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THIRTEEN WAYS OF SEEING NATURE IN L.A.
WE NEED TO REWRITE THE STORIES WE TELL ABOUT NATURE, AND LOS
ANGELES IS THE BEST PLACE TO DO IT.

PART ONE: The First Six Ways and a Trip to the River

DISCUSSED: *Nathanael West, Mike Davis, Raymond Chandler, Temescal Canyon, Dolphins, Hawks, Ducks, Mango Body Whips, Coyotes as Urban Terrorists, Seismic Retrofitting, Feral Peacocks, Aaron Spelling, The Concrete Straitjacket*

This other Eden, demi-paradise, this precious stone set in the silver sea, this earth, this realm, this Los Angeles.

—Steve Martin (and Shakespeare), *L.A. Story*

The entire world seems to be rooting for Los Angeles to slide into the Pacific or be swallowed by the San Andreas Fault.

—Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear*

Experience the beauty... of another culture while learning more about wastewater treatment and reuse.

—Brochure for the combination water reclamation plant and Japanese garden in the San Fernando Valley

PROLOGUE: FROM WALDEN TO L.A.

There are many places in L.A. you can go to think about the city, and my own favorite has become the Los Angeles River, which looks like an outsize concrete sewer and is most famous for being forgotten. The L.A. River flows fifty-one miles through the heart of L.A. County. It is enjoying herculean efforts to revitalize it, and yet commuters who have driven over it five days a week for ten years cannot tell you where it is. Along the river, the midpoint lies roughly at the confluence with the Arroyo Seco, near Dodger Stadium downtown. L.A. was founded near here in 1781: this area offers the most reliable aboveground supply of freshwater in the L.A. basin. It's a miserable spot now, a trash-strewn wasteland of empty lots, steel fences, and railroad tracks beneath a tangle of freeway overpasses: it looks like a *Blade Runner* set that a crew disassembled and then put back together wrong. It's not the most scenic spot to visit the river but may be the finest place on the river to think about L.A.

Like so many writers who come to Los Angeles—and I moved here seven years ago—I have succumbed inevitably to the siren call to write about the city. The long-established procedure has been to explore why one loves it or hates it, or both, and to proclaim loudly in the process that L.A. is the American dream or the American nightmare. The tradition tempts writers with a combination of navel-gazing and arm-waving that proves impossible to resist for too long.

Of course, I am a nature writer—a unique brand of writer that has felt no compulsion whatsoever to write about L.A. and even less to live here. Though you could toss an apple core into the bushes in Missoula, Montana, and hit a nature writer, I have found four practitioners so far among the ten million people in L.A. County, and one, my friend Bill Fox, fled to Portland for a couple of years. “Is there nature in L.A.?” people typically respond when I say I write about nature in this town. But I have ended up here happily, and Bill has just returned, exactly because L.A. has become the finest place in America to think and write about nature. More urgently, L.A. is the ideal place to tackle the problem of how to write about nature. In the past twenty-five years, the venerable American literature of nature writing has become distressingly marginal. Even my nature-loving and environmentalist friends tell me they never read it. Earnest, pious, and quite allergic to irony: none of these trademark qualities plays well in 2006. But to me, the core trouble is that nature writers have given us endless paeans to the wonders of wildness since Thoreau fled to Walden Pond, but need to tell us far more about our everyday lives in the places we actually live. Perhaps you’re not worrying about the failures of this literary genre as a serious problem. But in my own arm-waving manifesto about L.A. and America, I will proclaim that the crisis in nature writing is one of our most pressing national cultural catastrophes. I love L.A. more than I hate it. I wasn’t supposed to. A nature lover from suburban St. Louis, I have enjoyed a fierce and enduring attachment to the wilds of the Southern Rockies. I was supposed to love Boulder, Colorado, where I settled after graduate school in the hope that it might be the perfect place—and it’s a town that every day adores itself in the mirror and confirms its perfection. But by pondering all the ways of seeing nature in L.A., I can explain why I have decided that I love L.A. instead—and why the L.A. River (site of the famous chase scenes in *Grease* and *Terminator 2*) has become my favorite place in L.A., and “Enjoy the beauty of another culture while learning more about wastewater treatment and reuse” my working motto as a nature writer. Also why so many of the best-known interpreters of L.A. as the American dream and nightmare, from Nathanael West to Raymond Chandler to Joan Didion to Mike Davis, have written obsessively about nature. Why perhaps the most quoted lines in all the fabled L.A. literature are Chandler’s passage on the gale-force autumn winds:

It was one of those hot dry Santa Anas.... On nights like that every booze party ends in a fight. Meek little wives feel the edge of the carving knife and study their husbands’ necks. Anything can happen. And why we need to rewrite entirely the stories we tell about nature, and why L.A. is the best place to do it.

ONE WAY OF SEEING NATURE IN L.A.: AS NONEXISTENT

"Is there nature in L.A.?" The question sometimes betrays sarcasm, but sometimes not. L.A., after all, has long been decried as the Anti-Nature: it's the American megalopolis with brown air, fouled beaches, pavement to the horizon, and a concrete river. It's sort of the Death Star to American nature lovers—the place from where the destruction of nature emanates—which is why woodsy towns like Missoula and Boulder hail themselves as the anti-L.A.

And this is the reigning nature story we tell about L.A.: There is no nature here.

A SECOND WAY: AS THE WILD THINGS

But this story hews to a historically powerful definition of nature as only the wild things, which we destroy and banish when we build cities. This way to define nature—the great American nature story, and the heart and soul of nature writing—has become so firmly entrenched that seeing nature in other ways has been next to impossible.

Still, even by this inadequate definition, L.A. sports a great deal of nature: the extensive beaches, mountains, and canyons that have always brought people here. A few nature-writing anthologies include a single rogue piece about finding wildness inside a city. If L.A. symbolizes "the end of nature" (to use Bill McKibben's dangerously catchy phrase), it actually has more than enough real fodder for such tales, if you want to write about the sunset on Broad Beach in Malibu or the hawks soaring in Temescal Canyon or the dolphins leaping just offshore or how your heart soars like a hawk or leaps like a dolphin as you watch the sun set offshore from atop the trail in Temescal Canyon.

But there are so many more kinds of nature stories to tell here. I head for L.A.'s wild spots when I can, and delight in hawks, dolphins, and sunsets as much as the next nature lover. I have a special soft spot for ducks. But the anthologies ignore about 90 percent of the nature in L.A. and all the other places we live, as well as most of people's encounters with nature on Earth. What the crisis of nature writing amounts to, in a few words, is that Thoreau really, really needs to Get on the Bus.

