

## 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

was a distinctly California sound, an L.A. sound—as it is an L.A. saga—but one with more complexity than those early surfing songs would suggest. Like most California stories, this one begins elsewhere, with one branch of the Wilson family leaving Hutchinson, Kansas in 1921 for the west, fueled by little more than the perfume of a dream. That beautiful Pacific, the miles of water rolling in from Asia, the fruit trees and mountains, that endless summer—it might as well have been Oz.

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The Beach Boys' recordings began as a marriage of surfing (itself part of an old spiritual tradition in its native Hawaii) and music. Brian had the sounds swimming in his head—usually variations on The Four Freshmen—but no subject. During the group's first studio audition, the producer suggested something about the surfing craze. Dennis, an enthusiast, tried to convince Brian how important surfing was, and how popular a surfing song could be if they could write one. Borrowing terms from Dennis and other surfers, Brian came up with a simple melody kicking in behind the sort of lyric any high school senior might have written:

*Surfin' is the only life  
the only way for me  
now come on pretty baby  
and surf with me  
yeah  
bom-bom-dippidip*

It was December 1961, at the end of Jack Kennedy's first year in office. Brian Wilson was nineteen. A pattern was established: Brian would turn out teenage manifestos, driven by the particulars of the lyrics (that “fuel-injected Stingray with a 413”) and the lush family harmonies that he would spend an increasing amount of time perfecting. (Listen, for a point of comparison, to a very early song like “Surfer Girl”—already fairly rich, but harmonically indebted to the kinds of things Brian had been hearing for years—and then to “California Girls,” which, for 1965, was *sculpted*. It's a thoroughly conscious piece of work, beautifully built up layer by layer.)

But more than writing hymns to American teenage life, what Brian was increasingly trying to create was the

sound and feel of an imagined place. Call it “California as a state of mind:” on the one hand, it's a place of pleasure, of unending sensual gratification; on the other hand, the place is a state of high fidelity, of high-minded faithfulness to a sound that lived in Brian's head. This is faithfulness to a beauty he could hear, a beauty which, for him, was another form of paradise.

At this same time, John Coltrane would say “There is never any end:”

There are always new sounds to imagine, new feelings to get at. And always, there is the need to keep purifying these feelings and sounds so that we can really see what we discovered in its pure state. So we can see more clearly what we are. In that way we can give to those who listen the essence, the best of what we are. But to do that at each stage, we have to keep cleaning the mirror.<sup>1</sup>

This was an ideal that would, I believe, make perfect sense to Brian Wilson. But in 1964 he was heading toward a nervous breakdown, brought on, in part, by the pressures of a record company constantly hungry for new material. In December of that year, exactly as Coltrane was laying down the tracks for *A Love Supreme*, the Beach

<sup>1</sup> Eric Nisenson, *Ascension: John Coltrane and His Quest*. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1995), 268.

Comparing Brian Wilson to John Coltrane is, I admit, odd. Coltrane, of course, was older; in the early sixties, he was reading Paramahansa Yogananda's *The Autobiography of a Yogi* and was studying Kabbalah and Krishnamurti, responding powerfully to statements like “religion is not a matter of dogmas and beliefs, of rituals and superstitions; nor is it the cultivation of personal salvation.... Religion is the total way of life; it is the understanding of truth” (*Ascension*, 153). *A Love Supreme*, recorded near the end of 1964, was already sounding like world music; it had a decidedly Middle Eastern flavor, “played over Elvin [Jones]'s dynamic West-African-influenced drums” (*Ascension*, 153).

And yet the similarity is striking. After *A Love Supreme*, as Coltrane moved more and more deeply into free jazz—and farther away from what both audience and critics wanted to hear—it's increasingly clear that what he was after was something close to pure music (non-music? silence?), free of the boundaries of a defined rhythm, melody, harmony. His entire career (at least after 1957) was driven by this desire to push through boundaries in search of a mysterious sound, which is ultimately equated with the divine.

