

If you took away all the cars I think San Diego would look like heaven. I think what the late Pope Francis said about hell is beautiful. "This isn't dogma, just my thought: I like to think of hell as being empty. I hope it is." I think they shouldn't put cameras on the outsides of airplanes so that you can watch the clouds from inside the plane, because that also replicates heaven. Maybe I think humans shouldn't be able to fly at all. Catholicism has been close to the surface of my personal lake: the Pope, an exhibition about the Virgin of Guadalupe at work, the request to be my nephew's godmother. I haven't been a member of the Catholic church since they told my single mother she wasn't tithing enough money, and we dropped out of the Wednesday afterschool program. I loved eating the body of Christ; I never tried the blood.



This month I'm writing about the archives of photographer and friend Diego Jimenez, a lifelong San Diegan. We met in 2021 when he came to take my job for the summer; I trained him on how to process C41 film by hand and then left town to finish my master's degree. Later we tried and failed to unionize one of the museums in Balboa Park. He is one of the funniest people I have ever met. (How do I write about a friend's work without leaning into the mawkish?) He is someone I consider a picture worker, someone who cares deeply about pictures and acts as a steward for them.

The first picture, *bsbw\_027*, 2023 (*fig. 1*), shows the 54-W/5-S connector at sunset, freeway onramps weaving over one another in the gray sky while cars drudge home beneath them. During the 54's westward expansion in 1992, the San Diego Natural History Museum's paleontologist Richard Cerutti discovered the bones and teeth of a mastodon. In 2017, the Nat announced that they had dated the bones to be about 130,000 years old, and that cobble stones found alongside the bones indicated possible human presence in the Americas; the cobbles and other items from the site may have been used as tools to extract marrow from the mastodon bones or to use the bones themselves as tools. Other scientists dispute this. No human bones were found.



The pictures show human interference in San Diego County, regardless of when the interference began. Diego's photograph of the freeway is dominated by the hulking concrete posts, but beneath them, the grassy marsh holds wave patterns, places where the tide may have risen and carried the mastodon bones to their discovery site. The diptych taken by Frederick Wallace Kelsey around the early 1900s (fig. 2) depicts two trees marred by people. Diego digitized Kelsey's negatives as an archive intern at the Nat. Top cut for Xmas tree shows half of a piney tree's spiky branches aiming for the sky in some kind of valley. Burned by thoughtless campers shows a dark oval mark at the base of a thick trunk, pinecones scattered in front. I like the two pictures on one negative, like the miniature pictures brought together by a half-frame camera. Are they meant to be together? Did Kelsey photograph the absent Christmas tree and then turn to his right for the niche made by the campers, did he mean to photograph two absences? The Virgin of Guadalupe may fit nicely in there, or a suburban representation of her. Maybe Diego's photograph of the 54 is of another absence: what happens to local ecosystems when they're destroyed for a freeway, one of the four major interstates and either six or eight state highways that serve San Diego, according to the city's confused economic development webpage.

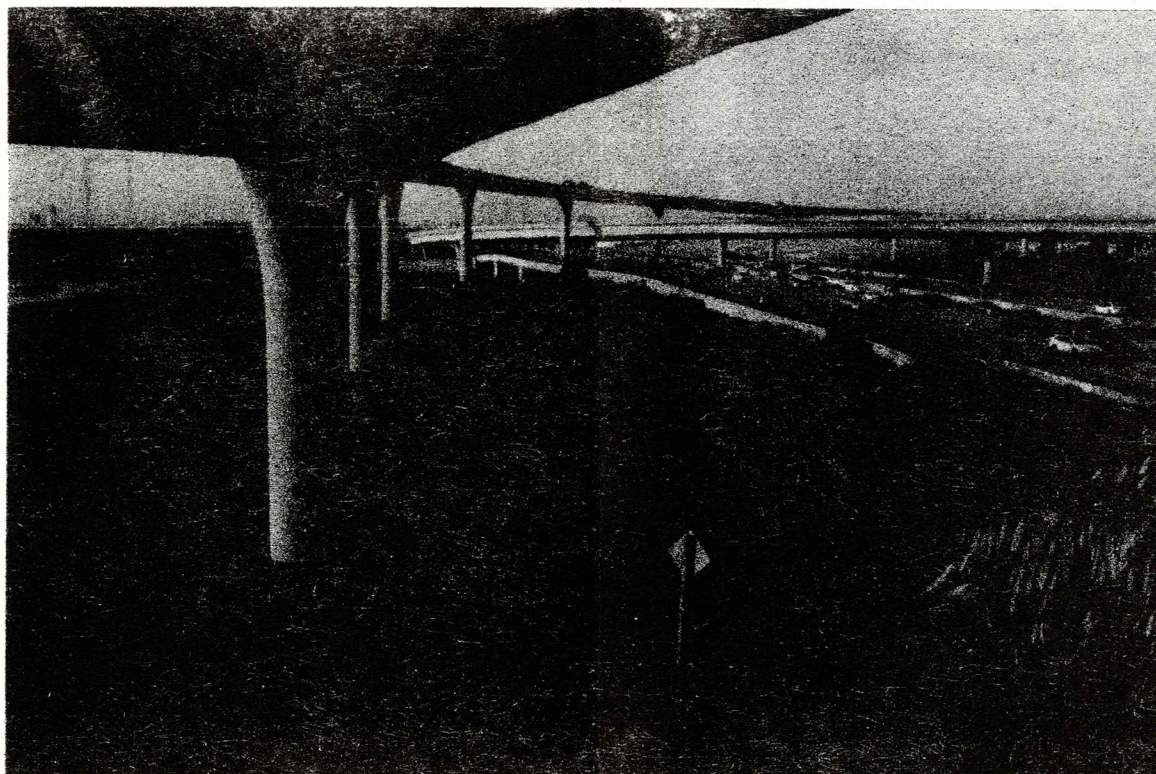


fig. 1: bsbw\_027, Diego Jimenez, 2023

## SPECIAL DISPATCH FROM THE ARCHIVES OF DIEGO JIMENEZ CURATED BY XOCHI ZEPEDA

fig. 2: Top cut for Xmas tree; Burned by thoughtless campers, F.W. Kelsey, c. 1899-1925



