



Alice Elizabeth Rogoff

Paper and Fountains

Lyle had once been a more famous poet. Perhaps, he would be famous again. He had a reputation as a bard of the City. Lines from his poems would appear erratically in a museum show about the city of San Francisco, or in a magazine article. In 1971, Lyle lived South of Market Street in a house on Guy Place. The house was three blocks south of the bus terminal with the Bay Bridge looming overhead.

The City, at that time, had inexplicably erected a fountain at the end of Market Street. It was the beginning of many other new buildings, but Lyle didn't know that yet.

Lyle was forty and lonely. His cure was either a woman or a fountain, and today his cure was the fountain.

It was easy for him to listen to a fountain for a long time. A fountain speaks in a constant tongue, with its peaks and valleys, lulls and storms. A fountain is eternal, in architecture and as an idea.

Lyle had an idea. It was to design fountains, to build fountains, to love fountains. But it was only ideas that he was constructing. No cement would ever get mixed by Lyle's hands.

Some ink had still not worn off his fingers.

'Material is the important thing,' he thought, 'What the fountain is made of.' 'Tomorrow,' he decided, 'I will make a paper fountain.'

And so, he walked back home from the Vaillancourt Fountain. He picked up

a newspaper along the way. The headline read, “Death Penalty Abolished in California.”

1971 was the year that Coral, A.K.A. Evelyn, arrived in San Francisco. Lyle walked back from the fountain to a neighborhood that is partly still there, but is partly only in Coral and Lyle’s memories. Lyle lived in Skid Row, San Francisco. He walked by the First Street Bridge. The neighborhood had the feel of being under something, maybe under water, or under the earth, rather than what would be seen in later years as a spot with a beautiful view. The little alleys mostly had women’s names of the early settlers like Annie and Clementina, and had houses that were rented dirt-cheap. To the literary scene in North Beach, to the poets who hung out in coffee-houses, Guy Place, his street, was famous for the somewhat famous and would-be poets who lived on it.

For extra money, Lyle scavenged through the local trash bins. He lived near a printing company and each night, a tremendous amount of stuff was thrown away. The company disposed of reams and reams of unused paper, and on the bottom was the best stuff – books that were perfect except for a page missing or a letter left out – simply a minor misprint. The bins were six feet long and four feet high, but it was not impossible for Lyle to scurry in and out of them while no one was looking. Then, Lyle would take the books to used bookstores and sell them.

Once, when Lyle had lifted the cover off a bin, and was just about to hop inside, he saw the shape of a man’s body lying on a pile of soft clean paper. ‘My God,’ he thought, ‘someone’s been murdered,’ and he slammed the top down with a gong-like crash. A second later, he heard an enraged scream. The lid was thrown back, and a head emerged.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” said a disheveled older fellow. Lyle looked at him, Lyle with a stoically handsome Midwestern face.

“You scared the Hell out of me,” said the fellow.

“Well, what are *you* doing in there?” Lyle demanded.

“I *sleep* here,” said the man. He began to calm down, and, as he did, his anger turned to caution.

“What are *you* doing here?” he said.

“Wanted to sort through the paper to see if there was anything I could sell.”

The man looked relieved. He had found a brother.

“There ain’t any good stuff today,” he said.

Lyle sighed, He knew if there was anything good, the fella wouldn’t tell him anyway. Everyone had to take care of oneself.

“Say,” said Lyle, “how do you keep yourself from being thrown away?”

“The garbage men know me. Before they dump the bin, they knock on the lid to wake me up.”

“Mighty considerate of them,” Lyle said.

The two men looked at each other. Lyle backed away a foot. The man was still standing up in the paper bin. Then, Lyle moved off, they each waved, and the man disappeared under the lid. From then on, Lyle knocked on the lids of trash bins, but he never saw the old fellow again.

‘Must have traveled on,’ Lyle thought. ‘People keep traveling on.’