And my own list of favorite representative topics for a more comprehensive, on the bus nature writing in Los Angeles would have to include mango body whips, the social geography of air, Zu-Zu the murdered Chihuahua, and Mapleton Drive near Bel Air. And, of course, the L.A. River, where all the possible kinds of nature stories in L.A. converge.

A THIRD WAY: AS THE RESOURCES WE USE

The mango body whip story begins like this: soon after I moved to L.A., a woman who ran into my car while it was parked on the USC campus left a note on the back of a receipt for a mango body whip, which she'd purchased at SkinMarket at the Beverly Center mall. What's a mango body whip? I didn't know. Skin product? More perverse? I made a trip to the Center, and found out that it's a mango-infused thick and buttery skin cream.

Nature stories abound in such an encounter. Begin with the mangoes. Follow them, and you can tell an intricate set of stories as farm workers harvest mangoes in rural Mexico, and drivers truck them into the L.A. area and into the SkinMarket factory in Simi Valley—just over the L.A. County line—where workers use industrial technologies to turn them into skin butter, and distributors transport them to upscale malls like the Beverly Center, and shoppers cart them away to bathrooms in adjacent Beverly Hills and West Hollywood and to other places throughout the country. Mango body whip stories, in other words, look for and follow the nature we use, and watch it move in and out of the city, to track specifically how we transform natural resources into the mountains of stuff with which we literally build cities and sustain our urban lives. These tales might track nature through cars. They could be about soap or magazines. They can look for the nature in refrigerators, sushi, dog food, TVs, linguine, baseball caps, closet organizers, digital cameras, bracelets, concert halls, laptop computers, bicycles. If you tell stories that follow nature through our material lives, you will see a lot of L.A.—the city's warehouses, factories, commercial strips, and cultural centers, and its residential neighborhoods, some of which have a great deal more stuff than others.

A FOURTH WAY: AS DIFFERENT TO DIFFERENT PEOPLE

Which brings me to the social geography of air. The air in L.A., if polluted, is not equally polluted everywhere. The coastal and mountain areas, which tend to be the wealthiest, enjoy the cleanest air on average. On the inland flats, the poorest, least white, and most industrial neighborhoods in L.A. suffer the worst air, along with alarming asthma rates. Another way to put it is that the Angelenos who work in and live near the factories that manufacture mango body whips breathe far more polluted air than the residents who are most likely to be the body whip devotees. I live on Venice Beach, near Ozone Avenue—named without irony in the clean-air early 1900s, but still one of the safest places to breathe in L.A. County. Twenty miles inland, the Southeast L.A. area—the most industrialized urban area in the U.S., with many of L.A.'s lowest-income and most heavily Latino neighborhoods—occupies 1 percent of the county by acreage but generates 18 percent of the toxic air emissions.

While mango body whip stories follow nature as resources through L.A., geography of air tales narrate who encounters what nature where. These tales begin with “who.” They ask, importantly, who benefits most and who suffers the worst consequences as who uses and transforms nature. But they also ask who eats what foods and who doesn’t, and who plants what in their gardens, and who lives nearest and farthest away from a city’s parks, and who hunts and fishes or watches birds, and who chooses parrots or pit bulls or rabbits or goldfish as pets. This brand of tale asks how different people encounter nature differently.

Nature writing has ignored these third and fourth ways of seeing. It has been a literary universe in which we visit and contemplate wild nature, but seldom use and transform nature: when the mango becomes a mango body whip, it ceases to be nature, as does the oil in a laptop computer or a maple tree that becomes a table. And the genre describes nature as a unitary force or kind of place that Man encounters, and where we’ll find universal meanings—but seldom something you encounter from a specific social position and point of view. But such a way of seeing can fully explain exactly no encounter with nature in 2006, whether in a wilderness area, on a farm, or at the Beverly Center mall. I love to go hiking on the vast trail network here in the Santa Monica Mountains. Sure, that’s a typical nature story in which I seek refuge and simplicity and quiet in L.A.’s wilds as antidote to the stress and noise of my daily life. But to narrate *all* the encounters with nature that define my hike,

I also have to ask where the natural resources in my Gore-tex shell and hiking boots come from—the oil, stone, metals, and animal skins in my twenty-first-century hiker gear, which keeps me warm and dry and makes my closet look like an REI outlet. How do they connect me to the global transformation of nature? And how do they shape my experience of hiking? The Simple Life out in nature is complex as hell. I’d also have to narrate how wealthier Angelenos are more likely to live near L.A.’s mountain parks—and to own cars to get to them. And how does the particular work I do at a desk all week make a strenuous weekend hike sound like a good idea in the first place? The hike has to be a story about how our connections to one another define our encounters with nature. And it’s about how the National Park Service in the Santa Monica Mountains has chosen my favorite trail routes, and how they manage fire suppression, and how they draw up hundreds of rules and policies to keep both the visitors and the parklands happy.

A FIFTH WAY: AS LANDSCAPE AND ECOLOGY WE BUILD IN AND MANAGE

Which brings me to Zu-Zu the murdered Chihuahua. As the *Los Angeles Times* reported, Zu-Zu's story begins, or ends, like this: In summer 2002, a coyote entered the yard of a casting director in the Silver Lake area west of Downtown and ate her Chihuahua, Zu-Zu. Coyotes, her husband warned bitterly, are "urban terrorists": the bereft owner said, "I have no liberty in my front yard." A letter to the *Times*, though, lionized the coyote as the real victim, an indigenous animal encroached on by evil yippy Chihuahuas (if, like me, you tend to agree, then try substituting a Labrador retriever puppy for Zu-Zu).

When you bring domestic dogs into a landscape of native animals, then the resident carnivores are likely to see the pets as prey. When you use and change a landscape, then the place will respond. Nature is never passive. Every place has an active, very particular ecology, climate, topography, geology, flora, fauna. Zu-Zu stories narrate how we change places and how they respond and how we respond back and so on and so on. They're about paving, building, planting, bulldozing, fires and fire suppression, polluting and cleaning up, pet keeping and coyote predations, earthquakes and seismic retrofitting, water supply and flood management, and sewers and gas lines and lawns and gardens and roads and trails and parks.

