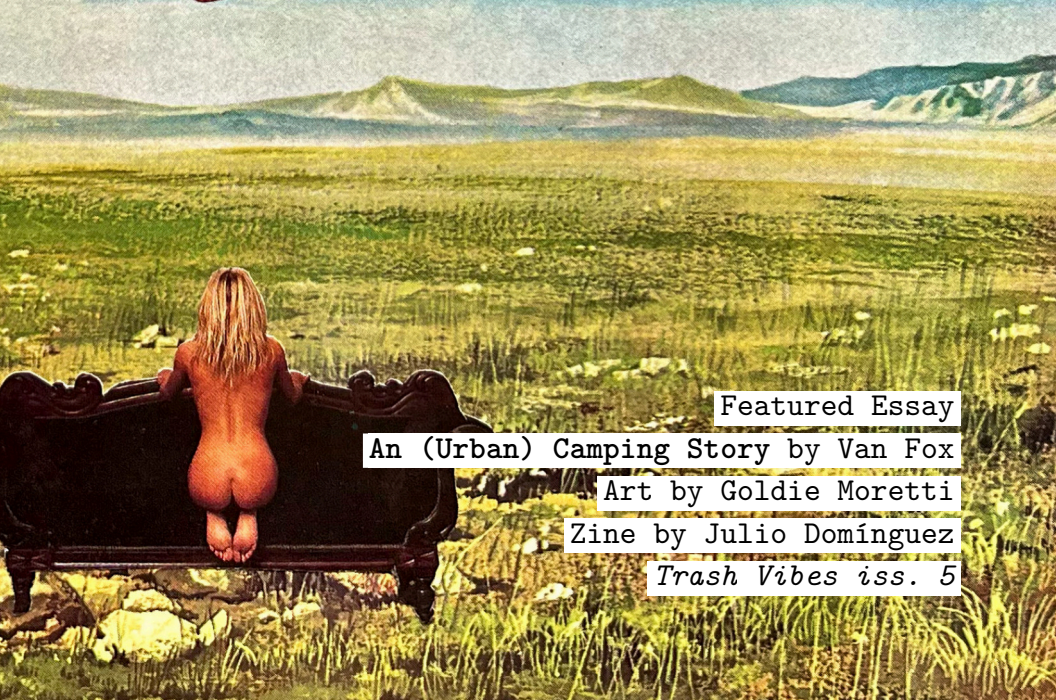
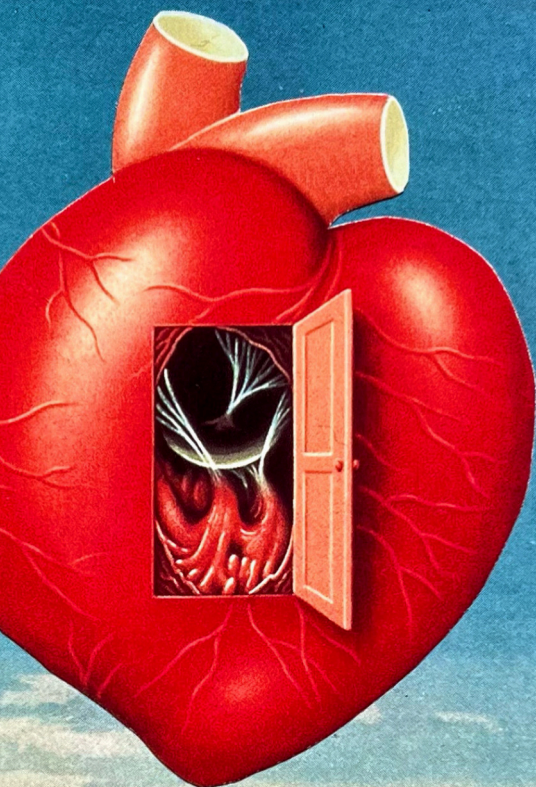


