

Author



Paving Paradise

Genevieve N. S. Ernst

Literary Journalism

Genevieve Ernst was looking for story ideas and became aware of the protests over the closing of the Irvine Meadows West (IMW) trailer park at UCI. In researching her story, Genevieve had the opportunity to enter the fascinating and unfamiliar world of IMW, one that was very different from the surrounding suburban environment. She continues to write narrative nonfiction; her experience in researching this story has led her to focus much of her writing on other small communities that stand out against the larger community in which they exist. When she is not writing, Genevieve learns by reading. She also enjoys traveling, dance and photography.

Abstract

Originally located where the Bren Events Center is now, the Irvine Meadows West trailer park provided low cost housing at UC Irvine for undergraduate and graduate students and faculty alike. After years of debate, IMW—later relocated to beside the Campus Village undergraduate housing community—was finally converted into a parking lot in July of 2004 as part of the University’s Master Plan to accommodate the growing need for parking. “Paving Paradise” documents my exploration of the IMW community in its final months and some of the controversy surrounding the closing of the trailer park.

Faculty Mentor



By telling a story, rather than simply assembling facts, Genevieve Ernst in “Paving Paradise” found a particularly effective way to document the controversy over UC Irvine’s plan to tear down a trailer park where dozens of students lived economical, unconventional lives. This topic obviously offered much promise, but it also presented the writer with practical problems and narrative obstacles. What most impresses, in the end, is how Genevieve Ernst overcame those problems and obstacles by finding her own narrative—an imaginative, insightful story full of personal voice. Only she could have written the piece as she did: By finding a way to spend two nights in one of the trailers and hanging out at the community campfire, she transformed a conventional “dispute” story into a rich, evocative portrait of a disappearing world.

Key Terms

- ◆ Affordable Housing
- ◆ Campus History
- ◆ Irvine Meadows West
- ◆ Literary Journalism
- ◆ Long-Range Development Plan
- ◆ Outside the Master Plan

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“Lelelelelele!”

The howling ceases and she begins. Statuesque, her face flickers like a television set nearing its death.

*Make no mistake
This is a
Trailer trash talking
Revo sandal wearing
Happening community Happy[...]
Trailer Park Poet Poetry Reading*

A blue headlamp scans familiar faces, hunting. It pauses.

“I read first last time.” The face sinks into the darkness. The light keeps hunting until Joe is willing to begin. With the smug triumph of a high school senior turning in a recycled assignment, he rereads last Saturday’s poetry.

“Most of you weren’t there,” he shrugs. Documenting a “urinary guilt complex” for attentive friends dressed in plaid and sipping beers, Joe’s poem muses on whether he’ll ever pee without seeing his toilet bowl as an eye again, while a man awkwardly roasts marshmallows. He has the miniature kind and squishes them together, forming little fluffy white atomic nuclei that he carelessly lights on fire. He’s at least 27 years old, maybe 30. Old enough, one would think, to be able to roast himself a marshmallow.

Amidst the Silver Bullets and Road Rangers, twinkle lights and makeshift front awnings, poetry cuts through the campfire darkness as Cowboy Hat holds his chin, absorbing word after word. Coyotes scream in the distance. Or perhaps it’s just fraternity boys. Joe drops sheet after sheet of poetry into the fire as the laughter he earns peppers the night. Finally, one last sheet flutters innocently to its death. Anybody wanna read a poem? The light is hungry now, pressing on as shadows approach through the crunchy pitch black, making your heart skip a beat. Robyn steps up to the spitting fire to tell a tale of struggle and despair. It is dedicated to the ants in her trailer, whose voice she adopts. With a chuckle, she admits, “This is how I hope they’re feeling.”

Coors Light, tonight’s jester, says that should be her last line. A rumble of approval traces the circle.

After a preface longer than the poem that follows, Paul teaches us in the low, deadpan voice of a young criminal, “Whiskey can be spelled with or without the ‘e.’”

Without cracking a smile, Paul exudes clever charm, nonchalantly reading the highlights of the evening and fiddling with his third eye, that blue lamp bestowed upon him in exchange for a few minutes of vulnerability in front of an endangered campfire amidst the tall trees and dilapidated trailers of Irvine Meadows West. Paul’s lines die out and the campfire engulfs him in howls. It is time again for the light to go hunting.

