

Processes of Dissolution



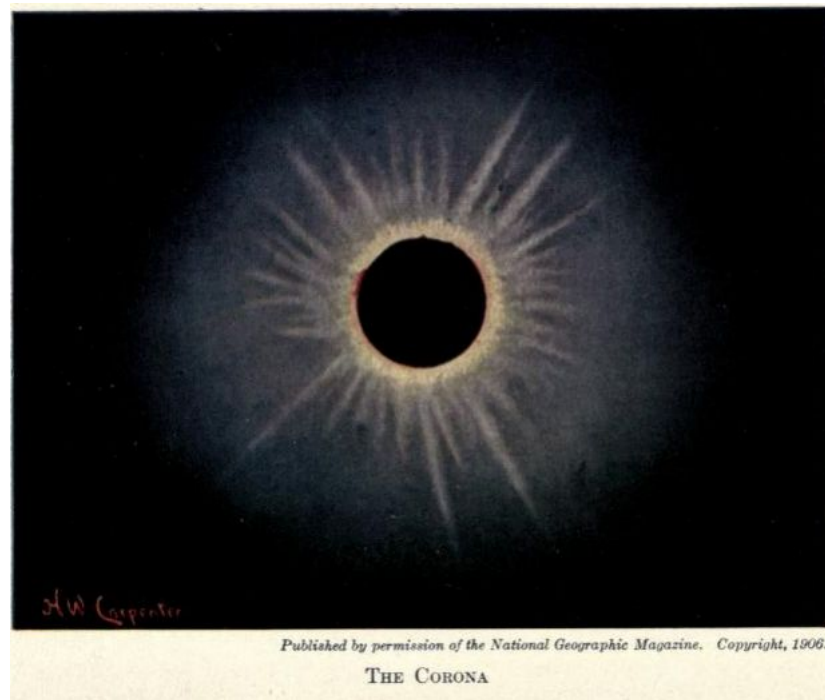
A Place Talk from the Burl Concentrate
(Sarah-Dawn Albani & Connie Zheng)

January 2021



Sinkhole by McClures Beach in Point Reyes, April 2019.

An introduction



Source: [*Earth Science: a Physiography*](#), by Gustav L. Fletcher.
1938. Prelinger Library archive.

When we originally proposed this *Place Talk* back in July 2019, we were thinking very much about fire in California. We had been writing for months about the site of Paradise, California and the mediascape surrounding the 2018 Camp Fire, with a focus on religious zealotry in Butte County, as well as the cries of armageddon on social media in the Bay Area during the Camp Fire. We wanted to investigate fire and brimstone and conservative rural California, in addition to the longing for apocalypse, the eros of the end and why we felt Americans could not imagine global warming. We were obsessed with disaster porn, live streaming the Rapture, and contemplating the problem with digital media and climate change. We are still interested in these thematics, and on the global warming front, perhaps not too much has changed. But of course 2020 has also changed so many things, and so terribly.

We had been scheduled to present our talk in March 2020, a few days after California's first shelter-in-place order went into effect. Given the emerging public health crisis — little did we know it would still be shaping our lives so drastically in 2021 — we tabled our talk. When we re-exhumed it nine months later, we found we were interested in examining some new sites and territories. How strange it is to revisit one's project nearly a year on, a shifted and transposed world later. At the Burl Concentrate, our individual interests have diverged

during this time, but we were fascinated to find ourselves having arrived separately at a shared excitement for thinking through collapses, hauntings and the subterranean.

We wanted to use this project to investigate the lyrical, tactile and historical currents of these shared interests, in a time of forced standstill and domestic burrowing, of gardening and reconnection to quietude, of terrible despair and freefall, of hopes muted and violently loud. Toward the end of 2020, many of those around us had nostalgically looked forward to 2021 as the great gate opening back into pre-pandemic Normalcy, but of course the new year has not fulfilled this wish. Trump may no longer be the president of this country, yet we continue to paddle in an eternally replenishing present of superlative disaster: everything is always *now*, always *unprecedented*, always in need of immediate and crucial attention. We are tired of surrendering our attention *all the fucking time* but it so often feels irresponsible to ignore “them”, whether they are events, the media, or a “them” for which we still have no name.

