

SANDRA MENDELSON RUBIN

Mouth of the Navarro River, 2013
Oil on polyester, 48 x 32 in



COURTESY WINFIELD GALLERY

SOPHIE NEWMAN

The Edges of Paradise

Memories of
growing up
in Big Sur

In the winter of 2017, Big Sur, California, was hit by a series of the most damaging storms in recent history. The storms came on the tail end of a wildfire that raged for three months, charring over 130,000 acres of coastal land. After a long drought, the rain was, at first, a welcome sight. But raging winds and waters turned destructive. Landslides blocked the highway, the only way in and out. Roads to houses flooded. A bridge collapsed, splitting the small community in half and leaving residents stranded in their homes, rationing food and awaiting emergency assistance in the form of the loud drone of a helicopter.

Transplants were surprised by the damage. But those who have lived on the land long enough are well accustomed to its volatile tides. Some can even spot the signs of storms long before they arrive. One morning, Feynner Arias, a family friend, naturalist, and faithful guardian of a large swath of private research property along the Big Sur coast, woke to the ground in front of his cabin covered with bay branches. *Wood rats*, he instinctively knew. *A storm is coming*. Responding to the damp temperatures, wood rats gather extra bedding for their nests to keep warm. According to Feynner, months before the storms, winds were so high that a wood rat gnawed off a branch, and it killed a man.

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Almost a century earlier, it is the dawn of the 1920s. Most of the country is loudly celebrating the coming of the modern age, but on the Central Coast of California, quiet is still everywhere. In 1919, the poet Robinson Jeffers purchases a plot of land on Carmel Point, just twenty miles north of Big Sur. On the property, he builds a granite house and a four-story stone tower he names Hawk Tower, possibly modeled after Francis Joseph Bigger's Castle Sean in Ireland, which supposedly influenced Yeats.

He moved to understand the Big Questions. War. Family. Faith. But Jeffers's discontent and his drive to write also stemmed from his dissatisfaction with humankind's appreciation of nature. Human relationships seemed unreliable and untrustworthy, while the landscape remained faithful. "It knows the people are a tide," said Jeffers in "Carmel Point."

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