Yosemite's Untold Story
Southern Sacrifice
JUST WASTING DIXIE?
REPORT FROM THE SCORCHED EARTH SUMMIT
THE MOUNTAINS OF LOS ANGELES
Up the River of Mercy

Names were keys to the landscape where I grew up. With names, the patterns of that coastal California landscape emerged: milkmaids that bloomed first, brodia whose bulbs the Miwok ate, miner’s lettuce and thimbleberries that I ate, buckeyes that flowered at the same time as June’s feral hedge roses and lost their leaves earliest in the fall. From a riot of green the natural world came into focus as a delicately balanced cycle of events I looked forward to, of dangers, uses, and niches. Place names didn’t add much to this picture for decades, until I began reading western history and realized that the larger landscape too was a crazy quilt of names representing cultures, battles, heroes, victims, and real-estate developers.

When I unfurled a map for my first real trip to the Sierra Nevada last summer, the names began to tell their story: Donner Pass for the...
desperate emigrants of 1846; Truckee for one Paiute chief, and, up Interstate 80 a ways, Winnemucca for another. Carson City for Kit Carson, who defeated the Navajo nation and explored California with John Frémont; Walker Lake east of Lake Tahoe for the trapper Joseph Walker, who in 1833 was perhaps the first white man to look into Yosemite Valley. Mariposa (Spanish for butterfly), the Mer­
ced (Spanish for mercy), and Yosemite itself, whose Miwok name had the strangest story of all.

We came to the Sierra from the east, stopping in Lee Vining on the shores of Mono Lake to stretch and buy provisions. Next to the main grocery store in this one­street town is a small monument of rough stones, cement, and bronze: "The name of this community honors Leroy Vining," it reads. "In 1852 Lieutenant Tredwell Moore and soldiers of the Second Infantry pur­sued Indians of Chief Tenaya's tribe from Yosemite across the Sierra via Bloody Canyon. They took back mineral samples and a prospecting party was organized. In this group were the Vinings, Lee and Dick..."

We continued west over Tioga Pass, along the paved route that supplanted Bloody Canyon. The heights were still covered with snow. The sun was already setting by the time we reached Lake Tenaya, so we continued our descent, though it was the lake that I'd come to see.

**Lieutenant Moore's Second Infantry** was better known as part of the Mariposa Battalion, after Mariposa County, where the group of about 200 men was organized. It was in pursuit of Indians that the Mariposa Battalion became the first party of whites to enter Yosemite Valley, on March 27, 1851. Most of what we know about the battalion's expedition comes from Lafayette Bunnell's *Discovery of the Yosemite and the Indian War of 1851 Which Led to That Event*, and it was Bunnell who gave most of the principal landmarks in the valley the names they still bear.

Bunnell's is a strange account, switching back and forth from the lustiest romantic response to the land to cool, journalistic recounting of how the war was conducted. When I read the book, I was shocked to learn that Yosemite had been first explored in the course of a war, that a place always described in terms of its idyllic scenery could have such a
brutal history, and shocked most of all by the way Bun nell could be lyrical and cold-blooded at the same time. The views moved him to tears, he wrote, and the rocks reaffirmed his faith in the deity. For me the inadvertent climax of the book is a scene at Lake Tenaya, after the old chief and his people have been captured, just before they are marched to a reservation in the flats of the San Joaquin Valley.

"When Ten-ye-ya reached the summit, he left his people and approached where the captain and a few of us were halting," Bunnell recounts. "I called him up to us, and told him that we had given his name to the lake and river. At first he seemed unable to comprehend our purpose, and pointing to the group of glistening peaks, near the head of the lake, said 'It already has a name; we call it Py-we-ack.' Upon my telling him that we had named it Ten-ye-ya, because it was upon the shores of the lake that we had found his people, who would never return to it to live, his countenance fell and he at once left our group and joined his family circle. His countenance indicated that he thought the naming of the lake no equivalent for his loss of territory."

Annihilating a culture and romanticizing it are not usually done at the same time, but Bunnell neatly compresses two stages of historical change into one interaction. Bunnell is saying, in effect, that there is no room for these people in the present; instead, they will provide a decorative past in another culture's future. Py-we-ack means "shining rocks"; like most of Yosemite's original place names, it describes the landscape rather than memorializing a passing human figure. Ten-ya is a name given from outside, a name that sheds light on neither the lake nor the man unless one knows its pathetic origin.

