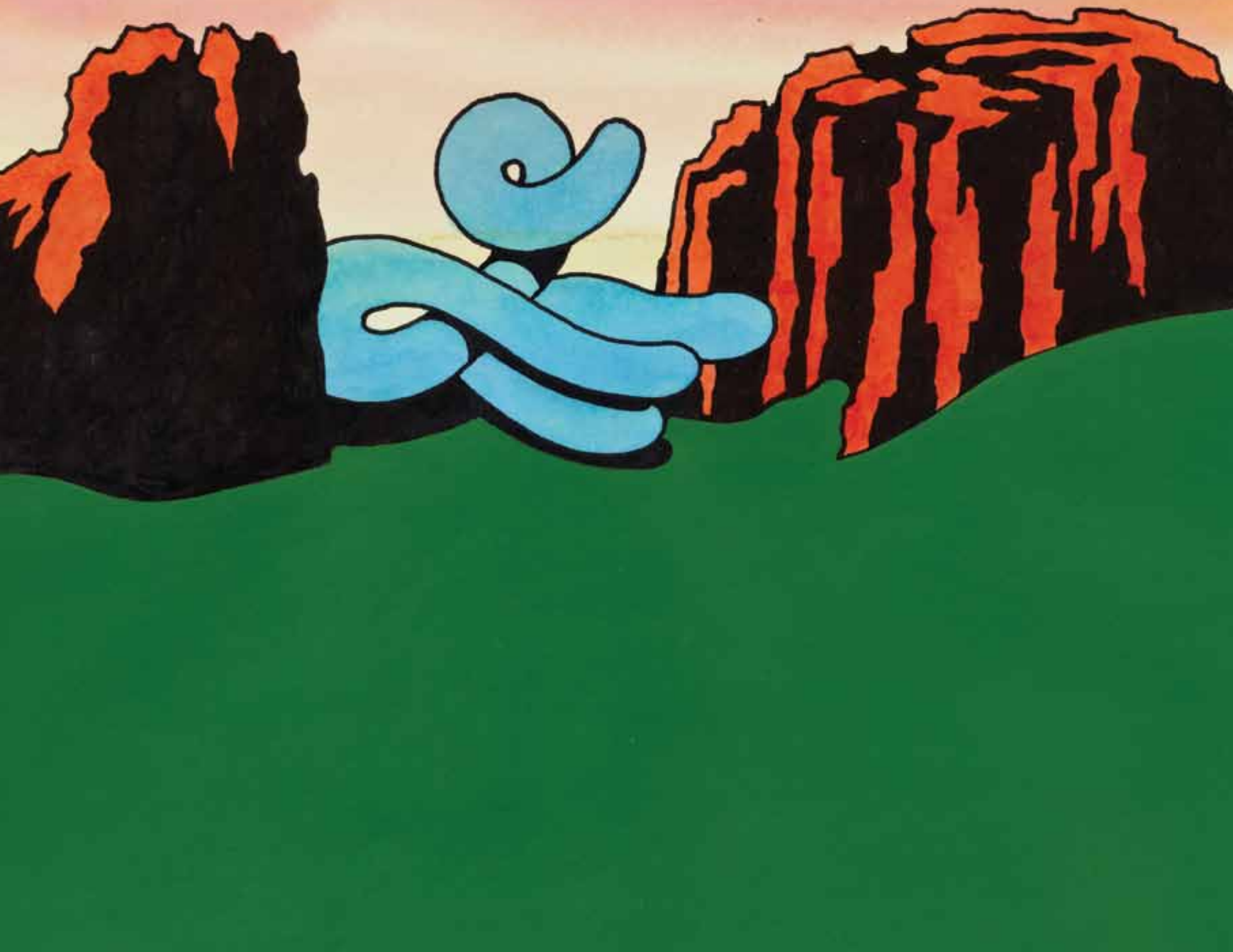


# NERO



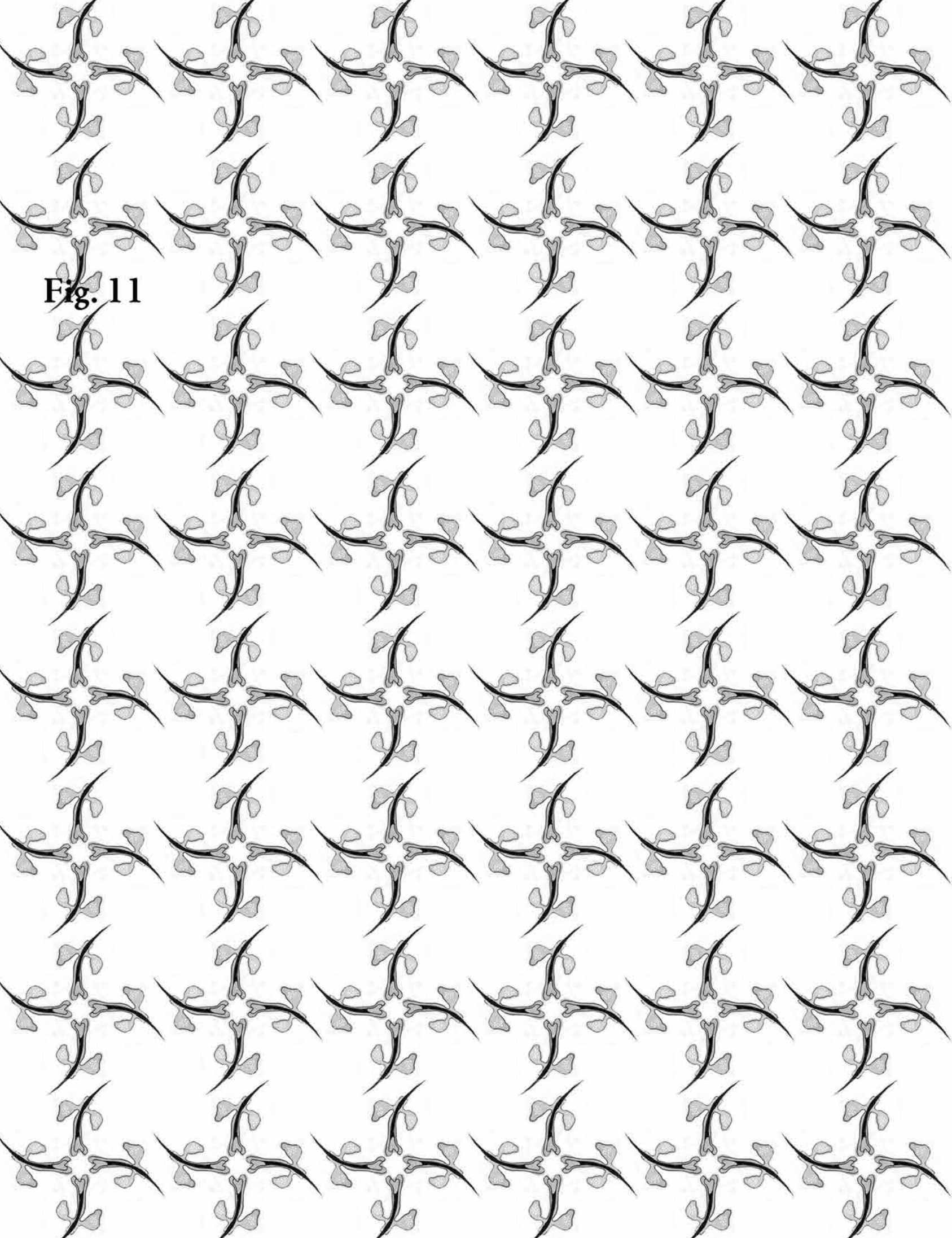


Fig. 11

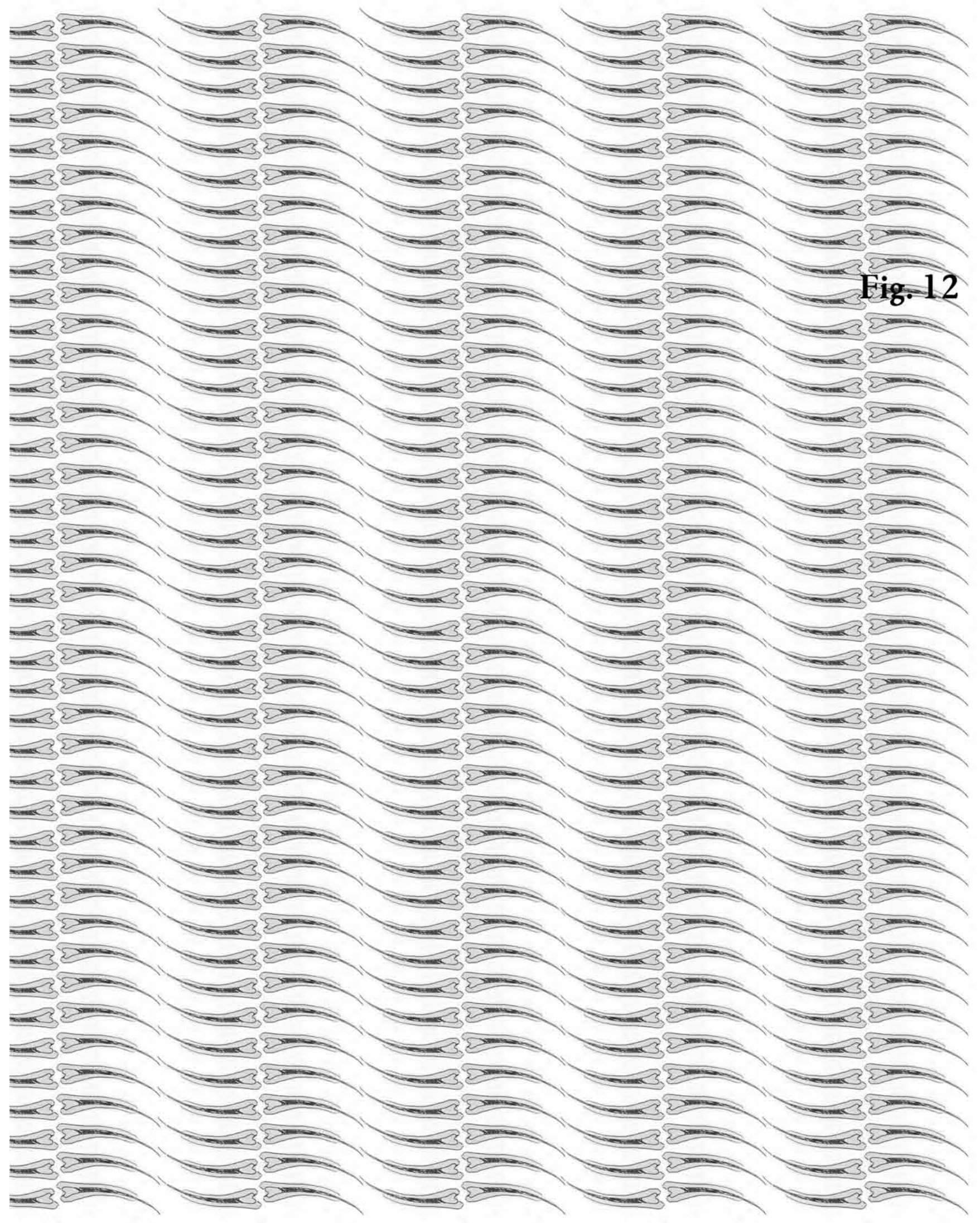


Fig. 12

SECTION 8  
WORDS FOR IMAGES



In an exploration of some of the possible relations between words and images, writers are asked to react to photos whose origins are obscure to them. The only guideline is that the text be somehow related to the images

# FROM THE CHÂTEAU TO SKIDROW

Words by Matthias Connor  
Images by John Divola

Matthias Connor is an English writer also known as “Wolf Boy.” Through his Poppy Books imprint, Matt tells stories of life’s long negotiation through the eyes of the put-upon, the lonely, the cynical and the drifting, while finding his own way to a voice that can see the important details in the world, find reasons to live, and determine right from wrong.

