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ESSAY

## Shoveling Water

Fleeing the faculty room to be a fly-fishing guide in Montana

HOWLING WOLVES, DISEMBOWELED SHEEP

"How could anyone actually *live* here?"

By MICAH FIELDS

It is a new day and I'm in the truck headed north. A dusting of snow reveals a fresh pair of moose tracks — a cow and her calf — dotted across the highway's centerline, disappearing into the borrow pit's tangle of willows. A roadkill coyote stretches her frozen paws to the sky. My thermos is full of coffee, the heater is cranked, and my shoulders are stiff after the previous day spent rowing, or "shoveling water," as some colleagues call it — my hands on the oars, pulling them in a constant, rhythmic stroke against the current while the boat drifts its way down the shining conveyor belt of the Missouri River, where I make my living as a full-time fly-fishing guide.

Out my left window, the Rocky Mountain Front rises from the plains into a skyline of jagged sawtooth peaks. I'll be up there in October, after the fishing season ends, leading clients on horseback hunts in the high country, where the wind gusts over sixty miles per hour and snowdrifts can swallow you whole. *Welcome to the moon*, an old veteran guide and mule-packer once told me in my rookie season, before I ner-

and escapist media, but it also isn't. One blessing of the natural world begets curses in another time or place. The pounding of snow we've received this month is good for wildfires in August, but will also bring floods that will demolish bridges and scour the riverbeds clean come June. Rusted old machinery, the detritus of gold and copper mines long abandoned, hosts nesting bluebirds. Arsenic from mine tailings still runs through the rivers, but gigantic trout thrive in the toxic settling ponds of EPA Superfund sites. The growing abundance of gray wolves in the region brings new challenges to ranchers who find sheep disemboweled in the back pasture after a night of intense howling, their livers gnawed out, intestines strewn across the field. That's the way the scales are weighed here.

The old struggle between the land and its most destructive animals — people — plays out in terms more immediate and dramatic than any urban theater. The profound saga of the West unfolds, and we assume our part in the narrative as resisters or observers,

JEREMIAD

## OH, CANADA. OH, CRAP.

Euthanasia laws, a government that targets normal people's bank accounts and gives medals to Nazis, have turned our neighbor to the north into a threat to free people everywhere.

JUSTIN TRUDEAU'S FATHER  
WAS A CUCKOLD.

Neil Young, go home!

By CLAYTON FOX

When I think of Canada, I think of snow, maple syrup, "O Canada," and ice skating (specifically that of Elvis Stojko's). I think of Wayne Gretzky. I think of my parents' love of Vancouver as "the most beautiful city in the world," of the supposedly global metropolis that is Toronto, the culinary delights of Montreal, of the vast emptiness of its northern reaches, and sure, of its sort of goofy little brother status *vis-à-vis* my home nation, the United States of America. And, from that point of view, that of the superior, alpha citizenry, something else I think about, and that really bugs me, is how Canada could have produced three of the greatest musical geniuses and poets in the history of mankind: Leonard Cohen, Joni Mitchell, and Neil Young. They all ended up down here, they don't live in the Great White North anymore, do they?

REPORT

## MALIBU VERSUS NOBU

Why SoCal's surfing paradise stinks

THERE IS POO IN THE 'BU

Surf Nazis, selfish billionaires, and the young punk Sean Penn in his Chevy Caprice reflect the spirit of Malibu's inhospitable Mother

By WADE GRAHAM

Surfing Malibu, when the conditions are right, can feel like a waking dream. Can be, because usually, surfing Malibu means fighting surly crowds, with ten people hassling for position on every wave. But once in a while, I've caught that wave that all surfers rehearse in their heads:

viving child of six children of the patrician Rindge family of Cambridge, Massachusetts. He then moved to California with his young wife, May, a devout former schoolteacher from Michigan, in search of "a farm" where they could settle. His wish list was short but ex-



REPORT

## THE SUN, THE MOON, THE STAR

The best little Basque restaurant in Elko, Nevada

FROM BUM DARTS TO AN  
ANNULAR ECLIPSE,  
FEATURING A BLAZING  
RING OF FIRE

Large Fodder's Rule: Get Naked or Get Out

By WALTER KIRN

Randy, a husky old crust in a tall hat and a striped, blue western shirt, sits on a stool at The Star Hotel and Bar — since 1910 the social crossroads of downtown Elko, Nevada — drinking a glass of bitter Picon punch, a specialty of this traditional Basque restaurant. It's three PM on a Friday, the hour of indolence, and he's telling me bawdy stories from an era which has ended, it seems, most everywhere but here. It's not the frontier era (corporate gold mines sustain this region now, although there are still teeming sheep herds in the mountains, tended by immigrant shepherds from Peru) though it does have the feel of an older way of being — elemental, earthy, alkaline. It's a spirit I associate with Elko as I do no other western town, and why I visit every year or two to fill up on lamb or seafood at



low you whole. Welcome to the moon, an old veteran guide and mule-packer once told me in my rookie season, before I nervously marched a trio of real estate moguls into the dark morning on an icy trail.

When the landscape is not loud with wind it is mostly quiet, but always in motion and at constant odds with itself. In this way, the job of guiding a day of fishing involves the relentless juggling of variables; the weather, the rate of the river's flow, the angle of sun, the mysterious temperament of fish, and on and on.

I am driving along the upper reaches of the Missouri, on my way to meet my assigned clients for the day, my bug-smearing windshield aimed toward the "Sleeping Giant" — what locals call the foothills of the Little Belt Mountains that brush up against our town. The Giant lies east-to-west, and from my window in Helena you can trace the granite silhouette of his nose down to the broad meadow of his chest. Elk live up there, along with black bears, the occasional grizzly, mountain lions, and innumerable wary, ghost-gray mule deer who have spent their lives evading the bullets and teeth of one predator or another. In the place where the Giant's ear would be, a broad coulee lies under a layer of fresh powder. By noon, all the snow will have melted and the arrowleaf balsamroot flowers will light up the mountainside in a splash of yellow so bright it seems artificial.