Sipping Naked Juice, Erica sits on a bench telling me a story. A while back, out on the fire road behind IMW ran two fat white hens. Behind them, an orange cat. Behind it, an earth mother, owner of the two fat white hens. That’s Irvine Meadows West.

In the summer of 2001, while looking for schools to transfer to, Erica’s boyfriend found a pamphlet on housing at the University of California, Irvine.

“Oh my gosh, they have a trailer park!” David exclaimed.

“Oh my gosh, I’m never living in a trailer park!” Erica shot back.

While the economic advantage and the availability of side-by-side trailers won Erica over, she still doesn’t consider herself the type to live in a trailer park. She is not an earth mother, as she calls them; she’s one of the few people who still consider the term “yuppie” favorable. Despite her clear dissociation from the plaid shirt wearing, poetry-reading, protest-leading (“I *don’t* stand there with signs and shout,” she stresses) “typical” IMW residents, there’s a twinge of pride in her voice. Not of the community, which has the feel of one great big outdoor ed. trip, but for having survived the experience. After all, Irvine welcomes yuppies; it breeds them along with with monotonous chains of restaurants and Starbucks. But concealed behind strategically placed, conspicuously tall trees, Irvine does have a trailer park and Erica has survived the ants, the propane leaks, and the sluggish water heater to tell of life among the earth mothers.

Between the morning glories on the outside and the stacks of books on the inside, Kate Irwin must have the thickest walls in Irvine Meadows West; indeed it appears that a meadow is growing right up the side of her trailer. While other residents complain of ants, inclement weather, and black widow spiders invading their homes, it’s not a problem for Kate, a graduate student in French who lived in Montana for 16 years. She stands in green rubber gardening

shoes showing me nasturtiums, basil, and a wooden crate that, at this time of year, gives her enough strawberries to garnish her breakfast. While she mentions the friendly people of IMW, the focus of her praise is the park's outdoor space—the community garden in the overgrown yellowish-green central lawn boasts her substantial vegetable patch. When I ask her about the University's plans for the park closure her conclusion is, "I'm sad they're cutting the trees down."

Periodically, the earth mothers and fathers knock on Erica's door. They want money for a lawyer, they want her to sign petitions, they want her to protest. But Erica doesn't protest.

When Erica came to IMW, she was struck by how quiet it was, and how dirty. The place is scattered with rusty gardening tools and bicycles. Whereas bikes all over UCI's 1,475-acre campus are locked tightly to racks, IMW bikes lay strewn in front of their owners' trailers. Nobody locks their doors. One resident even bought her trailer by leaving a check under a rock for the seller to pick up. Erica immediately detected a certain dissonance from how she likes to live.

Irvine Meadows West, a donut-shaped commune of around 24 inner and 49 outer ring trailers (it's hard to tell enhanced trailers from sheds), is home to undergraduate and graduate students, for whom the park provides a refuge from the beige monotony of Irvine, and a community of peers. Chris Hood moved into IMW after learning that campus apartments for his two-year MFA in Poetry program had an 18-month wait list. Driving from Vermont, he imagined private driveways leading to quarter-acre plots, not trailers stacked side by side like a circle of dominos. Chris admits there are lines of dead ants inside his freezer and half-measure repairs done with duct tape, but finding a community, the bright eyed, bushy haired student says, "was sort of amazing."

About two years ago, Chris got the idea of holding a poetry reading around the park's central campfire. The first meeting of the Trailer Park Poets, as they've been dubbed, was at midnight, the witching hour. While the idea seemed cool—and was, Chris insists—the complaints of "Dude, it's too late" bumped the readings up to 10:00. What amazes Chris the most is how little he's done to make the readings happen.

Yessir, our times may be over. Maybe there ain't no room in the Master Plan for a few two-bit poets on the dodge, but we aim to ride before

we're through. That's right, we deal in verse, friend, and you'd best circle the trailers, put on all ten gallons of your hat and strap on the chaps. The UC Regents may be getting a posse together, but we ain't run off yet...

