

When we arrived in San Diego in 2020, I was bitter in a white-hot sort of way, a bitterness that wilted down into something softer and sadder. I didn't write an essay about leaving New York because I was ashamed of leaving, a private shame that wasn't generative. I *didn't leave on purpose*, I told people. I left for love. Other people were leaving because of the novel coronavirus, because of New York's purported death, and I was leaving because I loved someone too much to consider staying behind without him. A week before things shut down, Jeremy walked over to my apartment and I opened the door and told him that the houses in California were ugly. In his wedding vows, he wrote that that was when he knew I was coming with.

I did not acclimate quickly and I did not approach with kindness. I am so squarely from the east coast — my father's parents and grandparents born in New York City, my mother's north Jersey, the first twenty-six years of my life spent within a twenty-seven mile radius. The trees here were lush and wrong; they flowered throughout the summer, fat yellow blooms that looked like orchids. The alleys were full of wild plants, bougainvillea and morning glories that climbed along trees and stretched to the sky, and a family of birds nesting in the neighbor's garage door. The birds learned to fly by hopping onto the fence and always stayed within view of their mother.

I didn't anticipate how slow it would be or how much urgency and ambition would sit latent within me, or how ashamed that would make me feel. I don't know what to do with that feeling, which still has teeth. We moved for my partner's PhD, his career, and mine was left behind. I did not have much of one; I worked at a bookstore. But I felt important nonetheless in a way that I was not, or in a way that no longer matters to me. When we moved to San Diego, my first job paid less than my college internships did. My master's program was discontinued while I was in it and reincarnated at an Ivy League school. I got very sick and could not work for the first time in my life, either wage labor or artistic labor. I felt like a failure; I did not know what to think of myself without work. San Diego served as the backdrop for five of the longest and strangest years of my life. I did not work for money for about ten months across those five years.

I don't particularly want a career. I maintain what one of my favorite professors said to me in undergrad: she wanted to have enough money to be able to make her work. In high school and college, I possessed ambition, pressed onto me by my parents. I was in the gifted and talented program in elementary school and went to a selective arts high school. On my first day of kindergarten, my parents told me that I was smart enough to go to Princeton. My father remains insistent that I have wasted his money and my life by choosing art school. (I never finished the Princeton application; I told my parents the school rejected me.) I didn't go to college to get a job. I went to learn about art and make art, and I worked multiple jobs to be able to do so. I was dedicated to pictures and I arranged my life around them. In San Diego, I've mainly worked in service of other people's pictures. I developed and scanned them and later talked about them. Most of them were not good pictures, and I did not find anyone who wanted to talk about pictures the way I did.

I've had less time to write this month than usual; they took my gallbladder out on the fourth of July, a few days before my planned library day. It was an emergency surgery that left my brain cloudy and my movements slow; there are three pink lines on my torso, and the hole of my belly button has been renegotiated, used for

alternative purposes, and resewn. I've put off writing because I rolled the only drawer that contains solely California pictures and because Nick and I decided that was a good stopping point for a brief hiatus while I move back across the country. I told the people who floated into BAB today that I didn't want to write this column because I sound like an asshole when I talk about San Diego. What I meant is

