

Fall 2016

## Real California Living

Jennifer Murvin

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

---

### Recommended Citation

Murvin, Jennifer (2016) "Real California Living," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 85 , Article 19.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss85/19>

This Prose is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in CutBank by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@mso.umt.edu](mailto:scholarworks@mso.umt.edu).

REAL CALIFORNIA LIVING

It is while you are showing me the shelving in the garage that I understand you and your husband have lost a child. The two of you are standing below a cardboard box with thick black letters on its side, *Winter, 18-24 months*, and one of you has drawn a heart below the words. The heart gives you away, and the box of diapers and the box for a baby walker, all above your head on the shelf as you try to sell me your house.

“Nice big space out here. You could have a little craft station, there’s enough room,” my husband Sam says into my ear as you and your husband watch us, pretending not to listen, wondering if our Lexus in your driveway means we have the money to buy your house. I don’t know why my husband thinks I want a craft station; I don’t do crafts. Why is it that the idea of a new house seems to invite the idea of a new life entirely? When I see the box, I put it together with the bare third bedroom you said you’d painted brand-new, the plastic plugs in all the outlets, the way you are not filling out your jeans. It’s like one of those photographs made up of other tiny photographs. “We’re moving to Colorado, a small condo, fresh start,” you told us. Why didn’t you throw away the boxes? Your husband had made a point to say it was just the two of you. I wonder now how the words felt in his mouth, if someone had advised him to do this, for closure.

The house is very nice, ranch-style like no one ever has as a dollhouse, a house that really says California to people like me who live here now but always feel like they’re just visiting. There is a courtyard where you’ve put metal sculptures of fish, coppery with sharp edges. I’ve always liked this part of the valley that doesn’t feel like the valley, up the mountain side of the freeway, high enough

to see the Santa Anas sweep through, high enough to see the earth move in ripples if there was a five pointer, if you were lucky enough to be standing outside when it happened. You've priced it too low, and I was suspicious from the outset. Sam even told me, "They're in a hurry to leave!" but of course he couldn't have known about what had happened to you, and he still doesn't understand, even when it is all so very obvious to me.

Your husband says, "Lots of storage space, and we put in these shelves from Costco, you can store your golf clubs and your Christmas decorations and dishes in there," and he is attractive in the way that his dark blue shirt makes him look tan and he assumes we play golf and have accumulated seasonal décor, maybe even wedding china. I like him because he has married you. It says something that he chose a woman like you, a woman who wears her hair in two loose braids, who runs her hand along her books as she walks by the bookshelf. You probably did everything all natural when you birthed your child, skipped the epidural, felt it all, every twinge and every kick and every move down and out. I want to hug you in the garage. I know you would smell like jasmine. You would hug me back with both arms.

I wouldn't call you orphans, that's not the word, but surely there is a word for this? There must be at the very least a poem. I look at you both, standing under your child's tiny gloves and knit hats and other winter things 18-24 months.

"We want to move into a neighborhood just like this," Sam says to you, breaking all the rules we agreed upon before we went in: no personal details, no seeming desperate for the house. If he wanted to exclaim over granite countertops and the red tile patio,

do it in the car so you wouldn't know not to accept our low offer. It's not that I want to cheat you, it's just that this is all a game. That's why they call it house hunting, but I'm no predator. Sam says, "Fenced-in yards and a potting shed out in back? We love to garden. We could put some tomato plants in there, maybe some strawberries or zucchini."

In our eight months of marriage, Sam has never before mentioned gardening. Sure, there aren't many opportunities at the rental house, which doesn't have a yard so much as a patio and steep slopes down off the sides. There's only that strange iceplant, with the thick leaves full of watery insides, the kind on all the slopes. I don't know if my husband is trying to impress you with the gardening. He might be, but it isn't sexual. He needs to be liked. You have covered up your acne below your cheekbones with thick makeup, and it looks purple still, like a bruise. I wonder if you take off the makeup at night before you go to bed, if you wait until the lights are dim, if your husband sees you without it. I bet your husband doesn't care you have acne. I bet he tells you you're beautiful and pulls on your braids with his fingers.

Which one of you drew the heart on the box? It seems like something a mother would do, but then again, your husband has not stopped touching you.

When we move into the kitchen, Sam talks about putting a motorcycle in the extra space in the garage. Even fix one up in there, like a workshop, there's enough room, don't you think? He could get tools. He is a chameleon, and we will look at houses until he settles on a skin.