A posting on the English grads' e-mail list and a flyer on the laundry room board is all it takes for sixty people from the trailers, around campus and even L.A. to show up and sit around a fire to watch Chris and his head lamp scan the crowd for poets.

When Leslie Harrison and The Doctor moved to UCI in September to fulfill her teenage aspiration of becoming a poet, other MFAs recommended IMW as a good place to live with her companion, an 18-year-old dog.

Within her first 24 hours in IMW, 12 people stopped by Leslie's trailer. She now insists that IMW is the only real community in the whole university, but as for inhabiting a trailer, she just laughs. It's like "living in a tin can on wheels:" wind rocks it, and light comes in places that aren't windows. Friends back at home in the trailer-unfriendly climate of Massachusetts laugh too. After all, at 41, Leslie has already had a 14-year career as a photojournalist. Nowadays, she has a 4'4" high bedroom ceiling, but she doesn't have a roommate assigned to her like some 18-year-old college freshman. Besides, she's writing poetry, and she can keep The Doctor around.

Ariane Simard captured my attention immediately. I was in my very first trailer park, having crept through the darkness to the campfire, clutching my roommate. Ariane started out the evening of trailer park poetry with the witty "trailer trash talking, Revo sandal wearing" introduction (the "opening yell," she says, is something she does for every reading) and socialized throughout the night (she claims that, being tall and nerdy, she has something in common with all of the grads). When I approached her to ask for an interview, she looked down at me from her 6'2" frame and casually requested that I first put on a pair of thick black plastic-framed glasses and pose for a disposable camera photo, some project proving that everybody looks good in whoever's glasses they are. After acquiescing, she gave me her contact info. I e-mailed and discovered that she spends her weekends in Los Angeles. We planned to meet at 8 o'clock Monday morning, but I was disappointed by the wait until I happened upon her postscript:

PS Why don't you check out my trailer over the weekend. We leave it unlocked, no one will be there but you could get a feel of trailer park hospitality. Make some tea or coffee if you want. Help yourself to a beer (as long as you're of age...) You can write there all week-end if you like. Don't feel strange. People stay in my trailer on the week-ends all the time. I want you to get an idea of how peaceful the place is, what will be lost if it is torn down, then hanging out in the place for awhile will give you an idea. I leave my computer in my trailer and leave the door unlocked. I leave my bike outside. I never worry about things getting stolen. It's a pretty stellar community. So feel free to experience it if you like [...] Feel free to stay all week-end if you like.

I found the *Don't feel strange* to be crucial; that was pretty much all I felt.

Saturday at dusk, as the twinkle lights were just becoming visible around rickety porches, I trudged over to the park with a friend, a flashlight, and some homework after checking the e-mail for her space number four times. After all, if everybody leaves their trailer unlocked with a bike lying outside, who's to say I wasn't going to plop down only to be somebody's unpleasant surprise upon their homecoming? After finding the trailer, a fairly unattractive one—four horizontal orange, red and brown stripes on cream with a tall reed mat and a small skeleton flag outside—I knocked on the flimsy plastic door and then, when that wasn't loud enough, I knocked on the window before figuring out how to work the doorknob and calling out her name a few times. With a squeak of terror, I took the flashlight from Felicia and crept inside, still convinced I was committing a felony.

Nobody home. I stalked up and down the hallway-sized house, careful not to bump into the walls and tables, though dangerously close at all times, searching for any light switch that worked and any evidence—a phone bill on the counter, those silly glasses—that the place belonged to Ariane. The ceiling was scattered with pairs of small cream plastic rectangles, and there were wide black switches all over the walls, but apparently they weren't connected, so with the light of two desk lamps and the flashlight (my new security blanket), Felicia and I settled down to read, though I mostly twittered around, periodically searching her face for reassurance that we were in the right place.

“So, are we spending the night here?” Felicia asked me.

I looked over at her, surprised. Spend the night?! No! Well... It was an exciting prospect. The multitude of ants with a predictable affinity for the kitchen, the urge to whis-

per and the fear of the bathroom (I still couldn't tell you how to flush the toilet in a trailer) all reminded me of middle school camping trips I missed so much. I don't know! Can we? I mean, she said stay the whole weekend, but is that weird? Can we really?

