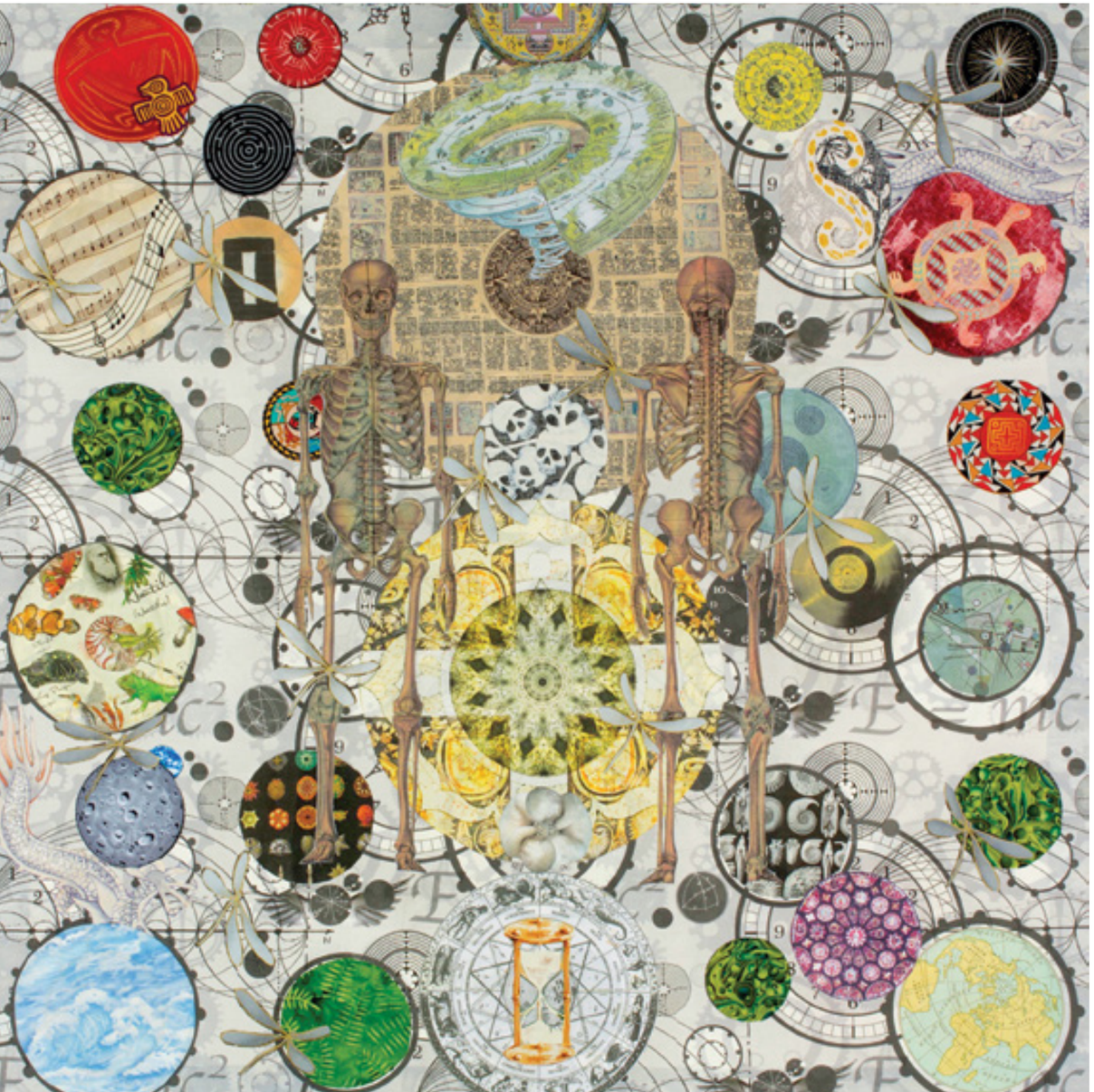
BEVERLY SKY

Evolution: The Sands of Time, 2014
Fabric collage on canvas, 36 x 36 in



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JERRY MARTIEN

The Angels in Our Kitchen

The Legacy of the Californios

My mother had a dream.

