

REBECCA SOLNIT

Photographs by Alex Fradkin

Concrete in Paradise

Marking the wars that never came

Et in Arcadia ego says the famous inscription on the tomb in Nicholas Poussin's paintings of that title. *Even in Paradise there am I.* He painted this tomb twice, surrounded by a group of shepherds and a woman (possibly a goddess), as though he himself were wrestling with the meanings. The assertion is sometimes thought to be spoken by Death itself; or perhaps the speaker is the dead shepherd whose tomb is being inspected. Whether the text refers to death or to one dead friend, the tomb is two kinds of intrusion into the landscape.

Growing is also dying, even in Arcadia, even in springtime, when the new grass pushes through the old, when the trees and flowers feed on the soil made out of life and digested deaths, where mortality itself, of lambs and shepherds alike, gives life the poignancy that heaven lacks. Poussin's Arcadia is a little rough and rustic—not tender shoots but lean trees, and in the distance, sharp crags. And in the middle of it all, the architectural intrusion of the big, heavy, rectilinear stone monument in the landscape—a trace of industry, of a labor far harder than herding, of something permanent in a landscape of change.

We have our own tombs throughout the coastal Bay Area, each of which could readily be inscribed *et in Arcadia ego*. In the paradises I have hiked so often—among the deer carcasses, squashed salamanders, the pellets of coyote and fox spoor in which the fur of mice and rabbits is compressed—there are seventy or so bunker complexes whose blunt concrete forms are an apt modern echo of that shepherd's tomb. These bunkers commemorate the violent death of war, in thought if not in deed.

There they are, along the beaches, roads, and the trails of the superlatively beautiful Marin Headlands, to be stumbled upon by hikers and day trippers who will stop for a moment to think more somber thoughts, pause like Poussin's shepherds to contemplate monuments and death. Outdated even as they were being built, the bunkers are monuments to a particular imagination of danger and fear. In a way, they are honorable monuments to the idea that wars involve direct confrontation,

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Ammunition Casement #1 Battery East: Fort Winfield Scott, 2005

and that the US could face the same threats it has imposed on other nations. Soldiers sat in the bunkers waiting for ships to appear on the horizon, waiting to receive orders to fire on those ships and to be fired upon. No ships arrived, however, and the nature of modern warfare rendered the bunkers obsolete.

"We are here because wars are now fought in outer space," said Jennifer Dowley, Director of the Headlands Center for the Arts in the 1980s, when the center was still a fresh arrival in what was a fairly new national park, the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. Not far away, the Star Wars missile defense system was being actively pursued at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory. The park is unusual because it's a large amount of open space, almost 75,000 acres, in one of the major metropolitan areas in the country. It's also unusual because its focus is neither historical nor natural, but an uneasy melding of the two. The history is rarely examined, though its evidence is everywhere in the chunks of concrete embedded throughout the landscape of the park. These are the dozens of bunkers and related structures, crumbling souvenirs of the wars that never were or that were waged elsewhere. And yet, war is here in California in a thousand ways. Even in the Headlands there is war.

Dowley spoke in Building 944, a spacious military barracks built in 1907, when the Headlands was an adjunct of the Pacific headquarters of the US Army across the Golden Gate at San Francisco's Presidio and Fort Mason. From those headquarters US military action from the Indian Wars to the Korean and Vietnam wars was directed; during the Second World War alone, more than a million soldiers were said to have embarked from Fort Mason for the Pacific theater of war. The barracks, with the other handsome buildings arrayed in a horseshoe that fits into the hillside, were used for training soldiers who'd be deployed across the Pacific. The Bay Area has always been militarized, always involved with wars, though most of the actual wars were fought elsewhere.

If you walk down Building 944's worn, handsome, wooden staircase, out the big doors, and head west past the old bowling alley and chapel, the eucalyptuses and the Monterey cypresses, you come to a Nike missile launch site tucked into a depression that the road curves around. It was designed to fire nuclear-tipped weapons at incoming missiles launched from overseas. In the 1950s the threat was thought to be Russia, but by the late 1960s the nuclear war fantasies that generated the preventative architecture and weapons included China. By then, the idea that a



Untitled #4: Battery Townsley, Fort Cronkhite, 2005

missile could take out a missile was itself something of a fantasy. There was no particular reason to situate missile depots directly on the coast. The Marin County Planning Department put together a staff report (probably written by my father) in 1969 that questioned “whether the probable risk of accident isn’t greater than the probable risk from the kind of attack these missiles are supposed to defend against.” Fortunately, neither accident nor attack ever came before the warheads were taken away. What remains are busily unaesthetic structures surrounded by cyclone fencing.

So ignore the Nike facility and keep walking. You can choose the narrow, uneven trail that takes you through tall green banks of willows, coyote bush, brambles, and poi-

son oak, on past the lagoon that pelicans, ducks, seagulls and other birds frequent, to the sand of Rodeo Beach, the cove beyond the lagoon and between two high shoulders of coastline. If you go left, or south, you’ll come to the bunkers. If you go north, you’ll pass the many buildings of Fort Cronkhite and arrive at the old road that leads to more bunkers. They are embedded in the landscape like shrapnel or buckshot in a body, the ruins of old fears and old versions of war, the architecture of a violence that was first of all a violence against the earth, with concrete poured dozens of feet deep into slopes that were also home to rare species and prone to erosion when disrupted.

