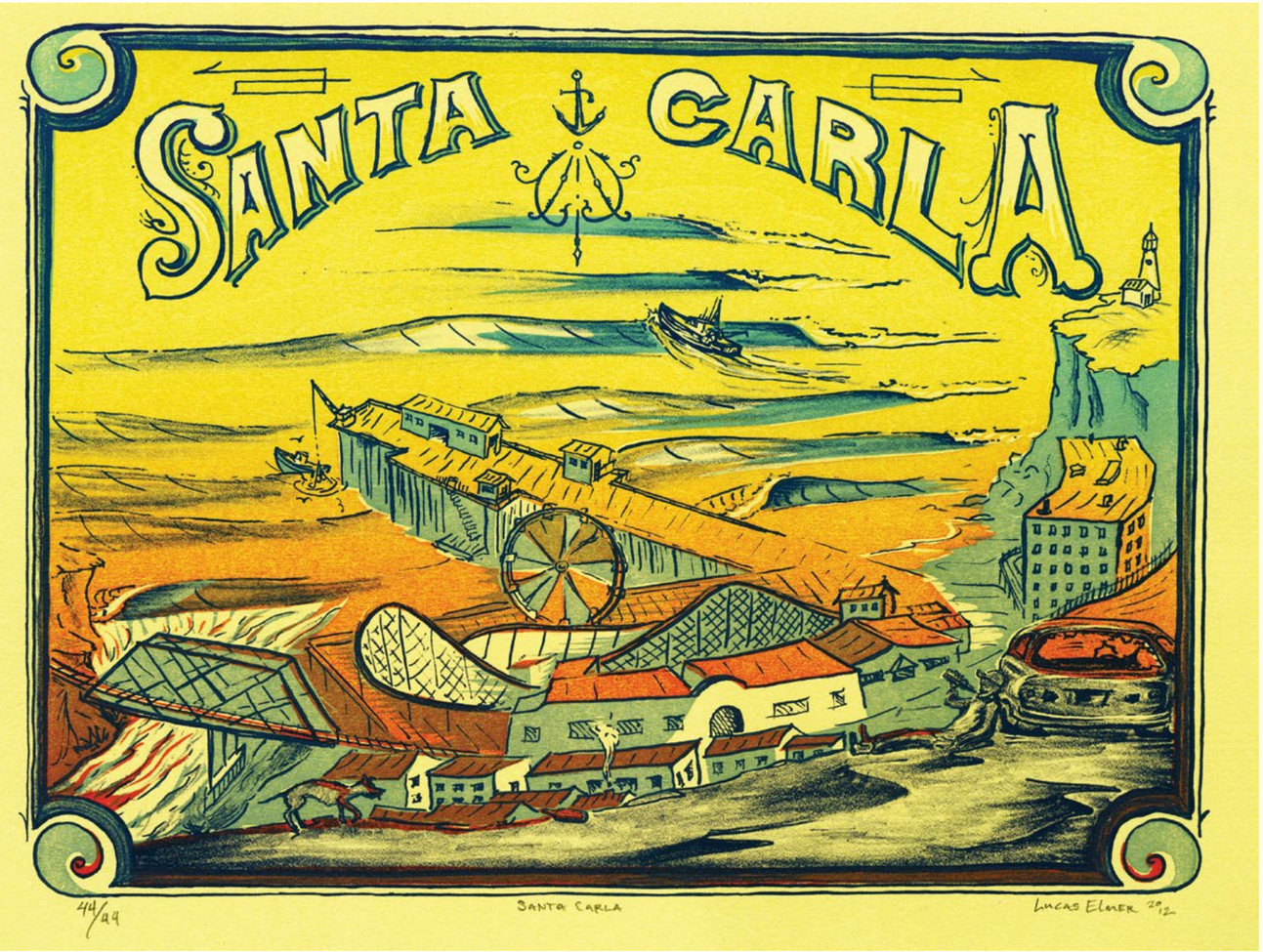
LUCAS ELMER

Santa Carla, 2011
Woodcut/Lithograph, 14 x 11 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

