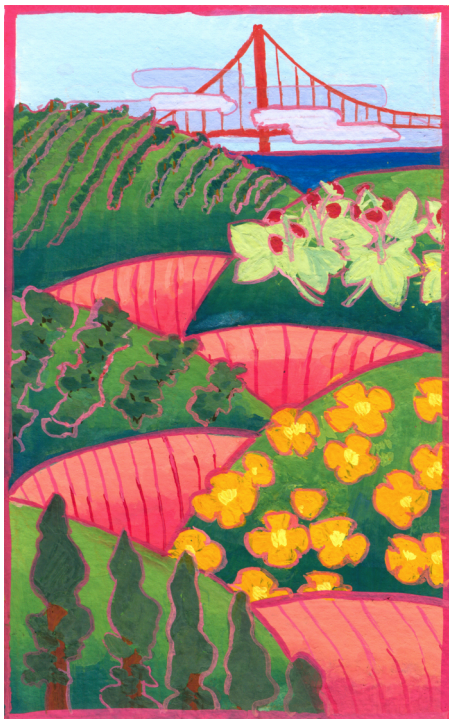




Giant Worm Story

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On July 18th, 2024, we awoke to find route 101 had been replaced by a giant worm.

There was little of value to say about this. It was clear to rational observers that no scientific cause could be attributed to such a thing. Nonetheless, from exit 362 to 433, from San Jose to Fisherman's Wharf, where once had been asphalt, now stretched 80 miles of taut, soft worm flesh.

That is not to say there was no cause for alarm. Instantaneously the heart of the road network was blocked, and every ventricle of side street was clogged with commuters, redirected toward the fastest non-worm route. Quiet suburbs were flooded with blaring car horns and rust-colored fumes.

Every street, no matter how residential, was plundered in the sweet, sweet promise of destination.

The chaos, of course, would not be allowed to last. A state of emergency was declared, though there was much debate over exactly what qualified as essential travel. Eventually the matter was settled by means of the national guard issuing traffic tickets via helicopter--until the roads were sufficiently cleared for the local police to resume their typical activities.

The congestion issue thus fined into compliance, the focus then turned to the long term. Though the area was riddled with long snakes of alternative routes, the loss of such a major avenue meant only the most vital transportation could feasibly be allowed, or the system would collapse back into eternal gridlock. Food, drink, emergency services was all the meager network could support. The transportation of people to fulfill those services would have

to be filled as best as possible locally, and when they could not, would have to be grouped in batches—aka buses.

It was, of course, no small matter to adjust. Livelihoods upended. Families separated. Two-day shipping a dream of the past. But there was no disputing the existence of the giant worm of 101 and eventually, life in the bay area began to adapt.

With fewer vehicles through the lifeline of the remaining route 280 came fewer places these vehicles were willing to go. 18-wheelers dropped off their hauls of non-perishable supplies at the densest population centers and then moved on to the next. Over time, the population drifted ever closer to these centers. Then, having nowhere else to go, the people began to improve their surroundings--demolishing parking lots for parks and cafes, replacing office buildings with apartments, finding new ways to fulfill the less desperate needs of their new

neighbors, like arts and entertainment.

There was an urge, however, that remained unslaked: dietary variety. Shelf-stable rations kept the population fed, but had the tendency to taste a little like its namesake--i.e. like a shelf. Fresh fruit and vegetables were a rare luxury on the ever-full caravan of the remaining network. This quickly priced them out of the reach of everyone except the exceptionally wealthy, who had all largely abandoned the bay area anyway. While pill bottle vitamins covered the nutritional deficiencies, they did nothing for the psychological ones. Eventually though, a solution emerged, from the worm itself.

It was hard to notice. At first the worm was awash in attention--from national news to tiktok and everything in between, crowds pressing at the barricades erected by the government to keep vehicles and pedestrians off of its sensitive and potentially dangerous flesh. But, once its biological functions were

adequately documented, the barriers rapidly fell into decay as the government dismissed the worm as neither dangerous nor convenient enough to remove. At that point, due to its sheer scale, almost anyone with an interest could get an up close and personal view of it. But once the breaking news and novelty selfies had come and gone, most people tended to avoid the area--there was something unsettling about its 100 foot wide, translucent orange-red skin, the slow flex and shift of its segments. Over time its seismic movements had cracked and crumbled much of the surrounding infrastructure, which, given the disuse and the difficulty of transporting construction equipment, quickly entered and remained in a state of disrepair.

But as the months went by, it seemed the deterioration was a little faster than expected. While the highway itself had disappeared with the appearance of the worm, would the spines of on- and off-

ramps have collapsed so quickly merely due to lack of maintenance? True, the churning of the earth accounted for the tearing of the asphalt and the sundering of concrete, but what about its dissolution first into sand and then later into clay?

It was not until the anticipated winter rains gave way to the usual drought of spring that it became truly apparent. As the hillsides and lawns regrew their annual coats of yellow-brown only then did people notice: in the midst of chronic drought, the wormland was verdant.

Continued at
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