Outa Touch



Featured Essay

An (Urban) Camping Story by Van Fox

Art by Goldie Moretti

Zine by Julio Domínguez

Trash Vibes iss. 5

1 *Moscas volantes*

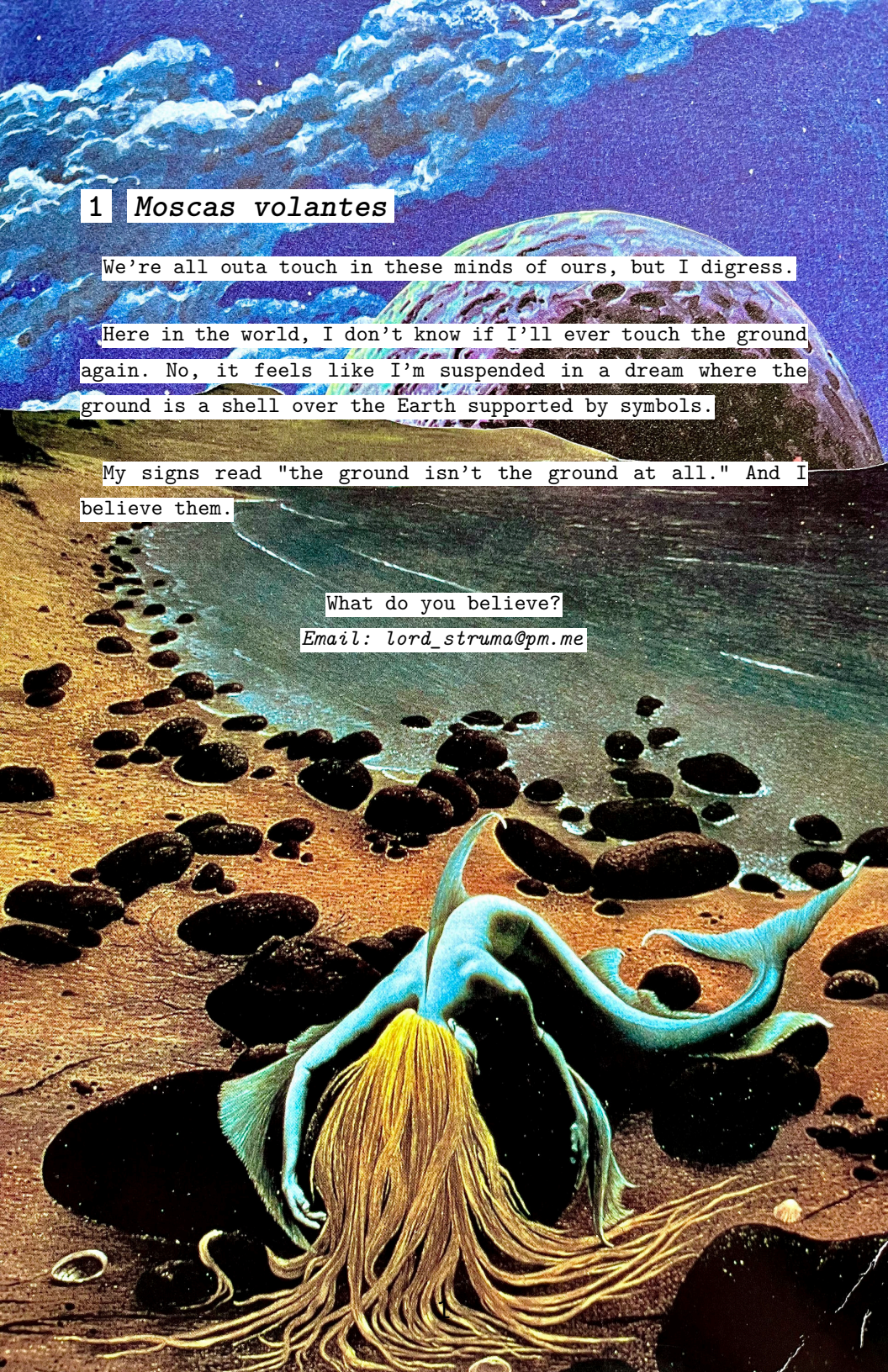
We're all outa touch in these minds of ours, but I digress.