CARL SCHIFFMAN

Gold Dust—Summer 1955

Remembering a lost era in San Francisco history

I had been working as a fruit tramp in the orchards south of San Francisco when the season ended and left me unemployed. Artists talk about a figureground relationship. For me, the ground of this sixty-year-old narrative is forgetfulness. The images I retain leap out at me from pure oblivion. As though I have been picking cherries this very afternoon, I find myself in the pit at the target end of a wooden lane, people are rolling balls in my direction with considerable force. I am sitting on a padded shelf behind and well above the target. I have to lift my legs out of the way to keep them from being hit by the pins when the ball strikes.

Not that it affected my getting hired, but I knew something about bowling. I had bowled for years with friends on 96th Street near Broadway, had been on a team in a high school bowling league that met once a week at lanes near Yankee Stadium in the Bronx. (I was fair for a spindly kid, an average in the upper 140s; years later, I rolled a memorable 252 on lanes in Hamden, Connecticut.)

The technology of the lanes was more advanced in California than it had been in New York, although still only halfway to the completely automated lanes we have now. My responsibility was for two adjacent lanes that shared a single ball return. The fallen pins would have to be cleared manually after each roll, but rather than being set by hand, the pins were put into a rack above the target area and then the entire rack was pulled down at once. There was a pedal at the back of the lane, just behind the last row of pins, that you stepped on at the same time you pulled down the rack. A row of tiny metal pins, matching tiny holes in the bottom of the wooden pins, would rise up to secure the pins' balance and make sure they were perfectly aligned.

Because the bowlers paid—and, more importantly, tipped—by the line, that is to say, by the complete game, it was in our interest as pin boys for the games to go quickly and for the bowlers to do well. Our skill consisted in the speed with which we could clear and rack pins and lift the bowling bowls to the height where the return track began, gravity then carrying the balls back to the rack at the bowlers' end of the alley. Even with two alleys going at once, which was generally the case, the work never got exhausting. The most difficult part was lowering the rack to set up for a new frame. The racks were poorly lubricated, unnaturally heavy, resisted being pulled down.

Sometimes the rack would come down slightly off-center and then the tiny metal pins, rising, would tumble the whole set of tenpins over, as though someone had just bowled a strike. Other than getting hit in the face by a pin, which did happen occasionally, although it never did to me, having a whole rack of pins tumble over was about the worst thing that could happen to us; especially since it looked as though our incompetence was to blame. How we were perceived by the bowlers was very important because a substantial part of our income came from tips. My memory is that we were paid ten to twelve-and-a-half cents for a line that cost the bowler forty to fifty cents, afternoons being the cheaper time. We would expect a nickelaline tip and hope for a dime. Some pin boys would make themselves visible, strike up conversations with the bowlers, compliment them, in hopes of getting a larger tip. Women bowlers were easier to pin for than men because the balls they threw were lighter and knocked over fewer pins. Women and couples were also better tippers than men alone, but their tempo was slower too, so things balanced out. We could only see the pins and not the bowlers from our perch behind the rack, so we would have to duck low to look up the women's skirts as they dipped to release the ball.

One dangerous trick I learned from the other pin boys became my stock-in-trade when the men's leagues bowled. The men threw a lot of strikes anyway, which meant one ball return fewer for me, a faster tempo to the game. A man who threw a lot of strikes was apt to end the evening in a better mood too, give a larger tip. (The practice was to fling the tip in coins down the gutter the full length of the alley.) The trick was to use the moment of impact as a screen behind which you kicked over a pin or two to make sure the bowler got a strike. It wasn't easy. We were constantly running the risk of being spotted or getting our leg or foot badly hit by a pin or worse, by the ball itself. Usually it would be enough to kick over the seven or ten pin, whichever was nearer our perch between the alleys. Sometimes though I would risk kicking over an embryonic baby split. I never got caught, nor as far as I know, at least for the month or so I was there, did any of the other pin boys.

