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CALIFORNIOS
SPRING ★ 2014

CALIFORNIOS

A Review from the Ends of the Earth

Volume 2 ★ Spring 2014

Editor ★ Timothy E. G. Bartel
Co-Editor ★ Jonathan Diaz

ISSN ★ 2326-523X

Californios, which takes its name from the Spanish word for the historical residents of California, is a quarterly, online review that seeks to promote quality writing about California and by Californios. We hope to do this by providing a forum for new writing imbued with verve, care, and Californio mythos.

Subscriptions: To subscribe to *Californios*, email the editor at californioseditor@gmail.com Subscription to *Californios* is free, though we do accept donations; to donate, contact the editor.

Submissions: *Californios* welcomes submissions of poetry, short fiction, and creative non-fiction, as well as reviews of California-based art, media, and literature. Address all submissions and queries to the editor at californioseditor@gmail.com.

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Editorial

Timothy E.G. Bartel

With Spring 2014, *Californios* Review celebrates its fifth full issue since its inception in early 2012. Five issues is a blip on the radar screen of periodical history, but we're proud, nonetheless, to have kept adrift this long. The idea for *Californios* Review emerged, if I recall correctly, in conversation between Jonathan Diaz and I during a long walk through the city of Edinburgh. Edinburgh is, of course, very far away from California, but as both Jonathan and I are California natives who were studying abroad in the UK, it is, perhaps, unsurprising that we were thinking of home as we walked over the bridges and the ancient stone. As is no doubt the original goal of all editors, we envisioned *Californios* as a literary review that printed things we liked to write, especially the things we liked to write about California, but saw too little of in print. In particular, we felt that California's history—especially before the rise of Hollywood, when Southern California became the center of storytelling in America—possessed untapped mythos, a mythos clinging in the bear-branded flag, the Spanish language, the native tribes, the Catholic saints, the displaced immigrants, the soil itself.

Further, as we were unemployed students, we decided that a print journal was simply unfeasible. So we turned to the web, where self-publishing costs only sweat and time. I, for one, admit to a deep distrust of putting writing online, where the wide white margins of the printed page are traded for borders laden with advertisements that choke the row of words that's dropped between them. Sonnets barely breathe as it is: why suffocate

them more by putting them on a website? With a healthy distrust of the web, we decided to make e-book style copies of each issue, so we could have complete control over what was, and wasn't, on each page.

So we set out, first publishing pieces by writers whose work we knew and loved and trusted, then opening up submissions to the public on the web. Here and there kindred writers found us, and we've built up a small little archive of work that we're proud to have published. This new issue is no exception. We've expanded our featured art forms to photography; in the issue you'll find photographs by Andrew Oxenham, some of which have such a California Beat-era vibe to them that I'm almost convinced Jack Kerouac or Gary Snyder had just stepped out of frame before they were taken.

We also feature a series of poems called "Wanderers" by Elena Johnston, wherein the poet applies Fibonacci sequences to the syllable counts of her lines, rendering her poems about the Golden State mathematically "golden." And while in our first few issues we reviewed forgotten classics from California's past, in this issue we focus on California's present, highlighting two of the state's most exciting established writers, Dana Gioia and Héctor Tobar.

Thank you for reading and supporting *Californios* Review. We hope to continue bringing you new writing from our little place at the ends of the earth.

THE EDITOR

Wanderers: Luna

Elena Johnston

Truth
pours
golden
as whiskey
stings until your throat
is numb. By morning light your head
throbs blunt and simple.
Spirits burn
a clear
blue
flame.

The 14th Week

Jon Bartel

And then beating the opossum with the 2x4 swung up and
over the head in full extension of rib cage rattling exhale breath
with the downward arc a gut retch a vomit of every shot vessel
in her eyes that day slumped in the yard cradling the never hardened
tiny bump belly rocking nothing now and knowing it maybe having
known it for a while repeating silent the songs she's sung for months folding
the little clothes remembering the first one in them chubby ankled and
alive present physical but then her in the grass and me climbing off the motorcycle
covered in the mud of reckless 80 mph mouth open screaming yeah of course
but what else you gonna do riding home from that morgue of a doctor's
office landscape blurring by like fuzzy peaks and valleys of an empty
desert ultrasound and now