Here in the world, I don't know if I'll ever touch the ground again. No, it feels like I'm suspended in a dream where the ground is a shell over the Earth supported by symbols.

My signs read "the ground isn't the ground at all." And I believe them.

What do you believe?

Email: lord_struma@pm.me



2 AN (URBAN) CAMPING STORY by Van Fox

Camping? Excuse me, but how is this a recreational activity? Basically what it comes down to is "Hey, let's go be homeless for the weekend!" Why? Be outside, sleep on the ground, be sore and dirty and cold and bitten by bugs? No, thank you. I had enough of that shit when I actually was homeless; I'm certainly not going to go do it voluntarily during my leisure time. And maybe this is the big dividing line. Maybe people who've actually experienced homelessness have no desire to do the quasi-homeless thing called camping. But sure, I can tell you camping stories if camping stories is what you want.

At the corner of Pico and Sixth in downtown Los Angeles is a big old ten-story building which used to be, years ago, the El Rey Hotel, probably once a nice hotel for nice people visiting LA on business or vacation, over the years evolving into a flop. I'm assuming it evolved, as I don't suppose anyone with a nice hotel makes the decision to close for a month and refurbish to just intentionally become a flop, but it was, by and by, a flop, and then one night it caught on fire- as flops have a way of doing, being habitated, as they are, by smokers and drinkers- and then it knew a brief existence as a burned out building, and then it was refurbished, or resurrected perhaps, to become the Weingart Center. Ta da! The Weingart Center! Rejoice, hallelujah! On the first floor was the city's detox unit, commonly referred to as "sleep-off," where the police dropped off the drunks they rounded up in the paddy wagon. You could sit outside and watch the paddy wagon pull up (I don't believe the paddy wagon was used for anything else at this point, though maybe it was years ago) and a couple cops would get out of the front, looking like they just loved the hell out of their jobs,

put on gloves and open the back. Anyone that could and would walk was made to get out and stumble inside. Usually during the trip a couple old boys had passed out and they had to be dragged or carried in. Not infrequently someone had puked in the back, and it was just basically a wholesome all-American mess. So these drunks would be hauled in for the offense of being drunk and ambulatory. If you were passed out on the sidewalk that was fine, but if you were lurching about bothering the good people of the city then you might get popped in the wagon and taken to the Weingart Center. The drunks would be thrown on cots and prevented from dying, and as soon as possible they would be sent on their way.

Now, on the second floor was the more long-term detox and sort of receiving center/staging area that served as the entry point to the rest of the Center. People were not brought there involuntarily. In fact, there was a waiting list of several weeks, because if you got in there then that meant that as soon as you were detoxed, bathed and deloused, interviewed, interrogated, and otherwise deemed fit and able, you could move upstairs to the inpatient treatment center that occupied the seventh and eighth floors of the building, and from there you could quite possibly get a room of your own in the independent living program that occupied the, let's see, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, ninth and tenth floors.



In other words, you could have a place to sleep, a shower, hot meals, washer and dryer. No more camping! And that's why there was this big waiting list, because many- certainly not all, but many- urban campers are sick to fucking death of camping and

want to live inside. Inside, you understand, not outside. Not. Outside. Don't want to live outside! Of course there was one big string attached to the whole deal, and this string served to keep the waiting list, as well as the actual population of the treatment program and the independent living, thinned out in a very efficient way, and of course the big string was this: you can't fucking drink.