Nature writers have in fact told this kind of story—usually, however, with an evil Chihuahua moral, in which Man stomps into nature primeval and ravages and desacralizes it. But as guidance for how we can inhabit places, seeing people inevitably as invaders in these stories works about as well as branding coyotes as terrorists. An "evil Chihuahua" moral demands that we leave the nature we live in as it is (in which case we'll die), but a "terrorist coyote" moral urges us to eradicate nature (in which case we'll die). Neither approach helps us navigate *how* to keep pet animals in a landscape with native predators—or how to make a road or build a house or ensure a water supply or figure out how to keep the air and water clean. Ideally, Zu-Zu stories should help us ask how we can create livable and sustainable cities. They should be deeply informed by knowledge of the ecology, geology, and natural history of the place. They should help us walk the essential line between doing nothing in nature and doing whatever we want. Like mango body whip tales, they should seek to understand what our connections to nature actually are so that we can think about what our connections should look like. These are a few topics the *Los Angeles Times* has reported on in recent months: water deals in the West, discarded American computers shipped to China, dog parks, an L.A. landfill in the Mojave desert, the hybrid Toyota Priuses, diesel pollution in industrial south L.A., battles against new developments in the outer suburbs, new parks on the L.A. River, high

silicosis rates among Chinese trinket-factory workers, oil refineries in Venezuela, farmer's markets, the best restaurants for peach dishes, sustainable water-use practices in Santa Monica, toxic plastics residues in polar bears in the Arctic, neighborhood lawn regulations, the fight over removing the feral peacocks who scream every morning in the Palos Verdes neighborhoods, pesticides buildup in frog populations, battles for public beach access in Malibu.

These are nature topics all, about how we live in and fight about nature, and about how we use it more and less fairly and sustainably, and about the enormous consequences for our lives in L.A., as well as for places and people and wildlife everywhere. And such topics beg for a literature—for a poetry, for an aesthetics—because to clearly ponder our lives in and out of cities, we have to be able to imagine and reimagine these connections to nature.

A SIXTH WAY: AS A PREMIER SOURCE OF HUMAN MEANING

Imagine the site of Los Angeles County four thousand years ago. The people who lived here—the ancestors of the Tongva, the Chumash, the Tataviam—used birds and deer to make food and clothes, and turned trees into shelter, and turned water, rocks, and dirt into energy, tools, boats, medicine, religious objects, art. (And in 2006 B.C.E., connections to nature were not all that simple either.) The people used and changed nature in order to live. They told stories about nature to explain the world and to guide their actions within it.

What do we do in Los Angeles now? Essentially the same thing. We use nature and tell stories about it to live and explain our lives. To use nature is to be human: that's a pretty fair working definition. To tell stories is to be a human explaining how things work. The stories that any people tell about nature are some of the most basic stories they tell. *Is there nature in L.A.?* The fact that the major nature story we tell in L.A., as in all cities, is that there is no nature here does not make this tale any less basic, powerful, or telling.

How do we make nature meaningful? “What nature means” tales are one last category of story I'll suggest, and nature writing has shown great interest in this kind of story—in fact the quest for meaning has defined the genre's very soul. Of course, nature writers have attached various meanings to a great range of places, animals, and plants. Yosemite? Majesty. A sacred place. The desert? Peace. Harshness. Clarity. Songbirds? Beauty. Delicacy. Earthquakes? Fury and vengeance. Water? A metaphor for life. But nature? The ur-meaning that frames all others? Wildness. Not-us-ness. The anti-modern. A place apart. Salvation. Refuge.

And this ur-meaning historically has reigned as an exceptionally powerful American cultural assumption. Nature writing has preached it tenaciously, but hardly invented this way of seeing and of refusing to see. The vision of wild nature as counterpoint to a corrupted modern civilization has always played a central role in American national myths and identity. (Think City on a Hill, the mythic frontier, a hundred years of Westerns, and landscape photography.) To define nature as the wild things apart from cities is one of the great fantastic American stories.

And it's one of the great fantastic American denials. On Mapleton Drive in Holmby Hills in the Bel Air area, in the Santa Monica Mountain foothills, the TV producer Aaron Spelling has built what's widely publicized as the starship of Hollywood homes—a 56,550-square-foot French limestone mansion with 123 rooms, with two rooms for wrapping gifts and a rose garden on top of one of four garages. Here are two generally ignored facts about Spelling's famous homestead. First, it is a house of nature: Spelling built it, has maintained it, and stocks it with fantastic quantities of oil, stone, metals, dirt, water, and wood (a likely forest's worth of wrapping paper, to begin with). And second, there are very few maples on Mapleton Drive. Maybe maples grew here in abundance once, and maybe not. Either way, the street enjoys the *idea* of maple trees, which conjures a bucolic refuge above the smog, noise, and torrential activity of the megalopolis below. Call it maple mojo. Smaller manses of nature line the rest of Mapleton Drive as well as the neighboring streets Parkwood, Greendale, Brooklawn, Beverly Glen. No parks, no woods, no dales, no brooks, no glens. Just the mojo of wild nature.

Mapleton Drive showcases the denial intrinsic to the great American nature story. To say there's no nature in cities is a convenient way of seeing if I like being a nature lover and environmentalist but don't want to give up any of my stuff. We cherish nature as an *idea* of wildness while losing track of the real nature in our very houses. We flee to wild nature as a haven from high-tech industrial urban life, but refuse to see that we madly use and transform wild nature to sustain the exact life from which we seek retreat. We make sacred our encounters with wild nature but thereby desacralize all other encounters. Or in other words, if we cannot clearly understand cities and our lives within them unless we keep track of our connections to nature, still there may be some basic things we prefer not to see and understand.

Ideally, if there's any one argument I could persuade you of, it's that our foundational nature stories should see and cherish our mundane, economic, utilitarian, daily encounters with nature—so that what car you drive and how you get your water and how you build a house should be

transparent acts that are as sacred as hiking to the top of Point Mugu in the northern Santa Monica Mountains and gazing out over the Pacific Ocean to watch the dolphins leap, the ducks float, and the sun set. True, there's a lovely yearning in the American vision of nature as a wild place apart—for simplicity, for a slower life. There's great wonder about the natural world, and terrific love for wild places and things. There's legitimate bewilderment, in response to the mind-boggling complexity of modern connectedness (how could I *possibly* keep track of where the nature in my Toyota wagon comes from?). There's a large dose of real regret, for the wanton destructiveness of toxic industrialism and excessive consumerism. And there's powerful, overriding denial, in the service of powerful self-indulgence and material desire, that pushes us to imagine nature out of rather than into our lives.

RIVER TRIP #1

Just how powerful? Well, in L.A., enough to let us lose track of an entire river—not just the nature in the stuff in our houses. We can't find L.A.'s major waterway, which sustained L.A. for 150 years and now runs under ten gridlocked freeways through the heart of L.A. County. A fifty-one-mile river in plain sight: lost.