We found your house on one of those websites. You even had a slogan: “Real California Living.” You had taken so many pictures, and I noticed everything was free of clutter, and you had put out clear glass vases filled with seashells to suggest the beach, even though we both know it’s a solid forty-five minute drive from the house. But there were palm trees shedding their hair onto the sod, bougainvillea climbing the wooden fences, and that view, today complete with some brown gauzy air people used to call smog but now simply refer to as *haze*. The pictures of the backyard showed slopes behind the house, but unlike our rental house these slopes went up, rising into the canyons made of rocks, sitting diagonally like the fall of a slide, like the angle of a roof, so sharp I could finally understand how the earth could be twisted. Images of your house, rough stucco walls, birch trees with flaking skin, made up a California as real as all the Californias I have ever known living here and not living here. I leaned over Sam as we looked at the website, and his breath had smelled of fast food, and for the first time in my life, I was repulsed by him. It was like cutting yourself while shaving your legs, how in that moment you realize what you’re holding is a knife, so close to your veins, and you think to yourself, this could cut me open.

“And how many square feet is the backyard?” Sam asks, and I wonder if he’d even know how many square feet a regular room would be. Square feet is only a thing when you’re looking at houses, at no other time does the subject come up. “And the utilities? Pretty expensive?” No more than the usual cost, you assure him, and when you smile I notice your teeth are white and straight. You are beautiful when you smile, though it cracks your

makeup.

I don't want to know what happened to your baby. It could have been anything, an accident, cancer. My sister miscarried at twelve weeks, and she told me after it happened she still found herself putting her hand on her stomach, in that different way she said a woman does when she's pregnant, as if her hand had a mind of its own and nobody had told it what happened. Your whole house like that hand.

Sam is telling you his life story. "My dad grew up water skiing in Long Beach," he says, "and here's a great story for you. So he's skiing one day and he sees his brother and dad waving frantically from the boat, telling him to look behind him, right? And he turns around and there's a goddamn killer whale! Right there behind him and he knew he couldn't fall, and that only makes it harder to stay up. We never really believed him, but he swears up and down that it was something big, and my uncle said the fin was really tall, too tall to be anything else, and shiny. My uncle's not the kind to lie, he was in Vietnam." You are engaged by Sam, everyone is. Even in this house where your child has died, you love his killer whale story like everyone else loves it. "You know we could put a boat in that third slot in the garage," he finishes, and he is trying on your house and this time it looks like tanned skin and smells like coconut, and I see him like his father in the photograph in our rental house, the sun on the ocean so bright behind him his face is shaded and he could be anybody.

I have no burning passions. None like Sam's, passions for Religious Studies and Communications and Film Studies and back

to Religious Studies and Professional Writing and, now, History. He can teach. He has a passion for educating teenagers. He can help them get into college and decide who they want to be. I open money market accounts, I count out soft money holding all the worst smells in the world, clip a tag with his last name on it to my collared shirt. I chose it all. At no time did I say no.

I only need one thing from your house, and it is all distance, miles and minutes like the inky gape of space, the way I can see your house on a map with inches made of forgetting.

“Are there wood floors under here?” Sam points at your carpet in the living room with his toe. We have moved in there to examine, as Sam has put it, the common living space.

“No, just the carpet,” you say, and Sam makes a clicking noise as if encouraging a horse.

“The house was built in the 80s, Sam,” I say to defend you. You and your husband don’t seem to recognize that this is what I am doing. “And I like carpet in the living room, it makes you want to walk around in bare feet.”

You and your husband look at each other, and I realize maybe you thought carpet a better choice for your small baby, who would of course need a cushion while learning to crawl and walk. How dare you set me up to say something so careless. Why haven’t you said anything? How cruel to leave out the box in the garage, to surprise me with your secret. I read somewhere that sellers are required to inform prospective buyers if a crime has occurred on the property. There should be full disclosure of all calamities oc-

curring within the walls of any given house for sale. They should be stated on the website. Check all that apply: Depression, Affair, Abuse, Lies, Bitterness, Regret, Disease, Loss, Pain, Divorce. For Sale: Three Bedroom, Two Bath, Large Yard, Real California Living. Child now deceased crawled on carpeted floors in Main-Level Common Living Space.

I look at your face as you examine the room with us like it's a stranger to you, and I can't help it, I have to know, so I say, "Why are you selling your house?" I don't mean it to sting, it's just a question, but I know you don't approve. You look at me like I am a criminal, like I have smashed all your tiny bud vases on the original tile floors, stabbed you with your pointy copper fish. You say, "Colorado is beautiful. We thought it might be a place to go." It's the right answer, and your husband moves to put his whole hand around just one of your fingers. Sam misses all of this. He is back in the kitchen, open to the living room as you promised it would be, and he is poking at the grout in the tile.

"Honey, what do you think?" Sam is showing all his teeth with his smile. You look at him with surprise, then over to me. I picture your husband fallen on a hospital floor, his eyes and mouth open in grieving against the hard cold tiles, open to the blood and the spit and the dirt and the sick because he does not care, he does not know anything but this floor.

"I'm just not sure," I say, and you and your husband breathe out your disappointment at the same time, and Sam's mouth tips down at the edges.