Pictures aren't often sufficient at showing absence; they require text to narrativize their empty space. Kelsey's supplied captions and the geographical information Diego shared have led me to this, to absence. Trying to write in a sustained manner about photography always leads you to its failures, to what it can't do. Diego's picture height chart at my *nana's* house, 2022 (fig. 3) shows the back of a door, multiple sheets of paper taped up and scrawled over and over in different marks and handwriting with names, dates, and heights. A dark stain seeps down from Ruben's height on September 12, 2012 and captures his height line on Christmas Eve 2010, at least a few inches shorter, before pooling at the bottom. Originally I chose only this picture, which makes me feel sad and loved. The years span from the 1980s to 2021; this is a house full of people coming in and out, adults and the heights they used to be and their babies and the heights they will come to be. I think it is a gift to have a living grandparent and the home that forms around them. My hair was very thick as a child, and my mother would press her hand down on the top of my head to flatten it as much as possible before marking my height on the pantry door. When she sold the house, I photographed the door obsessively, as though having the picture would replicate the feeling of opening the door and seeing a tiny family history.



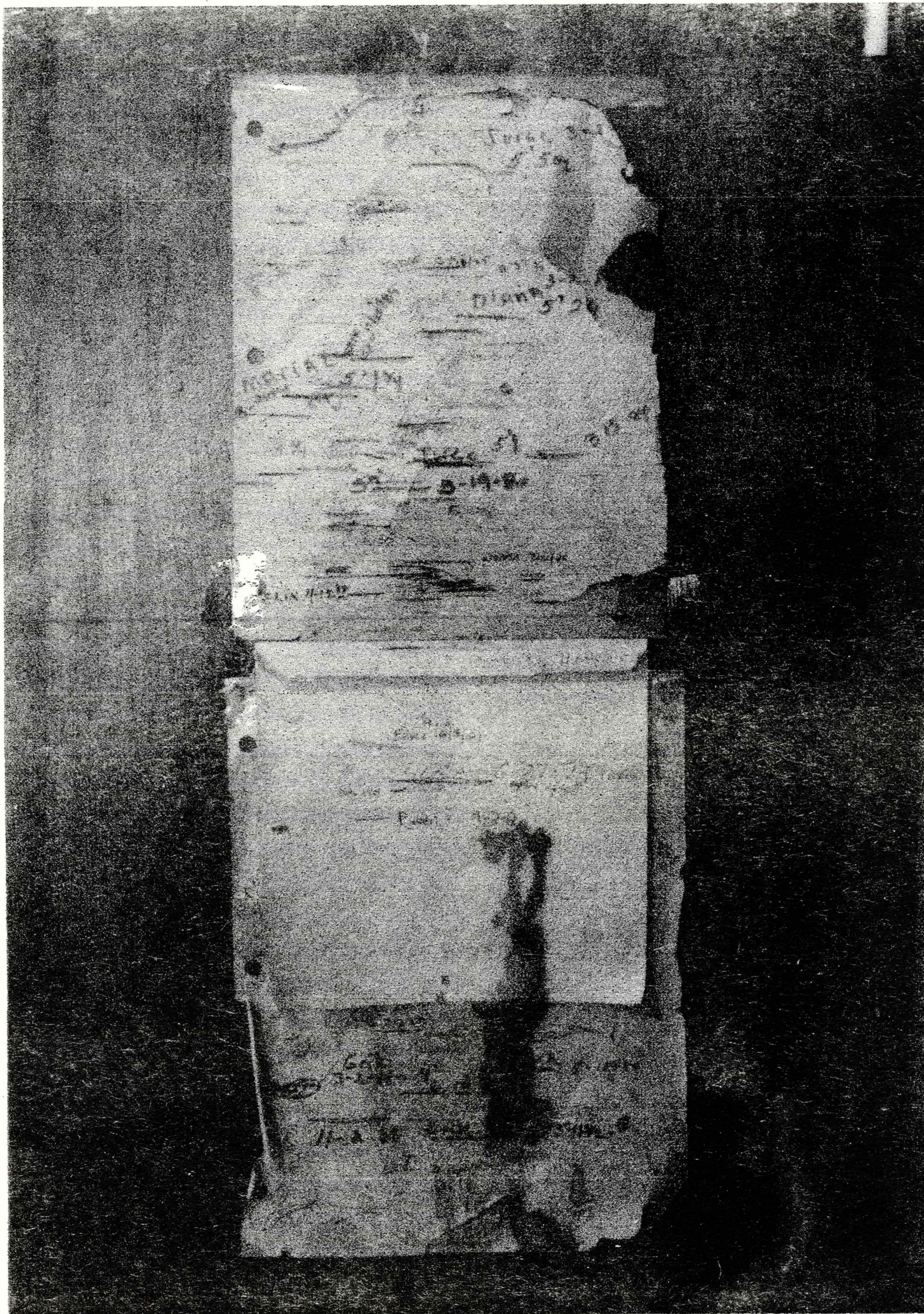


fig. 3: height chart at my nana' s house, Diego Jimenez, 2022