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DAVID L. ULIN

There it is. Take it.

Mulholland gave LA water and a motto to live by.

Los Angeles, give me some of you! Los Angeles come to me the way I came to you, my feet over your streets, you pretty town I loved you so much, you sad flower in the sand, you pretty town.—John Fante

Let's begin with the photographs. On 5 November 1913—a century ago—water began to pour through the Los Angeles Aqueduct in the San Fernando Valley's Newhall hills. It is in this instant that contemporary Los Angeles was invented: the apotheosis of the city's creation myth. And yet, if we now take these sorts of images entirely for granted, the documentation of history *as it is happening*, their existence shows how far ahead of its time Los Angeles has always been. The same might be (*has* been) said of the aqueduct, but let's stay for the time being with the photographic record, which captures the exact moment a legend comes to life. We observe the crowds begin to gather: men and women scaling the slopes in suits and hats and long skirts, clutching American flags. We observe the cars (even then, LA was a driving

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Crowds gathering at the opening of the Los Angeles Aqueduct. BY LOS ANGELES TIMES STAFF. COPYRIGHT © 1913 LOS ANGELES TIMES. REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION.

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town), the speechifying, and marvel as the sluice gates open and the stolen Owens River water starts to flow. One particularly striking shot, published in the following day's *Los Angeles Times*, portrays the cascade mid-torrent; as spectators line either side of the aqueduct, the water bursts through it, violent, unruly, its leading edge as angry as a storm-fed wave. In the foreground, we can see the pebbled bottom of the concrete channel, soon (in half a second) to be submerged. There's something so active, so aggressive, about this photo that it seems, almost, like a movie; we expect the water to explode into the frame. Minutes later, it is over, and another image evokes the aftermath: crowds starting to break up as behind them, water fills the aqueduct unimpeded. Los Angeles as we know it has been born.

This is, of course, an exaggeration, this reading of the city through the filter of a single flashpoint, as if there were one instant by which we might come to terms with everything. The history of Los Angeles—like that of every city—is made up of thousands of such moments, millions of them, in LA's case going back at least as far as Campo de Cahuenga and the end of the Mexican-American War. Still, there's something in the water, in what it promises, in its connection to the best and worst of us. It's the (not so) secret history of the city, a story recorded and mythologized, the story of the California Aqueduct, of the Owens River Valley, and *Chinatown*. It's a story marked equally by rapacious capitalism and vast public infrastructure projects, built on the trope of Southern California as a blank slate, where, as Charles Dudley Warner put it in the 1890s, "nature seems to work

There's something in the water, in what it promises, in its connection to the best and worst of us.

LA is a projection, a template for our own dreams.

with a man, and not against him." That this is almost exactly opposite to everything we've come to understand about the place—"Of course," the old joke goes, "there are four seasons in Los Angeles: fire, flood, earthquake, and drought"—is part of the point, if not the point entirely, which is to say that whatever else it is, LA is a projection, a template for our own dreams. Another well-worn trope, perhaps . . . and yet, if the city has anything to teach us, it's that all of it, cliché as well as nuance, comes into play here, that this is a landscape where the myths can't help but bleed (at times, without our even being aware of it) into the fabric of everyday life.

What does that mean? For an answer, let's go back to the aqueduct, although really, the story begins some years before. As early as 1900, Carey McWilliams observes in *Southern California Country: An Island on the Land*, Los Angeles, which then had a population of 102,249, "began to be disturbed by the discrepancy between the available supply [of water] and the rate of population increase." So far, so good, since LA, as a growing metropolis, had every reason to be attentive to its future; as McWilliams notes, "No one has ever seriously questioned the right of the City of Los Angeles to be concerned about its water supply." Yet as with so much here, there's a catch, a complication beneath the surface, which in this case has to do with not just water but also real estate and money, that Holy Trinity of the city's inner (and its outer) life. Here's McWilliams again:

> In large part . . . this fear [of drought] was artificially stimulated by a group of powerful "empire builders" of the period. In 1905 and later in 1910, a syndicate financed by Harry Chandler, General Harrison Gray Otis, Joseph F. Sartori (the banker), Henry Huntington, E.H. Harriman, E.T. Earl, and M.H. Sherman acquired most of the former holdings of the Van Nuys and Lankershim families in the San Fernando Valley. . . . Eventually this group of men acquired control over 108,000 acres of land in the valley. Once in control of this vast acreage, they came to the water board of the City of Los Angeles with a typically grandiose proposal: that the city should build a 238-mile aqueduct to tap the waters of Owens Valley (located between the Sierra Nevada and the desert); and thereby hangs a tale.

The tale McWilliams shares is hardly secret; indeed, it is rooted into the city's image of itself. As early as 1917, it inspired Mary Austin's novel *The Ford* (although she changed the setting to Northern California); it infuses both Morrow Mayo's 1933 history *Los Angeles* and Cedric Belfrage's 1939 novel *Promised Land*. And why not? It is, perhaps, the classic LA story, in which a cabal of civic leaders, including William Mulholland, who ran the Bureau of Water Works and Supply like a private fiefdom, conspired, pretty much in full view of everyone, to use public resources for private good. "To the amazement of the residents of Los Angeles, who had just assumed a $25,000,000 indebtedness," McWilliams explains, "the aqueduct line was brought to the north end of San Fernando Valley, not into the City of Los Angeles, and there the terminal point still remains. With water available to irrigate the lands they had acquired, . . . the 'men of vision' who had engineered this extraordinary deal, proceeded to sell their holdings for $500 and $1,000 an acre, at the expense of the residents of Owens Valley and of Los Angeles." This is what is celebrated in the photographs, the payoff of a get rich (or, get richer) quick scheme. Still, we understand, there's more. "From an airplane," Morrow wrote eight decades ago, "Los Angeles today resembles half a hundred Middle-Western-Egyptian-English-Spanish communities, repainted and sprinkled about. Its population is about 1,400,000. It is, and has been for ten years, the largest city in America in area, and people often wonder why. The answer is Water." In other words—and in spite of themselves—the tycoons who bought and sold the Valley helped guarantee the rise of the modern city, *the one we live in*, streamlined and speed-obsessed, a landscape of light and celluloid and sprawling freeways, with its own odd, airbrushed image of the past.

Because here's the thing, a century later: None of it matters, at least not as we think it does. Los Angeles is what Los Angeles is, and it makes no difference how it came to be that way. In fact, I can't help imagining, those "men of vision," as McWilliams calls them, were—wittingly or otherwise—onto something; call it psyche or psychology, but in any case, the spirit of the place. Again, I find myself drawn to the photographs, and to one in particular, a shot of Mulholland as he addresses the assembled masses, looking

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The tycoons who bought and sold the Valley helped guarantee the rise of the modern city, the one we live in.

for all the world like a politician or a priest. He speaks from a raised platform, hands gripping the railing, which is decorated in bunting, like the grandstand at a World Series game. There is a flag off to his left and a billboard in front of him, although the angle of the camera renders the wording obscure. In the foreground, men listen attentively; one, in a bowler and a clean snap collar, clenches a pipe between his teeth. Behind them, the Newhall hills rise plain and dusty, fronted by a line of telegraph poles.