We know that rest is a privilege not everyone can enjoy, especially not in 2021. But is it a right? And what happens when our bodies refuse to process any more without taking its right to sleep? Can collapse become its own kind of agency? As we continue to recalibrate, adapt and re-learn what it means to grieve in a society that persists in ignoring the ghosts of its past, what can we permit to gestate at this time? What kinds of compost do we want to cultivate? What do we want to bury for good, and what do we want to germinate?

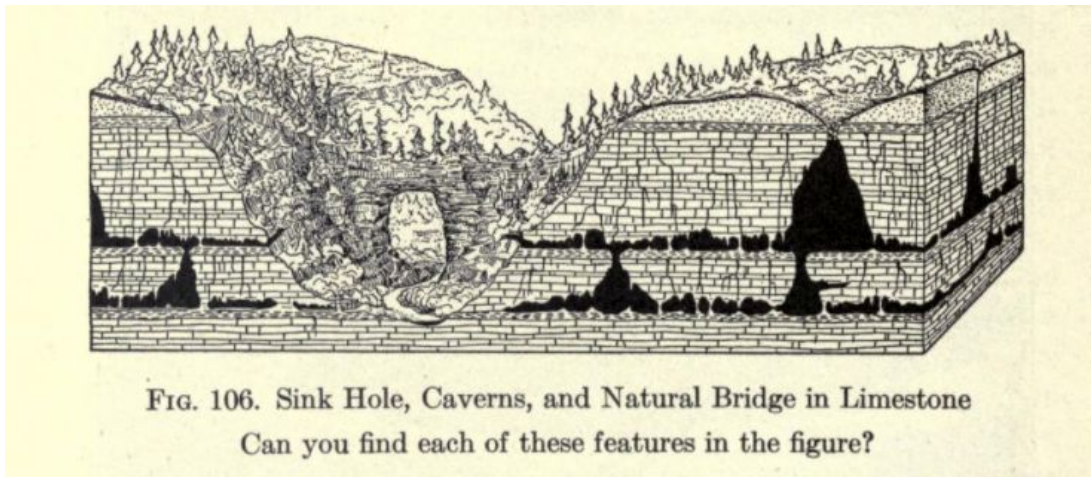
What follows are some reflections on dormancy and collapse, as witnessed through portions of the physical earth — its stones and soil, the haunted skin of its geography, the failed and failing strata of the asphalt armor built on top of it — in the Bay Area. We consider a brief history of Bay Area sinkholes and an encounter with a haunted shellmound in Emeryville; we flirt with instruction manuals for the liminal, haunted act of lucid dreaming; we end by telling stories about burials, geologic time and soil, and the things that grow in the darkness of loam.



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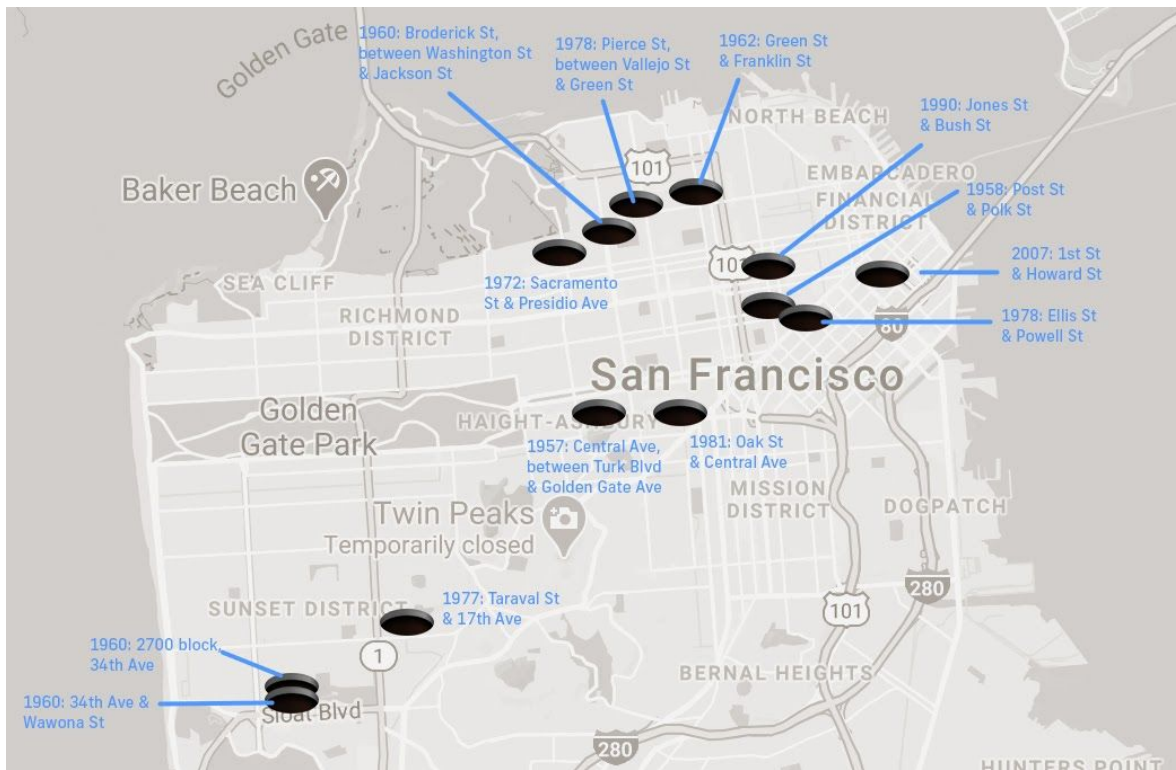


