Picture Files

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The San Diego Public Library's Picture File lives on the eighth floor of the Central Library downtown, just a bit to the left when you exit the elevator. The pictures live in the dusty beige filing cabinets behind the zine library. You'd have no idea, by looking, that you can borrow images from the folders inside, or that it operates on an honor system, or that it hasn't been updated since 2014. It is a dated collection, with an outsized focus on the United States and Europe. There is no surprise at what printed images from roughly the 1950s through the late aughts looked like. The collection is in danger; it is valuable real estate, the space that 38 filing cabinets take up (152 drawers total). The Picture File is one of the Central Library's many treasures; as I write this, I can see the glint of sun on cars crossing the Coronado Bridge. If I need a snack (packed myself - no cafe), I can go outside, up to the ninth floor, and eat beneath the strange dome. On the ninth floor there's an art gallery, the California Collection, the Rare Book Collection, and the Genealogy Collection. The eighth floor holds the Baseball Research Center. I scanned images for this newsletter in the IDEA Lab on the fourth floor, which also has 3D printers and embroidery machines.

I remember when my college's library cleared out their picture files. I don't know what they made room for. One of my professors encouraged us to take the folders home, and I didn't. My understanding of pictures has deepened with time: pictures are important, how we look at them is important, and how we used to hold them is as important as how we hold them now. In an internet increasingly cluttered by pictures, and concentrated on only a few websites, the opportunity for chance is low. The pictures in the filing cabinets are specific and not necessarily completely by chance either: Many of them are advertisements cut out of magazines, which have their own allowances and exclusions. At first I went through the files without any rationale. Then I handwrote a list of every single drawer and its subject headings instead of asking a librarian if they had a list. And now I am going to write about as many of the drawers as possible.

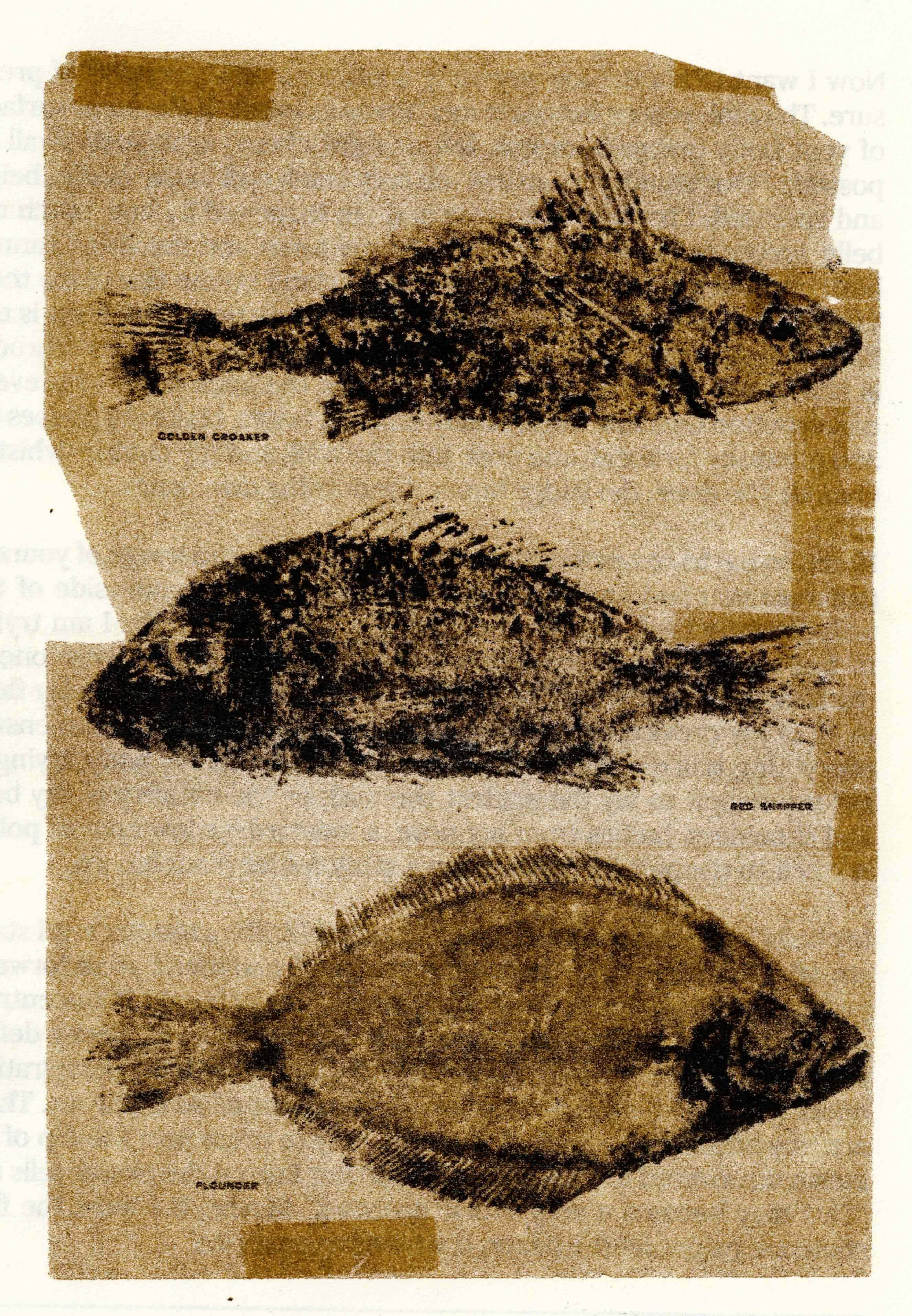
DRAWER 66 FIRE ENGINES TO FLOWER ARRANGEMENTS