She tells me about it as soon as I walk in the door. She's on the couch in her blue robe and slippers, a tattered paperback in her lap. She must have dozed off. She says that in her dream she killed a rat.

I've been at a meeting and it's late. It was sweet of you to wait up, I say, heading upstairs. I'm not ready for animal dreams, especially if the animal is a rat.

"It was in the kitchen," she calls up the stairs.

* * *

The root metaphor of ecology is housekeeping—where the *oikos*, the hearth, is in that greater dwelling place "out there." The house of nature, with all its rules and relations. But the literal meaning also holds true: nature's house begins at the cooking fire, and extends from our common everyday choices to the fate of the earth.

Now I'm learning that it also extends inward—to psyche and self, those dark chambers behind reason's freshly painted rooms. My mother has lived with me for a little over a month, long enough to demonstrate that my taking care of an eighty-year-old woman with dementia was a really dumb idea. But in another, unforeseen ecology—an unexpected dimension of caretaking—I find we're living in a house of spirits. And some of them are animals.

* * *

When friends ask my mother where she came from, she always says: *California*. Then they look at me, as if to ask what state she thinks she's in. I would add, "She means *Southern* California."

But in many ways she's right. Our climate and life forms belong to the Klamath province, part of the Cascadia bioregion of the Pacific Northwest. In cultural and historic terms, Mission Solano, two hundred miles south, marks the end of her California. On most people's mental map the state ends at the north end of the Golden Gate Bridge. We have a hard-core secessionist movement that claims we belong with southern Oregon, in a state called Jefferson. You see rusty pickups with a snail-eaten bumper sticker: *US Out of Humboldt County.*

In spite of all that, our material life—and our dream life—still inhabit my mother's California. We've both had some narrow brushes with middle-class success. By going

to college, even buying this old fixer-upper, I've realized some of her own thwarted ambitions. When I dropped out of academia, abandoning all that prestige and security, she made no secret of her disappointment. But then her own choices have been made with far more heart than practical judgment, and here she is, along with me.

It's more than our socioeconomic status that marks this regression. In some very tangible ways, our lives are repeating the lives of my grandparents. When I first moved into this wreck of a house I relocated the kitchen, but it wasn't till my mother arrived a year later that I realized I'd re-created the floor plan of their old house in Redlands. As if I'd built a stage to relive that story.

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From her hypochondriac's bed my grandmother ruled the household, including her youngest daughter, who'd moved back home with two children and the stigma of divorce. Guadalupe had been against the marriage, and referred to my father only as *el judeo*, the Jew. She missed no opportunity to remind my mother how right she'd been. Her own divorce had been forgotten, my grandfather allowed to return from his errant ways under conditions of virtual servitude. His day began early, feeding chickens and gathering eggs, making coffee for his daughter before work and oatmeal for his grandchildren before day care and school, and being ready with a glass of grapefruit juice the moment she called out from her bedroom, *Porfirio, trae me jugo*. Sometimes she took the few steps to the *cocina* to make a rice pudding for the kids, or her own favorite, bananas fried in margarine. On rare occasions she made the large paper-thin flour tortillas for which she was famous, a difficult task when her hands were gnarled by arthritis.

Porfirio usually supplied the evening meal, his cooking about what you'd expect of a man who'd grown up in a gold camp. If it wasn't beans, eggs, and occasionally one of the chickens, he got out the can opener. To this day, when I see the label on the can, I taste creamed corn. Staples came from a small cupboard and a little icebox, augmented by the fish man, the bread man, all the suppliers whose trucks brought goods to the neighborhood.

