

THE **NORTH
COAST**

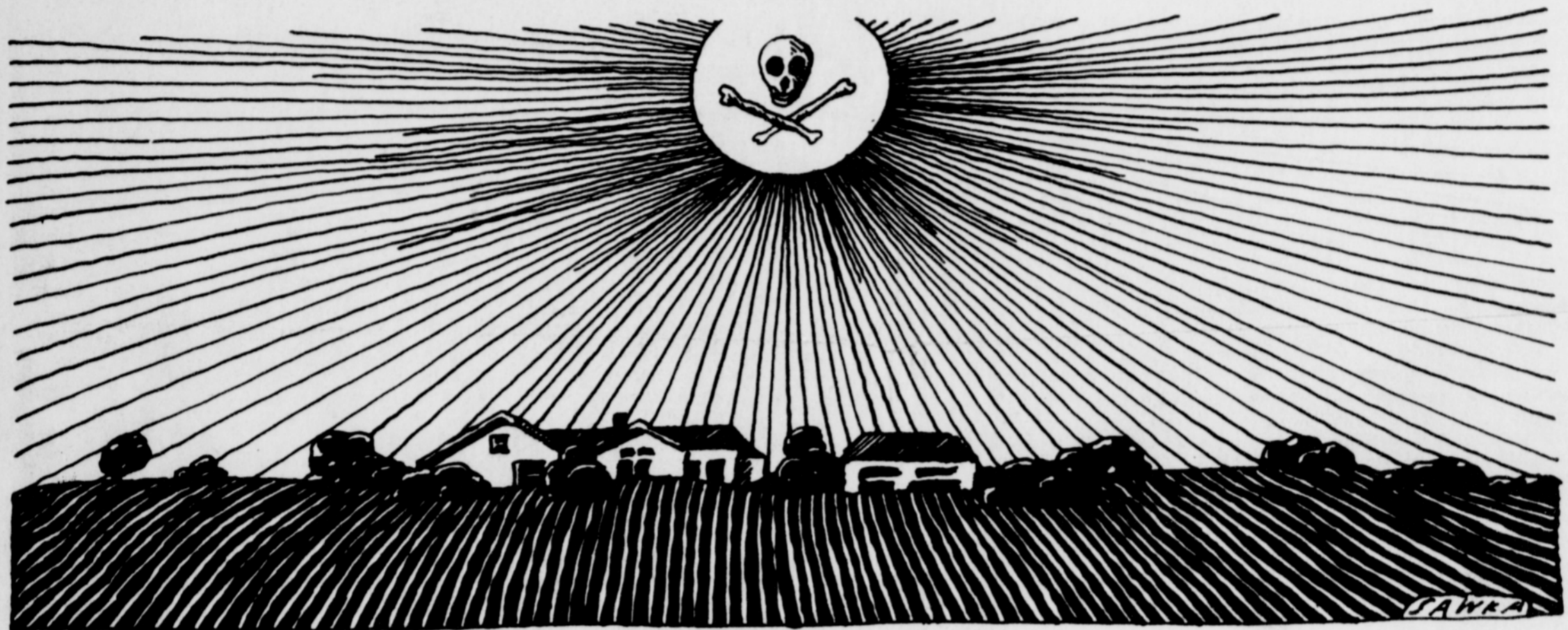


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In a dark time the eye begins to see.
— Theodore Roethke

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JAN SAWKA

SUMMER OF LOVE AND LEGEND

HISTORY IS THE SUM TOTAL OF THINGS THAT COULD HAVE BEEN AVOIDED.

— KONRAD ADENAUER

All sorts of people who are approaching middle age are reminiscing about the summer of 1967, which they call the "Summer of Love," a drug-induced hallucination in which several thousand (mostly) pampered middle and upper class white (flower) children suspended social strictures and sang, danced and fornicated like most of us imagine our wild and unfettered ancestors to have done in the primeval veld before civilization and Christianity dampened our freewheeling tribal spirits.

Mecca that legendary summer twenty years ago was San Francisco, known also as Baghdad by the Bay, historic incubator and refuge for many radical and eccentric mythologies. For just a brief moment in a nation torn apart by an unpopular war and racial strife a quicksilver of fun and peace rippled through the stoned young masses who had swarmed into the city from all over country. An adhoc socialist republic boomed and bust as rapidly as an old goldrush town. Everything seemed free for the asking — food, lodging, medical care, sex and wine, even now and then the drugs that fueled the dreamlike vision of a world of harmony, peace and love.

It all went badly quickly, of course. Before the summer was over evil spirits had merged with the blithe frolicking throngs of nirvana seekers, stealing, assaulting and raping, selling bad drugs and generally creating an infection of bad vibrations. The rhapsodies of nostalgia about that long ago and faraway summer seem to ease over the ruthless struggles of that period. That same summer of 1967 American cities burned with racial hatred and insurrection (and despair). More than two hundred other young Americans were dying in Viet Nam every week that summer, and God alone knows how many thousands of Vietnamese were killed between each Sunday and Saturday. The dreamworld itself soon darkened into nightmare: two summers later the counterculture that grew from the Summer of Love produced its most famous citizen, Charles Manson.

Some among the large restless tribe that worshipped the image of eternal youth never got much older, swept up in the war that everyone seemed powerless to stop. Some endured jail to avoid the war, others fought against the war and endured the clubs and disabling chemicals of police and national guardsmen, many of whom enlisted in state militias to avoid service in the war.

The drugs that opened the minds of thousands of alienated children seered them to ash in subsequent years.

Rampant ideologies and social solutions were bred and died in the turbulent years of which the summer of 1967 is increasingly regarded as the core. Revolution was a serious and futile flirtation, a more or less malevolent and adolescent reaction against a paternal system that refused reform or criticism. The police and military showed the young resisters of the state's authority that social change takes hard work and too often the shedding of blood, and most were not inclined to pay the costs in either pain or time. The "Now Generation" found some other nows to be Now about. Some in terrible frustration and rage tried to push against history but they were killed or hunted into jail. A few, not particularly adept at explosives, accidentally blew themselves up making or distributing homemade bombs.

Although the generation temporarily repudiated the corrupt leadership and incessant greed of the nation, it grew increasingly fond of the riches it had previously loathed. If time is reckoned by pop culture, the rebellious, egalitarian decade of the 60s mutated into the selfish "Me" decade of the 70s, followed by the freebooting retrogressive decade we presently suffer. The flowerchild hippy permutated into the yuppie, a subculture that believes the pursuit of wealth and status is compatible with its lingering sympathies for social justice.

Now the babyboomers are as old or older than their parents were twenty years ago. The Summer of Love is the generation's Hans Christian Anderson fairy tale, the watershed of its lost youth. They were the children born after World War II whose troubled memories did not include the daily sounds of bombers and bombs. They rebelled instead against prosperity and its flaccidness of spirit, although their continuing angst is a legacy of their parents' war, nuclear holocaust. They are so large a generation that they crash through history as irresistibly as fire, changing everything they sweep past. They are so accustomed to the attention of society and in particular its merchants they believe they are history itself. At least, apart from the hype and herd instinct, they tried to be kind to one another that long ago summer and felt a shared stake in the future that went far beyond naivete. That so many have not bought wholeheartedly into the rottenness they perceived twenty years ago speaks well for our common entry into the next millenium.

MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER