

State and Carrillo



It could be an arts festival tableau or even a model railroad scene -- a street corner anywhere until you look closely at the two young men lounging beneath the argon street light.

Mounted on skateboards, they wear shapeless baggy trousers, True Religion camouflage fatigue jackets, and Ferragamo go-aheads - the uniform of coastal Southern California trust fund teens.

The illusion of lifelessness is intensified by the languor in their postures -- identical in slouch and attitude but worlds apart in impact. A fluke in the lighting perhaps, but the boy nearer the light seems more vulnerable than the casual arrogance he is trying to project.

A soft green-white tint from the coffee shop down the block interrupts the sharp shadows between streetlights, introducing a sense of menace. The indifference of the surrounding darkness, the apologetic softness of merchant lights, the lack of traffic along the downtown's two major thoroughfares, and the worthless sincerity of mindless

traffic signals cycling from green-to-amber-and-red in hypnotic regularity all weave themselves into a web of affluent despair.

Finally there's a slight movement -- more an undulation -- beneath the outer garments of the boy farthest from the corner. The traffic light turns green, and as if triggered by the same circuit, the boy whirls into a pirouette. Then another.

"There," the abruptness of his action seems to say, "Like to see one more?" After a bit, the other boy begins to nutate in resonance with the same unseen impulse. While the apex of his head remains steady, his body pivots back and forth as he bongs between the front and rear wheels, the distance defining the amplitude of the living pendulum. Suddenly, he too explodes into violent motion, the forward tip of his board spurting 60 degrees into the air before describing a series of circles whose locus is riveted three feet below the point at which the rear wheels meet the sidewalk.

The first boy watches quietly, perhaps to assess the radius of the arc, or more likely registering the tightness of the circle to determine whether or not it is necessary to respond to the challenge.

Satisfied with the exhibition, the dervish slams the board's nose down, returning it precisely to its starting point. At the very instant he comes to rest, his companion slides forward with deceptive ease, taps the tail of his board viciously on the concrete and vaults into the air. At mid-flight it seems he will clear the other board by several feet, but when he lands, his rear wheels crack down hard on the other's spoon-billed tip, catapulting it's occupant over the front and almost into the street. Without stopping, the assailant lets out a whoop, accelerates toward the side of the building and at the very last moment, levers the tail down sharply and steps off, leaving his board parked against the wall. Both boys hoot and clap in mutual appreciation.

Two girls, leggy and bubbling despite the evening chill, come out of the Coffee Bean, savoring a grand departure. Almost before they reach the sidewalk, the boys are mounted and weaving diagonally back and forth across the apex of the corner marking it as their territory. Hand-in-hand, caught up in the intricate patterns of the dance, the

girls jinx this way then that, squealing with excitement. It's only after achieving the sanctuary of the street that they turn on their tormentors shrieking derisive taunts before bounding off into the outer darkness flushed by the encounter.

Alone once again, they change their weave. Their movements become more subtle. Now in this momentary solitude they flirt with thresholds, extending themselves to their limits and beyond. Sensual yet innocent; artful yet guileless; seemingly oblivious to the world around them, they trace magic riffs between the lights and shadows. But all at once, yielding to some unseen signal, both boys draw up short, shedding all semblance of animation in one motion. It is as if they themselves had vanished, leaving hollow vessels as markers for their return.

Presently, two older boys -- larger and obvious masters of the turf -- slide into the light from the side-street darkness. Their passage is so swift and confident that if they notice the mannequin-boys they don't show it. It is simple and chance and without overt threat. Yet it's only after the intruders are safely gone that the boys renew their game.

Almost immediately another group, this time composed of six older and larger boys -- more outwardly menacing -- strut into the light, making purposefully for the corner. As before, the boys stop, but this time they hold their ground.

"Hi, bro," the two say in unison, smiling and nodding to no one in particular. Things are cool.

"Right on, dude," a chorus of replies come in a ragged volley as the group veers off like moths in pursuit of the green-white light. "Let's do us some wakeup sludge," the leader adds as if the thought just occurred, and the chorus chirps its sequenced "Yo!" in agreement.

All of this action -- the whole litany from start to finish -- has taken place in the space of four cycles of the traffic lights. During the next, the wind shifts to the night pattern, washing away the day's residue almost instantly, drawing an imaginary needle five ticks down the Fahrenheit scale. The crescent moon emerges above a three story building's

red-tiled rooftop, threading its way through a bank of alto-cumulus puff-balls bound for somewhere else.

A knit-capped night person emerges from his evening lair in a recessed doorway behind hedge-bound courtyard, slinking furtively to his nighttime hideaway among the low-lying shrubs bordering the plaza's southern flank. He halts and freezes for a moment as a burst of happy greetings comes from the Coffee Bean where the night manager reminds the newcomers that closing time is in five minutes. It is that moment of ends and beginnings when all things ache to become possible.