The photo, as it survives, is strangely disconcerting: The sky above the hills and around Mulholland's head has been cropped out. The effect is to make the moment disembodied, as if it existed slightly out of time. Here it is, the myth again, the history of the city as a passion play, a pageant, like

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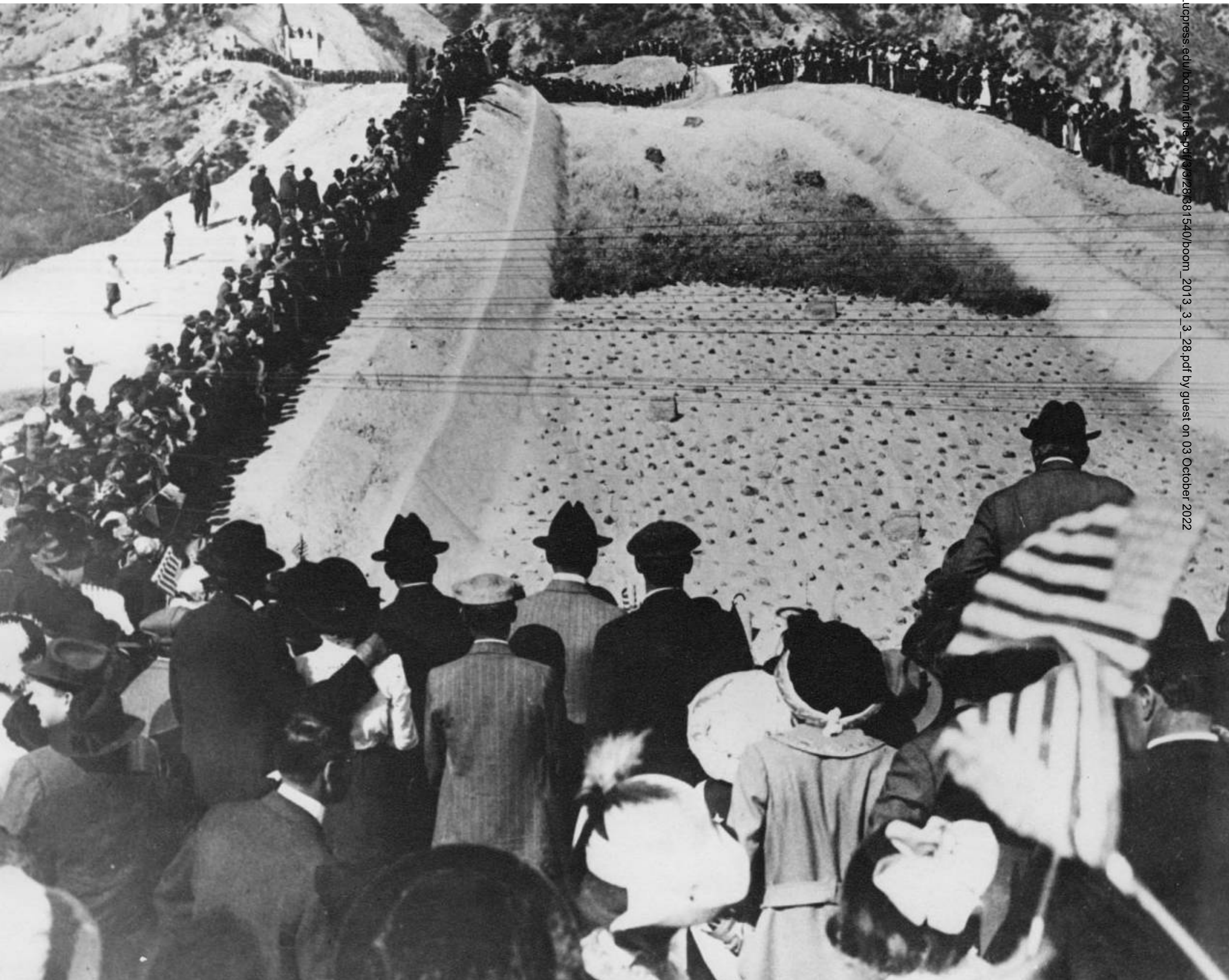

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William Mulholland addresses the crowd. BY LOS ANGELES TIMES STAFF. COPYRIGHT © 1913 LOS ANGELES TIMES. REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION.