“I don't know, I didn't read the e-mail!” Felicia reminded me. I went over it in my head. I wasn't completely reassured, but it was just so tempting. Finally we decided: go home, watch *Pulp Fiction*, and come back to spend the night.

It was definitely dark when we set out in that part of the morning we all consider night. I left with a purse under one arm, a pillow under the other and Felicia with a teal duffel bag full of down comforters. I was afraid somebody would see us and ask what in the world we were doing heading into Ariane's trailer, but I'd scoured that e-mail one more time for reassurance that I wasn't trespassing, *Don't feel strange*. She'd met me once and already knew I'd freak out like this. I'd checked the slot number for a fifth time.

“Did you bring the flashlight?”

“Oh. No.”

“We have to go back!” There was no way I was creeping into that place in the dark. But apparently I'd have to, as turning around was not on Felicia's agenda. Her sense of adventure was more fully developed than mine.

Door, window, squeak of the screen door. “Ariane?”

Nobody home. Relieved, I scampered over to flip the switch on the desk lamp. A big skeleton flag looked down on us. How welcoming. I almost wished I didn't hate ghost stories as I turned off the light and dove into bed.

Leslie was right. Light seeped in from covered windows, skylights and the fan behind the refrigerator. It was full daylight in the trailer by 8 in the morning, which revealed that Ariane's trailer is brown. Overwhelmingly brown. Fake wood paneling covered every surface, giving the place a vintage feel, but not necessarily in a good way. Her fridge was filled with Trader Joe's products: fruit yogurts, dried Thompson seedless grapes, roasted red pepper marinara sauce and there was—as promised—a beer. Ariane says it's convenient being able to slide food right from the oven to the table or dump dishes from the table into the sink without standing up. Frankly, I'd rather not have seen the ants

(whose meeting place was the corner of the stove) so close to me, or worried about collapsing the flimsy little table every time I crossed or uncrossed my legs.

By early afternoon, I was calling people. “Guess where I am.” Like Erica, I’m taken as a bit too prissy for the trailer thing. “You have to accept that you’re camping,” Ariane advises. A trailer is “one step above a tent.” People were surprised to hear about my adventure; after all, I haven’t slept in a tent since I was 12. As Felicia marked books on Balanchine with fuchsia Post-it notes for her research project, I bounced around doing my research by reading the Peking Noodle House fortunes taped on cabinet doors.

Trying to outsmart everybody is the greatest folly.

Now it’s time to set your sights high and “go for it.”

Careful not to make finger prints on its dusty top, I extracted the “Ultra White Trash Body detergent” (which apparently *Now Eliminates Redneck Residue*) from a little spice rack over the ant-infested stove (which, a sticker warns, is not to be used to heat the trailer). It smelled like powdered dishwasher soap, but it *Eliminates poor taste, big hair and indoor lawn furniture. It eliminates ring around the trailer. It’s culture in a box!*

I was reluctant to leave the trailer, or the park; the place overflowed with pets, community and character. As Erica says, when something goes wrong, she just tells herself, “Well, we’re just having a little trailer park adventure.” I could live in a trailer. I could *enjoy* living in a trailer. I noticed ants crawling across the mattress. Maybe not.

Early in the morning, IMW begins to stir. As you walk between the two concentric circles of trailers (a ring you can walk within 4 minutes at a leisurely pace), you can hear the muffled shuffle of morning behavior through the infamously uninsulated walls. The sounds can be comforting, embarrassing, and even strange at times. When garbled NPR wafts through your window all day, one neighbor talks like Darren from *Bewitched*, and the other yells and screams at his cats, sometimes it’s all you can do to just put up with it because you think it’s funny. Instead of wandering the halls of a dorm, residents stroll around the asphalt and gravel road in flip-flops and towels, returning from the communal bathrooms (which offer showers with full-height ceilings and real plumbing, not septic tanks) as others pedal off on road bikes to rejoin the rest of the world.