John Divola (1949) lives and works in Los Angeles. Since 1988 he has been Professor of Art at the University of California, Riverside. His work has been featured in more than sixty solo and 200 group exhibitions in the United States and abroad.

John Divola, *Zuma Series*, Zuma #4, 1978; courtesy the artist



This morning I am surprised to find two empty seats on the normally packed train. Only when I am seated do I understand why no one else has taken them. I feel guilty noticing, and this makes me more determined not to show the rest of the carriage that, even if I did, it does not concern me as much as it did them. The man sitting across from me, holding his nose and fanning his face with his hand, bothers me. Has he no compassion for the fate of a fellow human being? Yes, the smell emitted was an acidic one, and grabbed you by the throat until it threatened to choke you, but then surely the smell would become more tolerable as you acclimatized to it, as would your eyes adjusting to a change in the light? It is obvious that she has been living outdoors for a great many days, and underneath the layers of plastic sheeting she is shivering and condensation has begun to gather. At the far end of the carriage a pair of police officers make progress, moving in our direction, inspecting passengers’ tickets. For the most part, the metro system here runs on an honesty system; people can come and go, apart from during peak times, without anybody checking their tickets.

I cannot imagine the police officers shaking her awake, but when one of them asks her if she has a ticket and she responds negatively, he tells her that she will have to get off at the next stop. Even though the train is going as far as Atlantic City, I suspect that the woman, like me, is heading downtown where, a short walk from the old fashion splendor of Union

Square station, many of the city’s homeless congregate at Skid Row. When the train pulls into the next station, the police officers approach her again. “Come on, you’ve got to get off here.” His colleague stands between the doors to prevent the train from leaving. She slowly pulls herself up. The look of relief on the man sat opposite me when he removes his hand from his nose makes me feel sick. I have heard people reminisce that Skid Row is not what it used to be, as if it were a rock band that has grown too successful, that when they first moved to Los Angeles it was bigger, poorer, scarier, sicker, better and that now it is just a pale imitation of itself. Later that morning, when I look out at those waiting to be served in the dining room from the kitchen, I wonder if anybody has told any of them this and, if they have, does it make being hungry, addicted, or homeless any easier? I think about the woman on the train that day and how I should have said something, made my opinion known: there is a place for her in here.

At Union Station I use the bathroom, but when I enter there is a queue to use the urinals. “After you,” says a young man in front of me. He steps aside to let me pass, and when I finish he lets the man who was behind me go in front of him.

Tracy’s speech before lunch addresses some of the ladies’ fears that the seeds in today’s salad might influence any forthcoming drug tests. “These are sesame seeds, and the seeds that some of you are think-



John Divola, *Zuma Series*, Zuma #20, 1978; courtesy the artist



John Divola, *Zuma Series*, Zuma #67, 1977; courtesy the artist

ing about are poppy seeds” she explains. It is Friday, which means that Barbara has made the deserts. The cheer which greets Barbara when Tracy encourages the room to make their appreciation known to her is always an enthusiastic one. Today she has brought marble sponge – a walnut placed atop each portion.

Florien is waiting in his car when I leave the center after cleaning up. We drive through Skid Row; past flop houses, pawn shops, fading advertisements, drug deals, liquor stores, missions, beggars, preachers and lines of people trying to stay out of the afternoon sun. We pass Pershing Square. A woman I recognize is struggling with a suitcase on the sidewalk. A man who appears to be with her is sprawled comatose on his back. Two police officers are standing over him. She is trying to reason whilst trying to get away. Further along a large man is cleaning his sneakers with a toothbrush whilst his girlfriend films him on her phone.