Once, while hunting elk with a friend in that same draw on a frigid day in November, I watched a coyote chase down a whitetail fawn and clamp down on its neck. You could hear the deer's nasal scream ricochet off the canyon walls. I considered, briefly, the legal option of shooting the coyote, a great-uncle's Remington 30-06 in my hands, but I chose not to. Instead, I quit hunting for the day, drove back home, and fell asleep in the afternoon. I dreamed of running barefoot across some godforsaken scree slide, my heels shredded, pursued by an invisible, tireless threat.

I cherish my commute. The 40-minute drive from my door to the river is a way to ease into the day before I must flip the switch into the brand of exhausting sociability that is expected of my trade. I like to cruise and stare blankly at the roadside, taking stock of the sage flats and their familiar landmarks, letting my mind assemble itself from the blur.

Life is simple here, as the cliché goes among tourists

theatrical. The profound saga of the West unfolds, and we assume our part in the narrative as resisters or observers, buoyed by the delusion that we have a say in the matter.

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The "art" of fly fishing — if we can seriously ascribe it such depth, which I try not to do — is an occasion for repeated, humiliating, and personal failures. That's why I like it. I'm drawn to acts of hopelessness and romanced by faith.

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history of mankind. Leonard Cohen, Joni Mitchell, and Neil Young. They all ended up down here, they don't live in the Great White North anymore, do they? So, why do I have to acknowledge that it made them?

Blasphemous as it is, Neil Young has always spoken to me more than Bob Dylan, I'm really not sure why. Especially now that I know he's a hypocrite and a totalitarian. And so, by the way, is the Prime Minister of Canada, and his ruling party.

In 1970, after police at Kent State in Ohio murdered anti-war protesters on campus,

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REPORT

## WAGs Get Swag

### The instructive tale of Devil Baby

Digital dating delirium promises a pro athlete for the pot of every Instagram babe

**Spoiler: they'll wind up with a nurse from Minnesota, not you.**

By ANI WILCENSKI

Recently, during a late-night doom scroll of the *Daily Mail*, I came across an article about a 22-year-old British OnlyFans model who calls herself "Devil Baby." The model, whose real name is Orla Sloan, was recently sentenced to twelve weeks in prison for stalking Mason Mount, an English soccer player with whom she had a one-night stand after a party. She pleaded guilty to harassing not just Mount, whom she repeatedly called from 21 different phone numbers threatening to "destroy" him, but also two fellow Premier League stars, one of whom she claimed had gotten her pregnant and forced her to have an abortion, though they'd never been intimate.

The circumstances preceding the stalking are standard for dating and hookups in the digital age. Sloan had an Instagram with 80,000 followers and a lot of bikini shots in Mykonos and Bali. She attracted the attention of one of the footballers, who in turn invited her via Instagram DM to the house party where she hooked up with Mount. Their relationship did not progress after the party, save for some sporadic messaging until Mount cut things off six months later.

**"Action is character."**

— F. Scott Fitzgerald

That last bit is what the Devil Baby was ill-equipped to handle. In a statement during her trial, Sloan's lawyer said she was "dazzled" upon meeting Mount, but "he never intended it to be a lasting relationship... She felt somewhat discarded and she wanted to know why. She thought there was something there in circumstances where everyone else knew there was nothing. She had been sucked into a world of instant gratification achieved only by being seen with other people more successful than herself."

When I read that statement, I could not help but sympathize. To be clear, this woman's behavior is clearly deranged. But her behavior reads to me like the pure unadulterated id of a young woman who got involved with a man she was not prepared to handle, and then hated how she felt the next morning. In those feelings, she is far from alone. The circumstances of today's dating scene — the ever-more-open world, the mirage of the internet, the unquestioned celebration of casual sex as empowerment — make for a dangerous combination of idealism and masochism, in which a lot of women sign themselves up for situations where they'll inevitably get hurt. Women are

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On a classic longboard, you turn toward shore and paddle to catch the wave just as it rises to break; dropping down the face, you pop to your feet, push on your back foot to turn the board and accelerate down the line, take two steps toward the nose and pause, trying to be as graceful as a ballet dancer poised just ahead of the curling lip. That moment of stillness balanced on swirling water might last a second at most. Then it collapses, and you shuffle back, adjust your feet, and read the next section of the wave, or maybe you wipe out in bliss.

When the wind cooperates, the water's surface becomes what surfers call "glassy" — a curving mirror with a dark green tint. Distorted layers of green water, brown hillsides, and the confetti blur of cars shooting past on Pacific Coast Highway rise and revolve past your shoulder as you glide, and above them the clear periwinkle of California's blue sky. It's the best movie in town. But it isn't everything there is to see. Beneath, unseen, is another world: algae-covered rocks, waving kelp, fish in neon orange, stripes, and spots, camo-print leopard sharks, limpid-eyed seals, and the infinite shapes of anemones, nudibranchs, limpets, mussels, and urchins. Hiding among the rounded, mossy boulders are mottled bottles and trash, rounded pieces of concrete and brick being turned back into geology by the patient battering of the waves, and, possibly, the rarest of things: the hollowed-out, eyeball-like mortar stones used by the Chumash Indians who once lived here.

The world's best waves were nearly ruined before anyone ever surfed them. The villain, of course, was scenic estate-making. In 1892, one Frederick Hastings Rindge bought a goodly chunk of earthly paradise comprising 13,330 acres, nearly 21 square miles of the Rancho Topanga Malibu Sequit. The land, originally granted by the Spanish crown to a soldier attached to the 1775 Juan Bautista de Anza expedition sent north from Sonora, comprised "about ten leagues" of canyons and mesas, stretching along the Pacific shore from the border of Santa Monica on the east to what would become the Los Angeles-Ventura County line on the west. He paid \$10 an acre — a sum he could afford, having inherited a \$2 million estate in 1883 as the only sur-

placit: a piece of property "near the ocean, and under the lee of the mountains; with a trout brook, wild trees, a lake, good soil, and excellent climate, one not too hot in summer." Malibu — "the Malibu" as it began to be called — fit the bill.

Rindge was well-pleased with his acquisition, roaming it on foot and horseback, taking in its trees and birds, winds and weather, halibut-filled ocean and trout-filled creeks, even the brush fires that periodically swept through the chaparral that clothed the mountainsides. He rhapsodized about the land's rhythms and beauties in a self-published book, *Happy Days in Southern California* (1898), filled with witty verse and romantic descriptions of the life and work of the mostly-Mexican farmers, ranchers and cowhands, or *vaqueros*, of his and adjoining properties:

"Oh, the happy vaquero! Who would be a banker, when he could ride the smiling hills and hide himself and horse in the tall mustard! Who would be a slave to desk and electric-light darkness in a back room, when sunshine is free to all? Aye, a liberal competence is splendid, but slavery is often its price."