Toby Buchanan settles down at a blue plastic picnic table with his back to the deserted campfire in the park’s center lawn. A very small grey, white and orange cat promptly appears on the table. He gently brushes it off. A few seconds later, it’s back. Toby doesn’t seem annoyed by the little visitor; IMW is teeming with cats. There’s Dexter, who likes to visit the apartments across the road; slot B27 has a black cat with vibrant yellow eyes, and a playful brown tabby suns himself on the painted label B5, waiting for a belly rub from passers-by. The persistent tabby interruption learns he’s safe by my side and settles there, rubbing his face against the table’s corner as I interview.

IMW was the reason Toby came to UCI in 1985. He didn’t want to live in plastic Orange County, but when, as a junior in high school, he learned that he could live in his trailer on campus, he put himself on the waiting list. After graduating with a math degree in 1989, Toby returned for a degree in psychology, staying in IMW as a UCI student until 1993. For two of those years, Toby was resident manager of the park, then an elected student position. Toby scrapes bird droppings, tree droppings, and the cat off of the blue plastic table and plops his hands down in front of him, moving them from right to left as he indicates each year of change back in the time of student management. Now, Toby, his wife and three daughters occupy the largest trailer, which is spattered with brightly colored plastic bicycles and toys left wherever they settle. There is resignation in his voice when he talks about his increasingly difficult position as the park manager, a university employee who acts as the liaison between residents and the university. Of course, he’d rather the university kept the park, but he still communicates the university’s position to his residents, and vice versa. He even points out that the park was supposed to have closed in 1993, but like the boy who cried wolf, nobody listened after the university threatened to close it every year. Toby sees the value in the big picture: on the oft-challenged reason for closing IMW he sighs, “if it wasn’t parking, it would be something else.” You can still see a pride in his old college home though: when Toby mentions residents’ conduct at a forum discussing the fate of IMW with administrators; he firmly insists that they spoke well.

April 23rd, 2004, three months and eight days before the scheduled closing of Irvine Meadows West, the residents and supporters of the trailer park are hosting a forum to discuss affordable housing on campus. It’s a tense affair, with the suits in the audience and the earth parents nervously presenting their case. Amber Rinderknecht begins, introducing the attendees from the administration, the stu-

dents and, upon the harsh request “Who are *you?*” from a reporter by my side, herself. Amber is slightly disorganized and very flustered. After opening remarks, she forgets that the suits must speak. Despite all of this, Matthew Cardinale, an advocate for the homeless who doesn’t live in IMW but joined the cause, with the optimistic cry of “I believe we can save this trailer park!” nods appreciatively and smiles a lot. He claps quickly and stares intently at Amber as if it will help her through the presentation. Richard Demerjian, Director of Campus and Environmental Planning at UCI and markedly more comfortable at the podium, presents the university’s Long Range Development Plan. Garrett Assay of OMP (“Outside The Master Plan,” which leads the group of protesting students) nods and Amber stares blankly, halfheartedly taking notes.

Pro-IMW speakers, who highlight the lack of affordable housing in Irvine, dominate the forum, calling IMW the last true bit of character at UCI. Ani, an undergrad from the Young Democrats, speaks ahead of schedule to get to class on time.

“If your priority is parking over students, that’s not... for lack of a better word, nice,” Ani says before she and her pin-decorated tote bag skip away, leaving me wishing I could skip away with her. Quite frankly, the forum is dull. Affordable housing isn’t a particularly captivating subject when it is an excuse for students to be completely deaf to the words of the administration, and the administrators to act like the conspicuous lack of affordable housing in Irvine isn’t their problem. Of the suits, Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs, Manuel Gomez, seems the most genuinely upset. He speaks passionately, acknowledging the loss, but points out that while he bought them time years ago, this time there’s nothing he can do. My suspicions of deafness are confirmed later when Leslie tells me “Manny Gomez said he can close the park, and he will.” Funny how that’s not what I heard at the affordable housing forum long before I’d ever entered IMW and witnessed its charm.

After escalating turmoil, at 9 o’clock on the morning of March 30, 2004, protests began in front of the IMW “gates,” two long, low chains crossing the entries into the park’s teardrop shaped road. In the morning, Leslie Harrison protested the soil drilling scheduled for that day before leaving to run errands. By the time she returned early that afternoon, the police had arrived in what she described as an offensive “show of force,” with six heavily armed officers and UCI’s chief of police. Standing in front of her flimsy front door with The Doctor at her side, Leslie

watched in safety as her colleagues protested until their eventual arrests. A drilling truck had arrived, which, to the students, was a flagrant violation of the University’s promise to leave IMW as it was until July 31st. Around 3 p.m., after negotiations between UCI police and the protesters, a final warning was given: move out of the truck’s way or be arrested for unlawful assembly.