this opossum's bones snapping with each blow
and sometimes the board missing and sticking in bloodfroth mud as the little
smashed body writhes out the way on accident the nude tail bent like old
braided cable clicking faint as it twitches and the little leaking blueberry eyeballs
out their sockets opaque in moonglare and with one more swing pulverized
and the 2x4 dropped the hands paralyzed still in the form of grip cut with
splinters and my breath dense and choking in the blackfrost march night air
and the next day the roof goes on the coop nail by driven nail in silence broke only
by splatter juice tobacco spit from still grit teeth and the little chicks pecking around
the ladder feet unaware of course the near death of the night before
needle teeth and carrion tongue watered and waiting just above the new-framed walls

while they all warm and catatonic snuggled together knitting new feathers and
would not be here if I hadn't come out to check and caught him on the fence about
to pounce and pulling the knife leapt forward
and buried it in his side

Oh you don't fuck with anything newborn or unborn now cause it's all her rocking in that
grass rocking rocking all I could see was the rocking and this creature with the exposed
hunger bleeding then from the gash and the blade dropped in the second stab and the close
call with the incisors swung around and gnashed just outside fingertips
so the 2x4 offcut grabbed and brought down with all the fury of nature across
the spine splitting it in two instantly and then the rest and the next day between
each hammer blow stopping to eye the blood sprashed across the chain link
the smear on the concrete and then the pool still drying in the bed of the truck
knowing somewhere down by the Salinas the mangled carcass beginning to swell and
outgas where the ribs protrude

and smiling grim to myself watch her walk across the lawn
holding in her hand a tiny dense heart-shaped flesh lump like a steak saying
she came out
and taking it in my filthy hands
and kissing it once

Wanderers: Venus

Elena Johnston

Who
can
measure
the wastelands
between all the worlds
that are, and the ones that are not?
To see the starlight is to feel the strangling abyss.
Snuff them all with electric bulbs.
Aphrodite's star
is always
the last
one
out.

Portfolio
Andrew Oxenham

Andrew Oxenham. **Able**. 2013. Digital photograph

Andrew Oxenham. **Sunflower**. 2013. Digital Photograph

Andrew Oxenham. **BBall Looking Up**. 2013. Digital Photograph

Andrew Oxenham. **Lonely Hoops**. 2013. Digital Photograph

Fragment: Soft In My Ways

Christian Bearup

Those men working under Jay Walker come up from Havana, come up from Monclova, men with cigarillo hands and tragic shoes whose language is the discourse of untaxed labor under libertarians like Jay, Jay who owned a cannery in Port Isabel since his father died and his mother went down to live in the madhouse where there is no grace for the saints.

I was twenty-two and soft in my ways, back in the days when my father was still living alone in the suburb of my youth. Then in those days Jay Walker beckoned me towards the cannery he hated but kept for the money though no one there could talk to him in the English of his rearing, and he confessed that left him feeling some kind of outcast in that space he dominated, when all he might want was to say work instead of trabajar, bread instead of pan, and hear it said the same.

I turned him down and said Sometime Jay Walker as I still believed I had some destiny with hard labor while I'm young, such as would bend my head down with the dusty nobility from Havana and Monclova them tragic saints who put our white-collar gods to shame in this season where the true saints all hail from old pueblos that sweep them like a dry desert wind, sending them up to humid places down in Texas and the South.

No saint ever came from the suburbs because the suburbs are still-life and they choke the life out of you like a fetus roped by its own cord, and if you're gonna get out you gotta cut your own cord, an act of violence that everybody's got to do to himself if he's gonna

break out, and everybody here we gotta break out, gotta find hard work—we gotta go South.

There's some men—I'm thinking of these rural whites I know who pocket their own makings—some men that have taken to life in such deep ways that makes the crest of their brows look like heavy brims that plummet into eyeball chasms, that weathers their cheeks until their cheeks are the color of their country's dust, their bodies like landscapes to match their landscapes as if to say they know better than you because they know they're made of America's dust, and that flesh was never made to blossom because flesh is a desert topography. As for me and as for my family, our flesh is soft and has never been so mortified, and it never will be I'll bet.

I was, as I now remain, a non-saint from an LA suburb, where I left my father under some illusion of striking out for myself in a hard and humid world in which I'd be transfigured like any man of destiny, only to hear from a man like Jay who offered me salvation and tell him Someday Jay Walker, and sit on my hands and wait for destiny to pick me up, because though I wanted to travel I had no heart for work because it was my father who worked, my father who was trapped in his suburban slumber and saw nothing beyond what work could buy him, and what work bought him was the echo of a postwar paradise that chokes us all who never fought a war.

