

Ron Silliman / The Age of Huts



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Begin going down, Embarcadero, into the ground, earth's surface, escalators down, a world of tile, fluorescent lights, is this the right ticket, Labor Day, day free of labor, trains, a man is asking is there anything to see, Glen Park, Daly City, I'm going south which in my head means down but I'm going forward, she says he should turn around, off at Powell, see Union Square, see Chinatown, last day of the season so they say, visualize tourists, worms in a salad, wife speaks no English, Czech perhaps, Soviet, Polish, is this the right ticket, carpet of the car is yellow, orange, green, red, blue woven in also, going faster now, lights flicker now out the windows, dark there, not flicker but we pass them so quickly, didn't realize this station was underground, 11:30 Glen Park, we surface, cloudy day, these windows are dirty, should I get off here, should I wait, forget about Balboa Park, is it there, does it exist, does it exist for a reason, pen is blue for a change, a possible difference, a man about my age with razor-cut hair, old women, I get off, Daly City, go down concrete stairs, into the interior again but not really, the ticket *is* wrong, means I'll spend 75¢, okay, pay more attention, the vagueness of the landscape here, a large parking lot and beyond it houses, nothing special, this is where they keep the families now, upstairs to the platform, this one to Concord, a man, his wife, two sons, one daughter, another man in a tweed hat, is that what you call a fedora, not really, Arthur Jackson please call the station agent, taking a long time to get under way, doors close, I feel the motion first in the small of my back, my butt, car hums as it moves, you can hear the air-conditioning, another world when you come out she sez, look at those houses, big dumpsters in supermarket parking

lot, we're above it all, but now going down again, Balboa Park, second time, car stops, nobody gets off or on, money's available, we'll prove it, says Wells Fargo, poster of a stagecoach, this is an act, this is deliberate, parallel to the freeway, apartments very square here, you don't think of it as the City but it is, go into the world and describe it, the father talks with his youngest son, rest of the family is silent, more people get on, no one gets off, 11:59, moves quickly now, other conversations not loud enough for me to hear them, voice on the public address system sez 24th Street, no one is waiting but we stop, bought this notebook just for today, months ago, bought this pen just last Friday, today's Monday, Kathy Tobin and Shelley have pens just like it, 49¢, stiletto point, man gets on with a racing form in hand, looks apprehensive, you always see stress in everyone's face, it's in their eyes, how they hold their mouth, as if it took an effort to keep their lips in control, from contorting, you don't need to know them, any day, especially after work, Civic Center, 12:08, car's half full now, a longer stop than usual, no one's tried to sit next to me so far, Ev sez I wear my hair like a wild man, it puts the straights off, three older people stand and wait to get off, that man with the hat, carpet is mostly a yellow blend on this car too, fat woman with two boys, she shouts at them to sit down, I see my reflection in the window, an act of description, hand writing, good thing I don't get carsick, back now at Embarcadero, more people on, this has a different rhythm than buses, Duncan writes on them, anthology of literature scribed on public transit, man sitting next to me now, had to put my book bag on my lap, move my Argus C3, gray hair, balding, wears a green sweater, realize I'm underwater now, the bay, we all are, you too, move at 80 mph, now that boy's talking to his mother, America is beware

of microwave ovens, I'm wearing my phony earth shoes, beginning to show their age, harder to write with the book bag in my lap, alters the angle, the surface, Oakland now, rail yards, Military Ocean Terminal, postal station for incoming foreign mail, where I'd be if I hadn't quit, 8 years ago this month, every cell in body different now, that woman's still ordering her children, just her form of conversation, boxcars, seatrains, above the ghetto, sunnier here, the symbol of Mack Truck is a bulldog, Tribune Tower on the left lost now amid office buildings, into the earth again, you can hear metal scraping, forget the air-conditioning, this train destined for Concord, man with the green sweater gets off, wanna ride backwards somebody sez, more young people on the car now, man in front of me seems to have gone to sleep, red tile at 12th Street, blue at 19th, Japanese tourist, this is the familiar part to me now, way to Berkeley, more scraping as the car turns, I anticipate the nature of future stops, Pill Hill to the right, cluster of hospitals, with the inevitable parasites, chem labs, funeral homes, why call them parlors, remember waiting at MacArthur Station at twilight one night with Acker, sunset just before the rainfall, blacks in pith helmets are taking Polaroids of one another, now a woman sits next to me, her probable husband next to the man in the yellow shirt who wakes and goes back to his Chronicle, sixth of September, Grove-Shafter Freeway to the right, now they move to sit together, can I find my mother's place from here, no, take my jacket off, getting warm, Rockridge, 12:30, beautiful homes then below ground for a minute, how is a tunnel thru a hill the same or different from one underground or underwater, suddenly remember nights of staying up high to scribble verbatim thots as poems, 1964, Ginsberg-esque or so I thought, I didn't think when that ordering mother