No, you can't fucking drink, and if you do, you're out. Out of the waiting list or out of wherever you live, making room for the next poor hopeful bastard. I presented myself at the gates of the Weingart Kingdom, having been dropped off there by a nervous social worker type from the Valley who looked as if he didn't get downtown all too often, and was informed that I could be detoxed on the first floor for 24 hours, but if I wanted to be admitted to the wonders above it was going to be a good five or six weeks before a bed was likely to become available. In the meantime, I had to remain sober, not in an honor system sort of way, but in an actually show up there every day and say hello and more or less empirically demonstrate that I was sober sort of way. So I have no place to live, but if I want to make a go of this program I have to remain in close enough proximity to the building that I can stop by every day and show that I'm still interested and still staying sober. Something of a dilemma, I suppose, and here's where the camping comes in. Right, I told you this was a camping story, and so it is.

The first night of the campout I spent in a sort of sit and nod mode, walking about, sitting down here and there and sort of nodding off until I woke up again, cold or sore or nervous. Pico and Sixth, in case you're not intimately acquainted with the area, is smack in the middle of what the media and other

such cultural institutions refer to as skid row. I don't think I ever heard a real person call it that, but from the name you can probably picture the scene. Skid Row in Los Angeles. Whatever your images and impressions are about "skid row" in a rampaging goddamn beast of a city like Los Angeles, California, that's just what it was like, and more. Let's just say it's not for the dainty, and certainly not the most savory place for a campout, which is why I would wake up and be nervous. Much like camping in the woods, I imagine, there are things out there in the dark that you can't see. You can sort of sense them, maybe hear them, and you can definitely intuit that they're dangerous, like kill you and eat you kind of dangerous, but since you can't actually see them and your mind is filling in the details willy-nilly, they're just that much more sinister-seeming. So the sit and nod method is not a workable long term plan for a number of reasons. It's not comfy, not clean, and the exposure level to beasts and predators is not acceptable. No, not acceptable at all.

The second night of the campout I spent at MacArthur Park. MacArthur Park, in case you're not intimately acquainted with the area, is just what it sounds like: a park. A city park with grass and picnic tables and a little man-made lake and public restrooms and all that. And since it's in downtown Los Angeles, it's obviously filled with every imaginable variety of tramp and freak and bum and whore that the city can manage to belch out, and they all hang out in the relative safety and comfort of the park. Now, the "second night" of the campout was not actually the second night, but the day following the first night. Everyone who sleeps in the park does so during the day and goes somewhere else at night, because the park closes at dusk and the cops are fairly diligent about tossing people out.

And even if you managed to avoid the cops, the beasts would get you for sure. Obviously you couldn't just let a city park be an overnight campground for the homeless of downtown. How the hell would that work? The place would turn into a shantytown. So the park gets swept out every evening, but it's a decent place to hang and snooze during the daylight. So I got a bit of rest in the park, getting up to go present myself at the Weingart Circus and show that I was still on track, and then lining up for the feed at the mission. Novelists or whatever might call it a soup kitchen, though I never heard a real person call it that, although they did in fact serve soup from time to time, but certainly not every day. Most people called it "the feed," just like the place you could drop in and get a shower was called "the douche." That shit makes me laugh, even to this very day, the Feed and the Douche.



Anyway, what I probably needed, really, was to find some kind of an actual campground, so as not to just be adrift in the wilderness, as it were, and talking to some friendly kids in the park led me to the Hastings. Ah yes, The Hastings Hotel, another flop, actually within sight of the Weingart Emporium,