Deep in the Southpart country—back when I first went to one of the Carolinas, and I don't know which—I met a man in black and a little older than me, and him submerged to his knees in the shining crystal of the creek, a preacher unlike any I'd meet in LA but you hear of in the backwoods of the unsanctified South: a true prophet named Tobit after a book that's not in his Testament but he knew as a student of hagiography and myth, a man of some books, removed from the labor force cause he's taken up some mystic task that will take up his whole life. He was calling to a crowd on the shore after having baptized their little ones, and he was asking now was there anybody with affliction of soul as the Lord would want to consume him by the heat of a fire he said was mystic and invisible, less the

Lord would have it otherwise. He had to say this cause God don't work like fireworks. His arms went wide like pale ash branches and he asked for a third or fourth time now was there anybody who wanted to burn in mystical fire and kindle like he'd been kindling since a time when God saved him from contact with some devil in the past, and it was a devil of lust. But them on the shore weren't saying anything. Perhaps they didn't understand the question because it seemed like an abstract question, because what's an affliction to your soul when your mind's bent daily on bodily tasks, on turning your terrain until you've pocketed your makings and so doing are made honest and good. Least that's what I thought they thought, and I think I was right.

When there had been silence long enough to create a spirit of shame I raised my voice in the accent of LA and told Tobit I loathed my father and his suburban slumber (and these were the days when my speech was clipped), saying such as that he was the son of a soldier, and that he talks large about war heroism, and that he talks that way like good jobs and food and suburbia are all owed to war heroism, and all this though he's never fought a war.

And so there's hypocrisy (my mouth's still running), hypocrisy and I want nothing more of it or its gifts so I left, right, I left and he hates me for leaving, as if he'd tether me to suburbia with these pretenses and these sentiments, as if that was any kind of honesty in life.

And I could have gone on but for Tobit who told me to shut up, and shifted like a sleepwalker through the creek. Shut up.

When he'd come from the water I saw his ash arms wrench a low-hanging bough from a black tree that nursed a sickness in its unread rings. I feared for that he'd beat me with it and hell he rose like the skeleton of a bear and came swinging, looking so much the part of a man raptured into a satanic rage that the sons and the daughters he'd baptized were seeding the bank with their petrified tears, though their fathers watched like wolves. I lurched back before the whistle of the mace as it cracked in his fists and scattered its bark in popping flakes. Tobit was flashing in his eyes and on his skin under the sun as it lit upon us Gentiles. I backed against the trunk of an elm tree and held up a hand that was as pale as his

own, but he tanned it with a penal clout that rocketed an explosive sound throughout the wood and made the children howl as he rose like a giant to instill in me the nausea of fear, and roared that I spoke shamefully of them that are dead.

He left me nursing lesions made black from the charcoal cudgel and beckoning blood, and I didn't know what he meant when he spoke of them that are dead, for my father was alive and living in a suburban slumber. But then I couldn't ask Tobit what he meant because Tobit was gone, and the men by the bank were taking their children away, and not once did they cover their eyes.

I got up and found a main road that took me to a gas station with a pay phone. I called home. My father answered, and I hung up. It don't make sense, I thought, and went inside to see about some alcohol and gauze. They sold some and I bought some and holed up somewhere and patched up my wounds. Rough place. Cuts seemed to hurt more here than back home. I said it was owing to the South's wet air. In reflecting, I'm not sure that made sense. Anyhow it's what I said, and when I'd patched up I went back indoors and asked after someplace to stay. They gave me a number, and I went back to the pay phone to ask for a room, only on accident I call my father again, and again I hear him say hello. I don't hang up. I don't even say hi. I just stand there for a while and hear him keep saying hello, someone there.

Sooner or later he's hung up, and me, I've walked away.

Wanderers: Terra

Elena Johnston

Dry
grass
glitters;
molten sun
plating the contours
of undulating hills. Under
them Earth's blood once pulsed
hot and bright
in rich
gold
veins.