"But then we cannot all be vaqueros," he admitted in the next line. The Massachusetts Rindge family wealth had been built on shipping and banking; Frederick fattened it nicely with investments in California mines and real estate, Mexican timber, and an insurance company he founded. He was, in addition, a vice president of the Union Oil Company and a director of LA Edison (later Southern California Edison), and well-remunerated with their stock. He endowed his hometown of Cambridge with its public library, city hall, and what would become the Cambridge Rindge and Latin School, alma mater of Matt Damon and Ben Affleck, the latter now being a Malibu resident and contestant in the fabled Malibu Chili Cook-Off.

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Fred Rindge was hardly the first person to appreciate Malibu. For millennia, native peoples inhabited the California coastline, particularly the productive mixing zones of fresh and salt water made by river and creek mouths.

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spirit I associate with Elko as I do no other western town, and why I visit every year or two to fill up on lamb or seafood at The Star, gamble in the Stockmen's Hotel Casino, and fortify my depleted animal spirits.

As three weary-looking young gold miners look on, sharing a steaming tureen of cabbage soup at the far end of the bar, Randy tells me about the hunter from California who wasted his deer-hunting weekend in the brothels located around the corner from us. (Elko has four of them, open around the clock, including one whose neon sign is my favorite in all the west: *Inez's Dancing and Diddling*.) When the hunter returned home to his wife, he apologized for his failure to bag a deer, claiming that he'd fired some shots and missed, then complained that she'd forgotten to pack his boxers. "Oh, I packed them. You just never found them," she informed him. "They're in your rifle case."

"Good one," I say. Randy nods, because he knows it.

"When I was a kid, you know how I made money? I'd sell pairs of antlers to guys like that," he says. "Four hundred dollars is what I charged. That way they'd have a trophy to take back."

Randy is one of those practiced small-town talkers who offers good value for each drink you buy him, careful not to fall silent or grow dull. He's brimming over with local lore and inside dope. He tells me Elko's brothel workers give bartenders "one-hundred-dollar gift checks" in return for sending them clients. Sometimes the bartenders use these coupons themselves, sometimes they bestow them on big tipplers. He also tells me about his rancher father who owned the very first hot tub in Lamoille, a town to the east of here in the Ruby Mountains. "Large Fodder," we called him. He weighed four hundred pounds." Large Fodder, says Randy, had a rule about his tub: get naked or get out. "Clothing ruined the PH!" Randy tells me the tub was a site of non-stop antics and that, once inside it, "You didn't lose your girlfriend, you only lost your turn."

"Hey, do you know about

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# MALIBU VS. NOBU

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As far as knowledge knows, the Chumash people lived for, essentially, ever at *Humaliwo*, meaning “where the surf sounds loudly,” where Malibu Creek meets the Pacific. By far the largest of the watercourses on the rancho, Malibu Creek twists through a narrow, thickly-wooded canyon which opens to a large brackish lagoon facing the ocean. This rich creek-estuary-ocean confluence, with its acorns, plants, game, fowl, trout, and seafood, sustained 150 or so Chumash, according to Spanish records, in a village of houses lined up in regular rows, deploying sophisticated fishing gear, and paddling ocean-going canoes called *tomols*, which were made of redwoods and other big trees. Floated down from the north coast by winter storms, the logs were cut into boards, sewn at the seams, and caulked with natural asphalt tar.

When Frederick died at the age of 48, he left his widow, May Knight Rindge, three kids, a fortune of \$22 million (equal to half a billion today), property from Massachusetts to Sinaloa, and a family “farm” that had by then increased to 17,000 acres — 30 times the size of Monaco. The Malibu ranch was in actuality just the family’s weekend place, where they repaired after spending the work week in a splendid Romanesque Revival mansion that still commands 2263 Harvard Boulevard in the West Adams district of Los Angeles. In sum-



Eric Wienberg Collection, Pepperdine University Special Collections and University Archives

ner Brothers’ silent romance *Across the Pacific*, with the lagoon’s sand berm studded with fake palm trees to stand in for the Philippines. A young Myrna Loy played a supporting part of a half-caste, brown-skinned maiden cynically romanced by a US officer to obtain the capture of the leader of the Filipino rebels. Once in possession of his real prize, he abandons her.

May Rindge soon began leasing, for then-astronomical sums, lots on the sandy bay immediately west of the lagoon, which became known as the Malibu Movie Colony. One of the first buyers, in 1927, was Academy Award winning actor Ronald Colman, who invited his friend Duke Kahanamoku, the Hawaiian Olympic gold medal swimmer and global ambassador of the sport of surfing, to surf Malibu Point. Word was already out. Early surfing legend Tom Blake first surfed it the same year, having snuck past the gates. The best rides, he found, begin at the point and peel all the way to, and on very rare occasions through the pier, a distance of a third of a mile. The creek gets all the credit: It made the wave, by tumbling boulders fallen from the canyon walls down its channel, gradually rounding and sorting them before depositing them in the ocean during floods, from where the ocean waves spread them out down the point in a perfect, even fan. It soon became known as Surfrider Beach.

California’s population doubled from 1920 to 1940, to 7 million; many lived near the beach, and the beach was mecca for a culture bent on pleasure, even in the Great Depression — in the 1930s, there were surfing clubs up and down the coast. If surfing was the quintessence of fitness,

now versus the invading “Vals” — ‘Bu local-speak for visiting surfers from the San Fernando Valley, just over the mountains. Point Dume residents also stuck to Mrs. Rindge’s script, putting up locked gates and blocking access to “their” beaches; surfers who walked in from outside were harassed by locals. Despite state laws guaranteeing public beach access, the gates still remain today.

