

LOUISE LEBOURGEOIS

Whip Waves, 2018
Oil on panel, 36 x 36 in



BEN MASAOKA

Where Life Began

Ballona Creek overflowed its cement banks during the 1958 tropical storm that dumped a small ocean of water into the concrete Los Angeles basin. Imagine, all those square miles of streets and sidewalks and parking lots, from North Hollywood to Anaheim and suburbs beyond, the curb gutters whirling, flooding parts of town to wash away automobiles and storefronts and the occasional person who, with bitter luck, had been sleeping drunk behind trash cans in a low-lying alley. Whose disappearance in the flood had been prefigured years before by a disappearance from, perhaps, a more respectable life. These things are rare, but they happen.

Residents from housing projects to the east heaved all manner of broken things over the barbed wire fence into the culvert tributary of Ballona Creek. Televisions, dryers, shopping carts, bicycles, lawn mowers, mattresses, sofas with coiled springs hanging loose like broken clocks. The banks of Ballona Creek were so littered with junk that it almost seemed the purpose of that winter's deluge, to carry those artifacts of habitation, once-new products that temporarily brought joy, away. Away to the ocean, where the occasional piece of junk washed up on Toes Beach to be buried deep in the sand by pounding winter storms.

People gathered to stand on the banks of the creek to see what the flood carried; among the crowd was a small boy. A water heater tank turned and surfaced and submerged in the currents like a catatonic albino seal; a doghouse without, everyone hoped, the dog; a refrigerator with a closed door; a La-Z-Boy recliner that, seeing it awash in the flood, made elderly people sad. Now it was the third day of high water, although with the clearing weather it had abated a bit in volume, and people had lost interest. Only the boy returned, this time bringing a little girl. Michael was six years old and Miya, three. Their mother was napping. Squatting at the water's swift edge on the upstream side of Miya, Michael scanned for floating objects to point out to his baby sister. He saw an automobile tire tumbling toward them and he turned to alert her to the sight, but she was not there.

Michael stood and looked downriver, but there was nothing to be seen, only the tire that had swept by and was now far away bobbing and spinning like a life preserver in the dirty waves. Guessing that Miya had gone home when his back was turned, he dashed quickly up to the top of the

He imagined that this spot was the beginning of a trail, or a doorway, that would lead to his sister, or to a sign of her.

bank, expecting to see his sister walking in her toddling way homeward. But no, she must be there already. He ran to the house and entered Miya's room, next to their parents' bedroom, quietly calling her name so as not to wake their mother. He carefully opened the door to his grandmother's room, she was also napping, and silently searched. He went to his room at the farthest end of the house. But Miya was nowhere to be found. He looked in the closets, in the dirty clothes hamper that was too small for her anyway, in the bathrooms and under the sinks, and under the kitchen sink, and all around the yard. He dashed back to the creek and stood at the top of the bank and screamed her name as if she might hear him even though she was nowhere in sight. He returned to the house and searched through all the rooms once more. He touched the back of a chair to steady himself. Finally, he went to wake his mother.

* * *

The memorial service was held a year later on the anniversary of her presumed drowning. Miya's body was never recovered and the father knew it was time to move on. He had accepted her death a long time ago, of course; after the first couple of days, he knew. And so did the mother. But they both felt a kind of sluggishness. Their limbs were without strength and could barely move. It was exhausting just to be alive. And to see Michael every day. It was so terrifying what they felt about Michael that they could

not talk to each other about it or even admit there was something to say. The result was that they each fell into their own silences. The thought of a service for Miya then was too heavy a task.

As the gathering ended and relatives and friends left the house, saying their goodbyes and giving hugs, people shook Michael's hand, some of them giving him a lingering look that was curious and not sympathetic. Then everyone was gone and the grandmother sat in her chair in the living room, working her jaw and lost in thought, nodding to herself. The mother wrapped the leftover food and stored it in the refrigerator. There were chicken, noodle dishes, and sushi. She left the pies and cookies on the table. Michael had something important he wanted to tell his father. He wanted to remind him about the tire Miya had grabbed on to. Michael was sure she must have. He even remembered seeing her wave.