Source: [*Earth Science: a Physiography*](#), by Gustav L. Fletcher.
1938. Prelinger Library archive.

A note on the format

We are experimenting with the container of a table of contents to frame the various elements of this text, some of which we have hosted across a variety of domains. We are interested in the possibility of a rhizomatic sort of text, which we envision branching out from the central repository of the Place Talks archive via a central PDF (this one). The table of contents provides a structure for an ensuing introductory text, conclusion, and series of body texts. As the narrative proceeds, it becomes increasingly speculative, branching out into more and more external links, which you are welcome to explore as you will.

I. A very brief and incomplete survey of Bay Area sinkholes



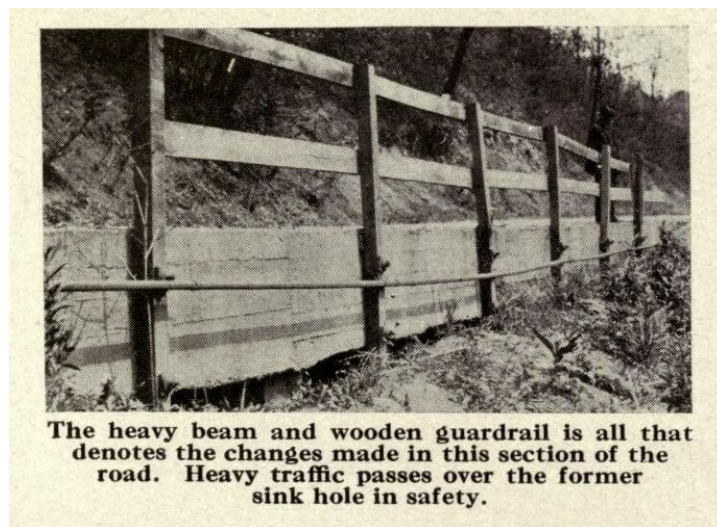
A sampling of recorded sinkholes in San Francisco from the past 60 years. Data mapped from the *SFGate* article "[Dramatic photos of San Francisco sinkholes through the decades](#)".

Sometime in the spring of 2019, a sinkhole appeared in the middle of the road leading to McClures Beach, in Point Reyes. It spanned the length of both lanes and felt as if it was anywhere from ten to fifteen feet deep: not so deep that you couldn't see out of the top, but deep enough that you would not have been able to crawl out if not for the slabs of asphalt debris lodged in its sides like steps. The edges of the sinkhole were crisp, as if a giant had punched a fist toward the heart of the earth. Inside, the sinkhole smelled of clean and juicy mud; threads of recent rainwater wound between torn wedges of grass and puzzle pieces of paved road. The collapse was an invitation, an interruption into the linear progress suggested by the yellow lines shooting into the horizon. That which lay below ground was exposed where it had once been covered; it had said *no* to the asphalt skin forced upon it and gave way. It was a *no* that could not be ignored. A car would ignore that *no* at its peril.



Sinkhole by McClures Beach in Point Reyes, April 2019.