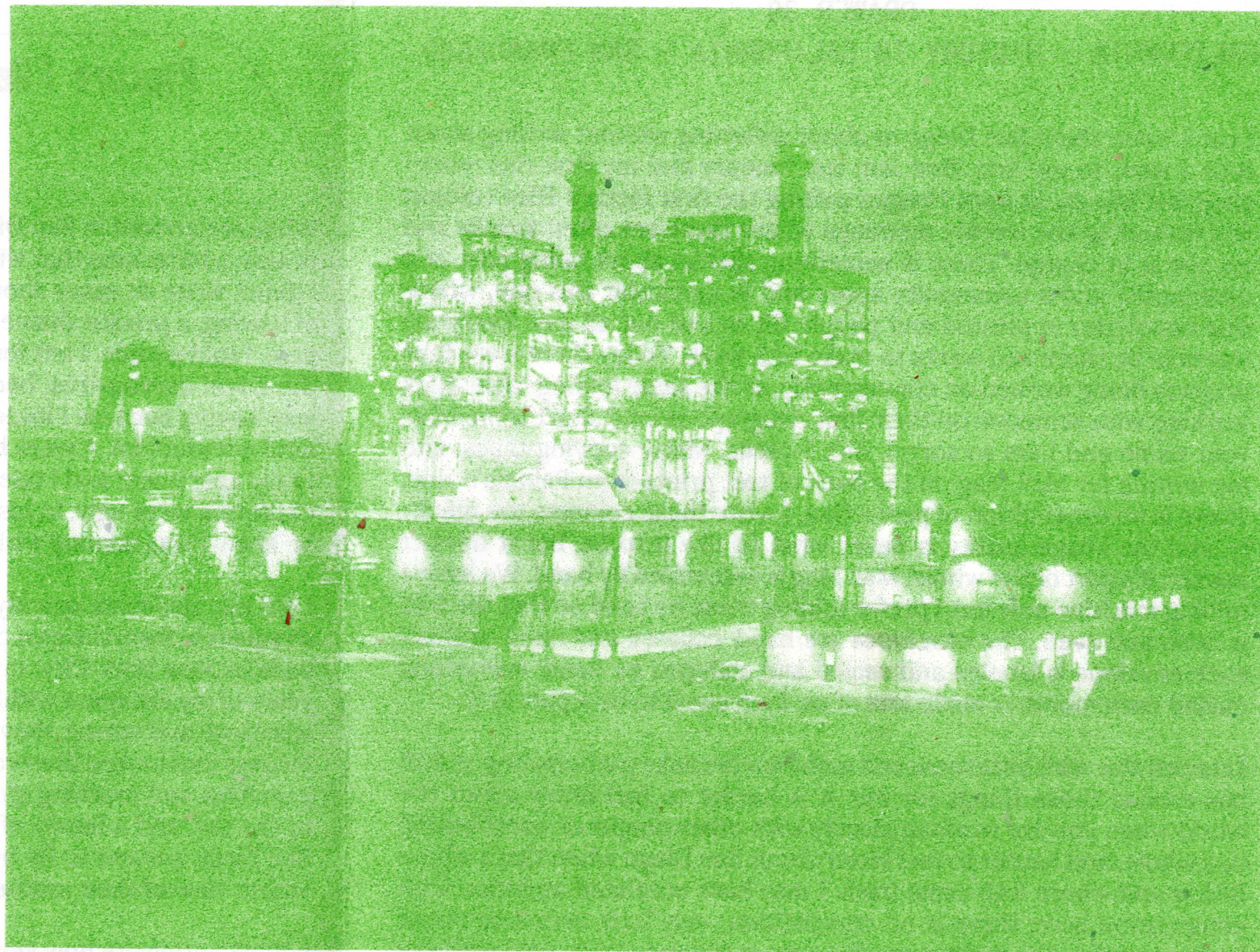


fig. 1

that I was an asshole and have remained one even as my heart has softened toward the city. We don't have ambition; that's why I like it, Ali Mehraban says as he cuts J-cards on an old wooden guillotine trimmer next to me. No one comes to San Diego to make it. I learn of the nickname Slow Death. I don't have the same bitterness; I no longer want to be an asshole, because San Diego is a container

for people I love, and I want it to be better for them. I want them to live far into the future, and thus I want San Diego, with its strange fucked-up energy, to exist in the future. I meant what I said about San Diego looking like heaven clogged up with cars.

I originally chose this picture (fig. 1) to write about SDGE, but there are other things to write.

CALIFORNIA – HISTORY TO CALIFORNIA – SAN FRANCISCO

I can't write about San Diego or about softening without writing about BAB. I went to my first Zine Jam last January and my first riso workshop last March; in April I began writing the first Picture Files column and attending the weekly meetings where there are often snacks and no one is in charge. There is something special about being part of a community and a community space and in particular this one, where this newsletter is printed and people flit in and out all day. Everyone wants to be there and wants to make BAB work. Today there were four projects being worked on concurrently, at the same folding table: Nick working with someone on their first risograph print (I don't remember your name and I am so sorry), Ali's J-cards, Matty copying tapes, and me writing for Mail Mag on the back of test prints from Paloma's zine. There is no expectation of perfection. I write these columns too quickly, and the image quality is never what I'd like it to be, but it doesn't matter; it's part of the whole. Mail Mag is assembled by hand. We have a folding machine now but I prefer folding these by hand so that the fold is crisp and even. The envelopes are hand-collated and hand-stuffed; each envelope is labeled and sealed and stamped by hand; everything mailed each month is made one of us. I am awed to be a part of it.

I started this with bitterness and ambition because participating at BAB has eroded those things for me; it is harder to feel bitter about the world when you are working closely with other people or contributing to a whole, and harder to feel bitter about San Diego when that's where BAB is and where BAB came from. I may have conflated ambition with competition here; there is no competition, only tacit encouragement to do something or make something or, at the very least, help with the envelopes or the folding or the stamping. There is less need for personal ambition when there's work for all of us to do. It goes faster when there's more of us.

Thank you for reading and looking at pictures with me, and thank you, very dearly, to the whole of the BAB community for making a spot for me. I remain bitter about certain things in San Diego (like the price of electricity, which I scrapped in favor of writing about what I do care about), but mostly enamored with the squat building that perches over the 805 and everyone and everything in it.