He found him in the garage. The big door was open and his father was smoking a cigarette. Michael was seven years old and small for his age, and his father, not a big man himself, seemed to loom above him. The father turned. He was still wearing the suit he had put on for the memorial. It was the one suit he owned, and he used to joke that he only got to wear it for funerals. His father looked at him, and when Michael saw the expression on his father's face, his little body felt so suddenly heavy that he stopped walking. He waited, his arms at his sides.

His father took the cigarette from his lips and tapped the ash off, holding it at arm's length so as not to dirty the suit.

"What is it, Michael? Speak up. Does Mom need me?"

His father kept looking at him. "Michael, go help Mommy clean up. Go now, Michael," he said.

That night he dreamed of Miya. It was not the first time. It happened every so often. One time he dreamed that she was older and they were eating Thanksgiving dinner. Another time she was little and crying and he gave her a stick to hold. In this dream she seemed to be fine. It was just her face, but she was very much alive. In the dream he heard the faraway whistle of a train.

He awoke the next morning, vaguely knowing what to do, and lay in bed thinking, picturing in his mind the things he needed to take with him. His parents were leaving for the day and he was to stay inside until the babysitter

came at noon to make him lunch. He pretended to be asleep in the morning when his mom poked her head in to say goodbye.

He found his dad's old army canteen and filled it with water. He gathered food from the refrigerator, a barbecued rib, sushi, cookies, and put them in his metal lunch box. That morning he had imagined getting a large handkerchief, tying his supplies in it, and hanging it from a stick across his shoulder the way he had seen in pictures of hobos. But instead he put it all into the old green army rucksack that his dad had given him and still had the faded letters of USA. And he would need a weapon of some kind; he had thought of that as well this morning while lying in bed. He went to the garage and found his father's fishing box and took out the fishing knife with the blue handle.

He went to stand on the banks of Ballona Creek, where he had taken Miya that day a year ago. It was just a shallow stream now. He imagined that this spot was the beginning of a trail, or a doorway, that would lead to his sister, or to a sign of her. He felt confident as he began walking west on the dirt road that ran along Ballona Creek and ended at the ocean some five miles away. There was nothing past the last house but celery fields and mudflats all the way to the beach. He had never walked very far down the road, because his mother told him that one time a child had disobeyed his parents and walked down the road by himself and had been murdered by hobos and his body had been found hanging from a bridge. That's why he needed the knife. But he heard other boys describing how their big brothers went way down the road at night through the fields to hunt rabbits in the dark. Just shine a light in their eyes and the rabbits stand still and are easy to catch. The knife would come in handy for something like that too, he thought. He might have to kill a rabbit to eat.

Pretty soon he was far past the last house and he felt relieved. The babysitter wouldn't be able to see him now when she came. He wondered what she would do. She was a lazy babysitter, he'd heard his parents say. He figured she would return to her home and go back to sleep or watch television. The sun was rising higher in the cloudless sky, and even though it was the wintertime it would be a warm day. The celery fields were vast and barren. Far away he could see a thin stream of smoke rising from a tractor going back and forth across the fields, silent in the distance.

He had already gone farther down this road than ever before, and he looked around for hobos. He stopped and took the rucksack off and found the blue-handled knife, and walked on with it gripped in his hand to be ready if he was attacked. But he wasn't afraid. That morning in bed he thought he might be, but he seemed to have lost all fear since that day when Miya had disappeared. Nothing frightened him. In truth, nothing made him feel anything anymore.