For a few weeks after, the sinkhole was still there, although the little creeks in its crevices quickly dried up and the clumps of grass turned a trampled, dusty brown. Some months later, a crew of workers filled it up. A few local [news outlets](#) and [nature enthusiast websites](#) reported on the sinkhole, sharing that the damage had been caused by an erosion of the sand dunes over which the road had been built. The *no* had been smoothed over into a *yes, of course. Go forth, eager traveler.*



Source: [Concrete Highway Magazine: Devoted to Concrete Roads, Streets & Alleys](#), by the Portland Cement Association. 1924. Prelinger Library archive.

While the Bay Area is not famous for its sinkholes — unlike, say, [Florida](#) — our sinkholes make news when they appear in urban areas with heavy vehicular and pedestrian traffic. Essentially, they become noteworthy when they exhibit the ability to swallow people and destroy infrastructure. (See: this [SFGate compilation](#) of San Francisco sinkholes from the past five decades; a sinkhole named “Steve” on Highway 13 outside Oakland; a sinkhole that swallowed several cars outside of [Levi’s Stadium](#), just this past fall.) According to the geologist Leslie Gordon (quoted in the [SF Weekly article](#) “Why San Francisco Has Had a Major Sinkhole Every Year Since 2011”), most sinkholes in the United States occur in areas with significant deposits of limestone: as the soluble limestone dissolves, it “undermines” the ground’s surface. Rain water falling through the air [gathers carbon dioxide](#), which becomes a solvent for limestone; trickling through the permeable carbonate underground, these trails of water slowly dissolve the stone over hundreds of years, carrying its minerals further and further below, often collecting in springs.

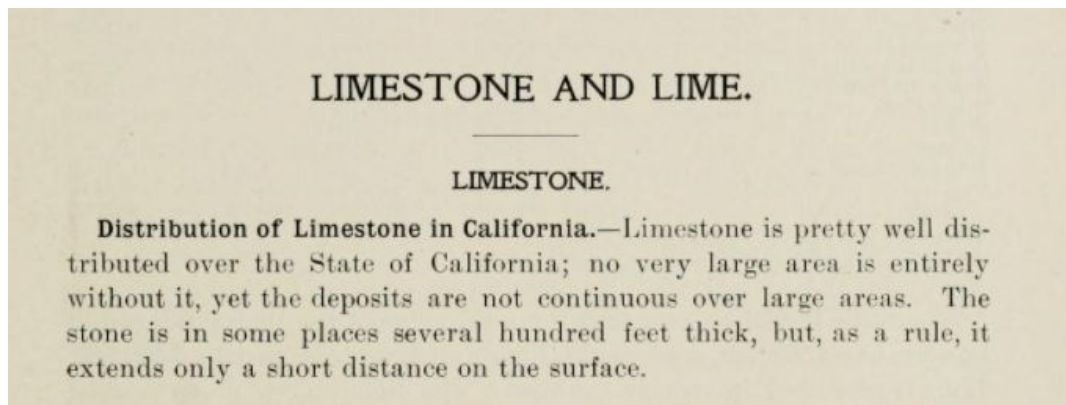


Students examining a sinkhole in Tallahassee, Florida. 1962.

Source: [State Library and Archives of Florida](#).

As the *SF Weekly* article also explains, Yosemite is the only significant limestone country in Northern California; most of the urban sinkholes in the Bay Area are actually caused by patchy plumbing. At the risk of oversimplifying a complex geological process, as soil slowly drains into leaky pipes buried underground, a gap begins to form in the space between the pipe and the asphalt above. As this gap increases in size, less and less compacted soil is

available to support the weight of the road and buildings directly atop it. A sinkhole then forms when the asphalt overhead collapses from its own weight.



Source: [*The Structural and Industrial Materials of California*](#), by Lewis Aubury.
1906. Prelinger Library archive.

Most sinkholes in the Bay Area are modest in size and scope: at worst, they swallow a few cars and obstruct tourism or pedestrian activity for several weeks. They are like modest potholes in comparison to the dramatic and lethal sinkholes of the American Southeast, which have been known to swallow entire houses and can easily punch [750 feet into the ground](#). But perhaps the homeliness of Bay Area sinkholes can be an invitation: it renders them approachable. Unlike their more dramatically destructive cousins to the east, our sinkholes are bite-sized disasters, more novelty than apocalypse. They will generally not kill us. They are like small sighs of the earth, shifting, sifting toward water and into water, which will carry them toward new homes and environments.