I can't figure out how to write about the drawers yet, whether to explain the process of looking through them or focus on the thing itself. I've hung up a copy of the fish print (fig. 1) on my wall. The eyes render as open, as though watching, and though the page is tattered and folded and taped, their bodies remain intact on the paper. Gyotaku is a Japanese technique, traditionally used to record a fisher's catches. The body of the fish serves as a printing plate; ink is brushed onto it, paper pressed atop that, to make a reproduction of the body. The fins fade out into wisps.

The fish prints make me think of Ana Mendieta's Silueta series, in which the artist outlined her body in the landscape via different methods. Some of them required pressing her body into the earth, against the sand, until she left a mark. Sometimes that mark was solely what constituted the silhouette; in other pieces, she filled in the mark, with blood, with gunpowder, with candles. The untitled Siluetas lacked the detail that the fish prints have; they functioned more symbolically, less about the individual than the accrual of the performances, the shape of the body repeated again and again.



One summer, two months into knowing one another, my boyfriend and I took the train up to Dia:Beacon. In the basement, between Bruce Nauman's television sculptures and yellow-green light, was his piece Body Pressure (1974), a stack of pink posters meant to be taken. (I think Nauman probably intended for the piece to be performed in the space, but I didn't know that at the time. I hardly knew the person I was with, and he was not the kind of person who would press his body against the wall in the basement of a museum.) I rolled one up and hung it on the door of his new bedroom. The apartment had just been renovated, and the wooden door recently stained, so that as time went on the residue of the door seeped through the poster and made sticky marks on it.



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Now I want to try it. Now my body contains a different kind of pressure. The pink poster instructs me: "Press as much of the front surface of your body (palms in or out, left or right cheek) against the wall as possible." Our laundry room has the only blank wall in the house, beige and speckled. I try first in a dress and am surprised by how much my belly precedes me in the world, how my torso and my shins cannot both press against the wall unless I try to stand on the tips of my toes. The mottled sun through the skylight warms my neck. The body is not flat. I pull my dress up and try bare skin against the wall. The bathroom is still, quiet. The tarp that I hung up over the back door, to prevent construction dust and bugs, breathes, and I fidget. I take my glasses off and press my forehead and nose into the wall, and my nostrils whistle. Outside the door, the fridge hums. A mourning dove sings.

I keep trying to remember the instructions. "Form an image of yourself (suppose you had just stepped forward) on the opposite side of the wall pressing back against the wall very hard." I feel like I am trying to hug the largest tree in the world, or the flattest. If I were one of the fish, the paper would be moving to accommodate me, to lay flush in all of my crevices; someone would be using their fingers to ensure everything was recorded. And instead I am twisting my body, trying to get my armpit to lay flat against the wall, or the entirety of my back and shoulders. Inches from my nose, a mustard-yellow spot of pollen is stuck to the paint, leftover from a stray spider plant bloom.

My belly looks round and long and impossible, like a toddler's. If I stand straight, it is the only thing touching the wall, and then I press forward, put my hands on the wall and my forehead on my hands. "Concentrate on the tension in the muscles, pain where bones meet, fleshy deformations that occur under pressure; consider body hair, perspiration, odors (smells)." I am freshly showered and sort of soft, porous. There are tiny bits of dust stuck to the wall. I try to press into the dip of my sternum, covered in little red dots. The last line on the poster tells me: "This may become a very erotic exercise." Maybe, if I were the fish, someone palpating the paper, it would become one.