In a little while he came upon a railroad bridge that crossed Ballona Creek, the tracks running north and south to he didn't know where. He'd heard about the bridge from older kids who dared each other to go all the way across. The gray metal panels seemed to grow out of the side of the dirt bank. The gray paint was dull and thick and covered the heads of large bolts like the paint had been poured on. He looked across the bridge, over the creosote railroad ties. It didn't seem that far. He wondered why crossing it was such a big deal. As he started it was easy, the railroad ties lay close together. But as he continued, the railroad ties grew farther apart, until at the middle of the bridge there were large empty spaces he had to step carefully across, the water glinting in the sun far below. Michael remembered the dream about Miya and the whistle of the train. It had been a warning; *she* had tried to warn him. For the first time, fear rushed upon him and he began to tremble. What if a train came? He waited for the rumbling that would fill the bridge and the whistle of the train bearing down on him. His father had told him that trains took so long to stop that anyone standing on the tracks would surely be killed. He could drop between the ties, but that would be death as well. He thought of his mother and of the story that other mothers would tell of his destruction as a warning to their children. But nothing happened, the silence of the early afternoon continued. He thought he should turn back and count himself lucky. Instead, he went onward. He didn't know why. He crossed the bridge and stepped onto the creek bank at the other side and turned to stare back to where he had started. And then he crossed the bridge again, not stopping in the middle but stepping across the larger spaces without fear.

He was about to continue on the road, but he saw there was a step-down place where the metal panels made a corner to widen out, almost a little room. There were

*After a while the
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drawings on the grey walls and he went to look at them. He saw penises, breasts, and women with their legs spread. Next to the drawings were cryptic messages and telephone numbers. He examined them, knowing that he should not be seeing them, but at the same time feeling a sensation like fear, mixed with an intense curiosity. He had a vague idea of what the drawings were about, but it was like trying to read something written with too many words he didn't understand. He wondered if the kids he heard talking about the railroad bridge had seen these drawings, or if they had made them.

He left the bridge and continued on his way. It hadn't rained for a while and the road was dusty with rocks that he kicked here and there. The celery fields had ended and mudflats with large tumbleweeds scattered across took their place. These must be the mudflats his mother had told him about, where a boy his age had come in spite of warnings from his parents and was taken down by the mud like it was quicksand. His mother had said all they'd found of him was his baseball cap. He stopped and pitched a few stones onto the mud and the stones bounced and rolled. It seemed safe, but those were just stones. He looked ahead up the road where he was going and saw a small figure coming in his direction.

It was a little girl. She was maybe four or five years old, with short black hair and brown skin. She came close and looked up at him, smiling. She had dimples and was missing a tooth. She wore shorts and a dirty white shirt and was barefoot. Michael looked around but there was nobody else in sight. He asked who she was and what did she want, but all she did was smile and tilt her head from side to side in a silly way.

Michael shrugged and walked on and the girl followed him back the way she had come. He stopped to look at her, and she stopped, too, smiling at him in a silly way. He thought she was making fun of him, because every time he stopped and asked who she was and what she wanted, she stopped too and giggled and tilted her head from side to side, her black eyes on his, and said nothing. He decided to ignore her. But every time he looked back she was still there.

The sun was directly overhead and it was hot. He was thirsty and hungry. There was a stubby palm tree off the side of the road and he decided to sit there and let the girl walk on to wherever she was going. So he sat in the dirt

with his back against the trunk and purposely ignored her. He opened the rucksack. He lifted out the canteen and unscrewed the cap and took a long drink. The water was warm and tasted metallic. Then he opened his lunch box and took out his food. Then he couldn't help it and looked and the girl was still standing there.

She was, he realized, about the same age as Miya would be now. He looked at her closely. There was the black hair and the black eyes, but the eyes were not the right shape. It was not Miya, he was sure of it. But she might know something.

"Do you live around here?" he asked. The girl stared at him, smiling. "Can you tell me your name?" The girl put her hand to her mouth and giggled. Michael thought for a moment and then he understood.

"One, two, three," he said.

The girl rolled her eyes.

