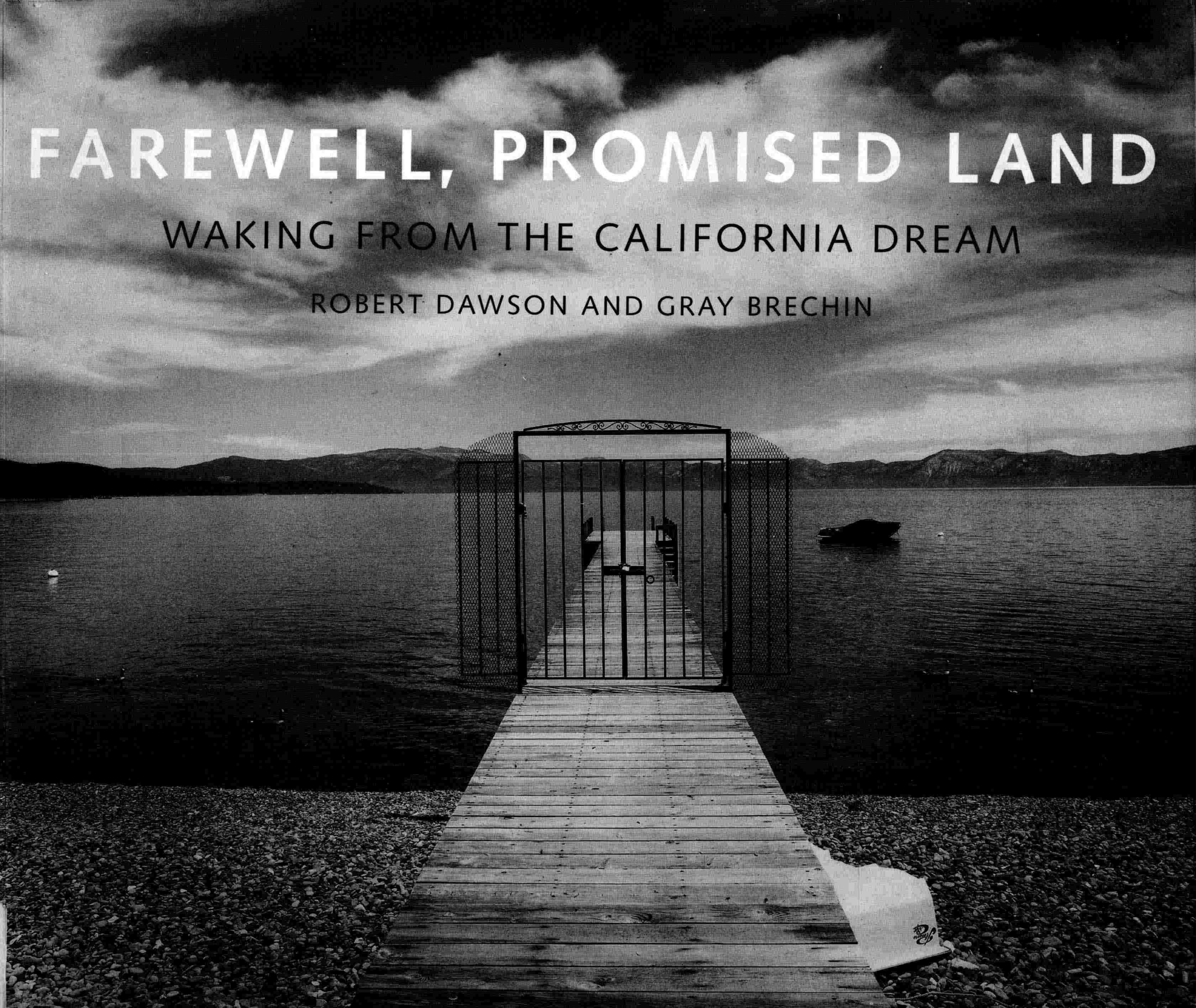
FAREWELL, PROMISED LAND

WAKING FROM THE CALIFORNIA DREAM

ROBERT DAWSON AND GRAY BRECHIN



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For Walker Manchester Dawson and his generation.