The L.A. River is one of the city's central natural facts. L.A. inhabits a river basin, and the major river drains large portions of three mountain ranges out to the Pacific. The L.A. Basin, while large enough for a megalopolis, is small for that much drainage, and the L.A. River consequently poses a greater flood danger than most urban U.S. rivers. (Mark Twain wrote that he'd fallen into a Southern California river and "come out all dusty"—but apparently hadn't seen one of the raging flash floods.) In the 1930s, when a last-straw series of floods made half of L.A. canoeable, the city signed up the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, who heroically proceeded to dig a concrete straitjacket for the river and all its tributaries—a twenty-five-year project that required 3.5 million barrels of concrete and remains the Corps' largest public works project west of the Mississippi. The Corps and County Public Works rechristened the river the "flood control channel." They recategorized it as infrastructure, with the freeways and electrical grid. To the public, in any case, the channel no longer looked wild enough to be a river or to count as nature at all. And this is how L.A. lost its river—not lost as in no longer had one, since L.A. actually still had it, but lost as in could no longer see or find it.

If a city is built and sustained through using, managing, and imagining nature, then however you see and manage your central natural facts should have massive citywide consequences. What happens when you deny that your river is a river?

The saga of the concrete L.A. River plays out as every brand of nature story. First, a “what nature means” tale: Angelenos reimagined the river as nonexistent, and banished it from their collective imagination of history and place. Also, a tale of wild things. Many birds and frogs continued to use the river (they apparently hadn’t received the memo that it was no longer a river), but other birds and most fish species did disappear, along with extensive wetlands and riparian habitat.

Also, a Zu-Zu story. As Los Angeles altered the Southern California landscape to control the river’s floods, we largely ignored the basic hydrological processes. The jacketed river could no longer flow out into its basin, and therefore no longer replenished the aquifer with water, the soils with nutrients, and the beaches with sand. The county designed the storm sewers, however, to empty *into* the channel, which promptly turned the river into L.A.’s Grand Sewer, which gathers pesticides, motor oil, trash, dog feces, and many hundreds more pollutants from driveways, lawns, roads, and parking lots across the 834-square-mile watershed and rushes the toxins downstream into the Pacific Ocean. And yes, floodwaters have stayed safely within the concrete walls, but the extra water from the storm sewers has actually dramatically increased the volume of the river’s floods.

The cement channel also constitutes L.A.’s strategy to move stormwater, that life-giving natural resource, through the city. Here is the river’s mango body whip story: a city that inhabits a place on Earth with a semi-arid Mediterranean climate pours as much of the rainwater as possible, which we get from the sky for free, into the storm sewers, through the river, and into the Pacific—and then pays dearly to import water by aqueduct from up to four hundred miles away. Call it watering the ocean, by draining watersheds across the West. And finally, a social geography of air story. L.A. may have wild places, but as the American city that has so consistently privileged private property over public spaces, it also historically has set aside remarkably little public park space per capita—and L.A.’s poorest areas suffer the worst shortages of neighborhood park space, enjoy the least private green space, and lie farthest from the mountain parks. In this infamously fragmented city, the poorest neighborhoods also invariably have been the most cut up by freeways and industry. The concrete channel turned the basin’s most logical site for green space, and the city’s major natural connector, into an outsize open sewer that carved a no-man’s-land through many of the city’s most fragmented and park-starved areas.

In sum, L.A.’s errant treatment of a major natural feature has profoundly exacerbated nearly all of L.A.’s notorious troubles—environmental chaos,

social inequities, community fragmentation, water shortages, water imperialism, and erasure of civic memory. The good news, on the other hand—and I'll get to the restoration efforts on the river presently—is that if you use and manage this nature more sustainably and fairly, you can make the city a healthier, more equitable, and all-around lovelier place to live in. First, though, you have to see the nature in the place. You have to find it.

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Is there nature in L.A.? Far more than our philosophies dream of, and much more than in Portland or Boulder—more, possibly, on Mapleton Drive alone than in some small towns in Iowa. One may as well ask if there is water in the ocean. To get on the bus—to imagine a more vital and comprehensive nature writing—is to deem the question plain dumb silly, along with “Where is nature?” and maybe even “What is nature?” and especially that nonsense about the end of nature, which makes only as much sense as declaring an end to rocks or air or water and bespeaks exactly the way of thinking by which L.A. lost its river. The powering question of this literature should become, rather, *What nature is it?*—and then, How do we use nature? How do we change nature? How does nature react? How do we react back? How do we imagine nature? Who uses and changes and imagines nature? And often the most vital questions of all: How sustainably? How fairly? How well?

Continued in [Part Two](#)

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THIRTEEN WAYS OF SEEING NATURE IN L.A.
A FEW NEW METHODS FOR THE OLD PRACTICE OF USING LOS ANGELES TO
THINK

PART TWO:

Another Seven Ways and an Arrival At the Confluence

DISCUSSED: *Urban Demographics, Consumerist Valhallas, Nature Writing, The American Eden, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Muggings, Suntan Lotion, Hydrology, The L.A. River Greenway, Clean Air Legislation, Nature's Revenge*

Continued from [Part One](#)

A SEVENTH WAY:
AS NEARLY INFINITELY ABUNDANT

The place is rapidly ... sinking into a Blade Runner dystopian futurism.... The air is unbreathable, the water undrinkable, the transit system impenetrable....

—*Time Out Los Angeles Guide*

(the guide I purchased upon moving here in 1998)

L.A. County spreads out over 4,084 square miles. It is the second largest U.S. metropolis (after New York) by size and population: more people live in the entire four-county greater Los Angeles area than in each of the least populous forty-two states. L.A. ranks as the largest U.S. industrial center and hosts the nation's busiest port. I live in a world Valhalla for wealth and consumerism. The nearly incomprehensible quantity of people's connections to nature in L.A. could mobilize a light infantry of nature writers. And all this nature is of such critical importance because these connections—how we use and move and transform nature here—entail enormous consequences for places in the U.S. and throughout the world.

There has been Walden Pond, and there have been John Muir's Yosemite and Annie Dillard's Tinker Creek and Barry Lopez's Arctic. And on the reimagined map of nature writing, there should be Los Angeles—and not just because nature is so wildly abundant here, and what happens to it so globally consequential. L.A. is also the place where the failures of our stories have played out in such exaggerated form, and where the usefulness of really seeing nature is perhaps most urgent. Because L.A. has always enjoyed an especially dramatic relationship to nature, to stories, and above all, to nature stories.

AN EIGHTH WAY:
AS EXCEPTIONALLY ICONIC

Since the start of the '90s... many of us [were left] with the distinct impression that... maybe the Four Horsemen were using the L.A. basin to warm up before riding on to the actual Apocalypse.