I'd passed through the valley only once before, on my way to somewhere else, but for years I'd been working as a landscape historian, and the pictures and literature of Yosemite were familiar to me. Yosemite is a crucible of the American landscape, a catalyst for turning beliefs into tangible effects. It is, among other things, the subject of the first significant landscape photographs. The valley was the first piece of land recognized by the federal government as worthy of protection as a national park. It reigned supreme in John Muir's heart, and was central to the founding of the Sierra Club. It is the most famous park in the country, and the most photographed.

In three years Yosemite went from homeland to vacationland, where visitors rarely thought of Indians as they sighed over waterfalls.

Those photographs of Yosemite portray, again and again, a sublime empty wilderness; early authors compare the place to the Garden of Eden, emphasizing its tranquil purity. None of the material prepared me for the picture Bunnell presents, of an old man held captive by a rope around his waist being told by the U.S. Army that his culture was going to be obliterated. In art, Yosemite always looks like a virgin bride, not somebody else's mother.

If this history of Yosemite begins anywhere, it begins with a contrary young adventurer named James D. Savage, who was born in Illinois in 1823, on what was then the white frontier. Named after his grandfather, who fought on both sides in the Revolutionary War, Savage would play a similarly equivocal role in the battles of his day. No solid account of him exists, only glimpses in dozens of memoirs of California at midcentury. Family legend has it that he was kidnapped by Indians as a child or ran away to join them as an adolescent; when he was 23 he joined a wagon train heading west—the wagon train that included the Donner Party, though he didn't join them on their unfortunate shortcut. He appears next in California, as a soldier under Fremont, helping to seize the territory from Mexico, and as a freelance looter raiding...
rancheros for the U.S. troops and for himself. He worked for John Sutter in the Sacramento Valley, rustled livestock, and was around when gold was discovered on the American River in 1848. Savage was one of the early miners who explored further, finding gold on the Tuolumne, the river that flows out of Hetch Hetchy Valley, and finding Indians to work his mines for him.

One pioneer ran into him at this time “under a brushwood tent … measuring and pouring gold dust into candle boxes by his side. Five hundred naked Indians … brought the dust to Savage, and in return for it received a bright piece of cloth or some beads.” Another explorer remembered that “Jim Savage was the absolute and despotic ruler over thousands of Indians, extending all the way from the Cosumnes to the Tejon Pass, and was by them designated in their Spanish vernacular El Rey Guero—the blond king. He called himself the Tulare King.”

Los Tulares was the Spanish name for what would later be called the San Joaquin Valley, and Savage achieved his sway over the tribes there through tricks—sleights of hand, electrical shocks—pretenses of supernatural power, and his gift for Indian languages. Contemporaries say he spoke several regional dialects, and he was often in demand as a translator.

Mono Lake Paiute in Yosemite Valley, circa 1899.

Some say he had five native wives, some seven, a few indicate that the number was near 30. “It is related of him,” writes the imperturbable historian Hubert Howe Bancroft, “that he made it a point to marry a chief’s daughter in every tribe: exchanged hardware and whisky by weight, ounce for ounce, with the Indians for gold dust, and bet his weight in gold on the turn of a card in a San Francisco gambling house.” By some estimates Savage was extracting $10,000 to $20,000 a day during his brief reign in the Sierra foothills. He moved from the Tuolumne to the Merced watershed, about ten miles downstream from Yosemite Valley (whose existence was still unsuspected by the gold miners), and established two trading posts on the banks of the River of Mercy. You might call Savage the mountain man as diversified corporation.

The whites derisively referred to the California Indians as “Diggers,” a name—still current in my elementary-school textbooks in the 1960s—supposedly descriptive of their root-gathering methods. Some of the Indians called the whites Gold Diggers, after their principal activity, as panning for gold quickly gave way to digging for it. In 1853 digging was abandoned for hydraulic mining, in which streams were diverted to hose entire hillsides away and wash the lighter materials from the gold. Afterward came chemical refinement of the ore with mercury, then chlorine gas and finally cyanide (which remains the method of choice in open-pit mines all over the West). By the 1860s rivers and streams had been dammed and diverted to mines, and whole hillsides of the Mother Lode and Nevada had been gouged into open sores.

