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A Family Album, Santa Clara County, 2009

Nils Peterson, Poet Laureate,

Santa Clara County

What shall we call our creation? A poem doesn't seem quite right, though clearly there is poetry in it. I think of it as a collage, a gathering of verbal snapshots, an album of the Santa Clara County family, a time capsule (wouldn't it be great to have a similar gathering from twenty-five years ago, fifty?). Yes, I think we'll call the whole piece *A Family Album, Santa Clara County, 2009*.

I've arranged the lines in groupings according to subject matter to make the reading easier. The order within the groupings is mostly random. The lines were chosen from the roughly 500 submitted. The authors are listed at the bottom of each section in the order of their appearance.

To be selected, the lines had to be between 9 and 13 syllables long. There are many reasons for this, the first, and most obvious, is that it gives a uniformity to the end product. Everyone gets equal time. It makes an approximation of a blank verse line, the major line length of poetry in English. It also gives a challenge. One has to work at it. One learns that to say something is *beautiful* is to use up three syllables which one could use to show its beauty. Also, it's not too forbidding. I don't think I would have gotten as many submissions if I had asked for a line of iambic pentameter.

You'll find joy and sadness here, exuberance and wistfulness, more than a little seasoning of anger. Yet, what surprised me a little is how much we still think of our county as beautiful. It made me look around and see it still is.

There are many voices in this gathering, the young, the old, the ages in between. It is a chorus of many cultures.

Lastly, there were many good lines that had to be left out. Some were very close in subject matter and I had to choose one over another. Others just didn't seem to find a comfortable place as the album grew. We all have boxes of pictures that never got put in the book that are as good as the ones that did. Some lines had a syllable or more too many. I hasten to add, there will be more chances to speak about this place and our time in it.

Thanks to all of you who were interested in this project and particularly those who were interested enough to submit.

~ Nils Peterson, Poet Laureate, Santa Clara County ~

Work

My day begins as the owl comes home for sleep.

Exhaust-ed I drive home in single file four lanes wide.

Workers swarm to the smell of the midnight taco truck.

Five o'clock traffic on 101. Tired faces.

Evening on 101 is like a dancing dragon.

Laid-off, got job- hummingbirds are back at my feeder.

Uprooted to jobs here, not quite fitting in ever.

Field workers and roots became tech workers and wires.

Seeking Sikh sells almonds fueling poet at fuel station.

Walgreen's clerk sneezes mightily, spraying me with germs.

Fading start-up tee-shirts fill Gold's gym.

Three months of work, now and then. Be in good health.

Footnote to line above: (Contract jobs don't offer any health benefits.)

Jackie Coffin, Merribea Berry, Daniel Tran, Emmanuel Eusebio, Hoa Nguyen, Manu Rao, Yoo-Yoo Yeh, Al Reynolds, Steve G. Davis, Susan Paluzzi, Shari Barnett, Ari Cohn

People

Bus stop, Story Road, man waits to go somewhere.

Chess parents, waiting: some friendly, some not.

I grab one ripe lemon from the tree and run.

High tech, low riders, and everything in between.

Neighbors barbecue wafts smoke tendrils. Can I come too?

I have grown accustomed to people talking to themselves.

Their neighbors could never tell when they were there.

"Green tennies, yellow cap - Long sideburns are where it's at!"

The weathered face of the homeless Woman allowed fear.

In the early evening unknown neighbors stroll.

Full moon night. I cannot sleep. Outside a siren wails.

Oh, to be so old in the green world! And yet....

Children are beautiful here - as everywhere.

*Christine Richards, Leigh Klotz, Mary Langenbrunner, Dorothy Reller, Marianne Salas,
Bret-Jordan Kreiensieck, Clair Schuur, Bev Gutierrez, Vicki L. Harvey, Erlinda Estrada,
Laura Mello, Margaret Withgott, Fred Jacobsen*

Our Lives

Morning awakes with the chipping of birds.

My morning paper, THE MERC, shrinking, shrinking.

Haystacks of aluminum cans. Hot beer. Car fumes.

Languages spoken loud and soft. "Buy rims out of box."

Peppered with sushi, tacos, and falafels.

The tandoori oven breathes fire, warms our diverse tongues.

Tacos, pho, and falafel - how to choose?

Currying the smell of garlic, ginger, soy and beans.

A tweet, a text, a finished thought, thumbs rest.

We import smart people; Prop. 13 killed our schools.

Talk slows, twitter grows, clicks impede our skill to read.

High tech hotbed covered with liberal comforters.

Freight Train Rumbles. Bedroom Trembles. Earthquake Dreams.

Like ants in a rush: parents, kids, the bell.

Spines worn out; classics among common; the Library.

Where many roads diverge, in goodness and greed we merge.

Joy! Reverse commute on 85 during rush hour.