Heir to the Argument

Elena Johnston

> "Well then," said Cephalus, "I hand down the argument to you,
> for it's already time for me to look after the sacrifices."
> – *The Republic of Plato* 331d, trans. Allan Bloom

Polemarchus, you and I bowed low
beneath the precious weight of argument,
remember Cephalus before he went,
smiling light with pride and trust aglow,
sure we'd prove the things we ought to know,
sure we'd straighten out the things he'd meant,
but now beneath their force, we too are bent,
and you and I can neither stay nor go.

O my father, stay a while and hold
my questions in the terror of the light.
Tell me that the things that I've been told
will still seem true when I can see aright.
Or, enter with me back into the womb,
that faith may be reborn from this bleak tomb.

Silence

Jesse Cone

Speak, and I will listen
for you speak silence
from the mouth while
the flesh in womb contracted,
like a fist, a microscopic
mass of meat and nerves

to batter down death
through three days of silence
and a heartbeat.

Héctor Tobar: A Review

Rebecca Card-Hyatt

Héctor Tobar. *The Tattooed Soldier*. New York: Penguin, 2000.

Héctor Tobar. *Translation Nation*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2005.

Héctor Tobar. *The Barbarian Nurseries*. New York: Picador, 2012.

In 2006, Héctor Tobar, a journalist with *The Los Angeles Times*, wrote an article about a day laborer, Fidel Chicas, who took a developer to court over refusal to pay back salary. He won his claim, but at the time of the article had spent months following his former employer in order to collect his due.

This is the sort of story that Héctor Tobar, a child of Guatemalan immigrants and a Los Angeles native, likes to tell. He finds and weaves together themes central to the 21st-century California experience while at the same time linking this moment in time to a larger American history. We see the tenacity of an individual, the economic plight of an immigrant and the self-respect of a new American fighting for his rights. In telling Fidel's story, among others, Tobar encourages us to consider the complicated relationship between communities, individuals, and a changing cultural landscape.

Héctor Tobar began writing for the *The Los Angeles Times* over twenty years ago. His coverage of the 1992 LA riots as a part of the Pulitzer prize winning team provided the background for his first novel, *The Tattooed Soldier*. After earning his MFA in Creative Writing at University of California, Irvine, he returned to the paper and spent years traveling as the Buenos Aires bureau chief, the Mexico City bureau chief, and the national Latino Affairs correspondent. This later post allowed Tobar to travel throughout Latin America and the US and provided him with the impetus to write his first nonfiction book: *Translation Nation*.

In *Translation Nation*, as well as in his *Times* articles, Tobar considers the

phenomenon of expanding Latin American immigration, both to California and the Southwest, but also to the midwest and southern United States. Tobar wants to understand what has changed since his own childhood in Los Angeles—why, for example, the carefully maintained neighborhood school of his elementary years is now a rarity. His investigations lead him, among other places, from small villages in Mexico to meat packing factories, trying to understand what makes people leave home. Tobar unashamedly assumes that this current wave of immigration ought to be considered in the same breath as the waves of immigration that are, to us young Americans, ancient history. Instead of a political crisis, he sees this movement as a natural part of our ongoing history.

The power of Tobar's stories, both fiction and non-fiction, comes from his attention to the individual. In his novels, he sits with one or two characters, considering carefully their past, present, and future and exploring how these both conflict and unite with a society that grows and changes around them. *The Tattooed Soldier* overlays the tragic history of two Guatemalans with the chaos of a city about to erupt into riots. Tobar considers homelessness, trauma, and the particular injustice of having no political voice.

The Barbarian Nurseries expands our vision from specific neighborhoods of inner-city Los Angeles to a larger southern California experience, opening the story of Araceli, a Mexican maid, and her employers, the Torres-Thompsons, in the wilds of an Orange County gated community. Tobar argues throughout the journeys and miscommunications of the story that cultural and social divisions run deep; it is difficult to actually see people who are different from us. Our physical landscape is segregated enough that we are able to go about our lives without interacting with the bits we'd rather not. He writes:

> *On those trips they had glided over the heart of Los Angeles, traveling near the tops of its palm trees, driving to museums and parks that were somewhere on the other side of a vast grid of stucco buildings and asphalt strips that stretched as far as one could see into the haze.*

Here, Tobar asks us to be honest with ourselves. How have our freeways blinded us? Whose histories are we overlooking when we pass a stranger in the street? Have our neighborhoods invited us into our neighbors' lives or forced us away from them? What are we missing when we blithely go about our lives in Los Angeles or San Antonio or Miami?