— ROBERT DAWSON

To my brother Vern, who gave me the tools with which to write and teach.

— GRAY BRECHIN

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FOREWORD

Raymond F. Dasmann

Farewell, Promised Land awakens far too many poignant memories of places we have lost. They have been taken away, one way or another—filled in, paved over, drained, torn down, burned out—inevitably crowded out. Too much has been removed from the wild—made tame or destroyed. I thought we had reached a low point thirty years ago when my book *The Destruction of California* was published. I actually hoped it would help to stop the downward trend. But nothing has halted the flood of people moving into California. Where one person stood thirty years ago there are now two. Where there was one when I was a child there are now twelve. They all take up space, demand housing, and need cars and highways, water development, sewage treatment, and so on—an interminable list of needs and wants. So the wild retreats vanish, often only in small increments, an easily ignored acre here and there, but collectively they add up to major losses.

Still, there is a California that is worth saving. Despite the losses, even more has been maintained. Battles have been lost, but the war can still be won. Those who are willing to work to preserve nature have more allies than ever before. I am optimistic enough to believe that *Farewell, Promised Land* can make a difference. It combines the visual impact of impressive photography with well-chosen words more successfully than any previous work.

Change is inevitable. Even the most carefully protected forest will not be quite the same tomorrow as it is today. But change can be positive, moving toward maintenance and restoration, and in that is our greatest hope. Cut-over forests need not remain as wasteland but can become forests once more. Overgrazed grasslands need not turn into desert but can regain their former luxuriance. It takes time and more patience than humans usually display, but recovery is always possible. If the seed stock has been maintained and soil kept in place, recovery can be relatively rapid. If much has been lost, it will take longer, but as long as biological diversity is maintained even barren lava beds can be green again.

The house that I lived in as a child in San Francisco was framed with old-growth Douglas fir. No doubt it was badly shaken in the 1906 earthquake, but it survived in good shape. The trees that produced its timbers, however, go much farther back; they were certainly growing when Cabrillo "discovered" California in 1542.

Nature has its own timetable, and people have trouble adjusting to it. I have yet to hear of a forest industry with the thousand-year cutting cycle needed to regrow the ancient redwoods that we so casually have removed from our forests.

Perhaps the change in our attitudes toward nature called for by *Farewell, Promised Land* is what is needed. I see it beginning to happen. One of my dreams has been to create a green ring of natural parks and reserves surrounding the urbanized areas of the San Francisco Bay region. When I look at a map I see that many of the reserves are already in place. They need only to be connected, as in the Golden Gate Biosphere Reserve, so that wildlife can move from one to another. The protection that already exists did not depend necessarily on the actions of Congress or the state legislature. Private individuals and organizations such as the Nature Conservancy, Trust for Public Land, Peninsula Open Space Trust, Sempervirens Fund, Save-the-Redwoods League, and many others have put up the money or brought pressure on the city and county governments to create parks and reserves.

The process of recovery and restoration goes on. Admittedly, the losses still tend to outweigh the gains. But I see hope in many things. Nature is reversing our past destruction of natural environments by reinvading lands now occupied by our cities. Each night in our backyard in Santa Cruz I see possums, skunks, gray foxes, and raccoons; once I even saw a bobcat. Deer feed on our front lawn. Not all of our neighbors are overjoyed to see these old residents returning. But attitudes are changing, and there is hope that Robert Dawson and Gray Brechin, with their sad farewell to California, will help bring a new dawn to this green and golden state.

PREFACE

Robert Dawson

Driving toward Stanford University, I listen to a new song by Bruce Springsteen about my childhood home in California's Central Valley. As I pass the Stanford Equestrian Center the ballad plays:

> Word was out some men in from Sinaloa were looking for hands
> Well deep in Fresno County there was a deserted chicken ranch
> There in a small tin shack on the edge of a ravine
> Miguel and Louis stood cooking methamphetamine

I think back three months, when Gray Brechin and I were working on this project in the San Joaquin Valley. We read in the local newspaper that the San Joaquin had become the meth capital of the country and about out-of-the-way farm shacks accidentally exploding during illegal drug production. We talked much about the desperation of the people caught up in this illicit drug world and the poverty that we saw every time we got off the freeways.