—*Time Out Los Angeles Guide*

Has any city engendered more enthusiastic myth-mongering? In L.A.'s special, unstoppable, even psychotic tradition of storytelling, we've tended to state the powerful vision of nature as a place apart, like most grand American tales, in especially dramatic style. After all, who asks, "Is there nature in New York?" or "Is there nature in Chicago?" One might say that New York and Chicago and Pittsburgh have little nature, but L.A., we like to say, has none at all. Not one whit: L.A. has long symbolized all other cities as places where nature is not.

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Rain... usually [leaves] people stranded atop their vehicles or entombed in sinking homes.

—*The National Geographic Traveler: Los Angeles*

How have nature writers, alone in literary circles, been able to resist L.A.? It's actually quite a lot of fun to write about, even if (maybe especially if) you hate it. The glee in the excoriations is as palpable as the rapture in the paeans. New Eden, Paradise Lost, Utopia, Dystopia, City of the Second Chance, the Great Wrong Place. Since the late nineteenth century boosters marketed L.A. as the American Eden, L.A.'s interpreters have tended to declare that the City of Angels (also the City of Fallen Angels) spells the success or failure of the American dream. It's the land of economic opportunity or class warfare, ethnic diversity or racial hatred, the democracy of homeownership or the evils of suburban sprawl. Whether describing sexual liberation, environmental ruin, or soaring homicide rates, L.A. stories tend to wax dramatic about what happens here to proclaim that life in America has gone fantastically right or wrong. "It is raining in Los Angeles," the *New York Times* reported on the first fall rains in 2002: "People are dying on the highways. Planes are falling out of the sky." Can you imagine such a *Times* report about the rains in San Diego or Houston? "There's a certain kind of white, piercing empty light to the Los Angeles sky," wrote a film reviewer in *Entertainment Weekly* shortly afterward, "that can make a person want to commit suicide." And for what other city would the informational guidebooks—not just the fiction, op-eds, news coverage, and academic scholarship, as well as the weather coverage and traffic reports—describe the place as a staging ground for the apocalypse?

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Near the [Santa Monica] Pier, the potential for getting mugged [is] almost as good as that for getting a tan.

—*Fodor's upclose Los Angeles*

The oft cited refrains "American dream" and "American nightmare" can set eyes rolling in Los Angeles itself. In reality, planes do not tumble from the sky and people do not head for their car roofs when it rains here, and you could spend years and a small fortune on sunscreen waiting to be mugged near the Santa Monica pier. L.A. is not inordinately dangerous: this is not a Gotham in dire need of a bat signal. The sprawl city does boast a plethora of great walking neighborhoods. It can be frustrating to live in such a relentlessly iconic city. But proclaiming the meaning of L.A. will not likely fade any day soon as a national pastime. You could say—to borrow a coinage from the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss—that Americans have used L.A. to think.

All of which makes L.A. an ideally resonant place to challenge the established American nature story, which imagines nature in opposition to cities—and we eye-rollers in L.A. have long been calling for new stories with which to imagine this city. If Los Angeles is really a city of nature, then all other cities must be nature, too.

A NINTH WAY:
AS A CASUALTY OF A BROADER
REFUSAL TO SEE CONNECTIONS
Imagination is all that finally defines L.A.

—Michael Ventura, *Los Angeles Times* op-ed, 2000

Really? Nothing but imagination? Of course, if the real L.A. doesn't always match up to the dramatic parables, these stories have tended to exaggerate more than to make things up. As the city with measurably more sprawl, pollution, ethnic diversity, economic inequality, and homicide than most other cities, L.A. has always tended to push all things American—our trends, ideals, and narratives—to the outer edge, and has pushed few things farther than an ideal of personal freedom. I encounter a salute to this ideal approximately weekly: in the weeks before I wrote this, an L.A. architectural historian told the *Los Angeles Times* that “you have a sense of freedom here that you don't have anywhere else in the United States,” and a TV reviewer wrote in the New York–based *Entertainment Weekly* that L.A. is “the land of reinventing yourself, of discovering new possibilities, new realities, new fantasies.” L.A. has shone as the fabled city where you can start over, cut loose from social constraints, and escape your past. As the astute L.A. writer David Ulin remarked in the *Times* about a commemoration of the 1994 earthquake: “[It is] expected to be the kind of event that doesn't usually happen in Los Angeles, a conscious effort to link the present to the past.” In the city that so often exaggerates American trends and narratives, you can most clearly watch the association of the American dream with private desire and a willful blindness to connections.

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You have an inalienable right to make your real life conform to your dream life.

—*CityTripping Los Angeles*

L.A. is notoriously short on parks and other public spaces. It is a stronghold of the gated neighborhood. L.A. ranks first among U.S. cities for the number of millionaires and forty-first in philanthropy. *Forty-first*. Here, you can so clearly observe the tendency—magnified in my adopted town but hardly unique to it—to confuse ideals of personal liberty with an ideal of being free to accumulate capital and use it to do whatever you want. You can watch the failure to ballast the quest for individual freedom with other, long-standing American-dream ideals of equality and community. This is the land of Prop. 13 and Prop. 187, where affluent Angelenos want the cheapest labor but no social services for the illegal immigrants who do it; and want the economic as well as cultural benefits of an ethnically and racially diverse city, but don't want the diversity in their own neighborhoods; and want private canyons and beaches but expect the public to pay for the inevitable fires and mudslides; and want to commute

in fabulously fuel-inefficient cars from enormous houses with forty-three-inch TVs and five bathrooms in remote canyons, but object to smog and traffic and pollution and, above all, to living anywhere near the industry and manufacture that bathroom fixtures, SUVs, and forty-three-inch TVs require. The point is that here you can watch the denial so intrinsic to the great American nature story play out as part of the larger desire to benefit from the innumerable ties to people and nature that sustain one's life in the city, and yet refuse to make good on those connections.

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L.A. is the city in me, the city I weave together for myself.

—Leo Braudy, *Los Angeles Times* op-ed, 2002

Of course, this enchantment with freedom is all very beguiling, and for at least some reasons that are less ignoble than admirable. I live on Venice Beach, after all, and in defense of L.A., I love living in a place where you can rollerblade in a thong at the beach (whether male or female) while strumming a guitar. You can order a hot dog topped with pastrami, chili, and American cheese and wrapped in a tortilla. And I love that L.A. is the sort of place where a friend once began a story, "I went to Terry's house, and there was Terry, and Terry's baby, and the baby's doula, and the doula's chimp in a dress." I appreciate the greater ethnic integration, diversity of lifestyles, and flourishing of experimental arts. I have found social and career circles to be gratifyingly more porous than in other places I have lived.