Across the street from the First Street Bus Terminal was Rosie's Pinball Parlour. When Coral strolled past the Pinball Parlour, under the beams of the First Street Bridge, Ernest noticed her right away. (Though Ernest didn't seem to notice anything, in the same way that Ernest seemed to notice everything. Ernest had been so-named by Lyle because this chap fit Lyle's imagined idea of what Hemingway would have looked like if he had lived to reach that ancient but indeterminable age of the white-bearded man hunched into a grey overcoat who smoked a cigar stuffed into a pipe bowl, and who flowed around the city from the docks to beneath the bridge and back again with the regularity of a tide. What Ernest's real name was no one could say, and Ernest never bothered to talk to anyone. But, when he saw Coral, he thought of Lyle who lived around the corner. She looked like what she had named herself. Like an island, floating and organic.

Coral was twenty-two, and had been in San Francisco for three months. Her breasts bumped and thumped loosely against her chest, because she hadn't worn a bra for four years. Coral thought she was independent and free; 'I am my own woman,' she thought, 'not susceptible to the hooks, and lures and tackle of men. No fish am I,' she thought. She was more like an uncut gem.

Lyle was a romantic. He idealized women. He liked to open doors for them. Even the birds in the park he thought performed to please their mates. He liked the thought of a fourteenth century French woman waving a silk scarf at her favorite knight. He believed in love sonnets. But Lyle found it difficult to tell the difference between poetry and untruths. His mind would occasionally drift through the squalid and the weird, making love difficult for him.

When Coral was a child, she played paper, scissors, stone. It was a game to tell what material would hurt or protect. It defined relationships in a very visual way. It also taught patience. It taught that the earth was a fragile place, that juxtaposition was everything and momentary. A game of hands and signals. One lost, one won, or met one's equal.

One problem had been puzzling Lyle. Was a paper fountain a fountain made out of paper (and if so, what color?), or was it a fountain which sprayed streamers instead of water?

That's a problem, Lyle thought, as he stood at a pinball machine at the First Street Parlour, of what size balloon to get on a Sunday afternoon, and he let go of a flipper, a problem of which gift wrapping to select at Christmas-time, and the silver ball spun back and forth until it finally disappeared.

Coral and Lyle were about to collide. Coral had just missed a bus to Berkeley, and decided to look for the address of the tiny literary magazine of which Lyle was the Editor. Lyle watched her go by from the window of the First Street Pinball Parlour, and began to follow her. She walked up the curve of the grimy yet almost rural moon slice of Guy Place. Lyle lingered behind her until she got to the door. When he realized that she was coming to his address, 44 Guy Place, he ran around to a side entrance, so he could appear at the door when she knocked.

Deep into the South of Market's run-down housing and printing plants, she looked fresh and lively, with long reddish-brown hair, and large blue eyes staring into Lyle's slightly lined and now smiling face. He invited Coral into his kitchen

with the cabinets that held back copies of his literary magazine, *Isle*. He sat at a round table reviewing the poems that she had brought, which he realized were good, perhaps better than his own.

Lyle had come to San Francisco from the Midwest in the early Sixties. People come to San Francisco looking for an era, but strangely, they often miss the era that they came for, and become part of a scene where they are always a little behind the beat or somewhat off the beat. Lyle was attracted by old-fashioned icons like the Golden Gate Bridge, and the Pacific Ocean. His poetry was grand, beatific, and not weird at all. This made his book sell to tourists who didn't normally read poetry. The book had been critically well-received, though, and to be happy as an artist, all he needed was to write a second book. But for five years, he hadn't. Coral was in San Francisco for the hippies and the beats, the people Lyle had encountered when he had arrived, and for whom, she was a little too late. Though Lyle's favorite poet was Keats, luckily for Lyle, the young kids were highly accepting of poets.

Two roommates, both poets, wandered through Lyle's kitchen. The youngest spoke about getting out of the Draft for Vietnam. He worked as a night watchman on an old clipper-ship at Fishermen's Wharf. The oldest poet in the house was the most famous of the three, a former expatriate who had lived in Paris. Rent for the house was ninety dollars a month, shared three ways. With the low rent, Lyle lived off the sales of his book, his magazines, and his scavenging expeditions. Sometimes, he would teach a class for UC Berkeley Extension.

