

Glen Erler: *Family Tree*

Text By Benedict Burbridge

Something that matters

Glen Erler's father moved to California in 1945. He was twelve, the depression had ended and the war showed signs of drawing to a close. His was a big Southern family, who made the move from Austin, Texas, to give Erler's grandfather a chance of finding some sort of work. Around the same time, Erler's mother moved to the same area from Georgia, Tennessee. Hers was a strict Christian family who settled with their strict Christian values in this hot, dry corner of the Golden State. A place of property and privacy and a certain sense of freedom, where every house had an orange tree and the long summer days stretched out into warm summer's evenings. This is the world in which Erler remembers growing up.

Erler left California for London in 1995, but his mother and his father and the rest of his family, and any number of the kids he used to know from school, had all remained close by. Roots had been laid there. Lives had been built. Years later, he went back to the area to make new work, photographing his family, along with those places and houses and fields and gardens he passed every day as a child growing up. He had stayed close to his family, had visited them regularly. There was no need to tell him that circumstances change. That hands get dealt and that, wisely or recklessly, cards get played. That, after all, is the name of the game. He had a family of his own now.

And still, in these spaces he revisited, these details he sought out, there seemed to remain the remembrance or traces of a childhood enjoyed and embraced, a tangible sense of how simple and joyful this game can be. Strange, upon returning, to experience these presences. The passage of time and a place unchanged. To sense and then to quietly follow that precious thread which somehow stitches past to present. To immerse yourself in that briefest of moments when the two come together, and to allow that exquisite and fragile continuity to wash over you.

It seemed, growing up, that almost every summer some place nearby was hit by a bush fire. The area was famous for it. Erler remembered watching the smoke rise as the distant flames made easy work of the crisp, dry vegetation. Just a year ago, the entire county was hit by the biggest blaze in decades, which the fire fighters struggled vainly against

for weeks. In some places you can still make out the charred remains of buildings and bushes and machinery.

The house where Erler grew up is still there. The first home he remembers, where he lived from the ages of five through twelve, until his parents split and he stayed, first of all with his mother and, after that, with his father, in a smaller apartment a few miles upstate. There's a wall now where the porch used to be, and the new owner put a driveway in a few years back. But the lemon tree still grows by the spot where, one Sunday morning, Erler's brother lost control of the mower and sliced off half a finger.

Erler's Aunt Holly still lives with her son Joel in the house where the family would gather to talk and to eat as the kids played baseball in the field out back. Her husband, Smitty, died a few years back, so Joel moved home to look out for his mother. Joel never married. He went to Vietnam and saw some things so now he lives in the old house with his mother. Their days follow a familiar routine, which makes its own kind of sense in its own kind of way.

Joel's sister, Dinah, who was kind of a rebel, lived in that same house on and off for most of her life. Going away and coming back to stay in her old room in the garage, until the drugs led to AIDS, back at a time when people were still learning what it was that that meant. She returned then, to her room in the garage, so her mother could care for her. The last time Erler saw her he was in his twenties and he could tell she was high. They stood by the drinking fountain in the courtyard of the church and she showed him her yellow fingernails. Dinah's brothers planted a tree at the front of the house on the day of her funeral.

The market in Valley Center is empty now. Its metal shutters closed for the last time what seems like years back. But the developers and the planners haven't moved in yet. The locals view these outsiders with an understandable suspicion; this need some people feel to rebuild, to pave over. Though they understand, too, that perhaps it's just a matter of time. Erler and his friends used to park their motorcycles outside the shop after school and drink soda and fool around before heading off together to scale the fence to the baseball field. Here they would stay until the

light finally faded, a group of kids intent on taking the summer evening for every last pitch, every last swing, it had to offer. Then, with dry mouths and warm faces, they would make their way home through the thick, warm night. The field and the fence and the backstop all remain, quiet shrines to simple times.

Erler has an eye for photography. He understands the way the play of light and shadow and a certain understated framing can help us to recognize something, something that matters. Roots that have spread and memories which linger. A past that stretches out into the present like long summer days into warm summer evenings. Pitch after pitch. Swing after swing. It's not a bad life, after all. ■

Glen Erler is a photographer who lives in London. To view more of his work visit glenerler.com.

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Oranges. Valley Center, Ca.

Most houses round Valley Center had some sort of citrus tree. We lived next to an orange grove and would often walk from our back door to the grove and eat oranges until our lips were red from having too many. On summer days we would ride our motorcycles through local orange groves and stop and talk and eat oranges and joke around.



Spot where my dad's dad was found. Del Mar, Ca.

This is a photo of where my dad's father was found dead just across the street from where he lived until he was thirteen. My dad's mother died a month before his father. My dad and his four brothers and a sister moved out and basically lived on their own from this point.



Logan laying by the pool. Vista, Ca.

Logan is the son of my niece Coral, who is the daughter of my oldest brother Joe. This picture was taken in the middle of a heat wave. The temperature went from 62 to 92 in just a few hours and remained over 100 for five days straight.



Weeds. Valley Center, Ca.

My dad and I had a motorcycle crash one summer day when I was eight—we ended up in this spot. I was wearing a bathing suit and nothing else and I jumped off just before hitting the asphalt. My dad stayed with the bike and ended up with concussion. I remember standing in the road trying to wave someone down to help but no one would stop. I still remember the look on this man's face as he drove by. We had to walk to the first house we could find and ask to use their phone to call my mom.



Blue towel by a hole, Valley Center, Ca.

I visited my cousin one day and found this blue towel laying by a hole in the ground in a clearing surrounded by orange trees. When I asked her what it was doing there, she told me that her daughter Hannah had been using it to sunbathe. It brought back memories of how simple life can be and was during this time of my life. There was a certain freedom involved. We kind of made things work. If you wanted to find some shade, you went to a tree and sat underneath it or went inside the house. If you wanted the sun and some privacy, you would lay down a towel by a hole in the ground in a clearing surrounded by orange trees.



Dead Man's Rock. Valley Center, Ca.

Every year or so, someone would get drunk and forget to turn right or stop and then smash into this rock. It was at the end of the road that leads up to our house in Valley Center.



Lounge chairs and window. Oceanside, Ca.

This is the back of my brother Joe's house. One summer day when Joe was on vacation, me and my brother Frank broke in with two girls who I kind of knew from school. I had sex for the first time in the room behind this window. My brother Frank ended up marrying the girl he was with that day.



Baseball backstop. La Mesa, Ca.

The same backstop we used to play at when our family gatherings were at my Aunt Holly's house more than thirty years ago.



My Aunt Holly holding a picture of her daughter Dinah in the shadow of Dinah's Tree. La Mesa, Ca.

Holly is my aunt on my mom's side. The entire side of my mom's family moved out to Southern California from Georgia and Tennessee and were raised in a very strict Christian household. Dinah was one of the first to rebel. She became a drug addict and died of AIDS in the late eighties. My Aunt Holly has never been the same.