Porfirio did the day-to-day shopping at a little family market around the corner. Sometimes he took my little sister along and bought her candy with pennies skimmed from what Guadalupe doled out to him, a small compensation for the old woman's meanness to both of them. He often scolded me, and even went after me with the broom, but usually I deserved it. Mostly it was because my grandmother made it clear that I was her favorite. So they worked out their ancient antagonism across the generations.

In the morning, when I ask my mother if she wants coffee, I hear Porfirio calling to his daughter from the kitchen: *¿Quieres café, mijita?* When I bring a cup to her bed I have to remind myself which Guadalupe I'm serving. Two warring hosts of angels have come to live with me.

* * *

From my grandmother's darkened bedroom came all the spirits of her morbid Catholicism. Hanging on the wall near her bed, a grotesque sculpture of Mary holding her dead bloody son. Not far from it, in her more beatific manifestation, a painting of the *Virgen de Guadalupe* being carried to heaven by fat little children with wings. Once a month a priest would visit, hear her confession, and absolve her of whatever sins she had managed to commit from her bed. The communion wafer made her more kind and forgiving for a few days, the entire household a little closer to heaven.

I shared my grandfather's room at the back of the house. Every night, in the space between our beds, he knelt on the linoleum and said his prayers. I never knew him to go near a church or a priest. Spiritually, he belonged to a culture that flourished long before he was born and was supposed to be over. Geographically, the Californios inhabited a distant province of Mexico, but spiritually, even after the closing of the missions, they were closer to medieval Spain and the remnant cultures of Native California. They were already history when Porfirio's father arrived from Spain, but their material culture persisted in inland Southern California into the twentieth century, and so did their ghosts. I think they were the gods in my grandfather's prayers. And though Guadalupe controlled the household, it was Porfirio's church we all secretly belonged to.

My mother says Porfirio's father, Joaquin, carried the scar of his father's Spanish sword, a mark of both nobility and disinheritance, his passport to the California gold fields. Porfirio's life continued this theme of dispossession. Though born here, like some of his offspring he would never successfully *settle* in California. He and his father and two brothers prospected along the Yuba River, with some success. Later, they struck it rich in Holcomb Valley above Big Bear, but then they lost it for reasons that were never clear. For a time he drove stage and freight wagons, and once told me he'd brought construction materials up the mountain for the second dam at Big Bear Lake. He grew up in a culture that had more than two hundred words for the breeding and qualities of horses. He once mentioned that he'd eaten horse meat when hungry. What did it taste like, I asked. "Not too bad, not too good," he said.

The Californios also left us most of our words for the region's landforms. Porfirio carried in his mind a detailed map of the upper Santa Ana watershed and the San Bernardino Mountains. Prospecting may have been mostly an excuse to explore that country, as my grandmother insisted. He had no other calling that I know of. When we shared the back bedroom he was the age my mother is now. He sipped his coffee from the saucer, ate peas with a knife, and belonged to a place that no longer existed, if it ever had.

My mother remembers several of Porfirio's lost-treasure stories: one with curses and ghosts, another featuring the Jew who sold him mining supplies, and another about the Yankee with deeds and documents in English. But I'm slowly learning that my mother's habits of confabulation began long before her present dementia. The tales could be entirely made up, sword and all. There's some evidence that her grandfather came from Sonora, not Spain. And Porfirio might have spent less money in saloons, and ought to have paid the taxes on that block of downtown San Bernardino they would still own—a loss for which Guadalupe never forgave him. But it's also true that he lived through times of intense anti-Hispanic bigotry and injustice, and many of his losses were inflicted on him. His grown children still teased him about bill collectors, but the sense of dispossession in our family was palpable. I don't know why or when my grandmother let him back into her house, but part of the deal seemed to be that he turn over his monthly old-age check, empty her piss-pot every morning, and bring her breakfast in bed.