Boys had five albums in *Billboard's* top 200, with two of them—*The Beach Boys Concert* and *All Summer Long*—in the top twenty. But Brian was also being challenged by family pressures as well, in particular by a demanding father who was still managing the group and who would, on the last world tour that Brian would attend, physically and verbally abuse his sons in front of the press. It was during this time, between 1964 and 1966, that Brian would experience at least two more episodes of nervous collapse, withdraw from the Beach Boys as a touring group, marry, experiment with LSD (as would Coltrane), and begin seeing his music more deeply in spiritual terms.

Born in June 1942, Brian turned twenty-two the year of *All Summer Long*, an album that represented a kind of graduation, one might say, from the first phase of The Beach Boys. Including “I Get Around,” “Wendy,” “All Summer Long,” “Little Honda,” “The Girls On The Beach,” “At the Drive-In,” and “Don't Back Down,” this was a concept album, an attempt to (re)create that ultimate teenage boy's dream of endless California days and nights with movies and girls, cars and girls, the beach and girls:

*Every now and then we'd hear our song  
We've been havin' fun all summer long*

The album was released on July 1, 1964, peaking at number four on the charts where it spent close to a year. The next day Lyndon Johnson would sign the Civil Rights Act, the most important antidiscrimination legislation in almost a hundred years. Inner-city rioting was common that summer; on August 4th the bodies of three civil rights workers, missing in Mississippi since late June, were found buried in an earthen dam. Three days later the Gulf of Tonkin resolution was passed by Congress, approving U.S. military action in Southeast Asia.

*T-shirts cutoffs and a pair of thongs  
We've been havin' fun all summer long*

Kodak moments fill the LP's cover: the girls on the beach who are (as the song says) always in reach; rhythm guitarist Al Jardine riding a tandem bike, eating hot dogs and drinking soda; Denny always and forever with his arm around some beauty, lying on the sand with a Coke;

Denny and his girl riding bareback down the beach; Carl with a football; Brian at the drive-in.

*All summer long you've been with me  
I can't see enough of you  
All summer long we've been free  
Won't be long till summertime is through*

On the very day the United States prepared to enter Vietnam, this music defined an adolescent American world that was about to change forever. Driving along listening to WLS in T-shirts and cutoffs, the apartment windows along Chicago Avenue open in those pre-air-conditioning days, I'd hear “I Get Around” on the radio—*I'm getting bugged driving up and down this same old strip/I've gotta find a new place where the kids are hip*—and already sense the restlessness, that desire for something more which in part defines adolescence.

Along, of course, with a desire for nothing to ever change.

This adolescent tension had helped to define the schizophrenic culture of the 1950's, on one side all nicely contained in *Ozzie and Harriet* and *The Ed Sullivan Show*, and on the other busting out with rock and roll and leather jackets, James Dean and the Beats, civil rights and Miles Davis. Communists. Little green men.

There was, then, not so much an innocence to the early sixties (and throughout the fifties) as there was a wall—one as impenetrable as Berlin's. And of course the Beach Boys were as much a part of that scene as John Kennedy's Camelot. From the beginning, their music created a myth of California innocence even as it sprang out of a ferocious adolescent need for both love and independence, for love growing *from* independence. This development had been painfully inhibited by a strong-willed and abusive father (himself an abused child) who had declared himself manager of the group and who struggled to maintain legal and psychological control over the boys until Brian, at the ripe age of twenty-three, at last succeeded in firing him—at what cost one can only guess. Fathers and sons: these relationships are both personal and political. In Vietnam during these same years, the Americans became the Daddy upon whom the South Vietnamese government depended but also, not surprisingly, resented.

So there is a parallel between the apparent innocence of the music and of the American government at that time, an innocence (and naïveté) that led to disaster on both fronts. There was much that we simply didn't want to know. Blame some of this legitimately on youth and ignorance: in the beginning, the Beach Boys' interests—like the interests of most teenagers and young adults (and most Americans)—didn't range far beyond Saturday night. The real dilemma arose when consciousness began to develop, and genuine decisions had to be made and risks taken in order for spiritual and psychological growth to occur. One's spiritual core always requires truth—as much of it as one can see at any one time—and this requires a continual determination to grow in consciousness and awareness, both in oneself and in the world. And America by the mid-sixties was growing into a new awareness of its own sins, both at home and abroad—which often meant not liking what it was seeing and longing to deny it, but being increasingly unable to deny it or being able to deny it only at a huge cost.

Few want to be heroes; it takes too much out of us. But most of us find ourselves at one time or another in a place of utter and awful clarity: we can see the truth and have to decide to speak and act according to that truth, at whatever personal risk, or to consciously lie and hide what we know. And to do this is to kill the soul.

This, surely, is what the Civil Rights movement was centrally about: its strength lay in its conscious knowledge that it was always, at bottom, a *spiritual* battle. It wasn't simply the vote or economics that was at stake; it was the soul. Martin Luther King spoke the truth not just for the benefit of his fellow blacks; he knew it was ultimately in service to whites as well, for it *their* souls were also on the line. All those who told us the truth in those days were doing us a great favor, however deeply we might have resisted hearing it, for to live in such blindness is a form of living in hell: we were prisoners of our fears, of our hatred—and King and his followers came like prophets so that others could begin to see their own condition.

And in turn they got treated like prophets.

Let the one who seeks not stop seeking until he finds. When he finds, he shall be troubled. When he becomes troubled, he will be amazed, and shall come to transcend all things. [Gospel of Thomas]

This was the situation of the country in the mid-sixties. You can feel it like a subtext all the way through the music of that time. And you can hear it in the Beach Boys' *Pet Sounds*—that struggle (both of individuals and of the nation) between childhood and maturity, dependence and independence. The album is stunningly beautiful and poignantly sad. Beginning like the sixties themselves in great hope and desire (“Wouldn't It Be Nice”), it moves through the sense of displacement (“I Just Wasn't Made For These Times”) and need (“God Only Knows”). It climaxes with the brief but gemlike “Caroline, No,” which captures the end of adolescence in a simple yet potent image:

*Where did your long hair go?  
Where is the girl I used to know?*

The album works because of its honesty and because of the discipline and craft that went into making it. When vocalist and co-lyricist Mike Love complained of the difficulty of the vocal tracks, and of Brian's almost ruthless desire for perfection (“Who's gonna hear this? The ears of a dog?”), Brian would just insist they do it again: “Every voice in its resonance and timbre had to be right. Then the next day he might throw it out and have us do it over again.... He would sometimes let the group do the vocals the way they wanted, then, after they left the studio, he would wipe the vocals off completely and finish the track himself, since he could sing all the parts.”<sup>2</sup>

No one knew quite what to make of *Pet Sounds*. The public expected “a certain kind of song from the Beach Boys, and (except for “Sloop John B”) none of those songs were present on the album.” Nick Venet, who worked with them on behalf of Capitol Records, says “There was a great love at the time of Beach Boys product...there were salesmen out there that could sell Beach Boys product and the customers were asking for it.”<sup>3</sup>

That was the dilemma. The “Boys” had reached a crossroads, although at the time only Brian seemed truly

<sup>2</sup> Steven Gaines, *Heroes and Villains: The True Story of the Beach Boys*. (New York: New American Library, 1986), 146.

<sup>3</sup> 3. Ibid., 150.

conscious of it. This meant that for him there was a legitimate decision to make: he could allow the music to become simply “product”—he could, essentially, lie to himself as an artist and as a human being in order to give the people what they thought they wanted—or he could attempt to follow whatever impulses and intuitions were working inside of him.

*Pet Sounds* is the result of this tension. In a sense it *exploits* the tension; it takes the struggle that Brian was facing musically—that struggle of adolescence (wanting to remain popular inside the family and community, and yet also wanting to be out there on his own)—and makes a new kind of music out of it. No wonder he heard it as religious. It *was*. It came precisely out of those depths.

One can hear a young soul growing up in this music: struggling, longing for something to hold onto (a girl, of course) even as it ventures out into the unknown and acknowledges the great loss that comes with independence. (*The dream is over*, as John Lennon would put it more bluntly a short five years later.) It is an album *about* independence, but rather than fireworks, it's closer to what our ancestors must have felt that first morning out of the garden. Time had become real.