Turning onto the freeway, Florien asks me have I seen her? The story has been on the radio all morning. That after being found guilty of shoplifting Lindsay Lohan has been sentenced to 360 hours community service at an unnamed women’s centre on Skid Row. “Well that must be where you work right?” Florien says. I agree, it sounds like the same place, since it is the only women’s center on Skid Row. No one had mentioned she was coming but then as Florien points out, the sentence has only been passed this morning, so I would not have known anyway.

Florien has already explained that we will be looking for a beach. The client has briefed Florien that they are looking for a beach with texture: beautiful, but in a natural, understated manner; as if he or she is dressed up, only in the sense that he or she looks like they are not. Some days Florien is asked to cast for derelict warehouses, or loft apartments, or Japanese ornamental ponds, or dry lakebeds, or single-storey houses in a specific pink.

I ask him who the client is. He cannot tell me and refers to them as “Rain Drop,” which is what he has been instructed to do. I push him further, as I know he wants to tell me because, unlike most of the clients he works for (and gladly tells me the names of), he knows I will recognize the name of this one.

“The iPhone?” I question him. “No, but even if it was I couldn’t tell you.” 10 minutes later, he tells me (“iTunes”), and we are able to resume our day without any further secrets coming between us. We turn off the freeway. We pull up at a Trader Joe’s and buy cokes and sticky donuts and eat them in the car.

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Before I ever set foot on Zuma beach, I had heard the sound of this same ocean and seen the sun setting over it, night after night, reading books by and about people who once stood here, or listening to the music also born here.

In the book *The White Album* Joan Didion moves to Malibu from Hollywood to escape the paranoia, in the wake of the Manson killings she saw as coming to characterize the end of the sixties, in search of a new, more peaceful life.

I do not know what I had been expecting. I had sold every single possession of mine to come here. These consisted mostly of books, records, and clothes. Whilst these items had spoken to me (even the t-shirts) as a young man, of hope, ideas, character, and fearless creation, traveling through time, across the cosmos, the more records and books I seemed to accumulate the more the feelings they had once provoked in me began to dry up. From where I stood on the beach, staring out to sea, it seemed like a futile bid: by getting rid of my possessions I had hoped to be reborn as the person I was before, and capture what I had when I still thought that, by listening to a piece of music or by reading a book, I could hear the ocean in the distance. I hear Florien shouting after me and I respond by walking after him in the direction of the car. We still have other beaches to visit.

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The screen rattles and the door opens. He looks me up and down, squinting in the sun. His fly is open. I say to him: “John, you’ve got your cock out.” He mutters something about having just got out of the shower, and looks irritated by my arrival, even though it was his suggestion that I visit him, and at this time too. “I suppose you had better come in,” he says, after I have locked up my bike, his English accent still intact after twenty years living here. The inside of his apartment is crammed with paperback books and records. He has already told me that he has originals by authors such as Charles Willeford, Jim Thompson, David Goodis, collectable paperbacks characterized by their garish covers designed to arouse potential readers. These, and hundreds of others, share space with a record collection dominated by blues, country, and soul influences that stretches around the room. John asks me what I want to listen to and I reply you choose. I cannot remember what we listen to. He shows me his copy of Barbara Payton’s ghost-written memoir, *I Am Not Ashamed*, which I had asked to see after he told me about her story whilst we were seated at the bar

in King Eddy’s.

Barbara Payton had moved to Hollywood in 1947 with her second husband when she was just twenty. She was described by one newspaper as the “Queen of the Nightclubs” and her marriage ended as quickly as the affairs had begun. Making her acting debut in the film noir *Trapped* Payton was enjoying the trappings of success in Hollywood; by now the doors of fashionable hotels, restaurants and nightclubs were held open for her as soon as she stepped out of her car, on the arm of one of the leading men, and she was ushered in, past the civilians, the baying photographers, straight to the best suite, table, or roped-off VIP area.