Mom and I occasionally get into crazy arguments about housekeeping and money, but she seems determined not to reenact *all* of the past, and I can usually stop myself if I start to hear the voices that raged in the night when I was a kid. I do all the cooking, so our menu isn't as interesting as it might be, but she's an appreciative eater and cheerfully does the dishes, sweeps the kitchen, scrubs the rusting electric stove that came with the house. She even cleans the monster green Kelvinator I got from a friend who repairs refrigerators. The new kitchen sink, still in its temporary plywood counter, is always spotless. "What can you do with it?" she says, throwing in the dishrag.

Despite our odd circumstance and the damages of history, we sit down nearly every night to dinner with something approaching contentment. She takes excellent care of the cat, and often feeds her in the kitchen instead of out on the porch.

"Spoiling the old girl?" I tease her. Occasionally she gets confused and feeds the cat her granola. I'm only half kidding when I say, "I hope you're not eating the Crave."

"Oh," she says. "Don't be silly." And then seriously: "God, I hope not."

* * *

I sit at my desk for a while, light coming up the stairs from the living room where Mom is still reading. The desk is half-covered by petitions, meeting notes, all the politics that came with this house and property. Out the window the sky is clear, half a November moon. Not a peep is coming from the swamp. No night riders tearing up the dunes.

* * *

The great struggle of my grandmother's life was embodied in the house she owned in Redlands. It represented a formidable effort, and was a rare achievement for a Hispanic single mother with four kids. She was supported by a community network that survived the influx of Anglos, and she adapted to the Americans far more readily than Porfirio did, but the force that drove her was the old immigrant's hunger for success.

Guadalupe came to California as a child in the late 1800s, when her family fled Hermosillo to escape an outbreak of yellow fever. One day, as she recalled in her old age, her younger sister was playing on the swing, and the next day she was dead. Her family emigrated to Arizona, then west to San Bernardino where railroads were opening the Inland Empire to its first residential land boom.

But the Fimbres family hadn't radically changed their

Excavated with primitive tools, lined with thousands of round stones gathered and transported and laid by Mission Indians, the ditch brought water from the mountains to the padres' inland plantations.

lives. They were still part of a Spanish-speaking community, still on the boundary of the Sonoran bioregion. From the state of Sonora to the state of Arizona they followed a route traveled for centuries, most recently by hard rock miners on their way to the Alta California gold fields. The legendary California bandit Joaquin Murrieta was another Sonoran driven north by circumstance, preceding my grandmother by only a few years. Nevertheless, they were considered Mexicans, and all the labels and stereotypes applied. It was Guadalupe's mission to prove otherwise. 807 Grant Street was the essence of that proof.

Apparently so was I. She listened to me read in English nearly every evening, and walked me the several blocks to my first day of school. She also took me to Sacred Heart Church, and introduced me to the nun who would prepare me for First Communion. I was becoming an angel in my grandmother's religion. But on the way to school, the street crossed a deep stone-lined ditch that Guadalupe called the *sanky*, and she warned me never to play there. As my child's map grew to include much of the upper Santa Ana watershed, the *zanja*—not church or school—was the thread that tied it together. Excavated with primitive tools, lined with thousands of round stones gathered and transported and laid by Mission Indians, the ditch brought water from the mountains to the padres' inland plantations. A trickle in summer, a muddy torrent on rare occasions, a sparkling stream through parks, a dark network of storm drains under city streets: it was my school, and the portico of my grandfather's church. I played and explored there, watched over by the angels of California's ruin.

* * *

I made an offer on this derelict piece of real estate, naturally, because of location: perched on a coastal dune, abandoned, probably haunted. Also, the price was in line with its appearance, a real steal for California beach property. The half-acre of swamp and sand would have probably been worth more *without* the house. It had been a cheap rental for decades, one friend after another telling me they'd lived there at some high or low point in their lives. The neighbor from Arkansas liked to tell about the drunk who shoved his mother through the front door, but he especially loved to describe the day-long parties, clouds of marijuana smoke, naked hippies screwing on the porch roof. In a community notorious for marginal behavior, it was a historic landmark. Like the little village and the surrounding dunes, it was half wild, half human wreckage.