Point Dume in particular was known for a certain bad streak, embodied in its homegrown actors, members of the “Brat Pack”: Rob Lowe, Emilio Estevez, his brother Charlie Sheen, whose bad behavior was incomparable, and Sean Penn, who drove around in a blacked-out surplus police Chevy Caprice, looking through his mirrored sunglasses for trouble. Penn said he could play the surfer-stoner character Jeff Spicoli in the 1982 mall movie *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* so well because he literally knew that guy. At backyard high school parties, kids with teased, dyed hair danced to Siouxsie & the Banshees or the Cramps. At one of these parties at the Sheen house (I was friends with one of the younger Estevez kids), we hung out on the fake rock waterfall, smoking clove cigarettes and listening incongruously to Sade.

Concerned citizens passed out bumper-stickers admonishing drivers to “Slow Your Pace on PCH” because the road was so dangerous — often leading the state in traffic fatalities, with 72 deaths from 1990-2010. Local youth collaged them to read: “SPace on PCH,” as in, get stoned and space-out while driving, dude. You could still park just about anywhere. The first valet parking I can remember was at Geoffrey’s restaurant, which opened in 1983.

Gradually but steadily, the trailer coast turned into the gold coast. In 1991, Malibu became a city, after a decades-long battle to stop LA County from running a sewer main down PCH, transparently to open the coastline to developers. Residents thought that the fact that all of Malibu was on septic tanks — the only significant area in the county remaining without modern sanitation — would help preserve its semi-rural character. Perhaps their logic was sound, but what’s rare is also valuable. Modest strips of beach houses were bought up and turned into castles and compounds. Carbon Beach unofficially became Billionaire’s Beach, where ex-New Yorker and new Malibu resident David Geffen fought for decades to deny the public’s right to access a legal easement (which he was finally forced to open in 2005). Tech tycoon Larry Ellison, from Seattle, set a new record in 2003, reportedly paying \$65 million for five beach properties, including one 1,500-square-foot house for \$15 million.

For the broader audience, Malibu didn’t always play well. Actor Mel Gibson’s arrest in July 2006 for drunk driving outside the restaurant Moonshadows, spiced with his profanity-laced, anti-semitic tirade and claim that he “owns Malibu,” didn’t help. (Gibson grew up in Australia.) Malibu had become a bastion of false localism, the whining of posers and nouveau-riche arrivistes.

The smell emanating from the lagoon didn’t help, either. Surfrider Beach attracts 1.5 million visitors a year, from all over the world. Many couldn’t help but notice the signs too-frequently stuck in the sand warning them not to go in the water. Year after year, Surfrider earned “F”s for harmful bacteria levels, repeatedly ranking in the top ten most polluted beaches in California for decades, with surfers complaining of ear, eye, and stomach infections, rashes, and worse.

The beaches are especially bad when the sand berm separating the lagoon is breached by winter rains flowing out of the creek into the

## The world’s best waves were nearly ruined before anyone ever surfed them. The villain, of course, was scenic estate-making.

Surfrider Beach is bad year-round. To surf there means scrubbing your ears afterward with hydrogen peroxide. The cause of toxic water at Malibu proper is hotly debated. Some point to urban runoff during rainstorms, especially the first of the season. Others to the fact that the Tapia treatment plant upstream discharges treated sewage into the creek in the winter months. Others blame the septic tanks concentrated in the Civic Center area: Several dozen commercial properties generate about 250,000 gallons of sewage per day; 400 or so surrounding houses on the hillsides; Serra Retreat, which sits directly on and above the creek; and the private Colony just north of the estuary, whose foul septic odor is especially noticeable along the beach at low tide. Septic tanks cannot function properly without drainage, and here, there is little or none. Stand in the Malibu Villages shopping center, in the back parking lot where it meets the lagoon, where the center’s multiple septic tanks are clustered, and the smell is enough to gag a swamp rat. No matter where it comes from, there is Poo in the ‘Bu.

To add to its debasement, the lagoon, which years earlier had been partially filled with dirt from former ballfields and rubble from the PCH bridge replacement, in summer had dangerously low oxygen levels and high temperatures for aquatic life. Fish kills have been common, at times filling the lagoon and the beach with thousands of rotting striped mullet corpses. What could live in Malibu Creek? Surely nothing, or nothing good.

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One day in August I hiked up the creek, following the homeless path through the invasive giant arundo grass along the lagoon, skirting the last few houses, then up through thickets of brush decorated with gray shreds of plastic bags. My feet sank into clots of trash and dried mats of algae. Sycamores, oaks, and willows grew in clumps and groves. Pushing my way through branches, I became conscious of the signature, turpentine smell of formic acid — but by then the ants were already walking on my arms and legs. The pools were small, few, and fetid. Soon I began spying fish, all non-native, all invasive: a small black, whiskered catfish called a bullhead; smallmouth bass; bluegill; then, in a deep-

mer, the Rindges vacationed in Marblehead, a sort of Atlantic Malibu for Boston’s WASP elite.

Yet the happy rancho life Frederick described in his early tales became more difficult toward the end. In 1903, the Rindge’s ranch house burned to the ground. The next year, the behemoth Southern Pacific Railroad applied for a grant of eminent domain to run its tracks through the length of the property, to join Los Angeles and Ventura. Fred Rindge passed away the following year, in 1905, leaving May in charge of the family and a complex agriculture business raising sheep, cattle, goats, and pigs while grow-

youthful rebellion, and cool, Malibu, the best surf spot in Los Angeles County by miles, was the quintessence of surfing, and its image poured out into mass culture. The high, or low, point for The Point came with the 1959 movie *Gidget*, starring Sandra Dee as Gidget (based on a real girl named Kathy Kohner, five feet high and 95 pounds, who had been drawn to the scene), James Darren as Moondoggie, and Cliff Robertson (who actually surfed) as Kahuna. Real Malibu surfers Miki Dora, Mike Doyle, Johnny Fain, and Mickey Muñoz in blonde wig and bikini for Sandra Dee, worked as stunt doubles. The surfing scenes had



the following year, in 1905, leaving May in charge of the family and a complex agriculture business raising sheep, cattle, goats, and pigs while growing alfalfa, barley, grains, hay, lemons, and 1,600 acres of newly-planted lima beans near Zuma Beach — directly in the crosshairs of an outside world that wanted in to paradise.

