

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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“Their works dissolve. Meanwhile the image of the pristine beauty

Lives in the very grain of the granite.”

Some of Jeffers’s epic poems ran two or three hundred pages, but after a while he grew tired of writing only about beautiful things. He found the drama of the landscape mirrored in relationships of the people who lived in an isolated, rural, and relatively poor community in the twentieth century. Infidelity. Heartbreak. Death. Poverty. All these familiar themes seemed different thrown against an austere canvas. The greater the beauty, the greater the tragedy.

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Big Sur is a land of extremes. It’s over twelve thousand feet deep and five thousand feet high, close to the sky and close to the depths of the earth. In every conceivable habitat, creatures with wings and fins make their homes. Humans are the most fragile of all Big Sur’s inhabitants, capable of living only in the most delicate of circumstances, but those who manage to carve out a life there relish their luck. They feel in the center of a vast expanse of life and mystery, like standing on a rock in the middle of the ocean.

To the east, the Santa Lucia Range rises abruptly from the Big Sur coastline, forming some of the highest peaks in proximity to the ocean in the United States. Foot trails begin in the damp redwood forests and steadily climb through low-lying shrubs and grassy patches to the crest of the mountains with panoramic views of the water, which changes color, from bright turquoise to azure, with the tides and the seasons. In the afternoons, when the sun is high, fog nestles between the cracks of the mountains and travels east to cool the forests and, beyond them, the Central Valley.

To the west, the Big Sur waters belong to the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary, which extends six thousand square statute miles into the Pacific Ocean. Just off the shoreline lies a coastal trench, Monterey Canyon, comparable in scale to the Grand Canyon, home to ancient squid and fangtooth fish. Less is known about what happens under these waves than anywhere else in the world, but looking out at the ocean from a ragged point along the Big Sur coastline, people still find a sense of peace. Erin Gafill, an artist and painter in Big Sur, wrote to me: “When I turn coming south from Carmel and see Soberanes Point in front of me, I feel all is right in the world. Again and

again as the highway curves further south and I approach my home, I feel this rightness. It’s like a good fit. Everything slips into place. I know where I am, I know who I am.”

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Before I was born, my grandparents built a house just south of Big Sur in an area called Plaskett Ridge, so named for the pioneer family who used to own the land. The property was cheap because no one could find water. Only Feynner, when he toured the place with my grandparents to offer advice, discovered ferns growing on the side of a mountain and convinced them: *Oh yes, there’s water here.* My grandfather built the house limb by limb from the surrounding abundance of redwood trees, like I imagine the homesteaders did before him. The shape of it was strange and wonderful, with asymmetrical architecture and large, almost twenty-foot windows, which framed the ocean.

Behind the house was a trail to an old gold mine, stripped of its precious metals but still full of white crystals and blue bats, which flew in and out in the evening light. In the front of the house, my grandmother created a garden of succulents, her favorite hearty plants. There were hammocks, a deck with a view, and a fire pit to warm us when we wanted to see the stars.

The house wasn’t far south of where I grew up on the Monterey Peninsula, so as a child, I went to visit often on the weekends. Sometimes, my grandfather drove me to the nearby Sand Dollar Beach or its neighboring Jade Cove, where the sea tosses up bits of emerald-green, black, red, blue, and even white stone onto the rocky shores. When I went to the ocean with my grandfather, he gave me one piece of advice, *You have to taste the sea in order to understand it*, and I did, swallowing mouthfuls of salty water and thrusting my tiny body into the waves.

I remember a swing, set back from the house, attached to a thick redwood tree branch, a tree so wide and tall I never understood where it began and ended. I loved feeling small in the company of the forest. The city dwarfs us, too, but in a less inviting way. Surrounded by so many lifeless things—fluorescent lights, cars, and concrete—we feel inconsequential. But to feel small against the back of something very ancient is to feel like a sentence in a story that dates back thousands of years.

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Before the Anglo-Spanish settlers came to colonize the Big Sur coast, one Native American tribe existed for thousands of years, the Esselen. *Esselen* likely stems from the word *Ex’salen*, or “the rock,” derived from the phrase *Xue elo xonia eune*, “I come from the rock.”

They made their home on the side of cliffs, gathering abalone from the shore and acorns and berries from the brush. Their spirit animal was the deer, which meant that they saw their spirits as connected, as one. When the Spanish conquistadors came for them, some believe that the Esselen people escaped through the mountains, scattered, and survived. Little is known of their language, which resembles no other native language of California. Only their handprints, in caves beneath the hot springs where they once bathed, remain.