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[L.A.'s]... best feature is... [that] it does not oppress its citizens with a civic identity.

—Robert Lloyd, *L.A. Weekly*, 2001

But "individual freedom," like all grand ideals, is perilously malleable and can serve a range of agendas. And the conviction that it should mean you can do whatever the hell you want cannot possibly have found more extreme expression than in the traditional refrain here that L.A. is, in reality, exactly whatever you want it to be. It's "all imagination," "the city in me," and "your dream life." Even well-respected critics and writers repeat this shibboleth with astonishing frequency. L.A., so this popular L.A. story goes, is not just a place where we've liked to *tell* stories. It *is* a story. Literally. And it's your story, no less, your own home movie. And this pushes the ideal of individual liberty well beyond the outer edge. It's the American dream on a shooting rampage. If one could expressly design a way of seeing a city to bless people who don't want to be accountable, this would be it: to say a place is yours to design and define authorizes you to deny all your connections to people, nature, and the past. It palpates with that same potent amalgam of yearning and self-indulgence as the American nature story, which seeks salvation in nature Out There but refuses to see how we use and transform nature in the city.

In L.A., you can most clearly watch the established American nature tale plug into a family of sins committed in the name of the American dream.

A TENTH WAY:
AS ESPECIALLY DANGEROUS
TO LOSE TRACK OF

On the other hand, you can also see the consequences so clearly. Whether or not you acknowledge your connections to people and nature, they of course remain operable. Go ahead and ignore your topography, your climate, your hydrology. The air will darken, the mountains will slough mud into your houses, and the lost river will gather toxics and trash. L.A. is not “all imagination.” It has never been “your dream life,” so watch out for the blowback—for smog, mud, freeway gridlock, racial violence, poverty, homelessness, beach erosion, sewage spills, severe water pollution, and the fact that the rest of the West hates you for hoarding their water supplies. Of course, most of these problems will create by far the most havoc for the city’s poorer residents. Wealthy Angelenos, who benefit the most from ignoring our vital connections, also can use their wealth to evade or compensate for the consequences. This city’s most infamous problems themselves constitute an argument, as large as Los Angeles itself, that our basic stories about nature should refuse to lose track.

AN ELEVENTH WAY:
AS A TERRIFIC BOON TO
BOULDER AND MISSOULA

None of which is to let Boulder off the hook. In fact, very much the opposite. We may wish away connections in L.A., but we can hardly wish away culpability for the ensuing troubles (and even affluent Angelenos encounter serious daily havoc). Boulder bills itself as the anti-L.A.: it’s the green place, the socially just haven, the great right town. But how much easier is it to keep your air clean when the factories that manufacture your SUVs and Gore-Tex jackets lie in other, distant towns? And you can minimize racial and class confrontations when your own population is white and affluent, while the poor and nonwhite labor force that sustains your city’s material life resides safely far away. Nature writers have documented how cities mine the hinterlands ruthlessly for raw natural resources. But they’ve declined to tell us almost anything about how the largest urban regions, and especially the poorer areas within them, disproportionately shoulder the burden of transforming nature to create all our lovely wondrous stuff.

Boulder couldn’t begin to be the town that Boulder adores without L.A. (and an abundance of other places globally like L.A.)—just as Bel Air and Malibu couldn’t be Bel Air and Malibu in their undeniable glory without their essential connections to the nature and labor throughout L.A.

County. Think of a defining difference between Boulder and L.A. as the difference between Malibu and Southeast L.A. but writ nationally. Boulderites benefit proportionately more and suffer far less from how they use nature—which I suspect is one reason why Boulder never claimed my head or heart. L.A. may be a land of troubles, but also gets so unfairly maligned, because being the great right place is much too easy when you don't have to live with a lot of the problems you create. Which is oddly heartening, because the City of Angels feels like a distinctly honest place to seek and write about nature. And it's a thunderously consequential place to do something about the troubles.

A TWELFTH WAY: AS A FOCUS OF GREAT GOOD WORK

And so many people are doing exactly that. The exorbitant social and environmental costs of losing track of nature have consistently confronted this megalopolis with the desperate need to pay attention. As a St. Louis friend who's an environmental lawyer has said enviously, California generally is "light years ahead of the curve on environmental regulation"—due in no small part to tackling L.A.'s problems. And L.A. itself has emerged in the last decade as a hotbed for the conviction that to make cities more livable and more equitable, we have to move nature through them more equitably and sustainably.

The American city with the worst air pollution enforces the strictest air-quality regulations, which include pioneering emissions standards for vehicles, outdoor appliances, and household products. Southern California also suffers the worst coastal pollution from storm water runoff, with one-third of all beach closures in the U.S. So NRDC, Heal the Bay, and Santa Monica Baykeeper sued the EPA, and in 1999 won a landmark legal victory that, for the first time, requires a metropolitan area to adhere to clean-up schedules mandated by the 1972 Clean Water Act.

Public agencies, environmental nonprofits, and universities have been pioneering strategies to reclaim phased-out industrial lands in the city that's long held the national title for least park space per capita. In the metropolis that suffers both extreme environmental ruin and polar social and economic inequities, environmental justice activists, including Communities for a Better Environment and Mothers of East L.A., have won nationally recognized battles in the poorer areas of east and south L.A. to shut down polluters. These groups have also waged successful, groundbreaking campaigns to force state and county regulatory agencies to recognize that air pollution and park-space shortages bedevil poorer and nonwhite neighborhoods disproportionately. And there can be no more cutting-edge place to work for urban transformation than on the banks of the country's most degraded urban river.

L.A. may not be the greenest, cleanest place to be a nature writer, but it is exciting. As *L.A. Weekly* writer Judith Lewis has put it: "Los Angeles has... [given] me a world to battle as much as I revel in it. It has given me a life in interesting times."

RIVER TRIP NO. 2

You almost need special glasses to see the L.A. River as the healthy, verdant river that the hundreds of people who are revitalizing it are aiming for. The project will take at least several decades to realize entirely—you also need great reserves of faith and patience—but it will happen if the political will and economic resources continue to flow.

In the mid-1980s, the first calls to revitalize the river, by the artist and writer Lewis MacAdams and his fledgling Friends of the L.A. River, were met with "River? What river?" FoLAR made Willy Wonka's schemes and hopes for his chocolate factory sound practical. At the time, proposals to paint the concrete blue and to use the channel as a dry-season freeway for trucks received far more serious consideration than FoLAR's ideas. After a decade of persuasion, their vision would prove to have been superb common sense before its time. And in the last five years, the river's revival has emerged as a major policy priority, as every imaginably relevant public and private interest—from Heal the Bay, neighborhood associations, and Latino social activists to the mayor's office, L.A. City Council, and the L.A. County Department of Public Works (our quondam Sun Gods of the river as infrastructure)—has concluded that revitalizing L.A.'s major river will help them ameliorate the city's worst troubles.