It was during this time that I had an encounter with the San Francisco police in which my pay stub from the alleys (or possibly my room receipt from the dollar-a-night Eddy Hotel) kept me from being arrested for vagrancy. That encounter took place just outside the San Francisco Public Library, where I was lying on the stone shelf that skirts the building, resting my eyes and head after two or three hours in the main reading room.

I was not so much frightened or furious as incredulous when the cop hit me across the bottom of the feet with his billy club. I had been upstairs reading the Greeks, I probably told him, after I proved I wasn't a vagrant. We wound up having a long, not necessarily friendly, discussion. "I don't understand people like you, Schiffman," he said finally, in a tone that mixed genuine bewilderment with a kind of disgust. The quotation marks owe nothing to present invention. The cop's exact words have stayed with me through the years.

I was sufficiently frightened by the incident, by what it said about my appearance, my collapse from middleclass status to life as a plausible vagrant, to consider hitchhiking back to New York right away, even though my apartment, which I had sublet, wouldn't be available to me until mid-September. What made it possible, even desirable, for me to stay on week after week in San Francisco was that I was doing so well in the poker games with the other pin boys at the bowling alley.

There was a large windowless room with old chairs and benches, coke and coffee machines, where we pin boys would wait to be called to the lanes. Each of us had a number that the man at the desk in the alley would write on the score sheet of the bowlers to whom he was assigning a lane. That was how our pay was calculated. He then pressed a switch and that same number would appear on a screen in the pin boys' room. For whatever reason—summer doldrums, leagues in recess, uneven flow of customers—there were usually five or six of us sitting around that room waiting for our number to come up. The nickel-and-dime poker game was the pin boys' major pastime, an institution at the alley.

(I seem to recall a time when I was obliged, due to a lack of pin boys, to work four alleys at once. I remember the sweat pouring off me, the unrelenting haste, the impossibility of keeping up, and the certainty that I was doing so inadequate a job that the diminution in my tips would surely cancel out the extra money I was earning for all those frames. Did that really happen? Was it a dream I had at the time? A nightmare? I would like events to come back whole and fullblooded, instead they come back as ghosts, weightless and transparent, full of doubt.)

I don't mean to suggest that I was a particularly brilliant poker player or that I made large amounts of money. What was true was that I generally won, and though the amounts were small, they usually added up to more than I was making setting pins. My life became much easier. I even made a friend, not among the pin boys, of whom I'm ashamed to admit I retain not a single face, not even a hint of age or nationality. I probably spent more time looking at—or for—face cards than I did looking at faces. My friend was a Canadian, several years older than myself, who had come down to San Francisco after being released from jail in Vancouver. He worked as a kitchen helper or counterman at Foster's, the cafeteria where I had begun eating, and that was probably where we met. I would drop by during his breaks, time my lunch so we could share a table, and he might share some of the free food he got. We would spend evenings I had off roaming the city together; we had late dinners in Chinatown, visited North Beach looking for girls.

There was always a considerable delay between the time a pin boy's number appeared on the screen and the time the customers on his lanes were ready to bowl. Serious bowlers had their own bowling shoes, a custommade bowling ball. The majority though had to rent shoes, change, then go hunting all over the alleys for a ball with the weight and finger-hole placements they liked. They had to clip the paper sheet to the scoring table, decide on what order to write their names. It could take them easily fifteen minutes to get ready. That time, for me, was more profitably invested in a few extra poker hands than in sitting idly on my shelf at the foot of the alley. One day I either delayed so long getting out that the customers complained or I forgot entirely that my number had come up. Either way, one of the managers came back to the pin boys' room and found me playing cards, fired me on the spot.

My temptation was to head right back to New York, but the farm buses were running again from downtown. I didn't need to last in San Francisco that much longer before my rented-out New York apartment would become available. I delayed my return to crop picking until I had nearly worn through my savings from the bowling alley.

The Department of Agriculture gave us day laborers no advance information about where the buses were going, what fruit we were going to pick. Perhaps the department realized that some of us, had we known, would have been smart enough not to get on the bus. After a long rattling ride in the direction of San Jose, we finally arrived, not at a hillside this time, but at a wide, treeless valley, rows of low green plants receding in the thin light.