> It was early one winter evening as Miguel stood watch outside
> When the shack exploded lighting up the valley night
> Miguel carried Louis's body over his shoulder down a swale
> To the creekside and there in the tall grass Louis Rosales died[1]

Passing by the Stanford Golf Course, I weave through the slim joggers and determined mountain bikers who dominate the campus on this warm winter day. I think back to the California of my childhood and I am astonished at how dramatically this place has changed during my forty-five years in the Promised Land.

In 1991, Gray and I received the Dorothea Lange–Paul Taylor Prize from the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University. We had talked about doing a book and exhibition on California's environment for years and were delighted that we had won the prize but horrified that now we would have to get to work.

Indirectly, we had been working on this project for a long time. Both of us were involved in the early effort to save eastern California's endangered Mono Lake, and had, in fact, met at a campground overlooking it. I went on to do a book with Gerald Haslam and Stephen Johnson on California's equally threatened agricultural heartland, the Great Central Valley. Later my wife, Ellen Manchester, and I cofounded a large collaborative photographic project called Water in the West that continues to look at water as a critical component of life throughout the arid West. Around 1989, Lonny

Shavelson and I photographed toxic waste sites throughout California. Gray was a cofounder of the Mono Lake Committee before moving to San Francisco to cover urban design and environmental issues for local magazines and television stations. In 1983 he helped to break the story of the poisoning of Kesterson National Wildlife Refuge.

Attending the University of California in the late 1960s and early 1970s, we were both shaped by the idealism of that time. *The Destruction of California* by Ray Dasmann (1965) helped both of us to understand the radical environmental transformation taking place around us. Dasmann's book was to California what Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) was to the nation. It stuck with us both, becoming more relevant as the decades passed. We wanted to update it, but also to search the past for the explanations for California's continuing decline.

The way in which the United States came to occupy this land still affects the character of California society today. The California Gold Rush of 1849 was one of the largest mass migrations in human history and had enormous consequences for our environment and native life. Miner Thomas Swain wrote in 1851, "Large cities have sprung into existence almost in a day. . . . It has generally been the emigration of individuals, not of families. The people have been to each other strangers in a strange land. . . . Their hearts have been left at home. They have considered that as, this is but a temporary stopping place for them, they have not been called upon to do anything for California but all for themselves." Another miner wrote, "Money is our only stimulus and getting of it our only pleasure," while Henry David Thoreau declared in 1862, "The rush to California . . . reflects the greatest disgrace on mankind. That many are ready to live by luck and so get the means of commanding the labor of others less lucky, without contributing any value to society—and that's called enterprise!" If only they could see us now.[2]

The visible changes in California's environment are there to see for all who can remember. The writer Joan Didion recalled growing up in Sacramento by noting: "All that is constant about the California of my childhood is the rate at which it disappears."[3] I, too, have spent a lifetime watching new homes spread over once-open land. Air quality has improved over parts of the state because of federal legislation in the 1970s, but the continued choking smog over southern California and parts of the Central Valley, the growing gridlocked traffic, and the fear that our state's population could double in twenty-five years fuels a persistent, underlying anxiety over California's future. The list of environmental disasters is long, and it is questionable whether our successes can be sustained over time as more people demand more of the land.

Our challenge was not only to depict the obvious crisis in our state but to remind people how we arrived here. What could we learn from our past to help us understand our present and redirect our future? Certain pivotal questions began to emerge.

> Why has California allowed so much of its native plant and wildlife to be all but wiped out?
>
> Can we really expect technology and chemically intensive agriculture to sustain us after we pave over the best of our farm land?
>
> During the largely unknown nineteenth-century genocide of California's Indians, were we establishing an attitude of ownership, free of all constraints, which continues today on our land and among disenfranchised people?