The roof had been leaking for ten years. Upstairs ceilings hung down, hinged windows were rusted open or shut, the metal sink cabinet was falling through the rotten kitchen floor. Termites had eaten the porch off at its southeast corner, foundation posts were missing or buried in sand. It was a few years shy of abandonment and half a breath from collapse. The sales contract stipulated: *As Is*. I couldn't resist.

It took weeks to get rid of the rats. Two resident cats had generously shared their large bag of kibble that lay in the laundry room, which also housed firewood and an electric kiln. With a leaking bath adjoining, it presented all the features of a first-class *maison de rat*. The human resident was on a first-name basis with the largest female rodent. The cats were also on familiar terms with her and her offspring, but pretended not to notice their coming and going.

I covered the large cat/rat entrance that had been sawed out of the laundry room's entry, which now became the kitchen door. The indoor cat was found another home, and Jezebel became the mostly outdoor semi-wild pet. Besides the Crave, I was told she required a daily serving of Seaside Supper and a cortisone shot when the fleas were bad. The rats—Veronica and all her relations and offspring—either emigrated or died in the prolonged mechanical and chemical warfare that followed. After generous applications of disinfectant and paint, the laundry porch became the kitchen, and except for an occasional meowing to be let in during storms, peace and calm prevailed in the animal kingdom.

But it's been a cold November and now they're back. I've set traps in the kitchen, but without success. The Kissinger option is imminent. Between my public and personal commitments—did I mention there's a woman in my life, I mean besides my mother?—these past weeks have been frantic in the extreme. The rodents are a sign of some deeper problems in our house, which my sweetheart now refers to as the Bates Motel.

Did you set the traps tonight, Norman? Of course, Mother.

I deeply wish my mother's dream were true, and that she had killed the goddamn rat.

* * *

I put the meeting notes in the appropriate pile, go back downstairs. Mom looks up from her book and asks if she can get me anything. No thanks, I say. I'm going to get a beer from the fridge. "I wouldn't mind one myself," she remarks, still keen-minded on some topics. While I'm in the kitchen, almost by habit now, I check the traps. One of them is sprung and empty.

The rats' reappearance has been deeply discouraging. After two years of labor and a low-income rehab loan, the place was just approaching the comfort zone of a suburban North American household. A new roof, new foundation, a sturdy porch the length of the house, new stairs, and an airy upstairs work-and-sleeping space. And downstairs, of course, Guadalupe's room and bath. But I ran out of rehab money before I got to the kitchen.

"Just like a man," my mother complains to anyone who'll listen. She points with the broom at the redwood tongue-and-groove subfloor, where I pulled up the linoleum and pressboard. "What can you do with it? You can't clean it." And she sweeps disdainfully to show you. Fiber ceiling tiles sag where the roof leaked, the light fixture hangs by its new wiring. In one corner, where I brought in the electric service and vented the water heater, the south wind keeps blowing out the crumpled newspaper I stuffed in the eaves. The patched-up cat-rat door still lets in a steady breeze around our ankles. Mom rolls a rug against it, a trick she seems to remember from the kitchen of some earlier life. Another kitchen we've inherited.

* * *

The legacy of the Californios is as dark as it is romantic. With the "liberation" of the missions from Spain, they took possession of the state's first infrastructure: buildings and roads, enormous herds of cattle and horses, and vast plantations and irrigation systems. Along with this wealth, which alone might account for their legendary generosity, they inherited the Native Californians who'd survived the Mission Period, and whose labor had sustained it.

The material gift came with a strange spiritual legacy, a blend of medieval Catholicism and Native animism, a hybrid religion whose darker side appeared soon after the closing of the missions. In one grotesque parody of the Franciscan padres, who appropriated tens of thousands of acres while liberating as many souls, two rancheros killed more than a hundred Indians said to be trespassing on their former lands. One by one, they sprinkled holy water on the victims, then shot them. These are among the angels of my grandfather's church.