got off, college-age couple there now, arms about one another, description implies a relation, the dry hills of Orinda, at the end of a summer drought, John and Ann used to live at the top of that hill, house is still there, we used to visit often, my mother's older sister, her husband almost as old as her father, my grandparents never approved, trees and low hills, suburbs to the east, country once, when we're "outdoors" above ground I can't see myself in the window, that's where the world is, condo-like office buildings, new life in Lafayette, a girl, age 10 at the most, in a bright pink jumpsuit is standing on the platform, waiting to go the other way, hot rods on the freeway beside us, 24 East, man in the yellow shirt is reading TV Log now, there's a cemetery, I notice a ring on his left hand, for a long time we've been turning slightly to the left, in Walnut Creek you can see Mt. Diablo, it's the mountain here as much as Tam, more parking lots, more condos, why didn't someone just shoot old Henry Ford, is housing contingent on transportation or vice versa, only in our time have people begun to live away from their work, what it does to the psyche, how large is your turf, my triangle the City, Berkeley, Marin, plus of course parts of Sacramento, Pleasant Hill now farther than I've ever gone before, nearing end of line, 12:47, streets without sidewalks, with trees, affect the rural, swimming pools, patterns of colored gravel, a power mower for every home, tanned fat men in shorts, so here's where they keep all the trains, dozens of them, grey sluglike things, flat brown countryside, I get off at Concord, no place to sit down, clock says my watch is slow, lots of motorcycles in the parking lot, voice on the speaker system says don't ride bike on the platform, crowd begins to thin out, I find a bench, old men still wear puka shells out here, women in pastel pantsuits, that's a shopping mall a block

away, the parking lots merge, four state-college-type jocks sit down on a nearby bench, woman walks by with three children, one in her arms, says of the car as she passes, it looks pretty full, it does, same one I got off of waiting to go back, do I want to drink that Fresca now, perfect summer weather here, so often I've noticed that people who grew up in the country work in the suburbs, service the people who work each day in the city, train pulls out and suddenly I see the whole west side of the valley, train engineers wear blue jumpsuits, slight breeze, woman comes by saying Steven, Steven, someone walks by with a transistor radio playing Spanish, scowls at us, couple with a baby talks to me, how often do they run, this one's crowded, standing room only, I get a spot but I'll have to ride backwards, woman in dark glasses tells her daughter to sit in her lap, she doesn't but takes a seat to herself, sobbing softly, blonde girl, 4 maybe, leans over her seat, watches me write this, guy sits next to me almost lands on top of my camera, has an "army" haircut and a brown paper bag, what is described forms a place, all words aim at that, I'm more cramped now, jacket, book bag, Argus in my lap, my left hand rests on the case of the Argus, holds the notebook, red cover, white pages, my wrist beginning to ache from the controlled act of writing, these aren't tourists, they're locals riding around as if they were, travel plans of the working class, now we're down to standing room only, 1:19, going backwards exerts a pull, San Angel Road, you could type towns by the kind of street signs they use, color, how much information they put on them, etc., housing tract, ranch-style school grounds, an orchard, someone says he's a native of San Francisco, Pleasant Hill and lots of people want to board, the couples in the next seats have introduced themselves to each other, he designs restaurant décor, we pass Palmer School,

lots of vans, campers, minibuses out here, condos in the distance, a few eucalyptus, yesterday at this time I was basking in the center-field bleachers at Candlestick Park, Montefusco halfway to a four-nothing shutout, man came up to us wearing bones in his ears, wanted to look at our field glasses, cameras, offered us a hit of coke, smack, grass if we wanted, we didn't even if we did, he showed us the coke, it was yellow, that was yesterday, it doesn't exist anymore, Lafayette and still more people get on, it's an event, ride BART for a day for a quarter, Labor Day is a day of rest, of description, is a relationship of words to place, nearing Orinda, voice sez her name is Jennifer too, Upper Happy Valley Road, Acalanes, Mt Diablo Blvd, I'm growing older in small units, by the minute now, new information modifies my history, losing weight too, 30 lbs since June, should these things have seat belts, air bags, one of the women standing is overweight, beside her is a beautiful daughter, she too looked like that once, assumption, my ears pop, we're back in Oakland, in the Montclair section, then Rockridge, train on the far platform on its way to Concord, money's available, we'll prove it, sez Wells Fargo, older houses now, this town is black, run by whites, I get off at MacArthur, decide to sit in the sun awhile, drink my Fresca, have to shove thru mob of boarders to do it, not as hot here, my whole body is feeling the motion, it puts a stress, a pull on every organ, wobble a bit or stagger, sit cross-legged at end of platform, realize I haven't had a cigarette today, trying to quit again, Camels left on my desk at home, man in a yellow shirt on the platform looks like my idea of a Navajo, has that broad face and crewcut particular to my image of that, wearing cowboy boots as well, Fremont train pulls in, I'll let it pass, want to finish my Fresca, take a few photos, get the motion