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the Mission Play so popular in those days. It was during this speech, after all, that Mulholland linked LA to a kind of manifest destiny. "This rude platform," he declared, "is an altar, and on it we are here consecrating this water supply and dedicating this aqueduct to you and your children and your children's children—for all time." On the one hand, that's to be expected, an expression both of Southern California's relentless boosterism and also the most obvious, self-interested dodge. At the same time, it is merely prelude to what, I want to tell you, are the most resonant lines ever spoken about Los Angeles, five words that, to borrow a phrase from Joan Didion, "get very close to what it is about the place." I have no idea if Mulholland knew what he was saying; apparently, he'd planned a formal presentation, but overwhelmed by the assembly, not to mention a ceremonial band and artillery pieces, he chose to cut it short. Regardless, as the water started flowing and Los Angeles mayor H.H. Rose stood beside him, Mulholland gestured toward the aqueduct, and—to the crowd, to history, to whomever—shouted: "*There it is. Take it.*"

T*here it is. Take it.* This should be the motto of Los Angeles, emblazoned on every police car and proclamation, embedded in the city seal. It says all there is to say about the place, about the myths and what they mean and what they will never mean, about the promise of the city, which is both true and the most pernicious sort of lie. A lie? Of course, beginning with the notion that LA is there for the taking, that *it is for everyone*. Who is Mulholland talking to (or about) anyway, if not his cronies, the back room dealers who through their influence over various civic institutions (the *Times*, the Water Bureau, the Pacific Electric Railway) built the city in the image of their greed? The aqueduct, the Valley real estate scheme, the Owens River Valley grab . . . these are just the earliest in

It says all there is to say about the promise of the city, which is both true and the most pernicious sort of life.

a long line of (*what shall we call them?*) indiscretions, the selling of public policy for private good.

In the early 1920s, oil baron Edward Doheny's no-interest loan of $100,000 to US Secretary of the Interior Albert Fall helped trigger the Teapot Dome scandal; in 1929, his son Ned died in a still unresolved murder-suicide at his Beverly Hills mansion Greystone after being implicated in his father's fall. In 1927, the collapse of Julian Petroleum, a Southern California oil company turned elaborate Ponzi set up, may have helped precipitate the Great Depression: Over a period of thirty months, the company issued more than three-and-a-half million shares of phony stock, bilking forty thousand investors while offering powerful allies, including businessman Harry M. Haldeman (grandfather to the Watergate conspirator), studio head Louis B. Mayer, political boss Kent Parrot, and gambling kingpin Charlie Crawford, participation in "pools" that guaranteed vast short-term returns. Crawford—who, with Parrot, essentially ran the city throughout the 1920s, using Mayor George E. Cryer as a front—would be gunned down in 1931 by former city prosecutor David Clark, an act inspired by either corruption or self-defense. (This, too, has never been resolved.) If all that sounds like ancient history, it isn't, and not only because some of these events took place in living memory. Just think about the 1992 riots (and the Watts riots and the Zoot Suit riots) and the culture of Darryl Gates's LAPD. Just think about Bell, among the poorest communities in Los Angeles County, where, in 2010, a group of city officials, including the mayor and the city manager, were found to be receiving exorbitant salaries after having manipulated a special election on charter reform.

There it is, take it, indeed.

Do I sound a little fatalistic? Well, okay then, I'm a little fatalistic—because these stories are as LA as it gets. They're the reason noir grew up here, as Richard Rayner points out in his book *A Bright and Guilty Place*, which casts the saga of Clark and Crawford through a wider lens. Raymond Chandler's 1935 story "Spanish Blood," Rayner reminds us, begins with a kingmaker named Donegan Marr shot dead in his office, much as Crawford had been four years before. "In a few more years he'd have taken the town over," a cop confides, although in actuality Crawford's influence was on the decline when he died. But no matter; it's the larger movement Chandler is after, a movement that, as a former oil industry executive, he understood from the inside out. As Rayner explains:

> What's important is that Chandler was a part of all this, not merely an observer. The history of Los Angeles through the late 1920s and early 1930s sank into his blood and became a part of his writerly DNA because he'd been a minor player in that history. He'd felt its breath. Chance and the loss of his job forced him to turn to the pulps, but LA made him the only kind of writer he could have become.... Chandler's fiction abounds in blackmailers who get what's coming to them (or don't), in crooked DAs, violent cops, exhausted cops, disinterested cops, tough cops that can be greased but aren't all bad, shyster lawyers, sinister racketeers, bent doctors, victim chauffeurs, seedy pornographers, gamblers too slick for their own good, and always the ruthless rich who do as they will and expect to buy their way out of whatever jam they land in.