But the rancho culture belonged to Native California as well as Catholic Spain, and this was also reflected in its occupation of the land. When Rancho Los Cerritos, now the city of Long Beach, was taken over by the American John Bixby and put under Anglo management, its *majordomo*, Juan Cañeda, refused to leave. *No puedo partir de aquí*, he said. He understood English but refused to speak it. *Soy de esta tierra*. I can't leave here—I'm part of this land. Such an idea of ownership—of belonging, not possessing—guaranteed that the Californios would disappear as quickly as those who preceded them. One order of angels following another.

The Californios inherited both an imagined nobility, with all the courtly trappings of *noblesse oblige*, and the

Native Californian customs of openness and gift exchange. Like Porfirio, had they adopted less extravagant ways they might have held out against the tax collectors and bankers. But for the most part they didn't change, and probably, because I'm their descendant, I find this refusal—this failure, if you will—dangerously attractive. Outrage at the appropriation of wealth and property made the reaction even more flamboyant, and social banditry flourished again. Signs of poverty and dispossession were worn proudly, a style manifested later by the zoot suiters and today chiefly in our state prisons.

For many, like my mother's brother, this romance took a predictably tragic course. His driving and drinking led to a fatal collision, followed by long years in Folsom. Within a year of release, still on parole, he showed up in Anaheim after a lost weekend, the hood of his car unaccountably missing. Relatives drove him to Mexicali and dropped him off there with money for a train ticket, but he never arrived at the ranch where he was to start his new life. We never heard from him again. My mother, his younger sister, who shared those early wild years in the town they called Berdoo, felt his loss deeply.

In Porfirio's last years, my oldest cousin and his wife took him up to the old mining claim above Bear Valley and they brought me along. We wandered among the bigcone pine and granite outcroppings until he found where his father's mine had been, a dark opening on a west-facing slope. They'd struck it rich, he said, but then they'd hit water. Nothing about Jews or Yankees. Just a hole in the ground full of water. White and rusty quartz around its edges, a clear stream welling up: the headwaters of the Santa Ana. Tributary of a river of losses, flowing through a land of beautiful ghosts.

* * *

I pour Mom a small glass of beer. Alcohol worsens her confusion and makes the tape loop of memory even shorter, but a small dose lessens the anxiety that accompanies her mind's failing. It relieves the fear of not remembering, which often seems to be what keeps her from remembering.

After drinking half the glass she goes back to reading the worn copy of Henry James's *What Maisie Knew*. It's missing some pages, but content and narrative don't seem important. She reads a passage, appears to thoroughly enjoy and comprehend it, then rereads it with the same surprise and pleasure a day or hours later. But now she stops and looks up, remembering more of her dream. Yes, she says. In her dream she killed the rat, then carried it outside and threw it in the willow swamp.

This is how her stories often grow, repeated over and over, sometimes within minutes of the previous telling. Confabulation, I'm learning, is characteristic of the early stages of dementia. Lacking memory, the mind fills the gap with an alternate, often mythic and symbolic version of the past. Already her history of this house has developed the familiar motif of dispossession. "At one time we owned all that land out there," she will say, gesturing toward the west windows. The property was in our family for generations. The house itself, as she tells the saga of my restoring it, had "fallen back," and I've somehow "straightened" it again.

At first I corrected these fables when they were too outlandish, or people looked at me quizzically. But now I let them stand. Once she creates a story she repeats it not as a fiction but from the facts of reconstructed memory, and there's usually an eerie symbolic truth to it. Whether it happened or not, the death of the rat is now part of our history.

* * *

In his eighty-seventh year, Porfirio left my grandmother's house. My mother says he overheard Guadalupe speak disparagingly of his own mother—another Guadalupe, who'd been dead for years—while gossiping with Mrs. Rivera from across the street. After the years of insults, that seems absurdly small, but his actions were more mythic than reasoned. Instead of turning over his monthly old-age check, he moved into a downtown hotel, bought a new white Stetson hat, found a few remaining friends, and bought them drinks down at Pinky's bar. He came back to the house one afternoon with cans of enamel and brushes, and paid us kids nickels and dimes to paint a bench and some backyard fruit trees red, white, and blue. It was great fun, but when the grownups heard of it we knew by their looks that something was wrong. There must have been other signs of dementia, though we kids never heard of them. He was committed to Patton State Hospital (known as Southern California State Asylum for the Insane and Inebriates until 1927) and died there not long after.