This is not a morality tale but Payton’s view of Hollywood was not to last.

By 1960, after a series of scandalous tabloid stories about her personal life, the 32-year-old Payton found herself adrift in Hollywood, ignored by her former co-stars and the studios that had employed her; living in a succession of boarding houses before finally living on the street, turning tricks in waiting cars to get by. The same doors that had once opened as she approached now remained closed.

It was in the hard years that followed, on Sunset, somewhere between the splendor of Château Mar-mont and Skid Row, that a hack approached Payton about writing her biography. By now desperate, Peyton agreed, but afraid that her creditors would claim any money she negotiated to be paid in red wine.

John grew up in rural Kent before leaving for LA, via a short-lived affair with New York City. He has not been back to England since. We drink milky tea, eat digestive biscuits, and listen to blues records. John is pale, as if he had never left the house, let alone England, as pale as I imagine him being as an awkward public school boy growing up in the English countryside. Before he learned to drive he rode his bicycle everywhere. “Back then, it wasn’t like now, no one rode bikes in LA then. You were a complete freak.” One night he drives me to one of his favorite Skid Row bars, The King Eddy Saloon, and, after having one pint, he watches me drink whilst we pontificate. Across from us, a girl in prescription-style reading glasses is reading Proust whilst drinking Bud. I confess, when we leave, that I am in love with her, but later will conclude that it was all just an ironical gesture on both our parts.

After being kicked out of school, John was sent to a school for difficult children in London. The fifteen-year-old John spent most of his days just walking

the streets and it was during this period that he first read *The Family* by Ed Sanders, the result of a growing interest in West Coast music and criminology. Playing truant from school he would ride around and around on the Circle Line, unable to put it down. In the evening, he returned to the family home in a quaint Kentish village, where he would read it by the electric fire in the sitting room whilst listening to *Forever Changes* by Love.

Even before he knew what Susan Atkins looked like, he was besotted with her, but after gazing upon the grainy full-page shot of her in *Helter Skelter*, he became hopelessly infatuated. He would stare at that photograph for minutes on end, completely losing himself in it. In the smaller mugshot underneath it she looked gore-crazed and psychotic, but not enough to dampen his ardor. What drew him most to the Manson story was the tragic predicament of the girls. They seemed like victims themselves, and they hadn’t been much older than he was when they fell under Charlie’s spell. Sadie seemed the most beautiful and tragic of them all. He wrote to her care of the Frontera Women’s Institute. A few weeks later he received a short letter back, in which she informed him that she had seen the light, and attempted to divest him of his fixation.

John’s interest in Manson had faded by the time he made it to LA in the mid-80s. Interesting to consider though, that, at that time, those girls were in their mid-30s and some of them were fairly accessible. In particular, he now wishes he had driven out to Trona and met up with Cathy “Capistrano” Gillies, who was living in that desert hellhole. In hindsight, John thinks, the Sadie infatuation probably had an unhealthy effect upon the kind of women he has subsequently gravitated towards, and later, when I see an exhibition of women’s portraits he has painted, many of the subjects are characterized by the same attributes that the Manson girls share. These girls are pill-poppingly skinny, more pale than they are white, forever lost in their twenties, a possible unfulfilled artistic streak lurking within.

Sometimes I will meet John at Stories bookshop on Sunset where he works. When I cycle there to visit him he sometimes comments I am looking sportier since arriving here.

For a long time John’s own writings on “the lower slopes of journalism,” as he describes them himself, have circled and ducked the, often imagined, pressure of doing something meaningful or “creative,” but more recently he admits he has been gripped by the ambition to leave behind a unique signature of his



John Divola, *Zuma Series*, Zuma #10, 1978; courtesy the artist



John Divola, *Zuma Series*, Zuma #3, 1977; courtesy the artist

own. First there came a volume of his poetry. Since then, there have been exhibitions of his portraits and more poems, many of them about the effort to resist doing something meaningful.