Resourceful, and with nearly unlimited resources, May went on the offensive. Finding an obscure legal provision barring duplication of rail lines, she built her own railway to block the Southern Pacific. May's Hueneme, Malibu, and Port Los Angeles Railway laid 15 miles of track to bring the ranch's grain and hides to the family's private wharf (now Malibu Pier), which was finished in 1908 for a cool \$1 million. In 1907, LA County announced its intent to build a road along the coastline, to make permanent the informal access route used since the 1870s by canyon homesteaders. May put up fences and locked gates, guarded by legendary ill-natured riders, who were armed. So began 22 years of escalation, as the county, then the state, fought her in the courts, and May responded with more lawyers and more armed men. Four cases went to the California Supreme Court, and two to the US Supreme Court, which, in 1923, finally ruled against her.

Seeing the writing on the wall, May began planning for a future as a real estate developer who would welcome people — some people, at least — instead of excluding them. In 1924, recognizing that she would need water in order to sell land, she started the construction of a dam on Malibu Creek, the only significant, perennial stream in the mountain range, draining a 109-square-mile watershed that lies behind the mountains (the creek is an "incised meander" or stream that existed before the mountains rose and cut down through them). Two miles from the ocean, the creek happened to have a perfect dam site, conveniently at the mouth of a steep, narrow gorge poised just above the largest area of flat, developable land on the ranch. It was plugged with a concrete arch 100 feet high, costing \$65,000, finished in December 1924. Steel rails from the railroad, which was shut down in the 1920s, were used as reinforcement. Two years later a separate spillway was finished, bringing the entire span to 175 feet wide at its crest and 95 feet at its base, with a capacity of 574 acre-feet of water — an impressive structure for a private dam, then or now.

Called "The Queen of Malibu" by the rapt Los Angeles press, she spent like a queen to achieve her husband's dream of an "American Riviera" in Malibu: greater than half a million on "Laudamus Hill," a 50-room house started in 1928 and never finished; even more on "Vaquero Hill" in 1929, an elaborate Spanish fantasy house built on the beach for her only daughter, Rhoda Rindge Adamson (now Adamson House State Historic Site). Both houses were festooned with Spanish-style ceramic tiles from the Rindge's Malibu Potteries business. In 1929, the Pacific Coast Highway opened, finally letting the public in.

1929 was a bad year to get into the real estate business. A series of development schemes in the 1930s failed. In 1931, the potteries burned. More of the leftover rails were sold off as scrap. The dam, plagued with engineering and construction problems, and disputes with contractors, engineers, and state inspectors, was finally issued a permit in 1935, 11 years after construction began. But by then, it was too late. The same year, May was sued by creditors; in 1938 she was declared bankrupt; in 1939 she was arrested for debt. She died in 1941, age 76, with \$750 to her name.

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Malibu's first movie role came in 1926, in War-

Dora, Mike Doyle, Johnny Fain, and Mickey Muñoz in blonde wig and bikini for Sandra Dee, worked as stunt doubles. The surfing scenes had to be shot at Leo Carrillo beach, ten miles up the coast, because Surfrider was too crowded.

It went downhill from there. The early 60s saw the "Beach Party" film series with Frankie Avalon and Annette Funicello, the former Disney Mouseketeer, filmed at Malibu — *Beach Blanket Bingo*, *How to Stuff a Wild Bikini*, and *Muscle Beach Party* among them. The Beach Boys sang about it. Chevrolet brought out its Malibu in 1964 (a slightly trimmed-up Chevelle). Malibu would never escape its own self-parody, but there was money to be made. That has never changed.

The *Gidget*-era boom saw waves of newbies flocking to Malibu and other breaks. Those smart or fortunate enough to have been there before often bridled at the crowds clogging things up and getting in their way. Miki Dora, the dark, handsome "King of Malibu," nicknamed Da Cat for his preternatural agility and balance, responded by inventing localism, a virulent and often violent claim that the surfers who were there already owned the waves. Previously, many surfers were happy to share a single wave, riding together in sometimes comical numbers, even switching boards for tricks. But increasingly, sharing waves was met with the "Dora tap" — a hard shove off one's board, or worse, having a board shot at your head like a missile. Miki painted a swastika on his board, and the surf-nazi became a (real) thing. When Dora and the Malibu crew learned that Kathy Kohner was Jewish — her father, who happened to be named Frederick, fled Nazi Germany for California — one of them painted a swastika on the family's driveway. From then on, the signature move surfers have desired to display is a "cutback" — a hard, carving, 180-degree turn that takes the board from the face of the wave back into the curl. It's a beautiful move, with many variations and subtleties that define a surfer's style, but the first cutbacks were likely drawn to prevent other surfers from trying to share a wave; only later did they become an expression of artistry.

As the state's population doubled again, from 1940 to 1960, to almost 16 million, Malibu grew steadily, but remained mostly modest and semi-rural. Point Dume was subdivided into one-story ranch houses on large lots, zoned for keeping horses. Trailer parks dotted PCH, as they did up and down the California coast before working class people — then close to 100 percent white in places like Malibu — were priced out. In the TV series *The Rockford Files*, James Garner's detective character lived in one, at Paradise Cove — which is still a trailer park, though the trailers there go for millions. Drive PCH today north from Santa Monica and you will also pass Tahitian Terrace, Palisades Bowl Mobile Estates, Malibu Village Mobile Home Park, Malibu Beach RV Park, and Point Dume Club — where some of the "trailers," perched high above Zuma Beach, enjoy views of migrating whales from their lanais.

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Growing up in the 1980s, I lived, through no virtue of my own, in the 'Bu, driving to high school in Santa Monica (before Malibu High opened, in 1992). Malibu was known for its culture of surfing and its surfers, some of them self-described as bums, nazis, and punks. A made-for-music-video band called the Surf Punks had a semi-hit with the angry lyrics: "My beach, my chicks, my waves, go home!" One Surf Punks member was the brother of the captain in Captain & Tennille, another costume-driven group, who had previously played drums for the Beach Boys. They were channeling May Rindge's locals-only 'tude,

and soon separating the rigors of

head; smallmouth bass; bluegill; then, in a deep-



Brett Weston. All rights reserved 2023 / Bridgeman Images

lineup, where hordes of surfers bob along the surface, awaiting their next wave. Anytime it rains at any beach with a creek or outfall, surfers and swimmers get sick. Once, after surfing at Topanga, near the Malibu-Santa Monica border, while the creek was flowing, I came down with a week-long horror-show that my doctor said had all the symptoms of typhoid fever; I was resurrected only by antibiotics.

er pool, a group of big, dark carp, nervously circling like schooling tuna. This circus was what laymen call trash fish, and scientists call "bucket biology" — non-native things that people like to eat, brought in a bucket and thrown in.