Did James Marshall and the Gold Rush of 1849 lead to the cutting of the last old-growth forests and the death of our fisheries in the 1990s?

Has the California Dream of unlimited possibilities given us the propensity to build homes on flood plains, in fire zones, and over known earthquake faults?

To understand California's environmental crisis, it became imperative to understand what created the myth of California as America's Promised Land.

As a photographer, I was challenged by the task of making images of things that, in many cases, no longer exist. As we sought to understand the California Dream, I frequently encountered the question, how does one photograph history? Monuments, and the lack of them, gave us our cue. Early in the project we came upon a monument in the impoverished Sacramento / San Joaquin Delta town of Pittsburg. It depicted an old Italian fisherman gathering his nets and was dedicated to the last commercial fisherman in the Delta. On the coast, a hand-painted sign near Half Moon Bay perfectly conveyed the complex relationship between rapacious logging and California's all-but-extinct salmon runs. Near Los Angeles, we found a house-size section of the St. Francis Dam a mile downstream from its original site. The dam collapsed in 1928, taking hundreds of lives. No official monument exists marking this tragic event, yet this mass of concrete and rebar unofficially speaks volumes about what is often left out of history and why. Farther north, a private monument on a wind-swept, sun-baked plain in the Sacramento Valley spoke of how soldiers there controlled most of northern California's "militant" starving Indians in the 1850s. Never did we visit a more sorrowful place.

History began to emerge from plaques placed like epitaphs on our state's lonely monuments and memorials. Some bear official accounts erected by government or private groups. Some convey unofficial messages from concerned individuals. Other important sites, like the dam, have no monument at all. What has been commemorated and what has been left out prove to be revealing of our selective process of writing history. These plaques also provided me with the physical evidence I needed as a photographer. Gradually, the mist of California's myths began to clear as we stood in the place of so many tragic events. By bearing witness to this public history we sought to chronicle the origins of the Golden State's environmental decline. Recovering our dim memory of California's transformation became a central feature of our collaboration.

Gray and I worked well together, and the final project is greater than the sum of our individual efforts. As we shared our perspectives over meals, and while driving over long stretches of highway and back roads, we played off one another. Gray wrote to my photography and my photographs were informed by his thoughts. Traveling together through California's landscape, and visiting its archives, was a continual process of revelation, interpretation, and reexamination of a land in which we have spent our lives. Our project succeeded because we informed, motivated, and challenged each other in our effort to understand the familiar geography of our native state.

The book *California Historical Landmarks,* produced by the state's Office of Historic Preservation, provided invaluable assistance in helping us locate landscapes of historical environmental significance. The Federal Writers' Project's classic *WPA Guide to California* offered insight into the 1930s California landscape, and Stanford University Press's *Historic Spots in California* also gave us a map to follow history. The Nature Conservancy's *California Wild Lands* described and located the conservancy's remnant natural landscapes

and gave us a glimpse of the remains of what once was California. DeLorme's road maps showed us the way.

It quickly became clear to us that depicting only devastation would invite cynicism and detachment. I felt it was essential to go beyond showing our failures by calling attention to individual and collective efforts to restore and sustain our home. People involved in preserving California are engaged in a struggle that agriculturist Wes Jackson once described as "becoming native" to a place. Jackson argues that our culture has settled on the American landscape but that we have yet to become native to that place we call home. That process of becoming native motivates many of the people and organizations in our book. In undertaking this project, we too were searching for a way to come home.

We spent most of 1995 traveling to every region of the state. During that time it occurred to us to include a chapter depicting "alternative courses," as we discovered a rich history of Californians trying to create communities outside the mainstream. Utopian communities such as socialist Llano del Rio and Kaweah tried and ultimately failed to redefine our basic economic system. A nineteenth-century community of former slaves in Tulare County, now identified as Colonel Allensworth State Historic Park, attempted to provide a place for disenfranchised blacks to join the Central Valley's farm economy. The early twentieth-century town of Runnymede (now East Palo Alto) bore the motto "One Acre and Independence." A few years ago it became the "murder capital of the country." Yet Trevor Burrowes worked with residents there to grow commercially valuable organic vegetables on the original one-acre lots to break the cycle of poverty. Contemporary alternative communities continue to seek paths away from our apparent environmental suicide.