out of my body, one way to see the bay, even see the City from here, 1:59, I'm only half done, is that it, an act, something done deliberately, of description, which means place, but of travel, meaning place shifts, alters, speech chain Möbius strip, had not expected the crowd, but that's alright, this blue ink is lovely, a pleasure to watch, jotting, is what I do, wander around the platform, take photos, speaker system sez slight delay on the Richmond-bound line, which is exact opposite of one I'm waiting for which arrives as I write this, jammed it seems as I wait to board, but not really, just people waiting to get off, an act of writing without let up, downtown Oakland now, can't even find the Tribune Tower, then underground again, all these cars have identical rugs, realize that I was wrong before, it was a five-nothing shutout, I forgot Gary Alexander's homer, his very first, in the eighth, up into the rightfield bleachers, 12th Street, more people get on, have to stand now, kids getting on one train, get off, get on another, repeat the performance, an act of endurance, calling each other names, you're stupid, etc., should we get off at Fremont, a long way from there yet, they run down the aisle onto the next car, another group follows, a small girl is eating a saltine, the woman I'm sitting next to is her mother, in front of me a woman with gray hair, a permanent, in a red jacket, man standing in the aisle holding onto the handrails pulls himself up off the floor of the car, feet swing forward and back, Lake Merritt, woman next to me, across the aisle, wearing a pale green suit, above ground again, pass Richmond-bound train, quick gray flash and it's gone, East Oakland, Polymir, a big Monkey Wards store, Melrose Ford, church spires, Fruitvale, people get off, not on, for once, hear a voice say "I'm sorry," Jimmy Carter for President '76, blue sign painted (crudely) on side of apartment building,

oomaloom, Michael, thinking of you, down below the carbarn for the AC Transit buses, Oakland Coliseum across the parking lot, CSB Construction, Sunshine Biscuits, Fun Games Inc., PACO, water tower, Standard Brands, homes built just before the war, green, pink, light blue, yellow, another train to Richmond, just the facts, ma'am, just the facts, San Leandro, more people get off, woman in a red wheelchair sits in the aisle, a field of greenhouses, homes, now more affluent-looking (not very), now less, Bay Fair shopping center, crowd is thinning, means either people are tiring or they don't want to go to Fremont, less wealthy and intriguing than Concord, homes not that poor, tho, small boats in the driveways, Hayward, large blocks of apartments, a school in the blue and green, Grand Auto, apple trees, willows, 2:46, never was this far before, a golf course, dry fields, another BART carbarn, I change seats, rooms to sit by a window, hawk in the sky, hills to the left grow higher, still dryer, a large playground, Union City, grain mills, auto-wrecking yards, Pacific States Steel, this isn't so far from San Jose, a small lake with water, I'm the only white left on this car, tourism is different to different peoples, train stops before we get to the station, people stand, stretch, kids dash up and down aisles, whooping, parents not caring to stop it, Japanese man asks me if this is Fremont, people get on, I see that the woman in the wheelchair is Indian or Pakistani, children are crying or whimpering in español, sign on a hillside says Niles, where they used to make silent movies, westerns, my grandfather would ride his motorcycle out from Berkeley to watch them, fingerprints on these windows, black smudges like a grease pencil, black man in a turban wanders about the platform, a little girl comes up and makes a face at me, friendly, my right lens is scratched, a slight blur, need a new pair of

shades, also new trousers, new jacket, we move again, pass a stable, kids shout caballos, a lake, then homes, this world is foreign to me, an act of description, old railcars, I beams, a school or hospital off in the distance, we stop, a woman gets on chewing blue gum, a yardful of transformers, PG&E, old homes, weathered, wooden, no lawns, just dirt, these tracks constantly bordered with cyclone fence topped with barbed wire (and I only just noticed), girl in a pink dress cries, a vacant lot, full of refrigerators and stoves, South Hayward, 3:13, woman with the gum gets off, others get on, I've seen hundreds, thousands of people, only one I've recognized, an old man in the CP, we merely nodded, a helicopter going in the other direction, this will be the longest stretch of riding yet, to Richmond, or maybe not, grove of apple trees, in Hayward I can see Mt. Diablo from another angle, nobody gets on or off, the sign for no smoking is a burning cigarette behind a red barred circle, the sign for no trespassing is the outline of a hand, in which the thing described is constantly moving, I can never hope to know all these lives, Honda Civics, bugs, Fiats, my brother and I would go with our grandparents each Sunday for a "ride in the country," which meant Grizzly Peak Boulevard, or out the Arlington or down to Lake Merritt, Golden Grain Spaghetti plant, more greenhouses, where people work takes up nearly as much space as where they live, but you forget about it, those become empty spaces, an old man with bright blue socks runs along the platform to get on, San Leandro, I flex my writing hand to ease the pain, see a young man is watching me intently, trying to figure this out, AJB Linoleum, nothing but blacks on the streets below, then more plants, one for yeast, billboard in Spanish, Longview Fibre, sky a very light blue, two teenage boys in identical white baseball shirts with green