"Uno, dos, tres," he said.

The girl's face brightened and she held up three fingers. "That's all the Spanish I know," he told her.

He was disappointed, but she also made him feel happy. She was Miya's age. Miya would also be silly and smile and giggle. He handed her the canteen. She took a sip and made a face. "Sit," he said and pointed to the ground. She sat close to him. He pointed at the food he had unwrapped. She took a bite of the rib meat and chewed it slowly. Then she tried a piece of sushi, wrinkled her nose, and put it back. Then she sat still and looked at the cookies, smiling to herself. "You can have some," Michael said, pushing the cookies toward her. She smiled and took one, then another. They sat together under the palm tree and ate all the food, passing the rib bone back and forth. When they finished, Michael was about to toss the bone away in the dirt, but he remembered that his grandma had told him about the boy who had littered and who grew up to marry a woman who was lazy and never cleaned their house. So he wrapped up the bone and put it away in his rucksack. The girl watched him approvingly.

Michael talked to the girl as they walked together. He knew she didn't understand what he was saying, but that was okay and it didn't seem to bother her. He told her about Miya, and how she had saved herself by grabbing on to a tire floating in the water, how everybody lost faith in her except for him, and how he was looking for her, or some

sign of her, because without faith his parents had become lost in sorrow. But he was different, he told the girl, because he never lost faith and so he did not feel sorrow; in fact, he told the girl, he had never cried about what happened, because crying would mean that he had lost faith.

After they went on for a while, they saw a pack of scrawny dogs come loping their way. The dogs moved closer and barked and growled and the girl clutched Michael's arm and hid behind him. Michael had the knife and thrust it toward the dogs, but it was hard to do because the girl was clinging on to his arms and whimpering. The dogs sniffed at them from just out of reach and sat on their haunches, tongues lolling out. Michael squirmed away from the girl and took off his rucksack and opened it. He got out the rib bone that still had some meat and waved it around so they could smell it, then he flung it away down the road in the direction they had come. The largest dog went after it first and got a hold of the bone and ran away with it in its mouth. The other dogs chased after, woofing softly. One or two looked back at Michael and the girl in a friendly way.

They walked on, she still behind him, and when they came upon a clump of tall grass, Michael stopped and showed the girl how to make a noose from the grass stalks for catching lizards, but she laughed and seemed to already know. After a while the celery fields began again, and off to the side was a grove of tall eucalyptus trees like the ones in his backyard. As they got closer, he could make out what looked like a couple of shacks with tin roofs. There was a tractor parked in a clearing and as they drew near a dog barked. The girl ran down a footpath and Michael watched her go, the pale undersides of her feet kicking up behind her.

In a little while Michael came to a long ditch. It was dry and was about four feet deep. There was some kind of pipe at the bottom. The sun was no longer directly overhead and there was shade in the ditch. Michael climbed down to sit awhile in it. The dirt was nice and cool, and he took off his rucksack and propped it up like a pillow behind his head and slung his legs over the pipe like he did at home with his long pillow. This made him think about home. It seemed so far away and now he felt a little homesick and tired. There were a few stretches of wispy white clouds in the blue sky and he watched them, not thinking about anything at all. It wasn't so clear anymore

what he was doing. That morning in bed he had imagined that looking for Miya would be like going to the playground to look for a friend. In that case, even if his friend wasn't there, someone would know where else he could look, or would tell him that the friend had gone home. Michael had been sure he would find some indication of Miya, but now he wondered if he was losing hope.

He was startled by voices that seemed to come from directly above. He sat up and looked, and there were two boys standing on the top of the ditch and staring down at him. One boy had red hair and the other was blond. They were both older than him by years.

"Are you a hobo?" the boy with red hair asked.

The blond boy snickered. He nudged a rock over the edge of the ditch with his foot and it fell on Michael. They both chuckled. Michael found the knife in his rucksack and stood up, pointing it at them. They stared, then looked at each other and grinned. They turned back to Michael with serious faces.