How do you resurrect the river? You have to green the banks. You have to clean the water. And you have to dynamite out some of the concrete. And each of these goals, it turns out, quickly becomes an act of thinking big.

To green the banks, this loose coalition of players has set out to turn the cement scar through the heart of this fragmented, park-starved metropolis into a fifty-one-mile greenway and bikeway, which ideally would serve as the backbone for a countywide greenway network. The Los Angeles River Greenway now consists of two dozen new parks on the ground and many more on paper, and will green and connect many of L.A.'s poorest, and most park-poor, neighborhoods.

To clean up this outsize sewer—which by law (after the NRDC lawsuit) the EPA must now ensure happens by 2013—you can't just extract the kilotons of pollutants after they enter the river. You have to think about where all the pollutants come from: the weed killers, insecticides, fertilizers, paints, detergents, gasoline, motor oil, car waxes, and countless more toxic everyday products in the basic city-America-2006 street stew that washes into our soil, our water, and eventually our bodies. Alas, the city has spent

more time fighting the legal ruling than the pollutants. But to clean the river, L.A. will absolutely have to mandate cleaner industrial processes to manufacture products that are themselves less toxic, more recyclable, more biodegradable.

You have to blow up some of the concrete, if not every last ton: the Seine, after all, runs through Paris in a cement channel. Blast it today, however, and the next heavy winter rains could submerge the Staples Center and Union Station. Rather, before you enjoy the thought of dynamite, you have to dramatically reduce the amount of water that flows down the river during storms. To do that, the river revitalizers propose to divert floodwaters into large basins that can double as parks and wetlands. Even more important, though, they aim to capture as much rain as possible where it falls, rather than rush it into the river to water the Pacific. To do *that*, Public Works has launched pilot projects to use porous paving, to unpave schoolyards, and to retrofit gutters, freeway medians, and parking lots to pitch water into the ground instead of the storm sewers. You can store the water in underground cisterns and use it on-site—say, to water your lawn—or you can let it drain into the ground and replenish the aquifer (where it'll clean itself up as minerals in the soil bind up toxic chemicals).

Altogether, restoring the river to health would improve water quality, control flooding, and restore wildlife habitat. Neighborhoods throughout L.A. would acquire much-needed park and green space. It would enhance local water supplies dramatically, and so would potentially change how water moves through the West. All the new greenery would help clean the air. The project has pushed L.A. to the national forefront of urban watershed management. It's made the river a meeting ground for Angelenos' broader efforts to enhance the equity and environmental quality of life in Los Angeles. And by reviving a premier symbol of urban destruction, it could make just about anything imaginable in urban transformation. A healthy L.A. River wouldn't be quite as wondrous as the chocolate factory, but it would be close.

A THIRTEENTH WAY:

AS THE FOUNDATION OF L.A. STORIES

This is a happy land for children and all young animals... They live in the pure air and sunshine.

—Health Seekers' [and] Tourists'... Guide to the...Pacific Coast, 1884
The palm trees were high with scrawny fronds like broken pinwheels... and a droopy ice plant could never quite hold the earth... in place... and an oil derrick [looked] like a rusty praying mantis, trying to suck the last few barrels out of the dying crabgrass.

—Robert Towne, on researching his 1974 Chinatownscript

And waiting in the wings are the plague squirrels and killer bees.

—Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear*, 1998

The river's revival, just like its ruin, plays out as every category of nature story. But the stories are beginning to sound better. The wild-things tales are about trying to create healthy rivers and wetlands, and the mango-body-whip tales describe the wise use of basic natural resources. In these social-geography-of-air tales, poorer Angelenos do not get shafted. In the new Zu-Zu tales, we aim to use a wealth of knowledge about the landscape to guide how we transform it. ^[1]

And the “what it means” tales should be about how we're imagining nature into the city and our daily lives. Except that we're not, mostly. Amidst all the new publicity about the river, so many Angelenos still declare that the L.A. River isn't wild enough to be “natural.” Amidst all the cutting-edge environmental work in this city generally, so many people in and out of L.A. still ask, “Is there nature in L.A.?” Consider, too, that every conceivable brand of environmental advocate, from ecologists and environmentalists to urban planners and landscape architects to policy wonks and politicians and environmental historians, have all been paying a great deal of attention to urban nature—and yet nature writers continue to shun cities as Gomorrah of iniquitous conspiracies against the natural world (to overstate the case, but only a bit). And as every other literary genre in the last 150 years has exploded with every wild experiment and philosophy imaginable, nature writing alone has remained comparatively unchanged. Unfortunately, the great fantastic American nature story may prove more resistant to any calls to blow it up than the concrete in the L.A. River.

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To watch the front-page news out of Los Angeles during a Santa Ana is to get very close to what it is about the place.

—Joan Didion, *Slouching Toward Bethlehem*, 1968

And nowhere has this powerful tale been rooted more tenaciously than in Los Angeles. And here is the last, and perhaps the ultimate, reason that nature writers should flock to L.A. as the logical headquarters to rewrite this tale: L.A., like no other city, has woven this story so thoroughly into stories about the city itself. From the nineteenth-century boosters to the popular *Land of Sunshine* magazine in the early 1900s to Raymond Chandler and Nathanael West in the 1930s and '40s to Didion to Mike Davis to the current coverage in the *Los Angeles Times* and *New York Times*, L.A.'s interpreters have been obsessed with sea, sun, winds, sky, and palm trees, as well as fire, mud, earthquakes, plague squirrels, and killer bees. And even Davis—from whom I have learned so much about how to see Los Angeles—imagines nature in opposition to cities.

Consider the American dream and nightmare stories. To simplify egregiously, these dominant L.A. narratives really parse into three kinds of tales—dream, nightmare, and apocalypse—that have coexisted since at least the 1930s but have progressed roughly in dominance in that order. In the beginning, L.A. was the American Eden: it was the land of eternal sunshine, healthful sea breezes, and amazingly fertile soils. The late-nineteenth-century boosters lauded the virtues of wild nature to market L.A. as a sort of noncity city. L.A. was supposed to be an Anglo refuge where you could escape the industrial pollution, ethnic and racial conflicts, and financial disappointments in cities to the east—and the ensuing dream stories would continue to use fabulous paeans to sun and sea and air to frame idyllic visions of urban escape, from the post-World War II garden suburbs to today's canyon living in Malibu and the Hollywood Hills.