"Of course you're not sure, you need time to think about it and everything," your husband says, and I feel another rush of



affection for him, and I even wish for a moment that he is my husband. I look at his red mouth and imagine him kissing my neck, touching me softly and lingering on the small scar I have on my shoulder from when I scraped it on the bottom of a pool while diving. He would have pleasant breath, like wine or warm rolls. I imagine grieving a child with him, holding him as he cries in that silent way where tears come down hard, but he is grabbing my hair, or clutching at my stomach, maybe even cutting me with his nails. “Please,” he’d cry, or “No.” It would hurt, his outpouring of sorrow, but it wouldn’t matter.

“Thank you,” I say, and I want to climb the slopes and lie diagonally with the rocks, headfirst so I can feel the blood coming down in a hot rush behind my eyes.

“We’ll be giving you a call,” says Sam, with a tone in his voice that says he will convince me, he has your back on this whole thing, I’ll come around, you’ll see. “The guest bedroom would be perfect, you know—” he starts to say, and I interrupt him to ask you to show me the master closet one more time before we leave.

You and I go in alone. Your closet is organized, and I notice your clothes are mostly made of cotton, and you have hung even your T-shirts. Your husband’s clothing takes up less room, and his shirts are ironed, and he has a collection of T-shirt jerseys with team logos on the front and last names of famous players on the back, and I wonder why it is that sports allow some men to wear costumes all their lives. You laugh and don’t apologize for the mess or for the lighting, and you move quickly to shove your husband’s underwear into a drawer. You have one nightgown hanging up,

purple silk with pink lace on the bottom. I tried lingerie a few times with Sam, and he never once looked at it, just took it off of me very quickly, but isn't that the point?

"There used to be a hole in the ceiling in here," you say, looking up. "We didn't fix it for three years, then last week, we got it fixed. It took a half hour." You look at the clean and vacuumed carpet and you say, "It's never been this neat in here." You leave the closet before I do, before you can see me touch the nightgown as I walk by, the lace catching on my nail, and I take a thread of it with me in my palm.

"You're not going to buy this house, are you?" you say, turning around to look at me.

I am backed into your closet, under your intact ceiling.

"Just tell me." Your eyes are perfectly visible in the glow of the lightbulb, but they might as well be closed. I consider telling you, yes, I will buy it. I consider telling you what we both know about this house. I consider the idea of Real Living, anywhere.

"No, we're not going to buy it," I apologize. As we walk out, you touch your hand to a certain spot on the wall in a way that lets me know there was something there before.

There are more minutes in the house, and you leave us alone to look around by ourselves, and I follow Sam as he reminds me how long we've been looking, how he needs an office like this to finally write his memoir. He likes the color you have painted the baby's old room, but the rusty brown makes me think of dry leaves. You have disappeared somewhere, and I am listening for your footsteps.

I don't turn around as Sam and I walk down the driveway

to the car, but I imagine you've returned to your husband at the door to watch us go, and the two of you are holding hands, and maybe he is undoing one of your braids.

Sam asks me if I think I have been a bit rude as he buckles into the passenger seat. I always drive when we're together, it's well known Sam is a terrible driver. He is a tall man, and his belly has grown paunchier over these months, hanging just a bit over the lap belt, his hair hanging just a bit over his ears. As I look at him, I try very hard to see him with the urgent love I remember now only as a dream.

"How could you not know?" I say. "They lost a baby. Their baby is dead." I want to say it again. "Their baby is dead. Maybe it was an accident. There was a box with clothing sizes with a heart drawn on it. Just the two of them going to Colorado. And you almost said the guest room would be perfect for a baby!"

"Jesus," says Sam after a moment. I feel him look at me. "No, there's no way. They would have said." He does not say this like a question. In a way, it's not surprising he doesn't believe me. But I know you lost a baby like I know the alphabet. "You're always inventing things," he says into the glove box as he digs for something. "You're so creative. You should try writing poetry sometime. I'm thinking of taking a class." He emerges from the glove box with nothing and leans back into his seat, closing his eyes.

He reaches over to hold my hand and I want him to take only one of my fingers. There is no word opposite of orphan. Orphans are something to think about. There are endless stories of orphans and they are all heroes. They have novels and gangs of

other orphans and surrogate parents. Disney has made a fortune on them, the orphaning the essential ingredient for bittersweet. There is no story for parents who have lost a child, only canyons, emptied skies, Rocky Mountains reaching up like blades.

I pull my hand from his and place it on the wheel. We will look at another house, and another, and we will evaluate palm trees and square feet and school districts, and we will buy a house with an open floor plan and a skylight in the master bedroom and imprints of fallen leaves in the concrete sidewalk. I will get pregnant and watch Sam hold the baby in his arms, and he will say, "Remember when we looked at that house . . ." and he won't finish, because of course we both will know I remember your house, and even though we never bought it, I'll live there just the same.