These welts of concrete have shifted, cracked, crumbled, and in some cases slid down eroded hillsides into the surf,



Base End Station, Construction #243, North Elevation: Fort Funston 2006

but the majority of them are still in place. If you imagine them as an assault on the earth, then the earth has fought back, with foliage that has half-hidden and choked some of them, with the forces of water and temperature that drove cracks in the massive structures, with erosion that has dislodged and tilted some at crazy angles. But they have a harsh beauty of their own, in the simple geometry of the domes and semicircular walls and cylindrical pits of the gun emplacements, in the steps that take you up to the roofs of some of the structures, and particularly in the long tunnels that frame views of land, sea and sky.

They have the shapes of art-school exercises in drawing cubes, spheres, cones, and cylinders with shading, and they are the color of old pencil sketches. Poussin, with his pas-

sion for simple monumental form, would have loved them, though he would have inscribed them all *et in Arcadia ego* lest the hasty hiker miss the point. And they have the seduction of all ruins, the seduction of the past, of lost history, of irrecoverable time, of the sense that something happened here and then ceased. (In Poussin's landscape it's the tomb, not the trees, that invites contemplation.) It's only when you imagine the dreary discomfort of soldiers stationed in them, the actual big guns that pointed toward the bay, and what a war might have looked like on these shores, whether like the bombardment of Fort Sumner at the beginning of the Civil War or the Normandy Invasion toward the end of the Second World War, that the romance diminishes. Or does it?



Gun Encasement No. 2 Battery Construction 129: Fort Barry, 2008

As Jennifer Dowley put it, wars are now fought in outer space. A nation under attack is usually attacked inside its national borders. Troops may surge across a border, as they did at the outset of both of the Bush wars on Iraq—across their border, not ours—but both those were accompanied by the kind of aerial bombardment that ignores national boundaries to go far inside the country. And aerial bombardment is often directed at civilians. Thus war, from Mussolini's bombing of North Africa and the fascist bombing of Guernica, became profoundly asymmetrical. The old idea of a confrontation between two sides is blown away; in its place is an attacker whose blows can be parried but who cannot be attacked directly.

Missiles and more monstrous new inventions, like pilot-

less drones, are even directed from afar, often from within the attacking nation. Afghanistan cannot fire missiles back at the headquarters of the drone operators near Las Vegas, Nevada, though in the all-out nuclear wars imagined during the Cold War, both the US and the USSR would send nuclear bombs to strategic targets, military and civilian, within the other nation's boundaries while trying to intercept incoming missiles. The heroic idea of combat, of bodily skill and equal engagement, of Achilles or Roland, or even Wellington and Grant facing risk with physical courage, has some relevance to the ground troops in some places, but nothing to do with the death rained from the skies by men whose daily lives more resemble those of video gamers. The Headlands bunkers are, among other things, an old



Gun Encasement #1 Battery Townsley: Fort Cronkhite, 2009

daydream of an enemy you would face, one who could only hurt you by confronting you, by showing up.

The bunkers were built to defend us from wars that never quite arrived on these shores. Central California has been attacked by foreigners a few times, starting with invading Spanish and Mexican attacks on the native peoples, which consisted largely of skirmishes and one-sided brutalities (the big campaigns against Native Californians were elsewhere and later, run by Yankees in events such as the Modoc War and the Bloody Island Massacre). The indigenous peoples responded with attacks on the Missions, raids on ranchos, and other acts of self-defense and survival, including an incursion on Mission San Rafael. Events resembling European war with all its pageantry and weaponry

came later, when the Spanish-speaking nominal citizens of Mexico had become part of the population to be invaded and displaced.

Commodore Thomas ap Catesby Jones's fleet arrived in Monterey—then the capital of the Mexican province—on October 19, 1842. He demanded surrender and got it without firing a shot. Perhaps the fearsome arsenal of the five ships with a total of 116 big guns convinced the small population that resistance would be unpleasant. The next day, 150 Marines marched up the hill to the fort while the bands played “Yankee Doodle.” The invasion was premature and based on rumors of British competition for the northernmost portion of Mexico. A couple of days later, Jones withdrew his proclamation and acknowledged Mexi-



Gun Emplacement #2 Battery Dynamite: Fort Winfield Scott, 2005

can sovereignty before the soldiers dispatched from Los Angeles could make much progress up the coast.

Less than four years later, the Bear Flag Revolt began inland with the attack on Sonoma and the raising of a primitive version of what would become the California state flag. A few weeks into skirmishes by invading Yankees against resident Mexicans, Army Captain John C. Frémont—one of the few government men involved in the revolt—took twelve men with him on an American ship, the *Moscow*, that sailed south in the bay to the Presidio of San Francisco. The fort had been abandoned and there was no conflict, though there were some squabbles when they marched onward to the hamlet of Yerba Buena and took a few captives. There were larger battles further south as the revolt merged with the war on Mexico, but the Bay Area remained un-

scathed by major conflict. The newly American region was prepared for defense against coastal attack in the 1850s and 1860s, but the Civil War led to no violence—beyond duels such as the Broderick-Terry duel of 1859—in the locale. The fortifications then and a century later were built for conflicts that never arrived. They are the architecture of grim anticipation, of imagination of things to come.