And then, the nightmare: the black sky, the fouled sea, the endless pavement, the dying palm trees, the concrete river. By the 1960s, as L.A. defaults on its promises of escape and pushes the problems of American cities to extremes, the Paradise Lost tales invariably invoke the utter destruction of nature to describe a city in which *everything* has gone wrong. And after the nightmare, the millennium: "Is the City of Angels Going to Hell?" *Time* asks in a 1993 cover story. In the early 1990s, L.A. reels from the Northridge earthquake, Malibu fires, mudslides, race riots, El Niño, and the O. J. Simpson trial. And the city that destroyed nature and everything else becomes the city where nature roared back for revenge. Apocalypse stories make the opposition of nature to cities decidedly literal.

The history of L.A. storytelling, if more complicated, still basically boils down to a trilogy. Nature blesses L.A. Nature flees L.A. And nature returns armed. In other words, no wonder I love L.A. This city has been hosting an obsessive conversation about nature for 150 years—or about as far back as when Thoreau camped out on Walden Pond. Nature stories have been more than key L.A. stories. They've been *the* L.A. stories. They're the driving stories in the city we use to think. It's ironic, isn't it? Los Angeles, which symbolizes the city as antinature, really has long flourished as a mecca for thinking and writing about nature, and for telling this powerful story in particular that nature writing has so dedicatedly perpetuated. Which makes perfect sense, if you think about it. In the modern United States, as in any human society, the stories we tell about nature are the most basic stories we can tell. L.A. has long been a place where we articulate grand American narratives. So it should not surprise us either that the foundational L.A. story is, what?—a nature story—or that we've told a wildly evasive nature tale to describe a city that's pushed the

evasion of accountability to people and nature to an extreme. The dream tales have assured us that L.A. is a city of nature where you can escape the social and environmental troubles of cities. The destruction of nature in the nightmare tales—how can you fix something that no longer exists?—laments the city's troubles while assuring us that we don't have to do anything because the problems are beyond repair. And how much further past salvation could a city be that awaits imminent millennial annihilation by nature? Here is a city where we've dreamt brilliantly of virtue while doing spectacularly unvirtuous things. It practically vibrates with brilliant denial in the service of spectacular yearning, self-interest, and material indulgence. And the city's definitive story is a way of seeing nature that allows for and encourages these exact evasions.

What we need in L.A., as elsewhere, is a foundational literature that imagines nature not as the opposite of the city but as the basic stuff of modern everyday life. Less apocalypse, more mango body whips. Less maple mojo, more actual maple trees. We could use a great deal less "It is raining in Los Angeles. Planes are falling out of the sky," and a lot more tales that explore our daily, intertwined connections to nature and to each other—such as "Enjoy the beauty of another culture while learning more about wastewater treatment and reuse."

I love that L.A. has been a uniquely powerful place to tell American nature stories. But as long as L.A. has been a mecca for American stories, writers have been calling for new stories with which to see the city. And nature stories have to be the logical place to start.

POSTSCRIPT:

THE CONFLUENCE

After I found the L.A. River, a year after I moved to L.A., I went searching for the confluence with the Arroyo Seco: the area where L.A. was founded, and the rough center of the river and the L.A. basin watershed. You cannot be surprised to hear that this spot can prove almost impossibly difficult to find. Even in the *Thomas Guide*, the bible of maps for finding one's way around Los Angeles, the blue line of the Arroyo peters out about a mile above where the two concrete channels do actually meet. The day I found the river remains one of my finest days in L.A. I was looking for birds, so I visited three short stretches where the Corps had left a soft riverbed: a flood control basin near the headwaters; an eight-mile piece in the middle, where the water table rises so close to the surface that it would punch through concrete; and the three miles of tidal estuary at the mouth. I started upstream in the San Fernando Valley, on the sole half mile that doesn't have any concrete at all. I continued downstream to the middle stretch above Downtown, which boasts an inspired new string of pocket parks with native vegetation and outdoor sculptures. Both stretches teemed with herons, ducks, coots, and other birds. Far

downstream, in Southeast L.A., the channel widens to the girth of a freeway, and I ended the day looking out over the river from atop a thirty-foot wall. Scores of black-necked stilts picked their way around upturned shopping carts. A mallard shot down the swift current, and swallows sliced the air. The sun set spectacularly to the southwest through power lines, billboards, and the smokestacks of the L.A. Harbor. A man on a horse rode by, wearing a cowboy hat, a Mexican blanket, and a cell phone. "This is L.A.," I thought. I was steeped so contentedly in the Complex Life. All day I had been marveling, "There's a river in L.A., a real river, what do you know," and it seemed, after a year of loving L.A. but not knowing why, and of wanting to write about L.A. but not knowing what, that I was now looking at the place (duck-filled, no less) that held the key to both. With urban designer and L.A. River aficionado Alan Loomis, I lead informal tours of the river—for friends, and their friends too, who like to think about L.A. and who have heard L.A. has a river and want to see it. We walk around the new parks, but we also insist on a stop at the Confluence, which I located at last on my own third try. We wander among the trash and muck, and skirt the homeless tents, and lean against the massive pylons of the freeway overpasses. Here, we say, lies at once the most hopeless and the most hopeful spot on the L.A. River. The geographic, historic, and ecological center of the river, the Confluence is perhaps the most extreme testament to L.A.'s erasure of nature, community, and the past. This spot is at once the logical nexus for the proposed fifty-one-mile Los Angeles River Greenway. Indeed, the city has broken ground on the first half acre of what should, eventually, become a grand central-city park. Here, we say, is one of the finest places to think about the river, which has to be one of the best places to think about L.A.—and L.A. historically has been one of the most powerful places to tell stories about America. You are standing, we allow, at an American narrative vortex. This spot ideally should be swarming with Angelenos, with writers, with nature writers. And to our delight, the people on the tours say, "What a cool place." They take a great many photographs—more, usually, than at any other stop—and then we continue downstream to imagine the future of L.A. and the Los Angeles River Greenway at a place where you can drive into the river Downtown.

An earlier form of this essay appeared in Land of Sunshine: An Environmental History of Metropolitan Los Angeles (William Deverell and Greg Hise, eds. University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005), used by permission of the publisher.

1. For definitions of these terms, see [Part One](#). Mango-body-whip tales are about using nature as resources, social-geography-of-air tales are about who benefits and who doesn't from how we use nature, and Zu-Zu tales are about how we transform particular landscapes and how nature acts back. [↪](#)

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WHAT DID YOU THINK?

[WRITE A LETTER TO THE EDITOR](#)