Lyle accepted two of Coral's poems. Coral interested him. He liked women who wrote poetry well – as though it were a separate mysterious ability apart from the rest of them that he could decipher and understand. The figuring out of the rest of them was harder and less accessible to him. He didn't really want to know about the detailed aspects of women's lives because he had become isolated from his own past.

Lyle, Coral noticed, was very neat. All of his books and papers were in orderly piles. His bed was perfectly made.

During her twenties, Coral had many infatuations, and in retrospect, she thought that Lyle was one of three or four that year. She was with Lyle for three months. Not very long, but time seemed longer when her whole life was shorter. She lived in an apartment on the other side of Market Street, on Hyde Street, not far from the poetry readings in North Beach, and the Caffè Trieste. Lyle liked going to the Caffè Trieste, too. Getting to The Trieste was an easy walk for him down Columbus Avenue. City Lights Bookstore was in between his place and the café. Hyde Street stood a few blocks to the west of North Beach. It was easy to intersect in the gathering spot for bohemians.

During the week, Coral worked as a temporary downtown. On the weekend, Lyle introduced her to the Vaillancourt Fountain. Many people hated it with its odd angular blocks jutting out, and wanted to tear it down. But, it became her river, her stream, her brook in the city. She always liked it.

Coral and Lyle spent Christmas together though her family was Jewish. To be good to Coral, Lyle stole a Christmas tree for her. They were walking down Market Street, a main street of stores both small and seedy, and large glittering

department stores, offices, and hotels, a little after midnight, past a group of For Sale Christmas trees. Suddenly, Lyle lifted up a tree and gallantly carried it off to her Hyde Street apartment. Coral thought Lyle's act was magical, but not so honest.

On New Year's Eve, Lyle took her through the reams of paper streamers that had fallen on Market Street, that great divider between his South of Market home, and North Beach. The financial center's end-of-the-year ritual of shredded data floated on their heads. And then, back to Guy Place, tucked into Lyle's room, which was always very neat, his oddest attribute, Coral thought.

The affair broke up. It might have been because of the visit of the sophisticated Danish woman that Coral saw in the kitchen, or because of a Berkeley doctoral candidate longtime friend of Lyle's who was writing her thesis on Pound. Or was it because February was rainy instead of clear, or that Coral discovered Minnie's Can Do's poetry readings on another side of town? Lyle interpreted Coral as sweet. There had been that poetry reading where she had brought to Naomi, the Emcee who knew every poet in town, a bouquet of jonquils. Coral thought Lyle was too traditional, he'd really like a woman who wore make-up and stockings, though her family, who she called each week, would find him strange. For awhile, Coral's feelings were hurt, because Lyle was the one who stopped seeing her. Since she was young, though, for Coral, Lyle's moving on didn't matter very much. He was an experience. She decided that she'd start a literary magazine, too. She called her magazine, *Reef*.

Twenty-five years later, Coral would wander through the new glass buildings South of Market, and drive along the curve around Guy Place, curving waywardly with a night view of the financial district's high rises, trying to find the lot where Lyle had lived, as that house crammed with paper literary magazines had burned to the ground. She remembered the *Isle*'s issues in the kitchen cabinets, and as a literary magazine Editor in the 1980s, she stored her magazines in her kitchen cabinets. Lyle couldn't afford an office. Neither could she. Could be I'm tempting fire with paper she thought.

During the late Seventies, after the Guy Place house burned down, Lyle moved to the Avenues. In San Francisco, it is easy not to see someone who hangs out in another neighborhood than your own. In the Eighties, when the rents really went up, Lyle moved away from the City. He continued his whimsical and run-down life in a resident hotel in Sonoma County. Neither Lyle nor Coral knew the address of the other. As the City became too pricey, she moved out to Monterey Avenue on the southern edge of the city. If they thought of their affair, they imagined the other by the Vaillancourt Fountain.