Tobar asks us to wake up and look around, lest the country move on without us.

Dana Gioia's Critical Advocacy

Timothy E.G. Bartel

Dana Gioia. *The Catholic Writer Today*. Milwaukee: Wiseblood Books, 2014.

Dana Gioia. *Disappearing Ink: Poetry at the End of Print Culture*. Saint Paul: Greywolf, 2004.

Dana Gioia. *Can Poetry Matter?* Saint Paul: Greywolf, 1992.

This winter I had the opportunity to hear the California poet and critic Dana Gioia read and speak at a creative writing conference at Houston Baptist University. Gioia was fresh from publishing a new, long essay, titled "The Catholic Writer Today," and riding high on controversy. This is something Gioia does every decade or so: he publishes a critical essay diagnosing an inequality or inattentiveness in American literary culture, and then sits back and watches everyone argue. He did it in 1991 with "Can Poetry Matter?"—a well-checkup of American poetry that ended with a strong recommendation that US poets emerge from their free verse, lyric myopia, or die. He did it again in 1998 with "Fallen Western Star," an elegy for the once great literary culture of San Francisco. The ensuing critical controversy caused such a ruckus that in 2001 a volume of selected backlash was published under the title *The "Fallen Western Star" Wars*.

Gioia's latest essay, "The Catholic Writer Today," was published in December 2013 in the catholic-leaning magazine *First Things*. In it, Gioia is up to his old tricks: Catholic writers, he argues, used to be a literary force to be reckoned with. Gioia brings O'Connor, Percy, and even the early Robert Lowell to his aid, asking whether today's literary heavyweights could take Catholicism as seriously as they took it, and, consequently, if the reading public could take such a religious seriousness seriously. While Gioia's own Catholicism (he was raised in a Mexican-Italian household in Los Angeles) was surely part of his motivation for both the subject and the insight of this latest essay, it is interesting to read it as the latest example of an ongoing mission of Gioia-as-critic: the advocacy of the overlooked. Of the three essays already mentioned, the first two—"Can Poetry Matter?" and "Fallen Western Star"—form the centerpieces of his two published books of criticism: *Can Poetry Matter?* and *Disappearing Ink*. And these volumes are filled with a criticism of advocacy. *Can Poetry Matter?* includes essays that advocate, among other things, narrative poetry, traditional formal verse, and the work of the once-renowned California poet Robinson Jeffers. In each essay, Gioia explores the previous ascendance, and even dominance, of each subject, before showing the downfall of the subject and its current state of almost-total eclipse. *Disappearing Ink* carries on this tradition of critical advocacy, including, in addition to "Fallen Western Star," essays on Longfellow (that arch-example of fallen poetic stock), Rexroth, and William Everson.

It would be easy to misread Gioia as a doomsayer, a weary self-proclaimed prophet cursing the contemporary at every turn and longing for an impossible-to-recover past full of formal verse and former masters. But this would be to overlook both Gioia's hope and Gioia's practicality. Take, as an example of the latter, the final paragraphs of "Can Poetry Matter?" In them, Gioia writes:

> If I, like Marianne Moore, could have my wish, and I, like Solomon, could have the self-control not to wish for myself, I would wish that poetry could again become a

> part of American public culture. I don't think this is impossible. All it would require is that poets and poetry teachers take more responsibility for bringing their art to the public. I will close with six modest proposals for how this dream might come true. (22)

These six proposals are detailed and eminently accomplishable. They include guidelines for the poet who gives a reading: "spend part of every program reciting other people's work" (22); for the editors of anthologies: "be scrupulously honest in including only poems [you] genuinely admire" (23); and for arts administrators: "avoid the standard subculture format of poetry only.… use radio to expand the art's audience" (22–23).