In his third novel, 1942's *The High Window*, Chandler even comments on the case of Ned Doheny (renamed Cassidy in the book). "You read it in the papers," his detective Philip Marlowe tells a policeman, "but it wasn't so. What's more you knew it wasn't so and the DA knew it wasn't so and the DA's investigators were pulled off the case within a matter of hours.... And what were the family and the family doctor doing during the four hours they didn't call the cops? Fixing it so there would only be a superficial investigation. And why were no tests made on the hands for nitrates? Because you didn't want the truth. Cassidy was too big."

Chandler, of course, has been written about plenty; no need to slip through that wormhole at any great length. But

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as much as Mulholland or Doheny or Huntington or Otis, he came to LA and took it, too. The terms were different—the sensibility, the moral center. (Chandler, that is, had one.) And yet, the impulse is the same. Chandler, as Rayner notes, arrived at writing as a last resort and was an unlikely literary hero: a detective novelist in a movie town. Could another city have produced him? Would another city have given him a chance? He was an artist working in a popular medium, not unlike his contemporary James M. Cain. Both were late bloomers: Chandler published his first novel when he was fifty-one, Cain when he was forty-two. Both had bottomed out, to some extent, Chandler in the oil business and Cain in East Coast journalism, and both ended up, if at times loosely, involved with the entertainment industry ("[T]he very nicest thing Hollywood can possibly think of to say to a writer is that he is too good to be only a writer," Chandler sniped in 1945 in the *Atlantic Monthly*), an association that influenced how Chandler and Cain thought about what literature could do. For Chandler, the big idea was to use a popular form, the detective novel, to get at the corruption of the city, while eschewing elitist aesthetics. "There are no vital and significant forms of art; there is only art, and precious little of that," he wrote in "The Simple Art of Murder." And: "It is always a matter of who writes the stuff, and what he has in him to write it with. . . . Everything written with vitality expresses that vitality; there are no dull subjects, only dull minds." Cain, for his part, produced a run of early books (*The Postman Always Rings Twice*, *Double Indemnity*) as fine as any in American literature, including one, *Mildred Pierce*, that seventy-two years later remains perhaps the greatest of all Southern California novels, a melodrama built out of the detritus of middle-class suburban culture—divorce, domestic strife, the indignities and aspirations of class. "I never forget," Cain once observed, "that the average man, from the fields, the streets, the bars, the offices, and even the gutters of his country, has acquired a vividness of speech that goes beyond anything I could invent, and that if I stick to this heritage, this *logos* of the American countryside, I shall attain a maximum of effectiveness with very little effort."

What Cain understood as well as anyone is that, for all its corruption, its stacked decks and sweetheart deals, Los Angeles is also essentially democratic—in the sense that here, or so we like to think, we can do what we want. This, of course, cuts both ways: Just ask the husbands in his first two novels, murdered by faithless wives eager for insurance money and a brand new start. And yet, isn't the appeal of such characters that they speak to all of us, that like Mulholland or Chandler or Cain himself, they turned their backs on every last vestige of propriety and looked for something else? *There it is. Take it.* This could be their motto, as it could for all of us. In his essay "Paradise," published in H.L. Mencken's *American Mercury* in 1933 (the cover teased, "What Southern California Is Really like"), Cain captured the nature of the place, imagining a map of the region and filling it in. "Now then," he writes, "put in some houses. Most of them should be plain white stucco with red tile roofs, for the prevalent architecture is Spanish, although a mongrel Spanish that is corrupted by every style known on earth, and a few styles not hitherto known. But you can also let your fancy run at this point, and put in some structures *ad lib.*, just to exhibit your technique. If a filling-station occurs to you, a replica of the Taj Mahal, faithfully executed in lath and plaster, put that in. If you hit on a hot-dog stand in the shape of a hot dog, prone, with portholes for windows and a sign reading 'Alligator Farm,' put that in. Never mind why a hot-dog stand should have portholes for windows and a new line of alligators: we are concerned here with appearances, and will get to that part later."

