

# Venice of America

written by Guest Contributor | May 15, 2015



Sunday morning, early, after our bike adventure, Edward only wanted a small black coffee. We couldn't see the front of the line that schmoozed and texted its way out the door of Intelligentsia and organized itself onto an Abbot Kinney sidewalk. Unlike natives of its namesake, these Venetians queued one behind the other in an orderly though pre-caffeinated slump, absent sharp elbows and pushing and black dresses and kerchiefs and industrial stockings and heavy shoes. Cream, beige, white, faded blue SoCal beach wearing addicts – Rag & Bone designer tees and jeans with holes in the knees – stood browsing their iPhones. Drip by slow drip, each person waited for their individual, artisan-roasted cup to be downed in a gulp.

Intelligentsia was both familiar and alien on Abbot Kinney, home to shops, restaurants and bars serving Venetians, the Los Angeles elite fleeing the city for the beach and wealthy European and South American tourists.

They are already ghosts  
John and Philomene  
As they pass  
Along the Boardwalk

Abbot Kinney, tobacco millionaire, won the ocean front marsh in 1904. There must have been a dispute. "Tails, you lose," so picturing Venice's canals and archways and ocean pier dance halls and bath houses from post cards and his entrepreneurial imagination, Kinney drained the marshes and built a destination both familiar and exotic. Tourists arrived mostly on the Red Cars from Los Angeles and Santa Monica. He rechristened the place, Venice of America.

I lived in Venice between 1991 and 1995, three places in five years. I didn't want to leave. For a moment, I was single, and Venice welcomed me into its aura reading, incense selling, street performing, roller dancing and Saturday late breakfast on the beach embrace. My Czech grandfather said, "We're really Bohemia Romanies you know."

Twenty something singles having a whiskey or a beer and maybe a smoke, hand-rolled Gauloises or Skunk peopled Venice. Billy and Poodle lived down the block. Broach walked by with his dog and came in for a cup of tea. V beat everyone at pool. Well, we all played pool at the Brig or the Townhouse. Helen showed up on our stoop at 3AM. Karin corralled the Great Britain contingent – the English couples and our Scottish paparazzi mates, Terri, et al. Actually, almost everyone was in the industry in some form or fashion – set designers, costumers, camera operators.

I could pop down to the Brig for a game assured of familiar faces. We left our doors open, walked into each other's houses, sat down on the blue and

green striped couch, made ourselves at home.

We ran into Broach with his dogs, chatting to the neighbors, that day, almost two decades later, when my husband, Edward and I biked to Venice.

Where ghosts and poets overlap  
As they pass, the gulls  
Ghosting above their shadows

Edward, an intrepid public transport using New Yorker, and I headed down our potholed alley behind our Spanish duplex for the South Pasadena Metro stop. Boarding the train last because of our bikes, we stood just inside the doors trying to minimize being in or blocking the way of other passengers while getting bike bumped and bruised as we tried to keep our balance. Blood ran down my shin where my bike pedal gouged me.

There were three trains, four flights of stairs, a crowded elevator. The Expo Line faced an uphill battle, subsequent delays and was rerouted through renamed South L.A. instead of Beverly Hills due to NIMBYism. Edward took over my bike on the last two trains, so I wouldn't have to try and balance the bike and myself through the stops and starts. I sat down.

Everything's haunting everything

We disembarked into the confusion of a construction zone. After several false starts down wooden-sided, metal scaffolded tunnels and three heavily trafficked street crossings, we mounted our bikes and dodged parked cars and traffic. We navigated vehicles in the right turn lane at five miles of stop lights. Edward journeyed towards New York walkability with a Mediterranean seaside climate. We locked our bikes to the bike hitching post outside of the Tortoise General Store.

South, multi-million dollar houses rose asymmetrically out of the reconstituted canals. In 1925, Los Angeles annexed Venice, paved over the canals and packed the gondoliers into the latest four door-sedans pedaled by Pasadena's Walter M. Murphy Motors, cruising the freshly surfaced streets.

Business interests and government officials set aside Oakwood for the blacks, recruited to work in the oil fields, and by the 1950s, Venice of America was once again rechristened, its new name, Slum by the Sea. Low rents attracted immigrants, mainly Holocaust survivors, and artists, The Beats.

Already ghosts  
John and Philomene  
Under the ghostly lampposts  
Of Venice West

Latinos migrated to Oakwood, aka Ghost Town, aka Oakwood Pentagon, in the 60s, displaced by 405 freeway construction.

Their cadence  
The breath of sleep  
At rest  
Lost at the edge of America

Edward and I decided to skip the line at Intelligentsia across from the Roosterfish and headed back up to Abbot's Habit past Hals but before the Brig. This quartet, Roosterfish, Abbot's, Hals, the Brig, represented the remains of my Venice, heading out for a night on Abbot Kinney or a morning cuppa, the shops and restaurants owned and run by locals.

Like Intelligentsia, Hals and Abbot's Habit, ahead of their time, already featured wood, concrete and metals. Hals used to be a favorite hang-out of the older more traditional pick-up set with its \$50 a plate dinner, \$15 glass of red and Ed Moses' paintings adorning the walls. Maybe it still is.

Abbot's Habit hawks healthy, organic, veggie options like their veggie southwest with spinach, sprouts and green chilies; you can substitute hummus for the cream cheese.

Only, the black sprite with white crocheted gloves and parasol in the banana yellow tulle trailing over broken sidewalks no longer floats down Santa Clara Ct to open her sandwich shop. The cute and boyish blond I could never divine whether she was a he or he a she no longer quits the pool tables at the Brig for the Roosterfish. Savvy businessmen, pioneers opened the Roosterfish in 1979. Looking inside, it was largely empty except for two guys, the bartender and one early customer.

Already ghosts  
And each poem  
Already a farewell

Skirting the sidewalk crowds, window shoppers and lines, coffee in hand, we continued up the street past the Brig. My heart did a deep knee bend inside my chest, or it would have if it had knees. I probably went to the Brig four or five times a week in my heyday. It was the most changed. There was still the boxer sign, a Rock Hudson type, getting ready to deliver his one-two punch over the door. There was still the mural within the mural on the parking lot side of the building where I use to park my '67 mint-green Catalina, with sea blue convertible top, when I came directly from work.

The building no longer wore beige texture coat but a smooth slick grey. Everything was slick. The stone façade was gone, and the always open door was closed and painted a bright orange-red. No longer brightly lit, the three well-worn pool tables had been replaced by one, barely used. The winner no longer called the next chalked name on the list for a match to see how long

she could keep the table. One night, I had a five game run. Sometimes, we played doubles. The green pleather stools and Formica bar were gone. Ruthie, the 50-something bar matron, with her no nonsense tough Scottish brogue and dry wit was gone. Instead, a light designer had set a dark club mood. There were yellow pendent lamps, a white under lit bar with purple and red over lighting. The patrons were better dressed, hipper, more self-conscious. They were strangers meeting strangers. Concrete cinder blocks with a sporty, front door matching, orange-red stripe and small window cut out formed the inside back wall of the mural outside.

In the mural, there's the boxer sign marketing cocktails and the cracked pavement and the stone façade and the early 60's era looking couple. They are smiling and have their arms wrapped around the others' back. He wears a musical motif Hawaiian shirt. She wears what looks like the same clothes as Marilyn wore in her last photo shoot. The ocean breeze blows.

Everything's haunting everything  
The sea is the ghost of the world

–Philomene Long  
“The Ghosts of Venice West” (1994)

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