During the Second World War, there were grounds to fear Japanese attack; in the wake of the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, seven enemy submarines patrolled the Pacific Coast. But Japan decided against a mainland attack for fear of reprisals. A false alert the following May caused the USS *Colorado* and the USS *Maryland* to sail out from the Golden Gate to defend the bay from attacks that never came. Late in the war, a Japanese fire balloon—a kind of



Base End Station GB-1, West Elevation: Battery Townsley, Fort Cronkhite, 2004

incendiary device that floated across the Pacific—was shot down by a Lockheed P-38 Lightning fighter plane near Santa Rosa with no major damage reported. (Others landed in various places in the American West, and a few inflicted actual damage and a total of six deaths—a pregnant woman with her five children, out on a picnic: *et in Arcadia ego*). War was in the skies, and coastal fortifications were anachronistic.

The P-38 Lightning fighter was made by Lockheed when it was based in Burbank on the fringes of Los Angeles, back when Los Angeles was producing the airplanes to fight the war and the Bay Area was turning out a warship a day in its furiously productive shipyards. If we think of war as combat and casualties, then it has, with small exceptions such as the Ohlone and Miwok resistance to the Missions and the land grabs, been fought elsewhere. But if we think of it as a mindset, an economy, a way of life—a lot of things that add up to a system—then two things become as evident as a thirty-foot-thick chunk of concrete embedded amid the sticky monkeyflower and fragrant coast sage of the Headlands.

One is that the Bay Area is entrenched in and crucial to this system, with the University of California, Berkeley running the nation's nuclear weapons programs since their inception, with defense contractors such as Lockheed Martin

(makers, once upon a time, of the Nike missile) clustered in Silicon Valley, and with the ring of old bases around the bay—Mare Island, Hunter's Point, Alameda, Treasure Island, Hamilton, and the Presidio.

The other is that this system is mad. Its madness was perhaps most perfectly manifested in the soldiers or National Guardsmen in camouflage who patrolled the Golden Gate Bridge at one phase of the GWOT, the Global War on Terror, a war that in its very name declared hostility not to a group or a nation but to an emotion, while seeking—with heavily armed men in civilian spaces such as Pennsylvania Station or the Golden Gate Bridge—to induce that very emotion in the public. That their desert camouflage only made them stand out, and that the threats to the bridge were sketchy and remote, while the men with semi-automatic weapons were evident and unnerving, articulates something about war as a state of being. The enemy may be remote, invisible, or even conceptual, but we, as a society devoted to war, see ourselves in a thousand mirrors, of which the bunkers are one.

The bunkers were both prophylactics against physical damage by an alien military and part of the damage that is the mindset of war—the mindset that induces fear and suspicion, that countenances sacrifices, destructions, and



Base End Station B2S2 Battery Construction No. 129, South Elevation: Devils Slide, Milagra Ridge Military Reservation, 2006

the willingness to engage in acts of violence, that damages a society before the enemy ever touches it. The military left radioactive waste behind at Hunter's Point Naval Shipyards; rusting, leaking warships in the Mothball Fleet near Benicia; PCBs at 100,000 times the acceptable level, along with dioxins and other chemicals, on Treasure Island; and more. The Headlands and much of the rest of the GGNRA got off lightly, larded only with cement and rust, not with chemicals and radiation.

What all these areas have in common is their status as monuments to public expenditure by those in charge of protecting us. There is, for example, the *Sea Shadow*, a stealth ship built at extraordinary expense in the 1980s and then abandoned without ever being used or being useful. The

upkeep of the Mothball Fleet, the prototype, is a corollary to the lack of money for libraries and schools in towns like Richmond, whose African-American population mostly arrived during the Second World War for shipyard jobs and stayed even when the economy withered. It remains a depressed area, despite the growth of the Chevron refineries there that have been refining Iraqi crude since early in the current war. Chevron, whose board member Condoleezza Rice became our Secretary of State and led us into that war, Condoleezza who is back at Stanford, Stanford that helped generate Silicon Valley, Silicon Valley which has done so much to develop the new technologies of war. War is everywhere for those who have eyes to see, but in some places it's hard to miss.



SF-88 Radar Installation for Nike Missile Site, East Elevation: Wolf Ridge, Fort Cronkhite, 2010



Base End Station B4S4, Interior West Elevation: Fort Cronkhite, 2005

It is good that the bunkers are in the beautiful open space of the coast, and good that one of the region's native sons, Alex Fradkin, has photographed them so eloquently. They should be there. We should pause amid the myriad pleasures that this Mediterranean climate and protected

landscape afford to contemplate the presence of death and our own implication in the business. Until something profound changes in the United States, war will never be far away, and even on the most paradisiacal meander we do well to stop to remember this. **B**