will heal us."

11   Thich Nhat Hanh, Breathe, You Are Alive! Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing. (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1988), 61.

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POPPY DE GARMO

Pescadero, 2009
digital image, 11 x 17 in

courtesy: the artist