I thought I should come back and try to catch some, pull them out, and leave them on a rock for the herons. Soon after, I returned with my fishing friend Joe, among whose qualifications was



having embarked on a trout fishing trip to Ireland after high school with his brother, only to learn that streams in the British Isles are private, closed to penurious American teens. Instead, they did what anyone would do and went to Paris, where, one morning at dawn after a long night out, they noticed giant carp lolling in shallow reflecting pools in the Tuileries gardens. Running back to their room for their rods, they climbed the fences and started casting pieces of baguette. The first chunk to hit the water was immediately seized and the fish ran hard for the far side, burning the line off the reel. Every cast raised a spray and fins, enough to make a Montana trout guide jealous. A crowd of spectators gathered just as instantly — which soon included members of the local gendarmerie, who ended the expedition.

Joe and I retraced my earlier route, passing small pools separated by long stretches of sand and boulders. A quarter mile below the dam we came upon a bigger one, by far the biggest yet, maybe 50 feet long and half as wide, dank, with a still, mirrored surface beneath which nothing moved. He cast a spinner across to the other side. The lure kerplunked, sank, he began to reel, and strike! The line went taut, the rod tip bent hard as whatever monster on the other end ran, causing the reel to squeal. It was an almost epic fight, but was over in under a minute, as the fish quickly tired and was brought in. As it swam closer we could make out, in the dark water, the unmistakable shape and color of a long, thick, silver fish, almost identical to a small Chinook salmon — a steelhead trout.

A steelhead trout is like a supercharged, superhero version of a normal rainbow trout. They're part of the same species, *Oncorhynchus mykiss*, as those trout that live their entire lives in rivers and streams from California to Alaska to Kamchatka in Siberian Russia, but *anadromous*, that is: born in freshwater before migrating to the ocean where it spends several years growing — up to 20 pounds and more than three feet long — then returning to freshwater to spawn. Some mysterious trigger causes a given number of baby fish in a population to undergo physiological changes to prepare them for salt-water and begin the trip downstream.

Unlike its five cousin species of Pacific salmon (Chinook, Coho, Pink, Chum, and Sockeye), the steelhead form of rainbows return to freshwater to spawn, then swim back to the ocean, and they repeat the cycle one or more times. We think of rainbow trout, in their remote mountain rivers and streams, as the “normal” state of trout, but forget that they had to get there somehow. How they got there was via the steelhead, the Viking children of the family, which connect separated river systems through their ocean journeys, planting their progeny in every swimmable cold stream system in the North Pacific.

Steelhead and “resident” rainbows — fish that remain in streams and don't make the ocean journey — were once found throughout Southern California, even in northern Baja. In the 19th and early 20th centuries people fished for them in every river from the Mexican border northward. Trout were a big lure for tourists and home buyers. Fishing camps dotted the canyons and mountains, and families even fished in “urban” creeks on weekend outings, hooking trout in Pasadena, Highland Park, and Compton. Opening day of trout season routinely made the front page of the *Los Angeles Times*. A typical photo from 1941 shows a smiling man in a suit and fedora holding a 41-inch sea-run steelhead he'd pulled from the LA River near Glendale.

Because water is gold in our semi-arid region, the fish were soon sacrificed. Dams were built on every river and every stream worth damming; all the rest were turned into fish-



Brett Weston. All rights reserved 2023 / Bridgeman Images

lion-dollar homes in Serra Retreat with flooding.

For most Malibuites, the idea of spawning salmonids in their polluted creeks was inconceivable. The closest thing to rainbow trout was to be found at Troutdale, an aging roadside attraction deep in the mountains on Kanan-Dume Road where one could dangle bait from a bamboo pole over a concrete pond and pull out bored, overweight, kibble-fed rainbows. One letter writer to *The Malibu Times* denied that any steelhead had ever existed there: “There is no evidence of the Malibu steelhead trout any more than there are Los Angeles River sailfish or Ballona Creek salmon.” Others, most notably Ronald Rindge, grandson of Fred and May, denied that trout had ever been present above the dam, due to waterfalls. Any found there, he asserted, must have been planted by state agencies.

Joe's catch aside, there is plenty of evidence that steelhead have existed in the creek forever. Fred Rindge bought his “farm” in no small part because they were there. He had rhapsodized about “the peerless graceful sea trout,” looking “into the shaded pools, trout homes, watching the fish dart under the shelving rocks,” and eating “the sparkling rainbow trout.” A fishing resort was built on Cold Creek, five miles up the canyon, in

Yet none of them would contribute a dime.

Ronald Rindge has repeatedly and publicly asserted that the dam should be listed as a historic monument, to honor the achievements of his grandparents. (He and others applied for protection of the dam under the National Register of Historic Places in 2003.) To him, it seemed natural that the initiative of his pioneering family, embodied in the dam, should be lauded and recognized. Looked at another way, the dam is concrete proof of the heedless destructiveness of American property ownership, where an inherited fortune can be used to monopolize huge swaths of nature, then damage it, through a combination of self-aggrandizement and blindness to how nature actually works. Nowhere did Mr. Rindge acknowledge that he and his fellow heirs shared a remaining family fortune valued in 1986 at \$75 million, based on the unearned value of Malibu real estate, nor that the citizens of the State of California had not only paid the family millions to take the dam, a clear danger of failure and therefore massive liability, off their hands, but to pay possibly hundreds of millions more to clean up the mess they had made.

How to understand a culture that operates this way? One doesn't have to look far. In a

Paulo, Cape Town, Budapest, Ibiza, and Dubai. There are 19 Nobu hotels around the world.