This truth is in the final words of the album: Brian reaching up in his falsetto to cry out “*Oh Caroline, no*”—that final plaintive syllable hanging there like the sound of grief itself, deepened by the fact that he's simultaneously sounding out “Caroline, no” and “Carol I know”—catching at once the absolute desire to *deny the truth* and yet the acknowledgment of it at the same time.

The album ends with that strange sound effect, Brian's two dogs barking in the distance and the fading of a train—a perfect example of his continual longing to move out of verbal meaning into pure sound and resonance. The barking dogs evoke a summer day fading into the distance, and these are echoed in some kind of intuitive, emotional way by that passing train, which quietly speaks of the ending to boyhood (and American) dreams.

In “Caroline, No” we hear not just the end of a young man's hopes with a girl; in hindsight we also hear—no less than in *The Great Gatsby*—the end of American innocence.

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John Lennon and Paul McCartney first heard *Pet Sounds* at a special reception in the London Hilton and afterward went back to Paul's house and began writing “Here, There and Everywhere,” whose preamble (“To lead a better life”) was inspired by the musical preludes Brian composed for *Pet Sounds*' “Wouldn't It Be Nice” and “God Only Knows.”<sup>4</sup> But the promotion for the album was modest, and Capitol didn't even release a single from the album until August, more than three months after the initial release. Instead, the company saved its ad campaign for the first *Best of the Beach Boys*, issued weeks before “Wouldn't It Be Nice” would enter the charts. The anthology quickly went gold, soaring past *Pet Sounds*.

Undaunted by the relative commercial failure of *Pet Sounds*, Brian continued to work on a “pocket symphony” called “Good Vibrations.” “It had a lot of riff changes,” he said, “lots of movements, changes, changes, changes. Building harmonies here, drop this voice out, this comes in, bring the echo chamber in, do this, put the theremin there, bring the cello up a little louder...a series of intricate harmonies and mood changes...the biggest production of our life.” Finished late one night at Columbia Studios in L.A., “I could just feel it when I dubbed it down, made the final mix down to mono. It was a feeling of power; it was a rush. A feeling of exaltation. Artistic beauty. It was everything...I remember saying, ‘Oh my God, sit back and listen to this!’”

*Ahhh I hear the sound of a gentle word  
on the wind that lifts her perfume through the air...  
Ahhh my my my what a sensation....*

It was in fact a logical and (in hindsight) an inevitable extension of the structure of much of the earlier great music—the slow “preludes” of “Wendy” and “California Girls,” the steady rise and release of tension in simple songs like “Dance Dance Dance” and “Don't Back Down.” But far more than anything that had come before, it was a song built almost entirely on evocation, on resonance—almost,

<sup>4</sup> Timothy White, *The Nearest Faraway Place: Brian Wilson, The Beach Boys, and the Southern California Experience*. (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1994), 26).

## POPPY DE GARMO

*Kali Goddess of Empowerment, 2011*  
Taken at Wanderlust Squaw Valley  
digital image, 11 x 17 in



courtesy: the artist

one could say, on intuition. The words are the least of it—they are there mostly to evoke the mood, to *suggest*. It's pure feel, some inner sense (those “vibes”) translated almost perfectly into three and a half minutes of music.

Never easy to dance to (you can see kids on *American Bandstand* just *stopping*—a horror to programmers), “Good Vibrations” was a roller-coaster ride of sounds, filled with aural peaks and valleys, a series of beautiful rising and falling waves. I remember it: in somebody's basement, all of us waiting, swaying slightly through the interludes, listening as the song finally broke into its rhythm and set us free to move, only to loop down again into that hush, that soft heart at its center:

*Gotta keep those loving good vibrations a-happening  
with her*

Mike Love's voice chants along with a pulsing base line, that heartbeat underlying the song, rising and rising like a beautiful wave to a wordless sound:

*Ahhhhhh!*

That was us as we stood there at thirteen, open-mouthed, holding hands, our eyes staring off into space, afraid to look at each other, afraid and yet filled with longing and amazement. That was the moment that caught us before we crashed back into adolescence and the exhilaration of the dance, whatever the dance might hold.