Our sinkholes are gentle reminders of the primacy of the earth beneath our feet and the fact that without them, our roads would be nothing but shards of asphalt. At Chichén Itzá on the Yucatan Peninsula, a [sacred limestone cenote](#) (sinkhole) 60 meters wide and 14 meters deep became famous in the early 20th century when dredging efforts exhumed not only jade and gold objects, but also the bones of over 200 men, women and children who had been sacrificed to the gods by Pre-Columbian peoples. Their flesh consumed by the hungry organisms of the green pools into which they sank, their tongues transmuted into the soil lining the cavity of their new womb.

DESCENDING INTO ABYSSES.—Do not be afraid of fire-damp, unless you are going down a sink-hole that may have been sealed at the bottom. The air of a true cave is purer and more invigorating than any to be breathed on earth. One can work with less fatigue in a cave than in the open air.

Source: [*Camping and Woodcraft: A Handbook for Vacation Campers and for Travelers in the Wilderness*](#), by Horace Kephart. 1921. Prelinger Library archive.

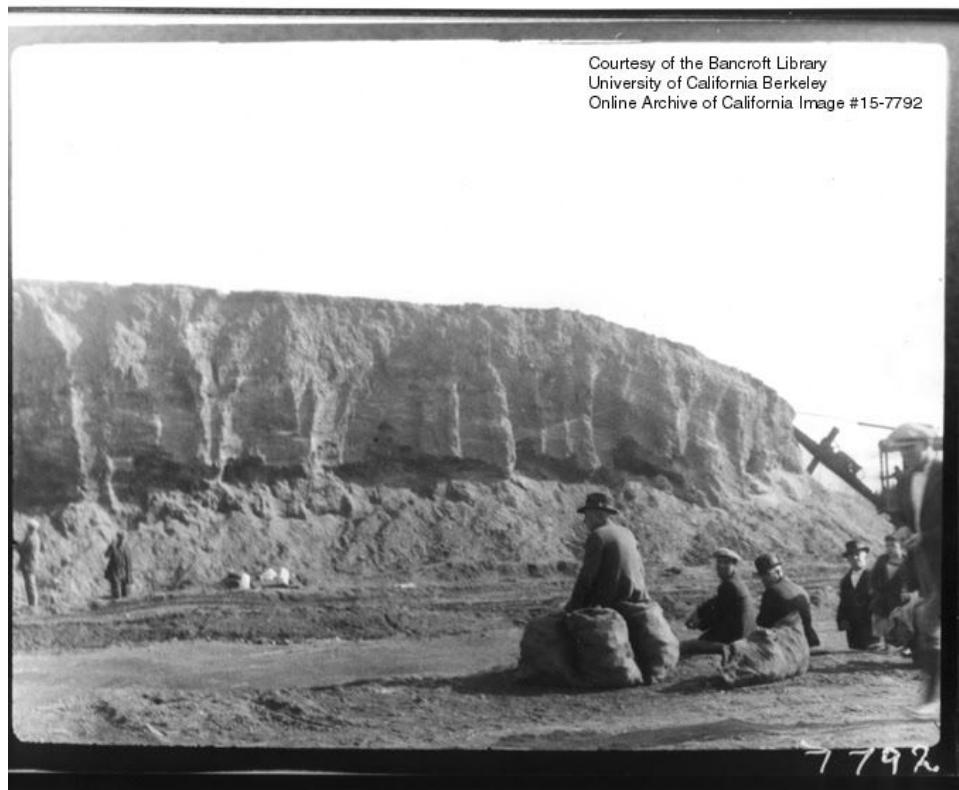
We are, of course, only the latest in a long and healthy lineage of sinkhole fans (see: this [Flickr album dedicated to sinkholes](#)), and our stop in this abyss is temporary. Rather, we have assembled this document driven by the belief that there might be hope in staying strategically underground at this time. As non-professional cavers, we cannot speak for the exhortations of Horace Kephart in the above citation. But we find his claim provocative; we too have reveled in the clean juiciness of our favorite holes in the earth. We think there might be hope in embracing dormancy and gestation, in turning toward the process of being a seed that is buried in the darkness of uncertainty. We think there might be hope in slow germinations — and we gently ask you to join us in going below, at least for a little while. We thus invite you to think through sinkholes with us as portals, carrying us into the strange passageways, currents and skins of the ground below. Where can they take us? Where do we want to go?