Inside, a sushi bar of warm-looking wood, honey-colored to complement the tinted, tree-haunted concrete, was thronged with chefs and glass cases packed with exquisite piscine offerings: tunas of several stripes — bluefin, yellowfin, bigeye, albacore; yellowtail, salmon, fluke, cod, char, monkfish, mackerel, and seabass; along with octopus, urchin, crab, and other invertebrate delicacies. Nothing from local waters featured. All had been gathered here — that is to say, flown into LAX by refrigerated 747s — from the four corners of the world, demonstrating Nobu's command of the world's oceanic resources. Anyone fortunate enough to have eaten at one knows that the dishes are spectacular. From the *omakase* menu, a parade of delicacies chosen by the chef, each one more ineffable than the next, I can recall only Canadian sockeye salmon wrapped around monkfish liver paté with caviar, yellowtail sashimi with jalapeño relish, and seabass with buttery shimeji mushrooms. A “small” dish such as bigeye and bluefin toro tartare is \$46, while the brand's signature black cod with miso is also \$46. Wagyu beef from Kyushu runs \$40 an ounce. At \$150, the



Because water is gold in our semi-arid region, the fish were soon sacrificed. Dams were built on every river and every stream worth damming; all the rest were turned into flood control channels, narrowed, straitjacketed, concreted, to rush their waters out to sea as fast as possible and leave maximum developable real estate in their former floodplains. California has 1,400 regulated dams (and hundreds more small ones). Steelhead, blocked from returning from the Pacific, have plummeted by 90 percent statewide, and 99 percent in Southern California. They were essentially extinct.

Or so we thought. In the late 90s, during several wet winters, steelhead were seen again: in the remote canyon of San Mateo Creek, in Orange County; in the Ventura River; stranded in a pond on a golf course in Ojai. Silver, muscular, and huge, they were ghost fish, literally fish out of water. In spite of their remarkable persistence, their chances of being reunited with resident rainbows, which persist in mountain headwaters above many dams from San Diego County northwards, were slim.

But what if some of the dams and other blockages could be cleared — could they find their way back home, reestablish their ancient trails, and so reconnect the ocean and the land? So much damage is already done: All but the tiniest streams in Southern California have been disfigured, for water supply and flood control. Millions of people depend on those alterations. But some smaller blockages, like Matilija Dam on a tributary of the Ventura River, are useless: silted up, storing no water, structurally weak and dangerous, and blocking sand from replenishing downstream beaches. Matilija is slated for removal.

Rindge Dam is another. Building it was a fool's errand: Malibu Canyon is spectacularly steep, fractured, and crumbling, a tight choke point through which 50 square miles' worth of torrential rainfall is forced to squeeze. Huge storm flows bring down massive amounts of rock and sediment, which historically fed the beach and perfect rock fan of the point break below. The dam was silted up by the 40s, only a few years after getting its permit. Today, an estimated 780,000 cubic yards of sediment are piled behind it, with trees growing picturesquely along its top, 100 feet above the natural creek level. It was declared useless and officially "decommissioned" in 1967.

In 1997, the Southern California steelhead were listed under the Endangered Species Act, because of their genetic difference from other rainbow trout: Evolved at the southern edge of the species' enormous range, steelhead can tolerate warmer temperatures, lower oxygen levels, and "stray" more, allowing them to recolonize streams that are temporarily closed off by drought and fire-caused erosion. Recognizing

## Malibu would never escape its own self-parody, but there was money to be made. That has never changed.

the value of preserving their genetics in the climate change era, when such traits will be crucial to adapting to a warming Pacific Coast, Congress asked the US Army Corps of Engineers to study removing the dam. Removal would unblock up to five miles of habitat, from the dam to Cold Creek, counting 86 percent of former spawning habitat, and 65 percent of rearing habitat. In 2017, the Corps finally released its recommendations: The dam should come out, and the sediment behind it trucked out, so as not to threaten multi-mil-

lions of dollars worth of property. A fishing resort was built on Cold Creek, five miles up the canyon, in

# ONCE, AFTER SURFING AT TOPANGA, NEAR THE MALIBU-SANTA MONICA BORDER, WHILE THE CREEK WAS FLOWING, I CAME DOWN WITH A WEEK-LONG HORROR-SHOW THAT MY DOCTOR SAID HAD ALL THE SYMPTOMS OF TYPHOID FEVER; I WAS RESURRECTED ONLY BY ANTIBIOTICS.

the 19th century. More recent records include a 33-inch steelhead in Malibu Creek, and multiple steelhead taken in the ocean from the pier. Historically, trout were present in at least ten of the streams in the Santa Monica mountains, some little more than rivulets but with alder-shaded pools between boulders big enough to shelter fish through the rainless summers. Since 2000, steelhead have been documented in Malibu, Topanga, and Arroyo Sequit creeks. The organization California Trout estimated that, before the dam, 1,000 steelhead ran in the creek every year.

After releasing the big fish, Joe and I kept walking, to the face of the dam, where a pool too deep to see the bottom of lapped against rotting concrete. We started to fish, and every cast was hit, hard — bam, bam, bam. As fast as we could unhook them and cast again, we pulled up more resident rainbows, 10, 12, 15 inches long. It was like shooting fish in a barrel.

How should we value those lost fish? The sushi value of 1,000 steelhead per year? The tourism value if anglers were allowed to fish for them? Or, should we consider their value to the entire species, millions of fish throughout the northern Pacific Ocean, connecting the freshwaters of North America and Asia in one, spectacularly beautiful and complex web? The genetics of these supremely adaptable fish — these mutants — might make the difference of survival in a warming climate, where more and more of their range will begin to look like Southern California. There is much that these southern steelhead know, quite literally in their bones, that we can never hope to — except by learning from them, if we can find the wisdom to save them. Richard Brautigan, in his odd 1967 novella, *Trout Fishing in America*, told of first learning of the existence of trout from his stepfather, an old drunk, in 1942. "He had a way of describing trout as if they were a precious and intelligent metal."

What of the other benefits of removing the dam? The value of the impounded sand alone can be guessed at, considering the homeowners of Broad Beach are eager to be permitted by the state to spend \$30 million to "renourish" their quarter-mile-long beach. By that metric, provided the beach renourishment is accurately assessed, the windfall that the property owners on Carbon (Billionaires') Beach would enjoy from the Corps' plan would pay for the whole project many times over. The first in line, directly in front of the proposed dump site: the Malibu Beach Inn, bought by David Geffen in 2005 for \$29 million; then Nobu Ryokan (a hotel where rates begin at \$2,000 a night, with a two-night minimum stay), and Nobu restaurant, which replaced the tatty old Pier View Cafe and Windsail restaurants — dowagers from the trailer coast era — bought by Larry Ellison for \$9 million and \$18.5 million, respectively. Nearby is another, on a mere half-acre, bought in 2019 by natural-gas billionaire Michael S. Smith for \$110 million (making its annual property taxes \$1.31 million).