Amid all the bad news we found signs of hope in individuals and organizations actively engaged in the task of restoring where they live. From river restoration in Los Angeles to community restoration in San Francisco, we discovered Californians who have dedicated their lives to rehabilitating their communities and preserving a sense of unique place against the onslaught of development. As wealth becomes increasingly concentrated, many people feel increasingly insignificant and powerless, but those we interviewed proved that individual efforts can still make a difference.

I also photographed remnant natural landscapes to remind us of what we have lost. Several of these sites were lands purchased by the Nature Conservancy, including remnants of the Central Valley natural landscape such as the Vina Plains Preserve, the Kaweah Oaks Preserve, the Pixley Vernal Pools Preserve, and the Jepson Prairie Preserve. The Carrizo Plain, just west of the San Joaquin Valley, has been called "California's Serengeti" because of its remaining prairie and wildlife. The Tule Elk State Reserve, west of Bakersfield, is attempting to bring back the once-abundant tule elk to its native home. The San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge is the largest urban wildlife refuge in the country. Meanwhile, the Eastern Mojave continues to be a battleground over public versus private ownership of California's desert. The California State University system and the University of California are trying to retain a semblance of the original desert through their desert research stations in the Eastern Mojave.

None of these preserves would exist without the work of people who loved a particular place, or who had a larger vision of what California and its cities might become if nurtured with human wisdom. People continue to make a difference in their efforts to become native to California. We who have had the privilege to see the state whole hope that this book may serve as a window for other Californians, that they may be inspired to strive to turn the land we inhabit into home.

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An Altered Land

Monarch, California's last wild grizzly and symbol for state flag,
California Academy of Sciences, San Francisco, 1996

ONE: THE ABSENCE OF THINGS

I noticed the emptiness of the sky long before I saw it on the land. Approaching Sacramento on the Yolo Causeway, I saw a sky free of motion. Where historic accounts spoke of torrents of birds so dense that they cast a shadow upon the ground, of thunderous rivers of geese, ducks, and swans moving down the state to the lagoons of Mexico and beyond, now there was nothing. Like most Californians, I'd come to take the emptiness for granted.

As a historian, I now see it everywhere—a growing and unseen poverty in the well-advertised land of plenty—and I know that we did it to ourselves. A 1901 photograph courtesy of the Southern Pacific promotional department showed men standing next to a trophy sea bass taller than themselves. The railroad hoped, through such publicity, to lure more settlers to the vast tracts of real estate that it claimed throughout the West. Because it worked so well, we will never see such fish again, or the state the *Chronicle* advertised in 1906 as "The Nation's Noah's Ark," telling sportsmen where they could bag the last of the big ones. Two years later, the same paper called the Colorado River delta the "best hunting and fishing in America," even as the diversions began that now exhaust the river long before it reaches the sea. The jungles and lagoons at its mouth on the Gulf of California have vanished. Hunters will never again pose for *Sunset* on a feathered mound of Canada geese brought down from the California skies. Little moves up there these days but the contrails of flying machines.

Humans are such an adaptable species that few are aware of the absence of animals with which they once shared the place. But far more than wildlife is missing from California today.