Milkman, Newsboy, corner stores gone; service now on-line!

Thousands of dot-com paper millionaires once roamed free.

Some fly away, some come to stay we'll come back some day.

Regina Esparza, Gloria Elizabeth, Marissa Zuniga, Mike Camren, Alfonso Villasana, Romina D. Saha, Beverly Jacobsen, Jaya Padmanabhan, Wayne Caccamo, Arthur Keller, Pat Kreitz, Clysta McLemore, Dave Whipp, Hunter Klotz-Burwell age 11, Kavya Padmanabhan, age 13, Natalie Panfili, Jody Glider, Sylvia Loran, Larry White, Madhu Kopalle

What Was Lost

Low water at Lexington: the ghost road to Alma.

Where trees grew in formation, information reigns.

My father's tractor billowing dust, now 280 covered.

Sunnyvale cherry orchard is now Starbucks.

Dwindled island of mustard grass, still ablaze.

The old timers all say this valley was paradise.

No more lights in the night sky; too many lights down here.

Crows, flapping and cawing, have banished my songbirds.

Ghosts of cherry trees watch rivers of people rushing.

Browsing books about cherries where orchards once stood.

Apricot blossoms forgotten, my heart rails at change.

From plump, purple plums to shiny silver apples.

They were bussed out of the Valley of Our Heart's Delight.

Ken Weisner, Judith Ogus, Clarice Mazzanti, Gordon Garb, Dennis Noren, Dennis Richardson, Alex Rodriguez, Catherine Miller, Natasha Vinnichenko, Barbara Saxton, Ellen Murray, Addie Hosier, Patricia Machmiller

What's Here

I thought it would be almost like Kansas, but it's not.

Home of garlic fog, traffic bog and many who jog.

Sometimes the earth shakes beneath our feet.

A hint of garlic seasons the morning fog.

Showers - what I once called drizzle.

Hills wrap long arms around the valley.

Winter rain stops; chartreuse gingko leaves finger the sky.

Hawks glide and dive, melted sunshine poppies spill downhill.

Morning doves coo softly from rooftop antennas.

A hummingbird whirrs through roses; jet lumbers above.

A woodpecker pounds the dead madrone, as I walk past.

Eleven ducklings in mom's wake down Coyote Creek.

Paired for life, two geese fly over Camden before rain.

Two lizards doing pushups - Qui es mui macho?

A dog barks...bark bark bark bark bark bark bark bark bark bark.

The street cat has a wild and holy light in his eyes.

With my wet laundry, I startle a doe.

6 AM: the mockingbird sang all night.

Squirrels playing soccer with walnuts on the roof.

Ocean cool morning, filigree snail trail on doormat.

Mountain lion hit on 85. Whose valley, this?

Above Silicon Valley two bluebirds are mating.

And crow, county jester, finds a way to thrive.

The Giant Orange. Not razed, just moved a mile. Hot dog!

"Two eighty south becomes six eighty north?! What?"

Moffett tarmac – white blimp, the floating skywhales return!

Annie Deckert, Gwen Hacker, Dawn Haskins, Bonnie Home, Martha Sterne, Millicent Kellogg, Mimi Ahern, Amy Meier, Cookie Curci, Margit Look Henry, Lucy Salcido Carter, Maureen Alexander, Erika Goss, Karen Booth, Bret Mannon, Floi Baker, Katie Welbourn, Katy Huber Grischy, Conne Shaw, Catherine Shinnars, Sharon Nelson, Maureen Draper, Sally Ashton, Larry White, Jennifer Swanton Brown, Stephen C. Wetlesen

The Look of Our Place

A broom left on the gray shingle roof: bright blue handle.

Honeysuckle vines like stained glass etched on Bird Street home.

Wild poppy bouquet rooted in the rough sidewalk crack.

Rain, shine; velvety tulips pop through green grass.

Open weave of reeds show gold flecks from sun in creek.

Cherry blossoms busting out, raining on lightrail tracks.

Itchy eyes, runny nose, pollen, cherry blossoms.

Mustard and golden poppies spread sunshine at our feet.

Daffodils bob nodding yes, yes, yes!

Bare suede hills of winter don a bright green coat in spring.

Jacaranda trees drip purple blooms on park benches.

A susurrus of oak leaves stirs the day awake.

See-thru buildings yearn for people to hold.

Heading west on Hedding and this road looks like I feel.

Spray painted graffiti screams from highway overpass.

Dark branches weaving shadows through fluorescent moonlight.

*Stephanie Pressman, Pushpa MacFarlane, C Flanders, Sarah Harrison, Brenda Cherami,
Brenda Lee, Mitsu Kumagai, James Kenney, Cheryl Levinson, Susan Dyer, Bonnie Home,
Kelly Cressio-Moeller, George Conway, Katie Carter, Pauline Chand, Tam Ngo*