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In 1957, Henry Miller publishes *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch*, a memoir about his time living in Big Sur with his wife and children. Raised on the streets of Brooklyn, Miller felt that Big Sur was a rare utopia in the context of the modern world: “Out yonder they may curse, revile and torture one another, defile all the human instincts, make a shambles of creation (if it were in their power), but here, no, here, it is unthinkable, here there is abiding peace, the peace of God, and the serene security created by a handful of good neighbors living at one with the creature world.”

The oranges refer to the famous triptych by Hieronymus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, where fruits and other symbols represent paradise. In his memoir, Miller wonders out loud to his neighbor why Bosch’s oranges appear so much more picturesque than they do in any other painting. His neighbor replies, “It’s because of the ambiance.”

When I read about Miller’s oranges, I think of the California poppies scattered across the mountains in the springtime. In response to the rain this past winter, the poppies experienced a “super bloom,” hastening to color the California landscape. Up close, they are ordinary, but in the context of the sprawling blue, green, and brown, they possess a tiny, spectacular beauty.

“Certainly paradise, whatever, wherever it be, contains flaws,” Miller wrote in *Oranges*. But he didn’t seem to think

Big Sur had any, and if it did, they were the faults of the beholder and not the paradise itself. He seemed to think that Big Sur had everything to offer but only to those who were willing to see it. When you live in a city, it is easy to ignore yourself, to slough off your identity in the concrete streets and wash it down the storm drain. But in Big Sur, there is no such outlet. He believed that to see nature in its purest form was to confront oneself.

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Big Sur’s landscape made it difficult to settle, partially protecting it from the urbanization that overtook San Francisco in the mid to late twentieth century. But the creation of the San Simeon Highway (later Highway 1) in the twenties and thirties established a narrow vein for outsiders to enter. “Literally blasted out of the mountainside,” Henry Miller wrote of its construction, which necessitated thirty-three bridges.

Jeffers also felt strongly that the highway represented the encroachment of civilization in a place in which it did not belong. In “Thurso’s Landing,” a poem about its construction, Jeffers attempted to capture the residents’ reactions to the so-called progress: “And the man: ‘I wish they’d let the poor old road be. I don’t like improvements.’ ‘Why not?’ ‘They bring in the world; / We’re well without it.’”

Today, the stretch of Highway 1 that passes through Big Sur is one of the most internationally visited roads in the world, welcoming millions of tourists each year. It is perhaps the kind of trafficked “bonanza” that Miller feared, although his very publication of *Oranges* attracted audiences.

In the twenty years following the road’s construction, Big Sur became a destination for everyone who felt the call of the wild—artists, nature lovers, hippies.

Now, tourists pass through Big Sur on their drive to Los Angeles in red Mustang convertibles. They stop to take a picture of the view at Bixby Bridge or eat ice cream at the River Inn. More curious travelers might hike or visit a local beach. They will try to find nature in the span of a day. “If we are always arriving and departing, it is also true that we are eternally anchored,” Miller wrote.

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When the rain came, it fell in biblical tides. Weeks turned into months. Trees fell. Animals hid in their homes in the

side of mountains. The waves crashed again and again on the rocks below. The mountains began to melt, spilling dirt and debris onto the road until it became so heavy that it cracked, severing its ties to the outside world. Traffic stopped, indefinitely. The residents of Big Sur became stranded. Big Sur became an island.

“Mountain and ocean, rock, water, and beasts and trees / Are the protagonists, the human people are only symbolic interpreters,” Jeffers wrote.

According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the California Coastal Commission and the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary (MBNMS) have discussed increasing “coastal armoring” projects along the Big Sur coast, which include building seawalls along Highway 1 to keep sediment from collapsing into the sea. Steep topography, seasonal storms, and active faults all contribute to the landslides in Big Sur. Wildfires make the slopes vulnerable to erosion, and the force of waves encourages the land to further crumble. Rocks pile up on one another, racing to reach the edge.

But if the mountains want to leap into the ocean, why stop them? “These mountains want to be in the ocean like a golden retriever,” Paul Michel, the superintendent of MBNMS, told me over the phone when I asked him if the landslides in Big Sur were a real threat. It was a metaphor so original it was almost incomprehensible, but I understood the sentiment: the mountains desire to collapse, waiting like eager giants to be absorbed into something else. Isn’t that what we all want?

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When I was in high school, there was a rumor that a boy I knew tried to jump off Bixby Bridge and never come back. No one wrote it up in the local news, but whispers travel fast in small communities. He was a boy with an absent father, and when we were young, we both spent a lot of time together at a day care center with other children of divorced or absent parents. Allegedly, a local child celebrity accused him of rape, and when the whispers began to surround him, he had no place to turn. He wanted to disappear. So, he went where they all did. To Big Sur.

His is far from the only tragedy that Big Sur holds. For all its beauty, it can be a lonely place. Once, Feynner told me the story of another man who attempted suicide. He

drove two hours from the Bay Area to take his car off the edge of the Big Sur cliffs. They found his body first and came back for the car, but it had already been swept to sea.