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Bob Dylan's *Blonde on Blonde* came out the same summer—1966—as *Pet Sounds*. Dylan had his motorcycle accident and disappeared for two years. The war escalated. Drug use intensified, and the music scene shifted radically.

Brian's intention was to shift right along—in fact, to ride out in front of the wave, even ahead of the Beatles, as he had done with *Pet Sounds*. Competition with them remained intense, and so that fall Brian was already thinking about the next album. “Designed to combine the divine and the dumb, an expression of Brian's heaven-sent music, outrageous sense of humor and belief in the healing power of laughter,” it was originally to be called *Dumb Angel* but this was subsequently changed to *Smile*. Brian explained

that he was “doing the spiritual sound...religious music. That's where I'm going...writing a teenage symphony to God.”

This was to be both deep and humorous music, a kind of compendium of Americana and (perhaps) of his own family's westward migration, filled with cowboy riffs, harmonicas and banjos, Old Hollywood clichés, commercials, 1950s harmonies, railroads, and Chinese immigrants all linked together through musical and verbal puns:

*Have you seen the Grand Coolie workin' on the railroad?*

Combining outright silliness and utter sublimity, *Smile* would be a huge and wonderful joke on America, on our obsession with heroes and villains. It would also, implicitly, be a declaration of musical independence, the logical next move after the elegy to adolescence that was *Pet Sounds*.

*Smile* combined everything Brian was reaching for: an innocence, a childlike quality joined with an utterly sophisticated musical sense and with lyrics that evoke more than tell; that move by indirection, humor, puns and pure sound. Consider, for example, the famous “Surf's Up.” Released first in 1971 in a cobbled-together version combining a number of different sections of *Smile* material, the song still gives some idea of the complexity, the humor, and the pathos of what the Beach Boys were trying to do—which, put simply, was to grow up.

Rising out of a baroque set of lyrics, evoking Victorian nostalgia more than California sunshine (*Carriage across the fog/Two-step to lamp lights cellar tune*), the song culminates in a place of great simplicity and sadness:

*Surf's up, umhmm  
Aboard a tidal wave  
Come about hard and join  
the young and often spring you gave  
I heard the word  
wonderful thing  
a children's song*

There's an *awareness* here: a knowledge of loss, of change, of time. And this knowledge in turn makes possible a kind of resurrection. In the end, the Beach Boys

decided not to simply go on with the surfing songs, but to take the very stuff out of which their careers had been built and *celebrate* it in a kind of homage that simultaneously looks back and moves forward into a far deeper understanding of what the surfing image might mean to them as adults. “Surf’s Up” then earns the right to its ending quotation of a line by William Wordsworth, for it inhabits exactly this same territory—finding strength in what remains behind:

*The Child is father of the Man...*<sup>5</sup>

\* \* \*

Beach Boys’ biographer Timothy White writes:

In the sixteen months after his 1964 breakdown on the plane, Brian had experienced two more episodes of nervous collapse during which concepts of God and prayer took on greater, albeit undogmatic, meaning.... As he withdrew further from the Beach Boys and depended on [Marilyn, his wife] to ground him again after periodic descents into chronic dope smoking and LSD trips, the open “God Only Knows” question of where he would find himself without her support became a fearful mantra in the back of his mind.<sup>6</sup>

Of *Smile*, White writes:

No Beach Boys album had ever had more advance publicity, and the appetite it whetted among eager fans for a full-length epic the equal of “Good Vibrations” was tremendous. Some devotees even tried calling the pressing plants to obtain an early copy.<sup>7</sup>

But on May 6, 1967, just weeks before the release of *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, Derek Taylor, a

former Beatles associate who was now handling the Beach Boys’ publicity, wrote in a column that “every beautifully-designed, finely-wrought, inspirationally-welded piece of music made these last months by Brian...has been scrapped.”<sup>8</sup>

In June, Janis Joplin, Otis Redding, Ravi Shankar, The Who, Buffalo Springfield, The Byrds, Laura Nyro, and Jimi Hendrix performed for fifty thousand people at the Monterey Pop Festival, inaugurating the Summer of Love. The Beach Boys, who were scheduled for Saturday night, decided at the last minute to cancel. Still performing in pinstriped shirts, they feared they might get booed.