The landscape the Forty-Niners thus transformed was fully inhabited. As anthropologist Theodora Kroeber wrote, “The conquerors wrested from its owners a land undespotted: no tool heavier than a woman’s wooden digging stick had broken the earth’s protecting crust.” The miners’ incursions displaced many foothill tribes, and the logging, sylting of streams, hunting, and grazing not only constituted the first wave of environmental damage, but devastated native food sources. During the Gold Rush, confrontations between Indians and whites were frequent and violent. Some whites believed extermination the only solution to the “Indian problem,” and harbored few inhibitions about killing native people. (The indigenous population of California declined by two-thirds during the Gold Rush era.)

A few foothill tribes took to rustling livestock as a solution to their food problems, and attacked some of the

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settlements in their territory. One such raid took place at Savage's Merced River trading post in the spring of 1850, and in December of that year another post was destroyed, its three employees killed. Savage's kingdom was falling apart. The chief of the Chowchillas had turned against him; his wives had begun to go back to their people; and several tribes were trying to kill him. Savage reported that an all-out war against the whites in the region was brewing. His Indian sources told him that the attacks on his posts had been launched by a fierce people they called the Yosemite; the Mariposa Battalion was organized largely to exterminate or relocate them. It was Savage's war, and the troops elected him head of the expedition: Major Savage.

Tenaya came out to meet the battalion near what is now El Portal, at the head of Yosemite Valley. Savage told him that if he did not bring his people out and sign a treaty, they would be utterly destroyed. A snowstorm came, and perhaps because of it Tenaya's people did not, so the battalion set off for the valley. Halfway between the main Merced River and its south fork they met Tenaya with 72 people—those, the chief said, who were willing to be relocated. Savage and part of the battalion pressed on into Yosemite Valley to get the rest. They got as far as El Capitan and, at dusk, made camp at the foot of Bridalveil Fall.

I spent quite a bit of time gazing at Bridalveil myself during my own exploration of Yosemite. We climbed up a vast boulder, and forgot the noisy children and the video cameras and even our impossible cookstove, rather as Bunnell was able to forget his military purpose when he saw Yosemite's marvels.

Bridalveil is one of the most surprising of Yosemite's waterfalls, shooting over an almost-smooth cliff rather than falling in a water-carved trench or a crevice. The rock face to either side of the falls is stained dark and glistens, and on those well-watered ledges grow ferns and other verdure. The spray swayed and billowed in the wind as though it were smoke or powder. Further down it became water again, cascading over the rocks and throbbing distantly, while the stream it fell into burbled gently below our boulder. Here the Mariposa Battalion had camped, John Muir had rhapsodized, and Carleton Watkins and Ansel Adams had set up their cameras. In spite of all that has happened here, Bridalveil looks today much as it does in the old photographs.
Thinking about natural history and human history is like looking at one of those trick drawings where a skull becomes a seated woman, a wineglass a pair of kissing profiles—it's hard to keep both images in focus at the same time. One doesn't usually write, "Washington crossed the Delaware, a south-flowing river whose animal populations include . . . . Yosemite has been defined in terms of geological time and natural wonders, making it easy to believe that the valley has no significant human history. But the has ever been since known and named. Every hill, every valley, creek, canyon, gulch, gully, draw, point, bluff, beach, bend, good-sized boulder, and tree of any character had its name, its place in the order of things."

Bridalveil Fall, under whose spray the Mariposa Battalion camped, had been called Pohono by the Miwok, meaning "a potent wind." At Bridalveil Fall that cold March night in 1851, the 50 or so men built a campfire and sat around it arguing about what to name the valley they had just marched into. Romantic and biblical names were brought forth: Paradise Valley was proposed by a man who cursed the Indians and their names. (The place was often compared to Paradise, and to Eden: A companion of the painter Albert Bierstadt wrote in 1863, "If report was true, we were going to the original site of the Garden of Eden." Bunnell himself idly remarked one day that the valley must have been a "veritable Indian paradise," and reports that Savage responded, "I remember well enough that Satan entered paradise and did all the mischief he could, but I intend to be a bigger devil in this Indian paradise than old Satan ever was;

After a while, tourism seems like the only natural response. And a tourist is a person who does not belong, a stranger in Paradise.