From behind the park gates, Toby was watching too. It was surreal to see his residents prepare for their arrests. All he could do was hope they had thought about the consequences of their actions. Nine students decided to be arrested and, from behind the chains, other residents took on dog-walking duties and gave them phone numbers to call for rides home from jail. The students lined up single file for the officers to show them the handcuffs and explain to them that they would be used if the protesters did not change their minds. The arrests weren’t violent or angry. In 14 years of reporting, Leslie never saw anything like it. Peaceful protesters generally follow the style of Mahatma Gandhi—you don’t resist and you don’t help—but after being handcuffed, the students walked under their own power to the awaiting paddy wagon. As they walked the 30 or 40 feet—“like death row” prisoners, Toby later recalled, marching his fingers down the blue picnic table—the students were interviewed by *Los Angeles Times* reporters, among others. Two interviews got on the Channel 5 news, good publicity for the cause. The paddy wagon drove off, leaving police, university officials, and dispersing residents behind. Leslie went back up the two stairs to her trailer and returned to her other responsibilities as a university student.

The clamor of a large metal roll up door stopped, revealing a metal cage each for the men and the women in the back of the paddy wagon. Three men and six women were loaded in and handcuffed to the tune of Matthew Cardinale (“I Believe We Can Save this Trailer Park!”) shouting “Shame on UCI! Shame on the Chancellor!” Seated on steel benches with plastic headrests to keep their heads from banging against the bars of the cages, the arrestees were strapped in with three seatbelts each, one low across their laps and two crisscrossed over their chests. “Okay, quit it!” the officer yelled as they started off towards the Irvine police station for fingerprinting. They were warned against any mischief as video cameras were watching their every move. Flying over speed bumps (though you can easily drive from IMW to the Irvine police station without a single speed bump in your path), Barbara, 56 years old and in a neck brace from surgery, bounced wildly in her seat, Garrett, another arrestee, recalled. The others yelled out for the wagon to

slow down. After fingerprinting, the “Heroic Nine,” as residents later named them, were driven to the Santa Ana prison in rush hour traffic on the warm day (even the driver saw no point in taking them so far, arguing, “What if the truck rolls over?”). At the top of the wagon, windows about the size of a rectangle made by connecting the tips of two thumbs and two index fingers gave a minimal view of the outside world. Through the little windows, barbed wire fencing and a cement building that looked like a public high school could be seen approaching. The wagon stopped. The fence rolled slowly open across the little view hole, the wagon rolled forward, and the Heroic Nine could see the fence slowly rolling closed behind them. Once inside the fence, handcuffs were removed. In front of them, a sheriff’s bus full of orange-clad inmates filed into Santa Ana prison.

Without any extra clothing or pillows, the residents were taken to an area of the prison called “Alaska” by inmates for its conspicuously frigid climate. One of the women wrapped her arms in toilet paper until yelled at by a guard. Garrett was separated from the rest, placed into a holding cell where he was told he would be kept for a 15-minute lunch. He was the only one of over a dozen not equipped with food.

“What are you in for, Garrett?” He’d forgotten to remove the nametag worn to facilitate interaction with press at the protest.

“Unlawful assembly.” He confirmed that yes, he was from the university. An economist, Garrett discussed drug prices with crack dealers (apparently drugs are more expensive in the summer because of higher demand) during his three hours with them.

From the holding cell, Garrett was taken to get mug shots and to be fingerprinted again. Waiting to be processed, he noticed two fellow residents on the other side of a window. When the guard left briefly, they began pounding on the glass. Garrett tried not to look. He kept his hands behind his back and his eyes averted, but it was too late. The guard returned. Garrett didn’t understand what was being barked at him through the guard’s thick Midwestern accent. Finally he got it: he was being asked if those were his cohorts. Admitting that he knew them, the guard screamed, “That’s exactly the type of shit we don’t tolerate!” Now the guards hated them all, Garrett figured, and could keep them even longer.