though not as tall, only four stories. And a roof. And on the roof was the campground. Talk about a well-organized group of urban campers! After spending most of the day in the park with some of the roof-dwellers, I was taken over to the lot adjacent to the Hastings for what amounted to an intake interview. The roof, as it turns out, did not have a waiting list, but it did have certain norms and expectations regarding one's behavior, and these were outlined to me, as well as a few questions about my general character and outlook on life. Apparently I passed, for I was allowed to access the campground. The roof closed at ten pm, and if you were not on the roof, you did not get on the roof. There was no roof access from the inside of the building, though a nailed to fuck and back doorway up there suggested that there had been at one time; the only way to get to the roof was via the fire escape on the outside of the building. And at 10 pm, that shit was shut down, and shut down tight. The landings at the third and fourth floors were strung with wire and ropes and all tied up with hubcaps and different shit, in other words, very hard to get through without getting twisted up and raising quite a clatter. The first two nights on the roof I was made to sleep next to the spot where the ladder came up over the side from the fire escape, along with a couple of other dudes. Arrayed along the edge of the roof in this area were all manner of pieces of brick and asphalt, bottles filled with dirt, giant bolts and other unpleasant hunks of metal, just wicked type shit that you would absolutely not under any circumstances want someone to throw on your head. And I think you can figure out the protocol. If anyone gets tangled up on the landing and alerts the people on the roof, they simply commence to hurl all the rocks and bottles and hunks of metal down below, and generally, I would have to imagine, just absolutely fuck the

shit out of whatever sorry bastard is down there. But look, if you live on the roof, you know not to try to get up there after ten. And if you don't live on the roof, well, there's really no reason for you to be coming up there at all, now is there? No one ever tried to come up when I was on the ladder duty, and only once did it happen when I was sleeping up there and not on the ladder duty. And let me just say that I would not have wanted to be whoever it was down there on the landing in the middle of the night when those kids woke up and started hurling shit, because they were like medieval goddamn warriors, I mean just not fucking around at all. A fortress is a fortress, I guess, even when it's a campground.

At nineteen, I was actually one of the older campers on the roof; a few of them must have been no older than twelve or thirteen. Lots of girls, runaways, some from LA, others from San Diego and Arizona, and Spink Colony, South Dakota, and all kinds of places. Ya, that sticks in my mind, the kid who said he was from some bumfuck place called Spink Colony, South Dakota. Funny how things work out sometimes, no? You have to wonder what could be so bad about Spink Colony that sleeping on the roof of a flop hotel in Los Angeles would be better, but sometimes Hell is personal and portable, not tied to a place but to the people you share it with. There was no alcohol allowed on the roof, and no drunkenness, but that worked out fine with my program anyway, checking in, as I was, at the Weingart Funhouse every day. Marijuana and cigarettes were OK, but no crank, no blow, no base, no sherm, no jive. Violence amongst the campers: absolutely not. Stealing from one another: absolutely not. In fact, one of the great things about the rooftop campground was that we could leave our stuff up there during the day and feel pretty safe about it, not having to carry everything we owned

(though not all that much for most of us) around everywhere like a lot of urban campers do. Lots of girlies, as I've said, but no grabass with the girlies. No, no, no. I feel pretty sure that any attempted grabass with girlies would buy you a quick ticket to the ground below, at ten meters per second per second or whatever the acceleration due to gravity is. Well shit, if they wanted to be poked and fucked with and molested they probably would have just stayed wherever they were living in the first place, now wouldn't they? On any given night there were probably twenty or thirty campers up there on the roof of the ol' Hastings, sleeping under the stars, smelling the good fresh air, enjoying the great out of doors in God's wondrous creation. Pretty tight operation, actually, safe and secure. Bunch of kids who basically were tired of being fucked with and so had taken steps to assure their own security. Shame the adults in their lives couldn't have provided that security for them, but there it is. Shame all over the world, now isn't there?