We were given bushel baskets and assigned rows. Unlike fruit trees, string bean plants were picked over several times in the course of a harvest. We were to pick only the mature beans, those closest to the ground, nearest to the stem. We were not to touch the younger beans that grew higher up and closer to the periphery of the plant. What this meant in practice was dragging a bushel basket behind you from plant to plant and having to kneel and reach under the leaves for the pitiful double handful of ripe beans each plant supplied. Within an hour, my arms were aching in a way they never had from setting pins, my kneecaps were sore.

We were paid—this I recall with certainty—fifty cents a bushel. By noon, when we broke for lunch, having been working since before seven, I had picked three bushels. That is to say, I had earned a dollar fifty. When I subtracted the dollar the bus ride back would cost me, I had earned fifty cents. That worked out to ten cents an hour and would probably have been equally intolerable at the height of the Depression. I ate whatever lunch was provided and then cashed in my three slips. I was surprised they were willing to pay me before the bus came back. I walked dirt roads to the nearest highway and hitchhiked back to San Francisco.

That was the end of the West Coast for me. I telephoned collect to my best friend in New York. He wired me seventeen dollars, probably all he had, to pay my way home. As soon as the money arrived at Western Union, I found a piece of cardboard and wrote NEW YORK CITY on it in large black letters, took my stand on the approaches to the Bay Bridge. I never bothered carrying a road map; I assumed that if drivers knew my destination, they would know whether they were going my way. This to explain my uncertainty as to where exactly I was when I got the lift that took me off paved roads and out into the desert. A man in his late fifties or early sixties, driving an ancient

pickup truck, its bed piled high with camping equipment, stopped for me and then, after we'd talked a bit, asked if I'd like to spend a week or two panning gold with him in the streams that run down from the California mountains. I figured out afterward we were in the Plumas Sierra or maybe just across the Nevada line in the Virginia or Nightingale Mountains. I know we were only a few hours drive from Winnemucca, Nevada, because that's where I wound up not much later.

The man described himself as an itinerant cook and preacher, who felt the need from time to time to get away from the habitations of men and restore himself. He said there was gold, in small amounts, in many of the streams washing down from the Sierra. There was no El Dorado in view, he had found only two or three small nuggets worth maybe a few hundred dollars each in the ten or so years he'd been doing this, but he could earn a reliable three or four dollars for a morning's work and have the rest of his day free for contemplation and to sketch out the sermons he would deliver when he returned to the world.

We were at work in a streambed within an hour or so after leaving the highway. My memory of the man, blue-eyed and rangy with graying hair, is much clearer than my memory either of the landscape around us or the exact process of panning gold. I think the land was bleak and slightly rolling, the stream shallow; there may have been some scrub foliage along the banks. The panning has been so infiltrated by movies seen before and since as to wipe out my own concrete experience. I probably did just what they do in the movies: I sieved and sifted sediment from the streambed and studied it in my pan; learned to tell gold dust from iron or copper pyrites, fool's gold, by seeing whether it still glistened under water.

The potential consequences of a week or two in the desert, of the preacher's healing influence, will remain forever unknown. We had finished our day's work and were driving toward our campsite when the truck broke down. The repairs, he told me, would take days, possibly as much as a week. He would have to move into town himself, look for temporary work as a cook. I think we were able to drive with difficultly back to the highway, I have no recollection of footing it across the desert, and from the highway I caught my lift to Winnemucca. The man had paid me two or three dollars for the gold I'd panned. I lost that, as well as most of my travel money, in a small casino in Winnemucca. At about two that morning, still in Winnemucca, I got a lift in a car that was going all the way to Albany, New York. They fed me, even though I couldn't drive.

Carl Schiffman is a native New Yorker, a graduate of Yale Drama School, and has had five short plays produced off-Broadway. He has published short stories in *New England Review*, *Missouri Review*, *Antioch Review* and elsewhere. His first online story is on Jewishfiction.net, based in Canada.