Sinkhole at Langton Street, San Francisco. March 2014.

Source: Peretz Partensky, [Flickr Commons](#).

II. Encounter with a haunted shellmound



Emeryville Shellmound being demolished in 1924 to make way for a paint factory.

Source: Bancroft Library, University of California — Berkeley. 1924.

One day they go to the shopping mall built on the shellmound. This is the burial site of the original human inhabitants of this place, the Ohlone. Here they first learn of this disagreement between them. He does not believe in ghosts and so they argue.

It begins as they lose the ticket that allowed them to exit the parking garage. It is a slow process but it occurs to them very quickly. It takes thousands of years but she notices it in an instant. Her hand goes into her pocket to fish the small stiff paper out. It is gone. It has not made it to any other pocket. She looks twice, then three times. Stuck inside the outdoor shopping plaza they thread their way through the place. Retracing the steps that they first took when searching for a coat rack for the very wealthy man she works for. Her job is mostly shopping for and then returning items for the very wealthy man. The other part of her job was moving things from inside his Diamond Heights flat to outside into the garage or even further down beneath the ground. Over time the objects multiplied and then she would need to sort and cull the items. They were mostly the same items. Multiples of the things he would order online in a flurry without looking in the horde below him. If he had he would know he

already owned five pairs of those same sneakers and 187 dress shirts in an array of pastel colors. Everything was very organized though, organized by her efficient hands and in her quiet and athletic way she would bound up and down the stairs with loads of the newly purchased goods.

The day she lost the ticket she knew it had been disappeared by the ghosts who in disbelief had erased her exit strategy. That one who had the color all about her the- color of delight and the luck color of seeing eyes—that she could be there shopping in the daylight looking for home furnishings at Pottery Barn and CB2 and West Elm and Design Within Reach and Restoration Hardware— that she was there had driven them to disappear the piece of paper. In her searching for the paper she would encounter them. The ghosts. In the tracing of steps she would vow never to shop at the shell mound again. In the tracing steps the spirits all around her crowd and she feels herself full to trembling and then she spills over into grief. She is crying hunched over looking under bushes. She has so few dollars in her pocket and the parking garage will take all of them if she doesn't find the ticket. It will be as if she had been on the shell mound all day. But she has not. She did not shop. She did not buy anything. But the ticket is gone anyway.

He doesn't understand and that makes her very angry. He doesn't believe in ghosts and he says so and look she herself is haunted.

She sings under her breath to soothe herself while she goes around looking for the ticket. The ghosts are grateful for her song. The blood in her cheeks is the color of pomegranates. The feeling in her mouth is of sticky revelations. He is unable to see her. She is a spirit invisible to him now. The spirits see her. Lapping at her sticky mouth, caressing her grief that tumbles out onto the concrete pathways and the dry garden landscaping, her reflection in the glass, tumbling, heaving while shoppers stride in gusting pulses all around her. No one can see her anymore down on the ground looking looking, but the bloom of red from her mouth is a cry and ghosts lick and suck the bright red. She will never shop on the shellmound again.

III. California Haunting



In this strange future we listen for the ghostly traces of organisms now gone, of stories long erased, and ancestors from across the earth to see if we can understand where we are now. We listen to the winds as they race down the Sierra from far away in the Great Basin, making our old wooden homes into creaking ships—ghosts of the ancient forest, timber dragged out of the Sierras after the gold was gone. The wind whips up the fires to the north and east and south of San Francisco, violent gusts that shake the street trees in the city also send embers into the dry grass at the edge of the raging fires, growing the haze of smoke that filters the autumn light. Fire season has become uncanny, the repetition a creepy *dejavu*, we are just far enough removed here in the city as it the light becomes cinematic, the lengthening dark growing all through the week of Samhain, Halloween, and the Day of the Dead. Ghouls stride and lurk in the streets, parties spill out of cobwebbed doorways and jack o’lanterns light up the stoops, all the while the countryside burns. Our families, neighbors, and friends must evacuate their homes while we celebrate the in-between time, the time where the spirit world comes close.