By now, of course, it's become a cliché to poke fun at LA's architecture; that's what seventy-five years of beating the same drum will do. Nathanael West, Truman Capote, Norman Mailer . . . although unlike Cain, they overlook the key idea, which is not so much to ridicule (okay, maybe a little) as it is to use the surface as a guide to the city's personality. And what is that personality? Cain describes it in terms of destiny. Again, from "Paradise": "Where this place is headed is to be the leader in commerce, art, citrus production, music, rabbit breeding, oil production, furniture manufacture, walnut growing, literature, olive bottling, short- and long-distance hauling, clay modelling, aesthetic criticism, fish export, canary-bird culture, playwrighting, shipping, cinematic creativeness, and drawing-room manners. In short, it is going to be a paradise on earth. And, with such vaulting ambitions, it might pull off something: you can't tell. It is keenly aware of the Orient, and also of Mexico; streams are meeting here that ought to churn up some exciting whirlpools. I, personally, even if the first act hasn't been so hot, am not going to walk out on the show."

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St. Francis Dam beginning to leak. COURTESY OF THE LOS ANGELES PUBLIC LIBRARY PHOTO COLLECTION.

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Cain is writing with his tongue partly in his cheek, of course, although not entirely; his mix of irony and credulity is one that anyone who has spent much time in LA knows all too well. How else are we to think about a metropolis built in a semi-desert, a get-rich-quick scheme that became something more? And yet, what resonates are those closing lines, the exciting whirlpools, the admission that he has no intention of walking out on the show. This is Los Angeles at the ground level, the level not of those who remade the place in their own image but rather of those who came here to be remade. Another myth, another trope, yet no less real for being so, this idea of the city as built on reinvention, on seizing the moment, or even better: on believing (*there it is, take it*) that there is a moment to be seized.

I, personally, even if the first act hasn't been so hot, am not going to walk out on the show.

So what does all this mean for the modern city, which both is and isn't the one Mulholland helped create and Cain (and Chandler) wrote about? Things have changed a lot since 1933, or even 1941, when *Mildred Pierce* was published, not to mention 1913. LA is, as it has ever been, a landscape of the present, where the past doesn't count for very much. That, too, is part of the ethos of *there it is, take it*, an ethos which defines itself, perhaps most centrally, in *never looking back*.

And yet, how is this even possible, in a universe where history accrues? Like any place, Los Angeles is not immune from such a process, no matter what we choose to believe. Mulholland is a drive now, "a drive and a highway," as David Thomson puts it in *Beneath Mulholland*, "running east-west, the supreme vantage point for the entirety of Los Angeles and the San Fernando Valley. You can stand up there and feel like Christ—or the Devil. Mulholland Drive allows both roles." Doheny is a drive also, and a library, dedicated at the University of Southern California in 1932, in the name of the old man's dead son. Huntington is a library and museum. All of them, transformed from human beings into monuments, forgotten in everything except their names. "And surely we no longer can afford to erase our home out of forgetfulness, or worse, a willful amnesia," wrote D.J. Waldie in 2000, "and imagine, as many want to, that we live in a historyless city, a placeless region, a Los Angeles devoid of contrarian surprises, an LA devoid of us and our sacred ordinariness." This, in its way, is an idea as transformative as *there it is, take it*, a strategy for looking at Los Angeles not as a mythic landscape but rather as a real place populated by real people, "a city," in the words of Chandler, "no worse than others, a city rich and vigorous and full of pride, a city lost and beaten and full of emptiness."