'I think she lives at the fountain,' thought Lyle. The closest Coral ever came to understanding how she felt about Lyle was that it made her angry whenever anyone wrote a letter to the *San Francisco Chronicle* saying to tear the Vaillancourt Fountain down.

For many people, the pursuits of their younger days don't become their life work. But Lyle and Coral both kept on writing poetry. She still returned to the

North Beach café, The Trieste. She wrote poetry on the round mosaic tables. “Oh, it’s you,” Naomi would say, recognizing Coral every few years.

Each month, Coral sold poetry books and magazines in City Lights Bookstore. She was the host of crowded book parties in City Light’s second floor poetry room. Paper, scissors, stone. Lyle was one of the objects moving through her life. If either of them became the right quality, they might meet again.

1997 – the barriers of Coral’s sea. The Trieste, having survived twenty-seven years. Some of the same poets. The small street under the bridge is being hemmed in by high new buildings, art museums, the Yerba Buena Cultural Center, and the Marriott Hotel.

One day, a poet friend active in the Women’s Movement, sends Coral a notice that a movie on breast cancer is looking for extras. She is to wear a black veil on her face, and be one of the deceased.

The preliminary screening is held in a theatre on the Embarcadero with its newly planted palm trees in “South Beach,” a new complex of condos four blocks away from Guy Place. Sally, a teacher at New College, takes Coral out to dinner in a restaurant one street from the theatre. There is an expansive view of the bay as they sit under the sweep of the Bay Bridge. Coral’s shoes need to be replaced. Her face has taken on a fox-like quality, her blue eyes looking like glass. She has been living off small arts grants for editing her magazine. She has stubbornly clung to a city that has gotten fancier and hungrier, with legions of homeless people. As she and Sally walk to the Delancey Street Screening Room, Coral looks at the view of the Bay under the bridge. It has become picturesque. Her eyes look a little mad and out-of-place amidst the transformation.

Lyle has had his second book published, at long last, this one nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. Neither he nor Coral really understand success. He now wonders if he will ever win the Pulitzer. His new book is about homeless people and public parks. The tourists don’t read it but it is an underground classic. Sometimes, he thinks about the Vaillancourt Fountain. He took a young woman poet there once. ‘Those kinds of things,’ he thinks, ‘how is it that they didn’t last?’

“What are your favorite places in the City?” says a young interviewer in his twenties to Lyle, now in his sixties with an attractive grey beard and smile, sitting at a small round table in the Caffe Trieste.

“I used to live on Guy Place by the First Street Bridge near the bus station with the down and out. Sort of a skid row. Now, homeless people try to sleep in the bus station. And the Vaillancourt Fountain. I used to take a young woman poet there.”

For a moment, Lyle found himself thinking of a conversation with Naomi, the poetry Emcee who everyone in poetry knew.

“Lyle, you never change,” said Naomi.

“No,” said Lyle. “I have changed. I’ve begun to think about my past.”

“Of course,” Lyle added for the interviewer, “she’s not young anymore. She’s the Editor of a literary magazine.”

On the opposite sides of the Trieste, Coral and Lyle looked at each other. Then Coral went back to reading her manuscripts and Lyle continued talking about the Vaillancourt Fountain and the intrinsic value of Public Art.

Alice Elizabeth Rogoff is an Editor of the Haight Ashbury Literary Journal. She is a winner of the 2004 Blue Light Book Award for her poetry book Mural. Her poetry book Barge Wood is published by CC. Marimbo. She has MAs in Creative Writing and Drama from San Francisco State University. In 2013, she received an individual literary cultural equity grant from the San Francisco Arts Commission to write poems on San Francisco women labor organizers. Her fiction has been published Black Maria and the Noe Valley Voice. She has appeared in several anthologies including It's All Good by Manic D Press and The View from Here from Street Sheet.