This hope and practicality has remained part of Gioia's critical work since the early '90s, and shows up at the end of "The Catholic Writer Today":

> The Catholic writer really needs only three things to succeed: faith, hope, and ingenuity. . . . [The] third element has nothing to do with religion. The Muse is no Calvinist. She does not believe that faith alone justifies the artist. The writer needs good works—good literary ones. The goal of the serious Catholic writer is the same as that of all real writers—to create powerful, expressive, memorable works of art. (31–33)

If early on in Gioia's advocacy essays everything looks rather dark, then in their conclusions the future can look quite bright indeed:

> The renewal of Catholic literature will happen—or fail to happen—through the efforts of writers. Culture is not an intellectual abstraction. It is human energy expressed through creativity, conversation, and community. Culture relies on individual creativity to foster consciousness, which then becomes expanded and refined through

> critical conversation. These exchanges, in turn, support a community of shared values. The necessary work of writers matters very little unless it is recognized and supported by a community of critics, educators, journalists, and readers. The Communion of Saints is not only a theological concept, it is the model of vibrant Catholic literary culture. (34–35)

This kind of guarded optimism fits well with Gioia's evolving model of criticism that advocates the overlooked. He begins with a lost "golden age" when his subject was a good and was recognized as such, he chronicles the fall of that subject in the eyes of culture, but then he concludes with a hope that the fall could be reversed, if only a remedy would be sought. It is hard to avoid calling such a critical method itself "Catholic."

And to call Gioia's method "Catholic" is to follow his own definition of the word:

> There is no singular and uniform Catholic worldview, but nevertheless it is possible to describe some general characteristics that encompass both the faithful and the renegade among the literati. Catholic writers tend to see humanity struggling in a fallen world. They combine a longing for grace and redemption with a deep sense of human imperfection and sin. . . . Nature is sacramental, shimmering with signs of sacred things. Indeed all reality is mysteriously charged with the invisible presence of God. Catholics also perceive suffering as redemptive, at least when borne in emulation of Christ's passion and death. Catholics also generally take the long view of things—looking back to the time of Christ and the Caesars, while also gazing forward toward eternity. (10)

Gioia is a critic with a long view, a critic who knows and shows the myriad falls of poets, of critics, of cultures, of self. But he is a critic full of hope, though he may agree with Tolkien that the hope of eucatastrophe is "a fool's hope." He is also, let us not forget, a

Californio through and through, who seldom has this West coast out of view. Whether it is American poetry or Catholic literature, Gioia's hope is hope for California, a uniquely American and uniquely Catholic place. The fact that Gioia is here, on this coast, accomplishing his good works is, to borrow again from Tolkien, "an encouraging thought."

Contributors

Jon Bartel teaches Comp/Rhet at Cal Poly State University, SLO, where he received his MA in English Literature in 2009. He lives on a half-acre off HWY 41 in Atascadero, California, with his wife and two sons. His poetry is generally written as a challenge to the reader as much as to himself; he maintains that poetry is a thing of the low gut, an act of violence against the past in which the constructions of the writer's own history are atrocitized and trotted out again and again, sometimes missing limbs, for snapshots and handshakes, if any hands are left. His poems deal almost entirely with events he believes to be true.

Christian Bearup is a senior English student at Biola University, and a perpetual member of the Torrey Honors Institute. He spent a term at Oxford University, studying Shakespeare, Modern Literature, and Southern fiction's unique relationship with Hebrew literature. He sojourns in the suburbs of So Cal, where he was born.

Rebecca Card-Hyatt is native southern Californian who was raised by an urban planner and a traffic engineer to love both the land and the stuff we build on it. She received her English BA from Biola University in 2007. After teaching English to public high school students in Los Angeles for several years, she has (temporarily) relocated to Edinburgh, Scotland, to do the same. She occasionally writes for *The Junia Project* and *Wheatstone Writes*.

Jesse Cone lives in a little house on a Californian hill. He is a student employed as a teacher where he tries to have thoughtful conversations with the help of good books. Fortunate to be a husband and father, he tries to harmonize his words and deeds.

Elena Johnston is a poet, music teacher, and homeschooling mama of six. Originally from the red-rock canyon lands of Arizona, she has studied flute performance and great books at Biola University and the Torrey Honors Institute. She and her husband Andrew currently live in Houston, Texas, where they are raising their family and dreaming big dreams about math education. Elena's poetry blog, "I Think, Therefore Iambic Pentameter" can be found at http://thereforeiambic.blogspot.com.

Andrew Oxenham is a coffee aficionado and weekend adventurer who grew up and currently dwells in Los Angeles, California. His constant struggle is to see and capture the nooks and crannies of everyday life in interesting and appealing ways. When he's not working, writing, and photographing things, he can most often be found Tweeting pithy thoughts during TV shows, or drinking coffee.