That morning John had met a man in a Denny's to sell a first edition of *Ask The Dust* that John had found for a few dollars in a yard sale years before. They concluded the deal, so people would not mistake their exchange for a drugs transaction, in the diner's bathroom.

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The first time I came to Hollywood, a young woman fed me soup and dill pickles washed down with champagne in her back garden whilst police helicopters circled noisily overhead, their spotlights swooping down on the neighborhood. In her bedroom, cramped with books (Denis Johnson, Rimbaud, Joan Didion, Raymond Carver) and records (Patti Smith's first 7", a signed Nikki Sudden album, NEU! coolly leaning against the wall) we listened to the alter ego of Graham Fellows, Jilted John's LP, *True Love Stories*. There came a moment when, sat on her bed, listening to Jilted John drinking cheap champagne, I felt that I didn't have to go back home to the bookshop to be that guy who I was in London.

I had written a series of stories that I published in photocopied pamphlets that resulted in me being asked by Ooga Booga, a tiny bookshop hidden above a bakery in Chinatown, to sit behind a trestle table at the Contemporary Art Fair. She was at the table next-door selling records; mostly old blues, gospel and punk ones that she would play for potential customers on a portable gramophone player. Throughout the three days we would mind each other's table when one of us wanted to go outside to smoke. Sometimes someone else would stop by and they would look after both tables so we could smoke together.

It didn't matter that, when I saw her later, a coolness had come between us, causing me to stutter nervously and say the wrong things. The fact that it did happen, and never had or seemed to whilst I lived in England, working in the book shop there, made me aware that these, and other extraordinary things, do happen and if it was going to happen again it might as well be in Los Angeles: a city built on dreaming.

*True Love Stories* tells the story of Jilted John's emotional awakening, from pre-pubescent to young adult; first going steady with Sharon Smedley before later glimpsing her kissing Colin Cooper. On the

dole after leaving school John asks the newsagent if he can have his old paper-round back. There is no job, but it is here, on side 2, that he sees Karen who is working behind the counter. After much hanging about, pretending to look at the magazines, she asks him if he wants to buy anything. To which he replies that he is happy looking, causing her to blush, before asking her, what are you doing tonight?

Three songs later she informs him that she has run away to London. She explains: "I am not sure where I am going but I think I will get a job as a chamber maid." By the next song, John can be heard hitchhiking south to follow her. In the album's final song he spends two days looking for her before, finally, giving up and wishing her goodbye. Later when I returned to England I bought the album but even though I bought an original copy complete with the snakes and ladders insert charting John's story, no matter how many times I played it, it did not sound the same as when I first heard it.

I truly believed working in the bookshop was holding me back. Two years earlier workmen had commenced work on The Shard, which was to be Europe's tallest building. Walking to and from lunch I would examine the artist's impressions of what it would look like – its completion still seemed such a long way off. For now the bookshop was taller than it and I liked to imagine the future and where I might be by the time of its completion. I envisioned a wholly different situation to the one I was in. It was not long before it began to first grow and then soar towards the heavens yet I was still walking past it each day. I was painfully aware that I was exactly the same person as before, only older. If they could build Europe's tallest building during the time I passed it, to and from Pret, dreaming, I knew I had to get out of there before it was too late.

I am writing this four weeks to the day when I met you at the Château Marmont. I tell the receptionist I am here to see you, and he tells me to take the lift to the suite on the top floor. It is very casual in here, in contrast to its reputation as a place where the famous meet. I mean just about anybody could walk in off the street, except, this being Hollywood, there isn't anybody on the street, and those that are would be spotted immediately, as they made their way up the curling driveway. You were checking out in an hour, but your flight did not leave until 4, which still gave the pair of us a couple of hours before your car arrived.

