

## POPPY DE GARMO

*West Cliff Reader*, 2011  
digital image, 11 x 17 in



courtesy: the artist

## DOUG THORPE

### All Summer Long

#### Nostalgia and the Beach Boys

*Mar e morada de sodade*  
(*The sea is the home of nostalgia.*)

—Armonda da Pin

**T**he *Beach Boys*. The name sings of a peculiarly Californian lightness of being. Like Marilyn, like Elvis, they are a classic American case: stars isolated by the darkness surrounding their image, a myth of their own creation.

The Boys themselves have fostered and nurtured this image. It's a commercial transaction, after all: in going to a concert or buying any one of a dozen "greatest hits" collections, we are buying (as a Capitol Records executive put it years ago) the Beach Boys product. And we get what we pay for. We get *nostalgia*, whose roots come from the Greek *algos*, ache, and *nostos*, meaning *a return*—derived, in turn, from the Indo-European root *\*nes*, suggesting "to return safely home."

What we get is that ache for home. The only problem is just how poor a bargain we're willing to drive—how little, really, we settle for.

Settling for too little had been the Beach Boys' problem from the beginning, going back to the name itself, which was bestowed upon them without a moment's concern by a studio executive. They were not, in fact, "beach boys," with the exception of Dennis Wilson, one of three brothers in the group. Brian, who did much of the writing and, for a time, the arranging and producing, hated the water. Carl, the other brother, was indifferent. And even Dennis's story, told more fully, casts a certain shadow over the image. For Dennis, the beach was the place to go not just for the waves and the girls; it was also where he escaped an abusive father. And it was here, not coincidentally, that he discovered a multitude of mind-altering and emotion-numbing drugs that ultimately helped to kill him. It was to the beach that he fled, just as Brian fled from their father to music.

From the beginning, the beach and the music both evoked an ache of nostalgia, and both functioned either as a means of escape or as a place to pursue a different reality. Like Dennis and Brian, the beach and the music were brothers—the one (the surf) serving as a metaphor for that paradise to which the other (the music) would, in turn, vicariously allow us to flee, wherever we might live. Phoenix, a desert city, adored the Beach Boys from the start.

Their music helped create the California myth. Those smooth harmonies—so unlike what was coming from places like New York, Detroit, Chicago, Memphis or Nashville—were intimately connected to a California ideal. It