So what do we do, we urban campers, when we're not comfy-cozy on the rooftop fortress/campground? Well, like most wild animals and campers and outdoorsy types, we spend a certain amount of each day looking for food. In our little enclave, this meant typically two things: Dumpsters and the Hippie Kitchen. None of the roof kids would go to the mission for meals, because the mission was kind of an "official" type of place with security guards and social workers and do-gooder volunteers and questions and forms to fill out and so on and so forth. Of course there was also the Jesus message, but hopefully anyone could let that just kind of roll off their back if they found it not agreeable. No, these kids were minors, most of them, and as such they were deathly afraid of getting snatched up and sent

home, remembering, if you will, that home was bad enough to make the roof look good by comparison. So no going to the mission, out of fear that before they got done eating some do-gooder would call the cops or Children and Family Services or some such official body, and they'd get captured and sent home. But no such worries at the Hippie Kitchen! Because the Hippie Kitchen was run by, you guessed it, hippies. And hippies don't care about rules and regulations and colluding with the Man and all that kind of shit. They care about peace and love and happiness and feeding hungry people with no questions asked. No trying to send kids back to their parents, and certainly no Jesus message. The food? Probably better than the county jail but worse than Thanksgiving at your grandma's. Lots of beans and rice, lots of veggies and fruit, lots of bread and pasta, little in the way of cheese or eggs or meat, and nothing whatsoever in the way of "Don't you want me to call your parents for you?" or "Why don't you come back this evening and I can let you sleep upstairs?" No, just food and love, no strings attached. Find anything that keeps you alive with no strings attached, and that's worth going back for. Weathered older dudes with long hair and beards cooking and serving, dirty scared kids with long hair and no beards sitting and eating. The second or third time I went there I asked one of the dudes serving what was for lunch, and here is exactly what he said: "Art of broccoli spaghetti and fruit chili." I concluded from this that asking them to put a name to it was not a great idea, just sit and eat. It was warm and hearty and given with love, what else do you need? Help wash the dishes and take out the trash from time to time, and everything was groovy.

If there was any downside to the Hippie Kitchen, it was only that they served lunch six days a week and that was it. This

left potentially one lunch, seven breakfasts, seven dinners, and an indeterminate number of after-school and before-bed snacks unaccounted for each week, and this is where the second prong of the two-pronged approach to gathering food in the wilderness came in: Dumpsters. Dumpsters, by god! A veritable horn-o'-plenty for the urban camper. Imagine a society where there are enough full people that the hungry people of the same society can get along simply by eating the full people's trash! Well, you don't have to imagine it because that's the society where you live. And what kind of treats did the full people throw in the dumpsters, even the dumpsters of downtown Los Angeles? All kinds of shit! Whole pizzas and piles of fried chicken, still warm from whatever heat lamp they were sitting under when the place closed for the night. Package upon package of bread and doughnuts and tortillas and every other imaginable bakery-type item. Cans of anything that might conceivably be put in a can, with a bit of a dent or perhaps a torn label. And produce! Any sort of apple lemon melon lettuce corn tomato pepper squash you could ever imagine, probably with some sort of bruise or brown spot or small tender area, but really nothing too serious usually, especially when compared to the bruises and brown spots and small tender areas of the hungry campers. It was presented to me that a Kitchen Paring Knife would go far toward quickly getting a handle on bruises, brown spots, and small tender areas (those of the produce, not of the campers), and so as soon as I was able to muster ninety-nine cents plus tax, I betook myself to the neighborhood hardware store, and there was able to purchase, sure enough, a Kitchen Paring Knife, so-called right on the package, the last Dumpster Paring Knife having apparently already been sold to some other industrious camper. So ya, now I was really able to go to town, so to speak,

on the mountains of produce that my foraging expeditions led me to, and I will also admit that carrying the Kitchen Paring Knife, small though it was, gave me a certain increased sense of well-being, there in the urban wilderness. I kept that thing for years, long after my camping days were over, and it never failed to serve me well. It had a green plastic handle, yes it did.

3 Absent Creator

Does God matter? Of course not, god is immaterial.

Is such a notion needed for peaceful animals like us human beings? Maybe, maybe not. I'll take it or leave it, there's no time to dream.

And if god is our connection with one another as a manifestation of the whole? Then yeah, maybe acknowledging our universal sacred and eternal interconnectedness could be liberating.

Maybe we treat each other better and create heaven on Earth.



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