How to understand a culture that operates this way? One doesn't have to look far. In a

not-atypical editorial, Arnold York, the publisher of *The Malibu Times*, complained that "We're willing to spend millions to preserve steelhead trout," when we ought to let them all go extinct, to be replaced by better competitors. "I believe in Darwin... We all compete. Plants compete for air, sunlight and space. Animals compete for food, breeding grounds, for mates. The stronger and more adaptive survive, the weaker die out, ultimately vanish, and become extinct."

Mr. York's philosophy is not Darwinism, it is Social Darwinism, which dovetails with (and has scarcely evolved beyond) Frederick Rindge's casual Victorian racism. In *Happy Days in Southern California*, Rindge wrote, faux-complaining about the success of introduced English Sparrows: "His ubiquitous self, like the Anglo-Saxon race, has been born to conquer."

...

Nobu Malibu is the hottest ticket in town. I arrived for dinner recently via a Tesla Model S, belonging to a friend, Captain Blue, who is one of the town's leading pot dealers (a legal pursuit in California since 2016). Unable to resist showing off to a newbie like me — almost a Val myself, since I live 20 miles inland, near Dodger Stadium, in the cheapest house I could find *the closest to the beach* ten years ago — he demonstrated the electric car's blinding torque by stopping cold in the fast lane of PCH at rush hour, shifting into "Ludicrous Plus" mode, then stomping on the accelerator. The streamlined, slightly iridescent blue beast lurched forward like the *Millennium Falcon* hitting warp drive. Then, slowly and elegantly, as if nothing insane and illegal had just happened, he dropped me by the restaurant's front door, facing the parking lot, full of row after row of equally shiny Range Rovers, Porsches, Ferraris, BMWs, and other exotic machines.

The squat, modern Nobu building is made of a warm-colored concrete, "board-formed" with un-sanded planks in order to leave the rough, organic impression of the wood sacrificed for the purpose — a textural juxtaposition of a type that the Japanese call *wabi-sabi*, a notion of beauty defined by the asymmetry, roughness, and simultaneous imperfection/perfection of nature's forms, and a certain self-effacing nod to austerity, if not poverty. This building, built by code to withstand a 7-point earthquake, is likely the most expensive commercial structure per square foot ever erected in the city. Chef Matsuhisa opened his first Nobu restaurant in 1987 in Los Angeles; today he owns 56, including locations in Monte Carlo, Jeddah, Mexico City (2), London (3), New York (2), Sao

**"Waiting for your buddies to get laid is right up there with hanging out in a dentist's office."**

— Thom Jones, "The Roadrunner"

tartare is \$46, while the brand's signature black cod with miso is also \$46. Wagyu beef from Kyushu runs \$40 an ounce. At \$150, the cheaper of two *omakase* dinner menus is the most economical way to feed oneself.

Nobu sells not simply seafood, but a kind of entertainment delivered through a carefully curated mixture of food, ambiance, and exclusivity which induces a certain euphoria. The experience is vividly sensual, but as soon as it's over it begins to fade, until only a blurry impression of what you just consumed, or were consumed by, remains.

Like a flush bank account, this abundance isn't always easy to sustain. Even the Nobu empire, in a good position to bid for what remains of the world's wild fish, has to reckon with the accelerating collapse of the world's seafood stocks. Many of the restaurant's offerings are now from fish "farms," including the bluefin tuna, the most desired and most endangered, quickly being fished to extinction on a global scale. In 2019, a single 612-pound fish sold for more than \$3 million in Japan, which consumes 80 percent of the world's bluefin tuna. Efforts to ban or even seriously constrain overfishing flounder on the cocaine-like economics of the global seafood trade.

The Tesla seemed to offer a parable. Like a bluefin tuna it is sleek, sublimely powerful, expensive, and rare, a concerted, highly technical effort at engineering an alternative to the spiral of collapse we have made on Earth: salvation through sexy, pricey technology, affordable only by a select few. It illustrates that, versus the relatively simple nature of the problems—overfishing and over-burning of fossil fuels—the solutions we have so far consented to undertake are so indirect, complex, slow, and conditioned as to be unlikely to forestall the worst consequences of our culture's unwillingness to curb its appetites. Even in the face of imminent disaster, there is bluefin toro tartare. Local stocks, irreplaceable genetics, even entire species may disappear, but only in certain places — at least that is Nobu's, and its customers' bet. The supply chain moves on. Credit cards will always be honored.

The next time I visit the beach, I leave my surfboard at home. Instead, I pull on a dive mask, slip under the glassy water at Surfrider, swim out over the fan of rounded rocks, and begin to see its real life. Mussels, barnacles, limpets, and chitons cling, crabs scuttle, hidden by waving algae in green, brown, red, and pink. Fish dart — first small in the shallows, gobies and blennies, then as the floor drops away, topsmelt, grunion, anchovies, sardines. Farther out, the mottled bottom of rocks and sand hosts halibut, octopus, round rays, lobsters, bigger crabs, thornbacks, shovelnose guitarfish, little horn, and larger leopard sharks. On larger rocks urchins crowd, picked at by bright orange Garibaldi (the state fish, named after the hero of the Italian Republic), tri-colored, aptly named sheephead, schools of corvina, croaker, kelp bass, opaleye, and halfmoon.

Based on remains in their middens (kitchen trash heaps), the Chumash enjoyed at minimum 40 species from these waters. Nearly vanished from the nearshore, by many decades of overfishing, are mussels, clams, limpets, sardines, anchovies, halibut, rays, and abalones; from deeper water, mackerel and bonito, and possibly yellowfin tuna, yellowtail, sharks, marlin, and swordfish. A local *omakase*, to rival any on earth.

A sharp-eyed diver or swimmer might even see, hunting among the reefs and kelp beds, a flash of what might be a precious and intelligent metal, waiting for the winter rains to fill the stream and breach the berm, sending freshwater flowing out to the sea and inviting its wandering children back home. ♡