That's a terrific description—all the more so because it holds up. This is the aftermath of Mulholland's dream, which transformed LA from "a big dry sunny place with ugly homes and no style" into something infinitely more difficult to pin down. Immigration, mass transit, the Pacific Rim . . . one hundred years after the aqueduct, *there it is, take it* has a new set of meanings, defined less, perhaps, by manifest than by a series of overlapping, smaller destinies. As Richard Rodriquez suggests in his essay "Late Victorians": "To speak of San Francisco as land's end is to read the map from one direction only—as Europeans would read it or as the East Coast has always read. . . . To speak, therefore, of San Francisco as land's end is to betray parochialism. My parents came here from Mexico. They saw San Francisco as the North. The West was not west for them. They did not share the Eastern traveler's sense of running before the past—the darkening time zone, the lowering curtain." The same is true of Los Angeles. Mulholland's vision of the place as a blank canvas to be filled in by those with the power or the wherewithal to make it happen has been superseded by the reality of a sprawling megalopolis (with a population of close to thirteen million in the last census) that is increasingly unmanageable in ways that would have never occurred to him. Still, if history has anything to tell us, it is that, for all their contradictions, a through line connects these visions of LA, that they share a common sensibility, a soul.

Of course, even Mulholland had his share of souls to deal with, especially after the collapse of the St. Francis Dam on 12 March 1928. This disaster—in which hundreds died after a dam in the Santa Clara Valley failed, flooding Castaic, Fillmore, Santa Paula, and other towns before reaching the Pacific near Ventura—effectively ended his dominion over the Bureau of Water Works and Supply. Eighty-five years later, the collapse stands as a bookend to the opening of the aqueduct, the moment when ambition (or greed, or hubris) rolled back in upon itself, like the cresting of a wave. Mulholland had inspected the dam just twelve hours before its failure and had declared the structure safe. "I envy those that were killed," he is reported to have said. "Don't blame anyone else. You just fasten it on me. If there was an error in human judgment, I was the human." In the wake of the disaster, Mulholland went into a self-imposed exile and

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The remains of St. Francis Dam. COURTESY OF THE LOS ANGELES PUBLIC LIBRARY PHOTO COLLECTION.

remained essentially in isolation until his death in 1935 at age seventy-nine. Although he was not held to be liable, an investigation concluded that the "construction and operation of a great dam should never be left to the sole judgment of one man."

If you're unfamiliar with the St. Francis Dam disaster, you're not alone, although the ruins are still out there, in San Francisquito Canyon, near Valencia. The site is unmarked, but there are photographs: before and after images of the dam rerendered as rubble, like the building of the aqueduct in reverse. After all this time, it's tempting to read this as a symbol, a metaphor for our history of forgetting, for the past so many of us came here to escape. And yet, if there's a moral to this story, it's that the past is always with us, that it asserts itself when we least expect it and regardless of what we intend. During the late 1990s, a friend of mine lived in a condo that had been Mulholland's office, in the Metropolitan Water District building in downtown LA. At night, she told me, she would smell cigar smoke, hear the low murmur of conversation, and sometimes, if she were sleeping, feel the weight of people sitting on the bed. When I asked her what she thought it was, she said the place was haunted by the ghosts of all the people who had died in the disaster, come to see Mulholland for recompense.

I have no idea whether this is true or not—but I believe it, and not only because I trust my friend. No, I believe it because it tells me something about the world we live in, about the primacy of place over personality, rather than the other way around. Mulholland may have created Los Angeles as we know it with the construction of the aqueduct, but the place came back, as it always does, to extract a price. One hundred years later, that's a lesson we'd do well to remember:

There it is, take it, indeed. **B**

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