As Bruce Johnston (Brian’s touring replacement) summed it up, “for the next five years they would be thought of as ‘surfing Doris Days.’”

\* \* \*

Lyric occurs in emptiness: a particular gesture locates itself exactly in a particular emptiness....

It is vision rooted in the preciousness, the losability, of the world.<sup>9</sup>

Showing up in 1968, the Beach Boys’ album *Friends*, even more than Bob Dylan’s *John Wesley Harding* (which marked his return that same year), felt like an intentional anticlimax. It took the very idea of climax (and thus the idea of rock and roll itself, built as it is on climax) and subverted it. It asked, *What do we even mean by climax? What are we after? What is this rock and roll hunger for?*

In its simplicity, *Friends* challenged the very energy that rock and roll creates and feeds on. It also implicitly challenged the energy that spun the war, that spun the revolts against the war, and that spun the technology that

<sup>8</sup> In 2004, Nonesuch Records released Brian Wilson Presents *Smile*, a well-received single CD version with *Smile* material rerecorded. And then, finally, in 2011, a five-CD box set finally surfaced (along with a two-CD version) with the original tapes in all of their strange and haunting glory. A detailed account can be found in Domenic Priore’s *Smile: The Story of Brian Wilson’s Lost Masterpiece* (London: Sanctuary Books, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> Zwicky, 128.

was created to wage the war and the drugs that were taken to escape the war.

It now seems clear that *Friends* and the forces of war represented distinctly opposite entities: heroes and villains.

Released in that year of assassinations, *Friends* peaked at number 126. And no wonder: in a time of such noise, who could hear such quietness? It seemed irrelevant, as did *20/20*, released a year later—the year of the moon landing, of Woodstock, and of Nixon in the White House. In this context, a song like “I Went To Sleep” (on *20/20*) was not likely to catch the national mood. Clocking in at just over a minute and a half, it’s a kind of ultimate Beach Boys’ nonstatement. Built on a simple, repetitive melody, led by a single flute playing over a quiet guitar and drums, the refrain “I Went to Sleep” could nonetheless be taken as a reaction to the American situation of 1969: an implied “I don’t want to deal with it.” Now, however, I hear it not as an escape from reality but as a return:

*I took a walk  
and sat down in the park  
gardener walked out and the sprinklers came on  
they watered the lawn  
and I went to sleep*

*10:30 I turned my radio on  
some group was playing a musical song  
it wasn’t too long  
and I went to sleep*

*Again at the park  
on a nice summer day  
high up above me the trees gently sway  
the bird flew away  
and I went to sleep*

We are watching time pass, things change—but with no anxiety, and with no attempt to alter the course of events. There is a kind of pure awareness here, a transparent presence. Even more than on Dylan’s *Nashville Skyline* (also from 1969), these songs not only defy the analytical process, they defy *all* dramatic process. Close to pure observation, almost nothing occurs in them (my favorite, from *Friends*, is aptly titled “Busy Doing Nothing”), which

is precisely the point. It’s as if we had driven all the way to the edge of the continent, stood there before the Pacific, and realized—not with angst or dread but with childlike freedom—that there truly was nowhere further to go.

\* \* \*

By the early 1970’s, The Beach Boys had come to reflect the struggles of a nation growing up in the midst of the war. Divorces were plentiful. Brian almost stopped making music, instead retiring to his bedroom, ballooning up to three hundred pounds, smoking up to five packs of cigarettes a day, and ingesting anything he could reach to get a quick rush. (A padlock was installed on the refrigerator at one point, and coffeepots were thrown away because Brian would put five tablespoons of instant coffee into a half cup of hot water and swallow it down in a gulp. His check-cashing privileges were removed to keep him from indulging in more potent illegal highs.)