Guadalupe, nearly crippled by arthritis, came to live with us in our two-story house across town. I tried to make up for Porfirio's loss, brought her food and juice, helped her up from the couch, gave her an arm to lean on when she walked. Despite their old antagonism, she was heartbroken by his departure and died within a year. We put a new coat of paint on her old kitchen, hung new wallpaper, and rented the house for a time. But it needed deeper repairs, the rent money got spent on other things, and eventually it was sold and torn down, a fifties stucco put in its place. The loss of that house may have some bearing on my restoration of this house, as caring for that Guadalupe was prelude to this one. These are the mysteries of the religion of home ownership.

* * *

The dream is getting real. Each time my mother tells it she adds a few details. Yes, she carried the rat by its tail. And yes, it turned and tried to bite her. She hit it with something. She looks at me, confused. "Do you think it really happened?" I don't encourage her, but I don't want to contradict her either. I have enough arguments in my life. Besides, once she creates a story she holds to it stubbornly, and it doesn't make her any less crazy to try to explain to her that she's crazy. And anyway, in our family maybe it's normal.

She finishes the beer, sets down her glass, and is about to pick up her book. "Look," she says, and lifts her feet. "Look at my slippers. There's mud on them." It's a brilliant piece of detective work, even if it is her own recent life she's investigating. It would be a miracle if this evening had some of the clarity of the California she spends most of her time in.

"Dios mío," she says. "Do you think it really happened?"

* * *

We live in a divided world, between the loss of our past and the uncertainty of our future. Between fable and history, romance and memory. Between Porfirio's gold mine and Guadalupe's house, a balance so precarious it can be upset by a rat. Instead of genteel poverty and noble simplicity, maybe we're just mired in desperation and pity. Four generations and still living like immigrants.

I'm feeding the wood stove, building up a fire that will keep overnight. Mom's wearing her big sweater and my old knit watch cap and the room's already too warm, but usually by now she's asked me several times to check the fire, and already I do it without thinking. As I close the stove door I'm wondering if the trap could have struck the rodent a glancing blow and left it injured and semiconscious, so she could grab it by the tail and take it outside. Except that she hardly ever goes out, and certainly not at night.

Then I see it. On the wood floor, in front of the stove, a large drop of blood. She must have picked up the injured rat and carried it toward the back door, and when it revived and tried to bite her, she dropped it on the floor and smacked it with a chunk of firewood. A gruesome piece of forensics, but real evidence of my mother's enduring toughness and sanity.

Look, I tell her. It's blood. It wasn't a dream.

"Maybe I'm not as crazy as I thought." She's as surprised as I am.

I go to the kitchen to get us another Bohemia. When I open the refrigerator, by the glow of its light I see a new little rat angel perched on top of the huge green Kelvinator. As I reach for a beer he flaps his tiny wings, circles the kitchen once, then ascends heavenward through the hole where the newspaper has blown out of the eave again.

It's a small victory amid all our losses. I'm not sure how home improvement and going to meetings will save us or Chicken Beach or these few miles of sand, but we have no other choice. We're losing the earth itself, as surely as I'm going to lose my mother, in our collective dementia and loss of memory. I can hear Guadalupe telling us to hang on to every scrap of what's left. And Porfirio reminding us that we live in a dream.

Maybe we're going to make it.

Jerry Martien is the author of *Shell Game: A True Account of Beads and Money in North America* and a poetry collection, *Pieces in Place*. He now lives inland from Chicken Beach, across Humboldt Bay and a quarter mile past the tsunami sign.