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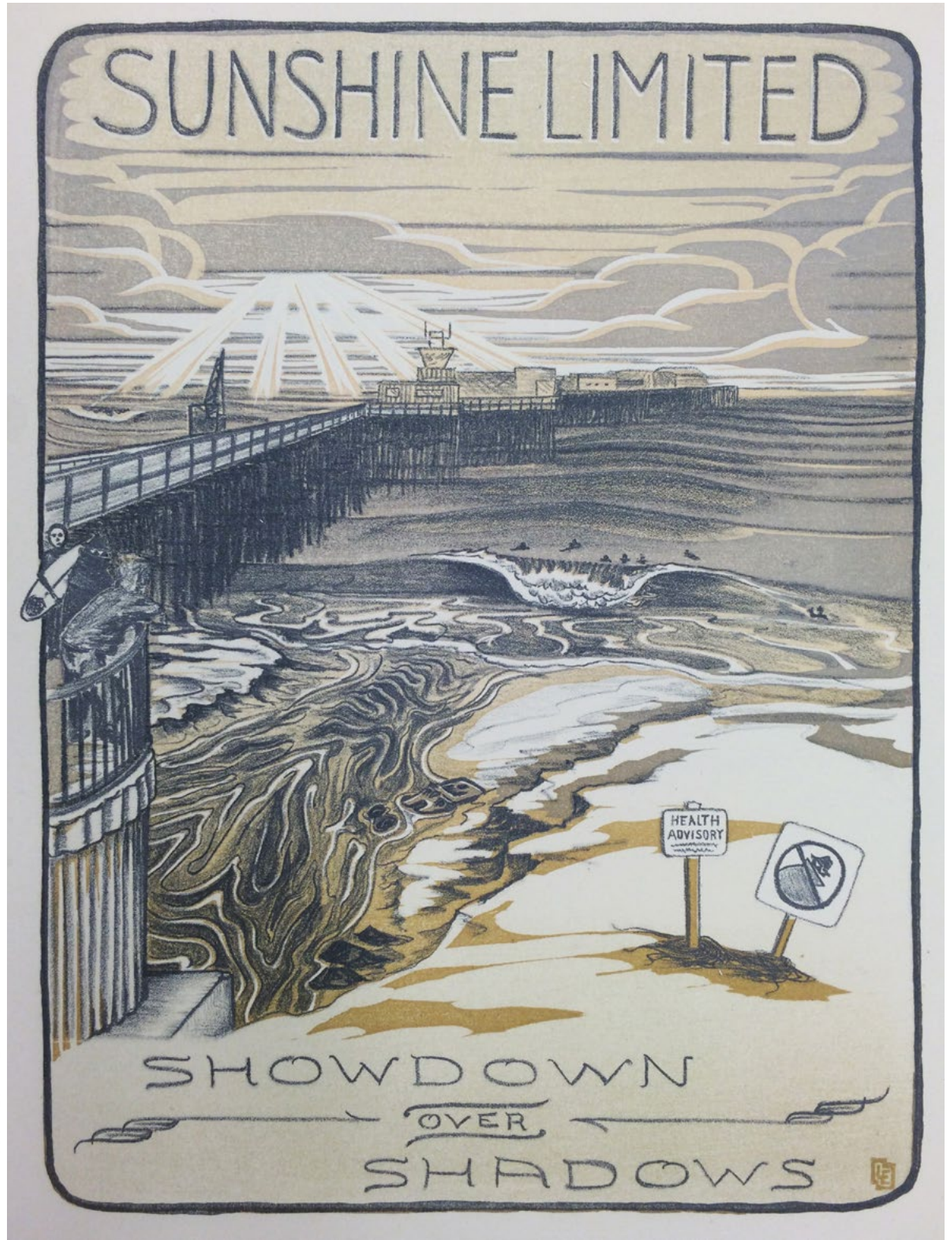
Sunshine Limited, 2016
Woodcut/Lithograph, 11 x 14 in



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