We listen to the Diablo winds and we think of the eighty-five souls departed from the ridges and canyons of Butte county a year ago in the Camp Fire. We ask if they can haunt us a little longer in this time of spectacular crisis and twenty four hour news. We wonder if we can let the deaths by wildfire link to the histories of genocide and slavery here in California. We want to be haunted. How many types of apocalypse must we account for? On how many different scales before we get a picture of how long, how wide, how deep and plentiful the dying will be? How long and wide and deep the dying has been?



Chimney left standing after the 2018 Camp Fire.
Paradise, California. January 2019.

In Butte County, the apocalypse came in 1863 for the Konkow Maidu people. Across the ridge from the town of Paradise is Helltown where the hanging of five Maidu men started the vigilante killings that led to the forced march of the Konkow Maidu from Butte County to Mendocino County- a death march under the guns of the US Cavalry, from Chico to Round Valley. The Konkow had already been under immense pressure- many of them having fled the Nome Cult reservation in Round Valley in an attempt to return to their ancestral lands and not be starved in the isolated valley. This march is known as the Konkow Trail of Tears.

Beginning in 1996, descendants of those forced to march across the Sacramento Valley and the coastal mountains retraced the steps for more than 120 miles and paid homage to their ancestors in what is now a yearly memorial walk.

Hauntings of all kinds are occurring here in the foothills of the Sierras. The population of California's Indigenous sunk from approximately 150,000 to 30,000 between 1846 and 1873. The names of the places we pass through while visiting Butte County—the places where we swim, work, play and go get a beer—they become the names for the sites of massacres, they become thick with ghosts, sticky with blood. Oroville, Yankee Hill, Pence's Ranch. Jarbo Gap, where we go get tacos and beer at a biker bar named Scooters, is named for Walter S. Jarbo, a stockman who gathered together a group of vigilantes and made for himself a mandate to clear the land of the Indigenous people, like rats, like fleas. All through this burn scar, the names of Indian killers, rapists and thieves are uttered, woven through, remembered. Even the winds that fanned the spark in the grass on November 8, 2018—the winds are named the "Jarbos", blowing from high up on the ridges in Butte county. They are katabatic winds, high pressure air moving from the Great Basin down through the Sierra to low pressure zones along the coast. The Jarbo winds, like the Santa Ana that blow across LA, and the Diablo in the Bay Area, pick up in the fall and race across the parched California landscape, fanning sparks into cataclysmic flame.

The campaign to erase the histories of California began in order to extract resources with impunity and was successful because the early pioneers really could not see. Interdependence was not visible to the pioneer, prospector, homesteaders—just dominance, destiny, and dollars. They became erasers in part because they could not see or comprehend the relationships they were witnessing. They saw only the products of those histories, forests with massive trees, park-like, and rich with flora and fauna, wild rivers and clean clear waters, birds darkening the sky, fish thick in every stream. To the pioneers these were commodities to be exploited or God's work and God's offering to his chosen people. The rich land was not seen as the result of thousands of years of care by indigenous people who lived in deep relation to the myriad species, elements, and energies that they were dependent upon. This type of caretaking was not visible to the farmer, the rancher, the miner, it was happening on a scale and a time frame that was invisible to those looking for quick profits.



Burned-out van in the Acres of Paradise Mobile Home and RV Park.
Paradise, California. January 2019.

These erasures were almost perfectly attained, and now we watch the land burn with incredulity, crying apocalypse. The stolen land is named for the thieves and murderers and they wrote the history, they popularized the myths and they sold the story of the opportunity called California.

There will be no rapture here. The end is not in sight. That is the horror of this, how slow we seem to be putting the puzzle together. How slow the end will be. Are we are still buying the story of California with the power out and the dry autumn air filled with smoke again?

The layers of truth are old, seeded in places dark and distant, and often cool to the touch, like the mycorrhizae of an ancient fungus. To begin to understand what is happening on our planet at this moment—to really understand, to sit with the horror and the tragedy—requires a fortitude, a steely patience. It requires a capaciousness, an ability to look into the eye of not just one kind of apocalypse — that of industrial capitalism and the civilization it has cultivated and protected, founded upon an ethos of exploitation — but also other apocalypses, the ones which occurred hundreds of years ago and whose scars still live deep in the land. We know that this is not easy work. It is easier to look away, to willfully forget.