Miwok themselves burned the meadows of Yosemite to keep the brush and pines down, gathered its largesse and otherwise transformed the land, so there never was a wholly "natural" landscape there, unless you go back 3,500 or more years to before the valley's first human inhabitants—or unless you consider people part of nature.

The emptiness of the West—the uninhabitedness of what we call wilderness—was largely an illusion. The West wasn’t empty, it was emptied—literally by expeditions like the Mariposa Battalion, and figuratively by the sublime images of a virgin paradise created by so many painters, poets, and photographers. This not only means a crucial portion of our history has been obscured, but that our larger understanding of landscape has been skewed.

When people talk about environmental problems, they often resort to the terms “nature” and “culture,” as if describing two truly separate realms. Many people believe in something untouched called nature, and that only the untouched is natural. Yosemite is often presented as a nature preserve in which culture does not belong.

There’s a deep misanthropy contained in our nature/culture split—it suggests that only undisturbed nature is worth looking at, that every touch pollutes, as though huckleberrying and hydraulic mining were indistinguishable. When we look at wilderness and see it only as uninhabited, we forget the landscapes we depend on, where our food and water come from; we forget that we ourselves still live off the land. When the only scenes that are celebrated are framed as vacant of people, viewing becomes the sole permissible activity. After a while tourism seems like the natural response; the only landscapes that seem natural are those in which one does nothing but look. And a tourist is by definition a person who does not belong, a stranger in Paradise.

Ursula K. LeGuin, Theodora Kroeber’s daughter, wrote of California, "What the Whites perceived as a wilderness to be 'tamed' was in fact better known to human beings than it

and when I leave, I don’t intend to crawl out, either.”) Bunnell insisted that the valley have an Indian name, “that we give the valley the name of Yo-sem-i-ty, as it was suggestive, euphonious, and certainly American; that by so doing, the name of the tribe of Indians which we met leaving their homes in this valley, perhaps never to return, would be perpetuated.”

“Yo-sem-i-ty” won by a voice vote; then Bunnell went to ask Savage what the word meant. Savage, who spoke many neighboring dialects, said it meant “grizzly bear” and that the name was given to Tenaya’s band “because of their lawless and predatory character.” Savage’s translation is still almost universally accepted; it is the version on all the park signage. But Craig Bates, the Park Service’s chief ethnologist in Yosemite, talked to the old Miwok speakers in the region and came to a very different conclusion. It is true that usumatt is the Miwok word for grizzly bear, but Yosemite seems to be a version of another Miwok word, johonitech, which means “some among them are killers.” Some Among Them Are Killers National Park, a place named by those who knew not what they did.

It would be tidy if the killers in question were the whites, if they had unwittingly named the area after their own sins. In fact the Miwok term referred to the valley’s native inhabitants, who had intermarried with the Paiutes around Mono Lake; the Central Miwok generally feared and distrusted Paiutes, and the name reflects intertribal animosities. The people who lived there called the valley Ahwahnee, meaning “big mouth”—a reference to its shape—and called themselves the Ahwahnechee.

Yosemite’s untidy history continued. The Mariposa Battalion destroyed the acorn granaries and villages it found. Bunnell’s division caught three of Tenaya’s sons near a triple rock formation later named Three Brothers in honor of the coincidence, and then shot one of the brothers as he tried to escape. Tenaya and some of his people took refuge with the Mono Lake Paiutes for a while after they fled the uninhabitable reservation they had been sent to, and Tenaya is said to have been killed by some Paiutes in 1853 in a gambling dispute. The year before, Savage had been shot down by another white man in an argument over treatment of the Indians; Savage had taken the Indians’ side.

In 1855 the first tourist party arrived in Yosemite. It had taken a little over three years for Yosemite to go from

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indigenous homeland to military zone to vacation land, where visitors rarely thought of Indians as they gazed up at granite walls and sighed over waterfalls. The valley the early tourists saw was dominated by broad meadows and spreading oak trees, a landscape beautiful in romantic terms and conducive to deer-hunting and acorn-gathering, a landscape that had been maintained by the torches of its former inhabitants. Later in the 19th century overgrazing damaged the meadows; suppression of fires allowed incense cedars to encroach on the grassland and unusual amounts of flammable undergrowth to build up. (Fire suppression contributed to the intensity of some of the recent fires in the park.) Now the Park Service has returned to burning as an element of meadow maintenance. “With controlled fires,” read the signs, “the National Park Service is reintroducing a natural process,” leaving nicely ambiguous what is meant by “natural.”

