

Fable

He can't believe his luck. Just a block from the beach a small Toyota pulls out as he turns onto Ocean Avenue. He parks in the tight space, zippering his car between a Volvo and a tall truck, unstraps the surfboard from the roof, begins to unload the trunk: an icechest, two towels, a wetsuit and some wax. And then . . . what? A strange sound, like a flag being planted in sand. He looks up, sees the meter turning over, the yellow warning sign inching to red, a hiss like a spring winding down. Before his hand touches his pockets he knows there's nothing there, no dimes or clean nickels, no eight or nine quarters, which is what he needs for a morning of surfing.

He looks down Ocean at the line of awnings and storefronts. The first shop sells cinnamon rolls and as he starts through the door he sees a hand-lettered sign in the window — NO CHANGE FOR METERS. He buys a soda for ninety-seven cents, gives the woman two dollars and asks for a few extra quarters, his voice rising an octave at the end of the sentence, a casual request becoming a plea. She says, *Sorry, can't do it*, points at the register, another sign: DO WE LOOK LIKE A BANK? He is about to say *Please* but she has turned away,

is spooning butter onto strips of dough.
He watches as she sprinkles cinnamon
and brown sugar, then begins to roll.

Outside, truants on skateboards
practice slides and strange hops.
They crash themselves on and off benches,
scarring the concrete and scaring an old lady,
who drops her bags, scattering frozen dinners
into the street. He watches a passing car crush
a chicken pot pie, then helps her collect
the rest. Perhaps she has change, he thinks,
but she *Can't breathe* she says, and sits down
on the sidewalk. He stands over her holding
her hand, listening to wheels crunch gravel,
the skaters hooting and laughing.
The old woman pulls herself up his arm
as though climbing a rope. She straightens
her hair, dusts the seat of her dress, walks
away across the street without a word,
though she appears to be crying.

The *Pollo Loco* is just opening for meals
of chicken parts and beans, egg burritoos
and espresso. The sign says SPECIAL
beside BREAKFAST, and below that
NO CHANGE. Further on the surf shop is leaking
boys from its open door. They're all shirtless
and tanned, skin brown as worn leather,
swim trunks huge and riding low,
arms and chests swarming with tattoos.
One has the word CHANGE in blue letters
on his shoulder, slashed diagonally with red,
a streetsign or warning: NO U-TURN,
NO EXIT, NO GUARDRAIL,
NO CHANGE. But it's CHANCE
not CHANGE, the name of a punk band
most likely, or how he sees the world,

his take on the next wave, Sartre
 on a surfboard. Poorboy is inside
 working the register, a friend from
 way back, from a year of dawns
 beside the pier. All those
 mornings sharing waves, he's sure
 to have some change. But it's
No way, man, won't happen.
 He points at a video camera
 in the corner. If the boss sees him
 dispensing coin he'll lose his job.
Sorry, dude, he says, and shrugs.

Outside the day is brightening,
 the fog lifting, an offshore wind
 on the rise. He glances down an alley
 at the ocean, at three-foot swells
 as glassy as glaze on a sweet roll
 peeling left to right from the getty.
 He walks back toward his car,
 stops to watch the cinnamon girl
 check the oven. A boy strolls out
 of *Pollo Loco*, half a burrito in his mouth.
 He spills bits of salsa and egg
 on his bare chest and flinches a little,
 then jogs off. A meter maid
 is making her way down the block.
 He tries not to watch her, tries to hear
 the clap of surf closing out, feel it shiver
 the air around his naked legs.
 He's left his board leaning against
 the car, so the wax is starting to melt.
 The meter maid is four spots down
 writing a ticket. He's got two minutes tops.

Across the street the curtains part
 on a tiny house, a crackerbox bungalow
 from the 30's, no yard, a tar paper roof.

It's worth half a million in this market,
crowded on two sides by Frank Gehry
look alikes. The old woman waves
from the window; she seems to be smiling.
He moves toward his car, waves back
with one hand, fishes for keys with the other.
Hey, buddy, are you leaving? a guy yells
from a silver Ranchero, circa 1968,
surfboard in back. He nods, straps his own
to the roof, repacks the trunk, looks up:
the old lady is still waving.
And as he pulls out of the perfect
parking place, the door opens across the street.
She walks out and puts two fingers in her mouth,
whistles loud enough to stop time on Ocean Avenue.
And now she's waving again but this time
it's at her driveway, her long empty driveway.
She's waving him in.