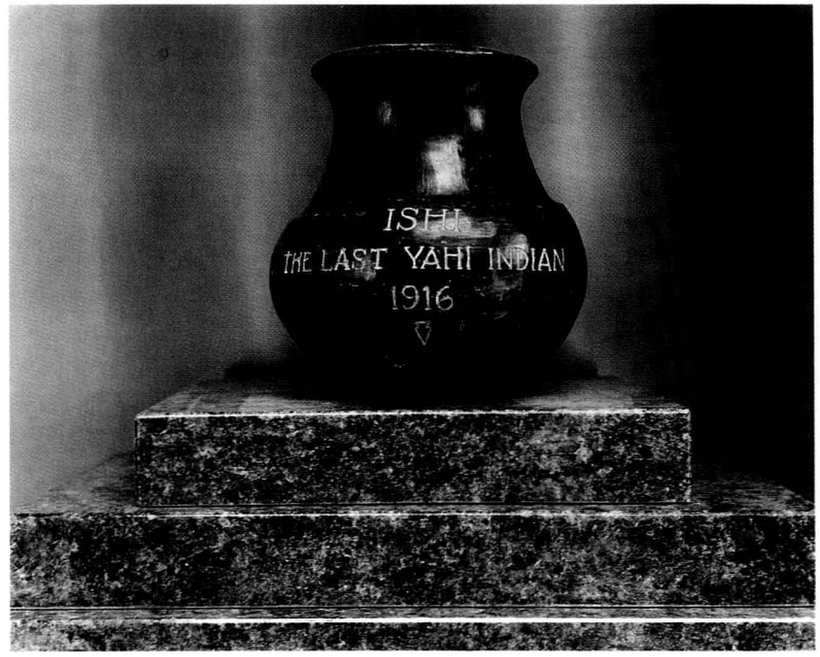
I was standing in the Jepson Prairie while Bob attempted to photograph its meagerness. The Nature Conservancy protects the 1,600 acres as the last and largest stand of native grasses left in the 15 million-acre Central Valley. Things have changed since John Muir described the valley's "bee pastures," where every footstep crushed a hundred flowers, "one sheet of purple and gold" sweeping from the Coast Range to the Sierra foothills "with the bright Sacramento pouring through the midst of it." Within decades of that first view, Muir wrote, the flowery pastures had vanished as if

burned, retreating to "rocky cliffs and fencecorners." They were replaced by a sea of wheat and by rocky stubble where livestock grazed "like hoofed locusts." [1]

Yet as late as 1915, the San Francisco world's fair was tinted to resemble the spring wildflowers for which the state was still famous. Once again, the *Chronicle* featured an article on the wild "gardens" that grew on the dunes within the city limits, including the usual picture of a woman gathering armfuls of lupine for short-lived bouquets. The fair was, of course, designed to attract people to California to populate those fields, as was the article, since the newspaper's proprietor also owned blocks of those sand dunes. Both were successful, for a sea of houses and streets now covers every trace of what the *Chronicle* called "the most gorgeous expanse of natural bloom in California."

It takes a stretch of the imagination that I cannot muster to see the tiny relic of the Jepson preserve, with its hummocks, bunch grasses, and flower-edged ponds, extending from Shasta to the Tehachapis and hosting herds of antelope and elk. One is everywhere reminded of the meagerness of what once was, for Jepson is a prairie at tight bay. Closely bounded by a county road on one side and a railroad bed on the other, it is quartered by power pylons that stride across the landscape, carrying juice to the bay cities and the nearby Solano suburbs that threaten soon to engulf it. The pervasive crackling of overhead high voltage is itself drowned out, every few minutes, by the roar of huge transports cruising into Travis Air Force Base. Jepson is another one of those fence corners preserved in a landscape of utility because it is of little use for anything else. It speaks eloquently of a poverty of intention.

Arriving in California eighteen years before Muir, Thomas Jefferson Mayfield confirmed what the Scots naturalist reported. Mayfield never forgot his first view of the San Joaquin Valley when,



as a young boy, he hastened with his family to the gold fields of the Sierra. Standing on the Coast Range, he saw fields of living gold, and much more. His mother described it as "a crazy quilt of color," and his father, though well traveled, said he would not have believed that such a place existed had he not seen it himself. Descending to the plain, the Mayfields decked their horses with flowers. Many were unknown to them, since plants had evolved uniquely in the isolation of California as on an island, each attuned to local environmental nuances. Thomas recalled that "the whole plain was covered with great patches of rose, yellow, scarlet, orange and blue. The colors did not seem to mix to any great extent. Each kind of flower liked a certain kind of soil best and some of the patches of one color were a mile or more across." The memory never faded, for more than sixty years later, Mayfield recalled that "the two most