sleeves walk by, going by the carbarn I realize all those buses have numbers painted on their roofs, I see in the distant hills the Greek Orthodox Church and the Oakland Mormon Temple, getting closer, lumberyard, chopped Harley, what I describe is what comes to me *in words* as I look out the window, miss all the rest, can't even write it all, Fruitvale, the big Chicano family gets off, Texaco, Shell, patio furniture says a sign, distributors of Hartz Mountain, into the earth again, an act of endurance, hand writing, hours without letting up, to see if one can, man in front of me has a shirt the orange of sherbet, his wife, I make these assumptions, a blouse of light purple, only he gets off, 12th Street, she doesn't, still more people get on, standing room again or almost, third time I'm at 19th Street today and not the last, woman over there has a pair of crutches, man sitting beside me wears an off-white leisure suit, Pill Hill, a collection of overpasses is often beautiful, curving masses of concrete, MacArthur Station, a crowd mobs in, people complain of the heat, this station the key to the system, many people standing, now an older woman in a heavy sweater sits by me, how can you describe people when you can only see surface features, Grove Street, I see the Berkeley Campanile, the Claremont Hotel, the old portable classrooms of Merritt College on wheels now, the campus to be torn down, Ashby, into Berkeley for the first time today, I hear somebody ask someone else her name, people get off at the downtown station, I've only talked once all afternoon, more people get off, few tourists left, there are only three more stops to Richmond, above ground on Gilman Street, neighborhood where I grew up, houses I've lived in, Solano Avenue, a game of baseball in Feeney Field, the bar in the circle of the no-smoking sign goes from upper left to lower right, an act, homage to you Jack, oomaloom, one

word after another, tennis courts, a man and a boy walk thru an empty parking lot, gulls sleep on a football field at a high school, another car barn for AC Transit, I get off at Richmond, it's windy, I put on my jacket, 4:04, I can see Mt. Tam, Point Richmond in the distance, somebody's taking my photograph, two older couples are sneaking cigarettes behind a sign, younger people just do it, who cares, teenagers run up and down the platform, slap the car windows, board and get off, giggles and shouts, the quality of light is just beginning to change, late afternoon means earlier now, mid-September, I try to figure how many stations I'll go by today, 71, couple in front of me is just starting their trip, they decide to go to Concord, she takes a Dramamine, a family gets on, all the kids have chartreuse turtlenecks with their names on them, we go by an old trailer park, another lumber yard, new condos on the west slope of Albany Hill, on my left my old high school, thru a thin haze barely see the outline of the City, no Golden Gate, a dozen kids dark down the car, others follow, cooler now, they got off daddy a kid sez to another, kids now running in opposite direction, still find tourists in Berkeley, the car crowds in a hurry, I'm feeling weary now, wish my ears would pop, a small woman with a thick accent sits beside me, two young people, a couple, are with her, they seem to really like her, she wears a yellow dress, a copper bracelet, there's a motorcycle parked on the freeway, the City more visible from Oakland, but not very, I get off at MacArthur to transfer, my hand hurts, I wobble walking, a woman comes up, asks me what I'm doing, we discuss writing, she wants to try it "sometime," asks me am I writing things, I shrug, I don't ask her name, the Daly City train comes, I get on, it's so crowded I have to stand, I keep writing, I'm much more conspicuous now, people are staring, I can't hold on

and write at the same time, I nearly fall, I'm going to have to stand all the way back, we'll be back under the bay in a second, 80 mph, a man watches me write this, I remember what Einstein said when asked to explain the theory of relativity in 25 words or less, what time does the station get to the train, it's coming, Embarcadero, my writing is a scrawl, an act of description, I'm describing these people who watch me, madras shirt, curly gray hair, here's the station, I get out, sit down, I can still feel the pulling forces, I am about to board the slow upward path of the escalator, thru the ticket gate with the wrong ticket, then back up to the street level, earth's surface, then home, 4:51, 9.6.76.