

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Susan Keiser: Two Poems

Susan Keiser · Friday, April 17th, 2026

California Dreamin'

1.

I walked on glass, at Pomona, at seventeen, I walked on glass,
gravel glass, rainbow-hued and waved smooth by rolling tires.
Barefoot always, I carried shoes for show when required, my own
soles thick and brown like home-grown leather. I stopped eating
meat, started smoking for real, and wore cheap nightgowns
as dresses under sweater vests and vintage men's jackets packed
in a peeling cardboard trunk that flew with me from New York
to a school I chose because it was on the other side of the country,
in California, the idyll in songs by folk-rock troubadours,
who lived in houses on stilts, high in the canyons of the Hollywood
Hills. I thought *I'd be safe and warm if I was in LA*, or at least
in a nearby ivied ivory tower, with beaches, and sun, sun, sun.
Distances were so much greater when life hunkered down in real
places and flying stopped time. Nothing could touch you up there.
Engine noise blocked my ears, silenced the voice in my head,
and my eyes marveled at the sight of the Rockies from above.
It was a slow glide to a new life in a new land and everyone
applauded a safe landing.

2.

I arrived a day late and missed the last weighing and measuring
of the freshman women by the football team—a tradition the captain
described as “really just fun” as he flipped through the student *Look
Book* with the figures listed beneath the women's photos. That night
was the first time I ever slept at ground level. People could walk
right up to my window, and a man woke me up at midnight, scratching
at the screen, looking for Diane. The next morning, facing me
outside the front door was a snow-capped mountain that hadn't
been there the day before. Like the backdrop in a play, Mount
Baldy flew in and out with the smog, its peak a French-tipped nail

scraping the sky. Behind the dorm bandana-collared dogs jumped for frisbees on Walker Beach, the back lawn, grass not sand, while in the basement laundry Bonnie Beyer hung her pastel-colored panties embroidered with the days of the week. Every night the ache of Carole King singing “So Far Away” drifted across the quad, the tinkling piano jarringly out of sync with the chinka chinka of sprinklers misting the close-cropped St. Augustine grass that tickled my feet when I walked to class.

3.

I studied religion because I couldn’t understand how anyone could believe in god and the philosophy department was a bunch of leches. I argued with a visiting artist holding court in the Coop, who announced, “Here’s the real deal” before asserting that pretty women had a duty to dress nicely. He wasn’t in the audience when I confused everyone by walking down the aisle at a Julian Bream concert in a vintage lace dress and crown of pink roses.

One weekend I took a double-date hike in Palm Springs Canyon led by Brenda’s boyfriend David, a Vietnam vet, the only survivor of his marine platoon, who brought ropes and pitons in case we had to “traverse a rock crevice” and wounded but did not kill a rattlesnake. Brenda was also from New York but was lucky to be in California when she got pregnant and needed an abortion. David took so long picking her up from the clinic I got worried, but it turned out she was hungry and they stopped for a burger.

Curtis was our only friend who didn’t have to worry about the draft lottery, his doctor having certified he suffered from “disqualifying allergies.” For the college’s performance of *The Death of Buster Quinine*, “a sacramental farce and fire opera” with giant puppets and light sculptures that was being staged in a nearby quarry, he and David snuck a master *castillo* artist out of Mexico in the back of a truck, and helped him build a motorized exploding firework tower with spinning wheels and shooting stars, all with a lit cigarette hanging out of his mouth.

4.

Every morning I looked for Mount Baldy, hoping to see its snowy peak rising from the desert palms that dotted the campus. But particulate matter isn’t magic mist and even when it was visible, it was always out of reach, hanging there in the distance like a postcard flashing “Wish You Were Here” in jaunty script from some future self that I was always looking for but was never going to find there. After two years I dropped out and headed back east, back to humidity, the neon flicker of fireflies, and the solemn silence of snow.

*

Freighted

Stowed as freight
Chrissy flew in the hold
of Sky Gabon, her place
secured by steel clamps
and French francs
laid out by her husband
to avoid the usual delays.

Freeze thaw, freeze thaw,
she stuttered to Ireland,
her zinc-lined coffin topped
by a shuttered window,
a greasy, fingerprinted pane
that exposed her face
when opened by customs.

I never looked, but
my brother Mark did, twice,
confused by the blackness
eating through her cheeks.
I stopped my ears, but still
heard him wondering aloud
about the rot setting in.

(Featured image from [Wikimedia Commons](#))

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