The suite is a collection of white rooms and covers an entire floor. It is strange to meet you here, in this

manner, because I am more commonly used to seeing you in the small independent bookshop in London where we both used to work together. I imagine it is much like the top floor of any big hotel, except that I have not spent so much time in big hotels, especially in their suites on the top floor, and this, after all, is the Château Marmont, which if one reads glossy magazines in hospital waiting rooms, is perhaps the most iconic hotel, in the most iconic of neighborhoods, in the most iconic of cities of iconic countries in our western world. Standing on the balcony I think of Wreckless Eric's song *Whole Wide World*:

When I was a young boy  
My mama said to me  
There's only one girl in the world for you  
And she probably lives in Tahiti

The view overlooks huge swathes of Hollywood and today there is a vast billboard, 3 stories high, for iTunes, featuring the Beatles circa *The White Album*. It is a view that many people dream of one day of seeing even if they are still unsure of what it is they are dreaming about, and what it will mean to be this person they are dreaming about. That is because, unless you work for the hotel, this is a view, looking down at the streets from this particular angle, that is exclusive and only ever experienced by a tiny minority of those who come here. Most people simply have to make do with craning their necks and looking up.

We smoke pot, as neither of us foresee another opportunity to meet here, and admitting to myself that it would be strange not to, even though in England I only smoke pot after dark when I can see my bed, before deciding to walk to the nearest branch of In and Out Burger. I know there is an outlet by Highland, next to Hollywood High, which we both knew from watching countless skateboarding videos – the two sets of stairs immortalized by what skaters are able to do down them. A sign clearly visible when walking past warns that skateboarding is prohibited and that trespassers will be prosecuted. You are still wearing the same borrowed suit from two nights before, and I am wearing the uniform of someone who, even if it's only subconsciously, desires strangers to judge him as possibly a writer or an academic or, at the very least, someone more intelligent than he actually is. Later I will ditch this outfit in a bid to be this exact person.

Even when it is the Oscars or Grammys night, there are few pedestrians to be seen simply walking along the street here. In fact, whilst there are people to be seen leaving and entering cars, coming and going from the different business addresses that line

our route, we appear to be the only people actively walking for the sake of simply walking. It's a strange sensation, and one not lost on the receptionist at the Château when you said we were going for a walk and he asked if you wanted a car.

We stop automatically when the lights turn red, even though there are no cars approaching either way. It is funny how quickly we have become accustomed to their ways even though neither of us is particularly law-abiding. It simply seems easier to cross when the light says cross rather than deciding for ourselves when it is safe. Passing cars slow down to inspect the strange sight of two strangers walking along Sunset Boulevard. Some of them threaten to stop, pointing at the sight of us as they do, maybe to ask if we have broken down or need help, before then thinking better of it. By now I am hungry and my stomach churns loudly, but as far I can see up the road there is still no sign of In and Out Burger. A car pulls over and a woman winds down her window to talk to us as we are waiting for the lights to change. Excuse me, she begins (or something to that effect, she is very polite) I am casting for a feature film and I really like the way the pair of you look. Do you mind if I take your photographs and enquire about your specifics? In days gone by, when vanity pursued me more closely, I had moments when I dreamt that I could be saved from the mundane nature of my existence by someone approaching me in this manner, on the street and clicking their fingers, but it never happened, and now that this opportunity has presented itself, I cannot understand for the life of me why I would have wanted this in the first place. All I want is a cheeseburger, fries, and maybe a milkshake, even though I cannot decide about which drink yet.

We say we will think about it, and she accepts this, before we walk a little and then turn back as if we might change our minds. That was close we tell each other, after we have wished each other a good day and we have resumed our walk. Finally we are awarded by the appearance, like an oasis on the horizon, of In and Out Burger. By now my throat is parched and my clothes feel sticky on my skin. The crowded car park is testimony to the other people also here, but now that we are inside, the queue does not seem to move, and I know that you are thinking of quitting because I am also. We stare at the menus over the heads of those in front of us and the friendly faces of those working behind the counter. There are other things on the menu that are famously not printed on the menu. I know this and so do you, because we have both been here before with people who order these items, but we cannot remember the special code names people use to ask for them.