“Soon after its discovery in 1851, Yosemite attracted artists, writers, photographers, and lovers of natural landscape,” reads the wall-text at the park’s Visitor Center. “Their interpretations of such scenic splendor helped awaken the public to its natural heritage. . . .” John Muir arrived in 1867 and ignored Yosemite’s remaining Miwok villages; when the great landscape photographer Eadweard Muybridge came to the valley in the 1870s, he took a lot of huge photographs of the land and a handful of stereoscope pictures of its people. In the 20th century, Ansel Adams carefully cropped out evidence of habitation to make his majestic, uninhabited landscape images, and argued that “people, buildings, and evidence of occupation and use will simply have to go out of Yosemite if it is to function as a great natural shrine.”

That first evening, when we’d been too late to stop at LaH Ténaya, we drove down into the valley and fell asleep under a spectacularly starry sky. Half Dome loomed over me when I stirred in the predawn, and when I woke up again, so did hundreds of cars and people. We made coffee on the hood of the car, ate bread with my wild-blackberry preserves, and set out to see Mirror Lake, the pond fed by the creek that flows from Lake Tenaya. The park was crowded. I found a plaque in front of the Curry Village Store that said the valley was first seen by Joseph Walker’s party in 1833 and “next seen and described . . . by a group of volunteers—the Mariposa Battalion—who had been sent deep into the Sierra foothills to dissuade the native Indians from their violent attacks. . . .”

Afterward, I went to the Indian Cultural Museum, whose story of a Native American homeland contradicts the Park Service’s version of Yosemite’s past, an alternate telling that has never been reconciled with the official history. The museum is a cluster of modest rooms full of baskets, ceremonially
garbed mannequins, photographs, and a diorama of native life.

Suddenly, to my shock, one of the figures moved: Among the glass cases and pedestals was a living woman seated on a platform, demonstrating traditional crafts. Here was the decorative past in the future that Bunnell had set in motion—a contemporary woman dressed in the clothes of another century, seated among statues.

It seemed time to get out of the valley, and so I went to what I suspected would be the quietest part of the park, Hetch Hetchy. If the human body is 70 percent water, mine after a decade in San Francisco contains a considerable proportion of Hetch Hetchy. I'd wanted to see this drowned valley at the other end of my faucets for years.

The road to Hetch Hetchy goes north through a burnt forest, along the rough, rocky, western face of the park. Toward the end it turns east; far away and tiny, you can see two waterfalls and the face of the dam dividing a whole world in two. One side is almost level with the tranquil reservoir; on the other, hundreds of feet below, an angry jet of water spurts out sideways. Vehicles can only go as far as the edge of O'Shaughnessy Dam; thereafter Hetch Hetchy is accessible only on foot. In Yosemite, you walk on the valley floor; in Hetch Hetchy you walk on a broad path carved out of the valley's side. There was something as terrifying about the idea of an entire landscape drowned beneath the still, opaque blue waters of that lake as there had been in seeing a living woman on display in a museum: Both of them were evidence of something grievously lost.

What remains of Hetch Hetchy is more richly carpeted in flowers than Yosemite Valley, and infinitely quieter. (Indeed, the San Francisco Water and Power Department argues that its dam saved Hetch Hetchy from excessive tourism.) John Muir considered it more beautiful than the other valley; he called them the Tuolumne Yosemite and the Merced Yosemite (Tuolumne is the name of a local tribe), and he died still fighting to save the Tuolumne from the dam.

Snowmelt was near its peak when I was there, and the waterfalls were glorious. The first was a slender, graceful plume that fell hundreds of feet and broke into rivulets that ran down a broad swath of smooth stone, forming pools and watering a wild garden of mosses and flowers. I heard the second before I saw it. As I came around a bend in the trail, the air filled with a thunderous roar, and I turned to see a rainbow that leapt from a torrent of whitewater to the lake below: A wooden footbridge led across the waterfall, but the spray was so thick that I walked through its gentler edges. The temperature dropped. Water streamed across the vibrating bridge, and the roiling water below was clearly dangerous. As I walked across the bridge, the spray soaked my clothes and obscured my vision completely: All I could see was the full-circle rainbow the cascade made in front of me, like a halo around a secret.
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ON MY FIRST VISIT TO Yosemite, under the influence of Bunnell, I believed that I had discovered a tragedy of extermination. But that was before I learned that the last Ahwahneechee from Tenaya’s band, his own granddaughter, had died in 1931. I went back to Yosemite to use its research library, and to talk to ethnologist Bates. This time, yet another picture of Yosemite’s human history emerged, neither an extermination nor a rout, but a slow squeeze that is only now reaching completion.