By 1977, Dennis and his wife Karen were doing heroin together, leading to a lifelong struggle on Dennis’s part to avoid its lure. By this time, Brian (who’d gone with the group to Australia and returned in a state of near-disintegration) was still managing to obtain cocaine and barbiturates even while being watched constantly by three caretakers. One night, “on some untold mixture of drugs, Brian began to vomit in his sleep and would have choked to death if the sound had not awakened Marilyn. The next day he disappeared, got a lift to Mexico, hitchhiked back up to San Diego, and wandered around the city for days, barefoot and unwashed.”<sup>10</sup>

All of this behavior may seem like a huge departure from the spirit of the music associated with the Beach Boys—all of that sun and teenage innocence—but appearances deceive. Addiction, after all, is just another form of nostalgia:

*Love...Hi Rick and Dave,  
Hi Pop...good morning Mom  
Love, get up guess what  
I’m in love with a girl I found*

<sup>10</sup> Gaines, *Heroes and Villains*, 318-319.

*She's really swell  
because she likes church, bingo chances  
and old-time dances....*

*Oh reality, it's not for me,  
and it makes me laugh;  
fantasy world, and Disney Girls,  
I'm coming back.*

This (from 1971) isn't just nostalgia; it's full-scale regression. It is to the work of the soul what drowning is to surfing: an impulse to dive under the water and stay there.

\* \* \*

Nostalgia, the Jungian analyst Mario Jacoby writes, "is predicated on separation." In *Longing for Paradise*, he links nostalgia with "an unresolved parental tie," a desire to return to what never really was. We long for what is missing precisely because it is missing. Consider Brian Wilson's first truly personal song, "In My Room:"

*In this world I lock out all my  
worries and my fears  
in my room  
in my room.*

There's safety here, and comfort; the room substitutes in some way for mother, for lover and, ultimately, for God.

But paradise is always being lost. Losing paradise is the human condition: it's what growing up is all about. All of the loss, all of the sadness of these lives—Dennis's alcoholism and addictions and drowning, Brian's retreat to his bedroom, to food, to drugs—could be traced one way or another to this wounding, this longing, whose roots are in the spirit. We are moved by what we love, pulled by a kind of gravity towards this beauty, this truth we find in what we hear and see. It's a road. And always it asks: what are we to make of this? Where is it leading?

So, too, on a larger scale, could we say this of America, symbolized not just in the patriarchal Uncle Sam but in that maternal icon of liberty in New York's harbor, her torch lit, her raised arm calling out to the tired and poor. The very country is born of nostalgia. Why else is *Gatsby* one of our greatest touchstones? That green orgiastic light,

forever receding, is a precise metaphor for where nostalgia wrongly leads us. Wrongly, because of a mistaken assumption—an adolescent's assumption—that getting the right girl (the right house, land, job) will finally satisfy our hearts.

"Medicine may be bitter," the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh writes, "but it will possibly heal our sickness."<sup>11</sup> The medicine for nostalgia is a deeper nostalgia for a home without boundaries. This is what Dante discovers as he moves from his attraction for the beloved Beatrice to a vision of the divine Mother (and from there to the Trinity). It is what Dostoyevsky's Alyosha discovers as he throws himself upon Mother Earth and rises up a spiritual fighter.

Nostalgia involves, I suspect, a melting into the other, or more likely having the other melt into oneself, which is closer to a kind of narcissism. This same narcissism may lie behind the notion of America as a melting pot, as it is a desire to deny a real otherness, to *see* the other person, and instead to have that other vanish into me, into us: my race, my religion, my beliefs. Behind this lies a simple refusal to grow up.

*Oh reality, it's not for me* is the Beach Boys' siren song, indicating where in fact their work so often comes to a halt: in the face of time, of death, they are all too ready to retreat to Disneyland. Yet, as Thich Nhat Hanh has written, "Reality may be cruel, but to see things as they are will heal us."

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<sup>11</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Breathe, You Are Alive! Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing*. (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1988), 61.

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## POPPY DE GARMO

*Pescadero, 2009*  
digital image, 11 x 17 in



courtesy: the artist