As the smoke from the SCU, LNU and CZU Lightning Complexes disperse and re-settle into an uncannily persistent shroud of fog blanketing the Bay Area, we remind ourselves to stay vigilant, to remember what asks to not be forgotten. The forests, the fields, the clouds, the sinuous curves of the water have never been quite the static diorama cutouts, the natural

history exhibits that our local leaders and propagandists claimed they were. The fires that have torn through Sonoma County, Butte County, and Los Angeles these past three years also ruptured this fragile veneer, allowing for the re-emergence of the ghosts under the veil. The twenty-four hour image factories of our media empires relentlessly create and re-create the conditions for us to close up, forget, move forward, stay too shriveled and small to hold multiplicities. But we can do better. If we want to call these woods, these grasses, these rivers of California our home, we must do better. Like shoots of bamboo sprouting from a root system threaded hungrily and hardily into the earth, the past returns persistently to the present, and ghosts long for an audience. The skin of the earth is a troubled mesh of ghosts, dreams and portents. It is with this belief that we call for grief, for mourning—for the slow stepping into the shadowy haunted landscapes of our home.

[The text in this section can also be accessed via:

<https://www.theburlconcentrate.org/hauntings>

Internet Archive backup:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20210125041005/https://www.theburlconcentrate.org/hauntings>]

IV. The Burial of the Sardine



Francisco Goya, *The Burial of the Sardine*. 1812-1819.

These winter days in pandemic time I think often of those things I have buried. People and animals, memories and desires. Twenty-three years ago we had a massive queen alpha dog. She was part wolf and malamute, a willful and merciless animal, unafraid of taking another dog down. A killer of deer and squirrel and the neighboring farmer's turkeys. She was driven to kill and there was little we could do but pay for vet bills and the thanksgiving turkeys. I think of her often and the way she would dream with me. In dreams I would see her

transmogrify from wolf to woman and back again. In the dreams she could speak to me and in a dream language I understood she would tell me to be brave, to live my life, to be bold.

When she succumbed to cancer we buried her on the hill below Bus McGall on McNab Ranch. In a little hollow looking south and east where the apple tree grew on the swale below the pond. She died when it was still hot out there, not long after we moved to the ranch. We buried her near the garden and planted daffodils and narcissus on her grave. We hoped she would feed those late winter flowers. Looking out to that hill in the pinking light of sunset time, the grass so blonde in October, she is there beneath that mound of earth, the wolf woman dog who dreamed with me.

Burial. This could be of a body as you might imagine as you let that word into you. Burial as in a ceremony of internment. Or as the object created once the action has been completed. The burial grounds, the burial mounds, the burial site. This can be lost to meaning. A body without name or provenance, or story. This is the body of a person or many people. What is the difference to a grave? The grave is the place of burial. The burial here becomes the action and not the thing itself.

Some years ago I spent time on the Iberian peninsula in the winter after the carnival time. There I encountered Entierro de la Sardina, the burying of the sardine. My Spanish friends explained to me that this festival ending the carnival time was a way to let go of the past, to make a fresh start. So I got some sardines from a big weathered man at the fish market and we rode the train to the shore. The day was bright and cold and the sand was pale and wet from the rain. The surf pounded the steep beach and we dug a hole and buried the sardines. I sang a song about the year and the friends who taught me about the tradition laughed and filmed me as I worked in the sparkling winter sun. I took a photo of the sardines I buried that day. I thought them very beautiful. After we found a cafe and ate grilled cheese and drank very cheap red wine and took the train back to Porto in the dark.



Praia da Granja, Portugal. 2015.



Druid cemetery. Elk, California. 2019.

V. Instructional



An image and text offering; access via:

<https://www.theburlconcentrate.org/instructional>

[Wayback Machine archive:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20210125070040/https://www.theburlconcentrate.org/instructional>]

VI. Tomatofruit



A sound offering; access via: <https://soundcloud.com/yconniezheng/tomatofruit>

VIII. Geophagia



A sound offering; access via:

<https://soundcloud.com/sarah-dawn-albani/geophagia-burlprelinger-good-take-1621-507-p>
[m](#)

IX. How To Be In A Body



A sound offering; access via:

<https://soundcloud.com/sarah-dawn-albani/how-to-be-in-a-body>