"Wow, look, he has a knife," the blond boy said.

"Oh wow," the red-haired boy said, "he must be dangerous."

"I think I'm scared."

"I'm scared too!"

They grinned at each other, and the red-haired boy said, "It's a good thing we have these to protect ourselves." And both boys took strings of firecrackers and cherry bombs from their pockets.

They lit a string of firecrackers and tossed it at Michael.

“We’re going to blow you up, you little slant-eyed fucker,” the blond boy said.

“Yeah, we’re going to atom bomb you, Jap,” said the boy with red hair.

They lit a string of firecrackers and tossed it at Michael. He jumped aside and the firecrackers exploded around him. “Here comes the big one!” and he saw them trying to light a cherry bomb. But suddenly they were running away from two other older boys who came from the direction of the road. The two new boys chased them for a little bit and then came back to where Michael was. They stood above him where the first two boys had been and looked down at him and the rucksack at the bottom of the ditch. Michael was still holding the knife.

“Did you meet our little sister?” one of the boys asked.

Michael said nothing.

“She said she saw you on the road today,” the other boy said.

“I guess. I met a little girl.”

“She said you saved her from *wild* dogs.” The two boys laughed.

“I guess,” Michael said.

The two boys looked down at him.

“You can put your knife away, *ese*.”

Michael put the knife in his rucksack and one of the boys reached his hand down and Michael took it and the boy pulled him out of the ditch.

“Our sister says you are looking for your sister.”

“Yes. Did she understand me?”

“Maria? Sure, her English is good.”

“I thought she couldn’t understand.”

“She was just playing with you, man.”

They walked back to the road together.

“Our mom says we should come and thank you. And because you are looking for your lost sister, we should give you this.” The boy reached into his pocket and took out a small blue medallion, it was the size of a dime on a thin silver chain, and gave it to Michael. Michael held it in his hand and stared at it.

“You wear it around your neck, *ese*. It will protect you in your travels, and maybe help to find your sister.”

So he did. And then he asked, “My sister is the same age as yours. Have you seen her?”

They shook their heads.

“I wish I could find her,” Michael said, and he suddenly felt how young he was compared to them.

“You will!”

“Sí, you will!”

“*Vaya con Dios*,” they both said and turned and walked away, back in the direction of the eucalyptus grove.

It was about an hour before sunset when Michael finally reached the ocean. Ballona Creek emptied into the sea between two rock jetties, and Michael crossed a final bridge and passed by a weathered two-story house that was painted black and had old fishing nets and buoys hanging from it. The house was alone, set off from the other houses on the narrow street. He walked on the jetty and then he was standing at the beach.

It was windy, the blue-green ocean was whitecapped, the shore-break waves rose and crashed into the sand over and over with a never-ending roar. Michael walked along the waterline. He found a long stick and he trailed it in the sand, drawing squiggles and writing his name then watching the seawater wash it all away. He swung the stick around his head several times and let it fly into the water, where the waves collapsed on it and washed it back to shore. He ran and picked it up and threw it back out to sea. He did this for a while, playing catch with the stick and the waves. There was no one else on the beach. It was windswept and empty.

He left the stick behind and walked to another rock jetty. He looked farther south at the miles and miles of endless beach and rock jetties and endless water; as far as he could see, waves were pushing against the shore. He felt

hopeless, seeing it go on for so far. He decided if there was anything to find it would be on the beach he had already crossed. He walked back the way he had come along the wet sand at the water’s edge, then wandered higher in the beach across the soft dry sand. It was tiring to walk here, every step sinking into the sand made him feel he was going nowhere. There was a slight depression ahead where tufts of seagrass grew mingled in the sand, and in it was a half-buried car tire. He knelt and put his hands on it. He pushed his hands into the sand that filled the tire, and then he dug around the tire and was able to pull it free. It was an old tire. It looked like—it must be—the one he had seen. He rolled it across the beach to the shore to wash it off. He tried to examine the tire but it was getting dark; the sunset had been gold and pink but the light was fading and it was getting difficult to see. He thought about how he would roll the tire back to show his parents and it would finally be proof. It was a long ways back, and he was tired, but he would have to do it.