After the Mariposa expedition, government men came and made a treaty with some tribes in the area, but Congress never ratified any treaties with California Indians, and the documents were lost or suppressed until the early 20th century. In the 1890s, a “Petition to Congress on Behalf of the Yosemite Indians” was written by a sympathizer with an elevated style:

“... when the long list of oppressions and outrages to which our fathers were forced to submit at the hands of the whites had long ended by the slaughter and dispersal of our tribes, no notice was taken of the few who remained, and who from then until now have continued to travel to and fro, poorly-clad paupers and unwelcome guests, silently the objects of curiosity or contemptuous pity to the throngs of strangers who yearly gather in this our own land and heritage. We are compelled to daily and hourly witness the further and continual encroachments of a few white men in this our valley. The gradual destruction of its trees, the occupancy of every foot of its territory by bands of grazing horses and cattle, the decimation of the fish in the river, the destruction of every means of support for ourselves and families by the rapacious acts of the whites, in the building of their hotels and stage lines, which must shortly result in the total exclusion of the remaining remnants of our tribes from this our beloved valley, which has been ours from time beyond our faintest traditions, and which we still claim.”

The petition finally suggested that since the valley would never be re-
turned to its original inhabitants, they would consider a million dollars as payment for their title. Nothing came of this proposal. In 1929 the U.S. government finally decided to pay for the land it had stolen, at the rate of $1.25 per acre, minus all appropriations of goods made for all California Indians since 1848. The value of the land was set at $17 million, the value of the appropriations at $12 million, and a judgment of $5 million was awarded. By 1950, disbursements of $150 to each individual had been issued, and a few similar sums were handed out until the 1970s, when the government satisfied itself that it had bought California fair and square from its first peoples.

Until the 1960s, Ahwahneechees and other indigenous people lived on the margins of Yosemite, working for the hotels and the Park Service. Some of them performed for tourists, and the Park Service organized various entertainments out of native ceremonies and crafts. In 1929 the village most of these people had been living in was judged an eyesore and burned down, and some of the inhabitants who could prove their lineage were given new cabins to live in, at a site near where a gas station is now. By 1969 most of those people had died or left, and the second Indian village was burned for firefighting practice.

The eviction that began in 1851 is almost finished, and what the U.S. Army hadn’t been able to accomplish, tourism and the Park Service have. Books and museums tend to place native peoples in the scaled-up past, right after geology and biology, so that they become a first people whose story is disconnected when other stories begin: The implication is that they simply disappeared. In Yosemite they were made invisible before they were exiled; the former made the latter go more smoothly.

I met one man who was born and raised in the valley, as were his father, grandmother, and—in the 1830s, 20 years before the whites came—his great-grandmother. The last original inhabitant of the valley, he had managed to stay on in Yosemite by becoming a grocer, a job he holds in reserve in a Yosemite hotel.

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I finally got to Lake Tenaya on a warm day in August. The water was marvelously clear. Dead trees and fallen limbs were bleached to the same pale gray as the rocks. At the far end of the lake was a bulge of solid stone like a vast forehead, and much of the surrounding landscape was of the same curving, glacier-carved granite.

I stood as far from traffic as I could get on a lake along a road, and looked. The light made skeins of golden lines slip over the lake floor, and rounded boulders rose out of the water or hovered just below its surface. The water was so shallow and the lake inclined so gradually that I would have to walk far from shore before the water became deep enough to swim in. In the gravelly shallows, eddies of fool's gold rose around me at every step. As the waves lapped at my legs. I tried to picture Tenaya and Bunnell standing there on a cold May morning 140 years before, and I wondered which shining rocks had moved the Ahwahneechee to name the lake Py-we-ak.

REBECCA SOLNIT is a writer and art historian in San Francisco.

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