Since the arrests, Leslie Harrison has gotten to know her neighbors better. Particularly, receiving the same “nasty let-

ter” from the university as the arrested students had received brought people together.

“If you’re going to accuse me of something, you’d better get it right,” she declares. The community is working with ombudsmen and there’s talk of involving the ACLU, just to get the university to apologize.

Curled up on her trailer’s sofa, clutching the backs of open-backed slippers, Leslie speaks lethargically but she insists, “The university won’t get a dime out of me as an alum.” She’ll never say that she went here, and will never recommend UCI to a student.

Toby has also seen a change in the IMW community since the arrests. People are more depressed and work to keep the park open has quieted down; Kate stopped fighting to keep her morning glory-covered trailer because taking on the seemingly omnipotent university was just too depressing. Toby says there are fewer people at his movie nights.

Erica is outside the Silver Bullet she shares with her husband polishing a copper teakettle when I come to visit. One of the few vintage trailers in the park, it has four different kinds of linoleum on its floor, a reminder that it’s older than Erica by a good 10 years. Inside, there’s a Carousel microwave about her age that takes seven minutes to heat up a cup of water. By contrast, my own microwave, which celebrated its fifth birthday this past March, recommends two minutes for an eight-ounce beverage. I can see the trailer in its entirety from my vantage point two steps into the trailer’s eight-by-eight foot living room. Her husband, David, whose typical college boy mop of hair comes in a dull blonde, sits quietly at his computer as Erica starts describing the arrest day. Early in the morning, protesters gathered outside their trailer. Complete with a megaphone and bullhorns (though apparently one of the protesters’ complaints was that noisy drilling would be a disturbance), they made concentration impossible, and Erica looked into filing a noise complaint.

“We’re not very popular here!” David interjects cheerfully. They were amused when an “I Love Capitalism” sign they put in their window got audible responses of “OHMY-GOSH those people there are EVIL!”

David can’t help but add to Erica’s arrest day story and it soon becomes story time. One night, they looked outside to see a bearded resident drunk, holding a paper bag-covered bottle, and jumping up and down on the roof of some-

body's junk heap car. Inside the car, five of his friends had bottles too. He was up there alone though, making a ruckus. Yelling? I ask. No, he was ROARING.

There was also a medical student that lived in a box (one of the little wooden sheds beside a trailer) and a 45-year-old graduate student so hairy they called him "the shirtless wonder."

It's discouraging to hear about the guy who dumped the contents of somebody else's shed onto the ground and moved it to his lot saying it had been promised to him by its last owner, or that bikes and entire loads of laundry have been stolen, or to hear Erica and David say of other residents, "Some of them have this community thing going" but they're lonely and don't work hard. They're people who all exhibit "laziness or some permutation thereof," who have "settled for THIS." Even Erica and David haven't been able to avoid the other residents entirely though. One day, before they lived together, a man named Bruce knocked on Erica's door. Reading off of a flashcard, he began: "Hi...I...was...wondering...if...if...you would like...to...come...eat with me...because I have...extra...meals." David and Erica reluctantly agreed to dine at one of the first year housing communities on campus that they were trying to avoid. They were serving red snapper that night: overcooked fish sitting in a soup of red sauce. Bruce, who David describes as being built like himself, "Which is pretty dang skinny," had developed a system of calculating calories by using the ceramic mugs in the cafeteria as measuring cups. He got excited about accounting for the air pockets of the frozen yogurt in his calculations. Bruce, they explain, is in computer science, and seemed really weird at first, but turned out to be one of the most decent guys around. While Erica reassures that he's become a lot more normal, he's still the type of guy who David can just ask random questions out of the blue.

"Hey Bruce, ever seen a ghost?"

"Yeah, I think I have."

Monday 8 a.m. rolls around and again I approach Ariane's trailer hesitantly, but this time it's for an interview, so I'm definitely allowed. I knock. I call. I leave a message. Ariane calls back an hour later: her car broke down and she is stuck in Los Angeles. If only I'd known, I would have stayed one more night.

Works Cited

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