In the dim light he saw a lone figure walking across the sand toward him. He thought vaguely of his knife, but he was too tired to care anymore. He’d found what he was looking for and that was enough. The figure came closer and he saw it was a woman. She wore pants and a sweater, and her whitish hair was cut short like a man’s.

“Hey there,” she said as she came near. “Hey there. Are your parents here with you?”

He had been told to not talk to strangers and what happened to children who did, but his mother had also said that if he was ever alone and lost and needed help, that he should find a woman to ask her for help. And here one was. “No,” he said.

“Well,” the woman said, surprised. “There’s nobody but us on the beach. Are you here with friends? You can’t be here all by yourself. Do you live nearby, in one of those houses?” She gestured at the row of beach houses.

“No,” he said.

“What’s your name?” she asked. “Okay, Michael, it’s not safe to be here alone, especially at night. I saw you walk by my house earlier. I live over there, see?” She pointed to the old black house he had passed near the bridge. “I kept an eye on you because you seemed to be alone. What are you doing out here?”

“I’m looking for my sister.”

“There’s no one else on the beach. Are you sure she is here?”

Michael told the woman everything about Miya, how he had taken her to see the flooding creek and how he wasn’t holding her hand by the water, and how he saw her floating safely on the tire. That tire, he pointed at it. How it had been a year and she hadn’t come back, but he knew that she would. How his parents had lost hope, but he hadn’t.

The woman listened and they were both silent for a long time. The tide washed against the tire and it started to float. The woman helped him drag it up the beach a little ways. The boy sat on the tire and she sat next to him in the dry sand.

“I finally understand what you are doing here. I can understand it all, I think.”

Michael waited. She had that tone in her voice that adults have when there is something they want to say.

“I’m Naomi. I’ve lived out here for a long time. And I’ve seen all kinds of things. I remember the flood last year in the creek. And I remember reading in the paper about a little girl. That must have been your sister. It must have been Miya. Yes,” she said, looking across the water, “I remember that.”

Michael asked her, “Did you see anything?”

“No, Michael, I didn’t see anything like you are asking about. Nothing at all.”

She looked at him. He was so small, clasping his knees with his arms, hunched over and staring into the sand. She said, “I live alone now, but I didn’t always. I used to live with a friend, but she died. I thought about moving after that.” She kept her eyes on him. The wind was blowing his hair. “But I love it here so much, and so did she. I couldn’t leave.”

Michael raised his eyes and saw how much darker it had become. The waters were black.

She wanted to put her hand on his shoulder, but she stopped herself. “My friend and I used to walk together on this beach nearly every morning. I still do.”

“Michael, did you know that the ocean is the source of all life? That’s what the scientists say. All life came from the sea. It is where life began. They are still finding new life in the sea. They find new things we know nothing about. Things so deep and that seem too strange to be

true, but they are. It's beautiful out here, Michael, don't you think so?"

The boy began sobbing. It was as if her words had unlocked a doorway to all his shame and terror. He shook, rocking himself and moaning. She rubbed her hand up and down his back to comfort him, and it comforted her, too.

Naomi cried with him. She put her arm around his shoulders and rocked with him. The wailing that came from his small body felt stronger than the ocean wind.

Ben Masaoka was born and raised in Los Angeles, California, a third-generation Japanese American now living in Seattle, Washington. Married, he has three children and an old black cat named Kuroneko. A newly retired teacher, Masaoka is working on a novel. He has published in the *Chicago Quarterly Review*.

LOUISE LEBOURGEOIS

Light at the Horizon, 2018
Oil on panel, 36 x 36 in