Jeffers also wrote stories of suicide into his poetry. His poems capture a sense of desperation that multiplies in isolation. “When she left him the stars were dead to him,” Jeffers wrote in “Ruth Alison,” a poem about the suicide of a man whose wife leaves him after the failure of his lumber mill.

I know there must be others whose stories have never been told. A whole collection of souls, who, when they didn’t know where to turn, turned to Big Sur. Perhaps they thought the land would save them and that when they arrived, they would look out from a mountainside and know the answers to the questions that they asked. Maybe they wanted to disappear and not be found. Big Sur was the only place that showed them what the world would look like without them.

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By the time I was thirteen, my grandparents had sold the Big Sur house. For years afterward, I didn’t know what had happened to it, although its presence stayed with me in daydreams, where I played memories like photos in a gallery, trying to recall each touch, taste, smell, sound. The splinters on my feet from the deck. The bridge to the gold mine. The stars.

Two years ago, I came across a YouTube video called “The Road to Plaskett Ridge.” Actually, I didn’t come across it so much as searched it out, desperate for a chance to return. It was a phone-quality video, shot out the front window of a car, set to dreamy music. Almost instantly, I recognized the road, and at the end of it, the house, almost unchanged. “Our beautiful home,” said the woman who posted the clip, and my heart dropped. *Who was this person, living my childhood? Did she know anything of the history hidden in the walls?* But in the end, I couldn’t resent her. I felt, even through the screen, that she loved the place, too.

It is sometimes easy to forget the places that made us. With each new destination, we leave something of ourselves behind. Big Sur is less of a physical place for me than a spiritual destination. I have wept and laughed and bled there. Part of me believes that returning to that house

will somehow also rewind time. It’s not an impossible feat. Every place holds its own stories. Even redwood trees have seen dinosaurs.

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In “The Marginal World,” the naturalist and author Rachel Carson wrote about the indefinable boundary between the land and the sea. “For no two successive days is the shoreline precisely the same,” she says. The land can sometimes belong to the sea and the sea to the land, and in between these two worlds, in this marginal space, life flourishes. Through her expressions of wonder at the creatures that occupy this space, she also hints that this boundary possesses a deeper meaning. But in the end, she concludes that the meaning cannot be precisely located, or it is always changing. “It is the elusiveness of that meaning that haunts us, that sends us again and again into the natural world where the key to the riddle is hidden,” she writes.

And maybe it is also this marginal world that sends us again and again to the coast of Big Sur. Perhaps it is why no matter how many times I write about the place, I am never satisfied with the story. Maybe Big Sur is even more than the intersection of two worlds: land and sea. Even Carson must have known that the natural world is infinitely more complicated than this and that, and involves not just the intersection of land and sea but of people and nature, conservation and control, loneliness and belonging. In a society that threatens to put us in boxes, maybe what we crave most is this sense of uncertainty.

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When the rain stopped, the wood rats emerged from their nests. Residents stretched their arms and left their homes to walk down to the empty Highway 1. Animals crawled from the cracks in the roadway. Walking down the highway, it was, after so many years and tire tracks, possible to hear nothing but the crash of the waves on the rocks below.

“You can hear the birds,” said Blake Cusack, a Big Sur resident. “You can hear lizards running across the road.”

Already, the tourists have returned. The state has every reason to open Big Sur to the outside world, which has thrust it onto a global stage. Big Sur has become reliant on

outsiders. People come to find paradise in the extraordinary because they can’t find it in their own lives. Paradise is a bestseller.

The land, however, has no regard for visitors. It will heal itself with or without us. Those who understand that Big Sur cannot be contained within the confines of a postcard will understand and will stay. Others will pass through without really seeing or changing. Landslides will persist. The whales will continue their migration patterns up and down the coast. Storms will make and remake the landscape like an unfinished painting.

Once, while camping with my boyfriend on a rock ledge in Big Sur in the rain, I woke to hear the crash of waves so close to our tent I was sure, in a moment, we would be consumed. I felt the rhythmic spray of mist on synthetic walls, and I couldn’t tell from which direction the water came—the ocean or the sky. I thought of leaving, but there was nowhere to go. My car wouldn’t make it down the gravel hill in the weather, and I was certain that the road to the highway had disappeared. I felt the power of the land rendering me defenseless, like a child, but I knew that the storm would pass. The only way to proceed was to let go of all semblance of control and bed down, like the wood rats in their nests, waiting for the sky to clear.

Sophie Newman was born in Berkeley and raised on the Monterey Peninsula. She is currently an MFA candidate in creative nonfiction at The Ohio State University. A recent graduate of Rice University, she has spent the last five years in Houston, Texas, where she learned to love the bayou almost as much as the sea.