

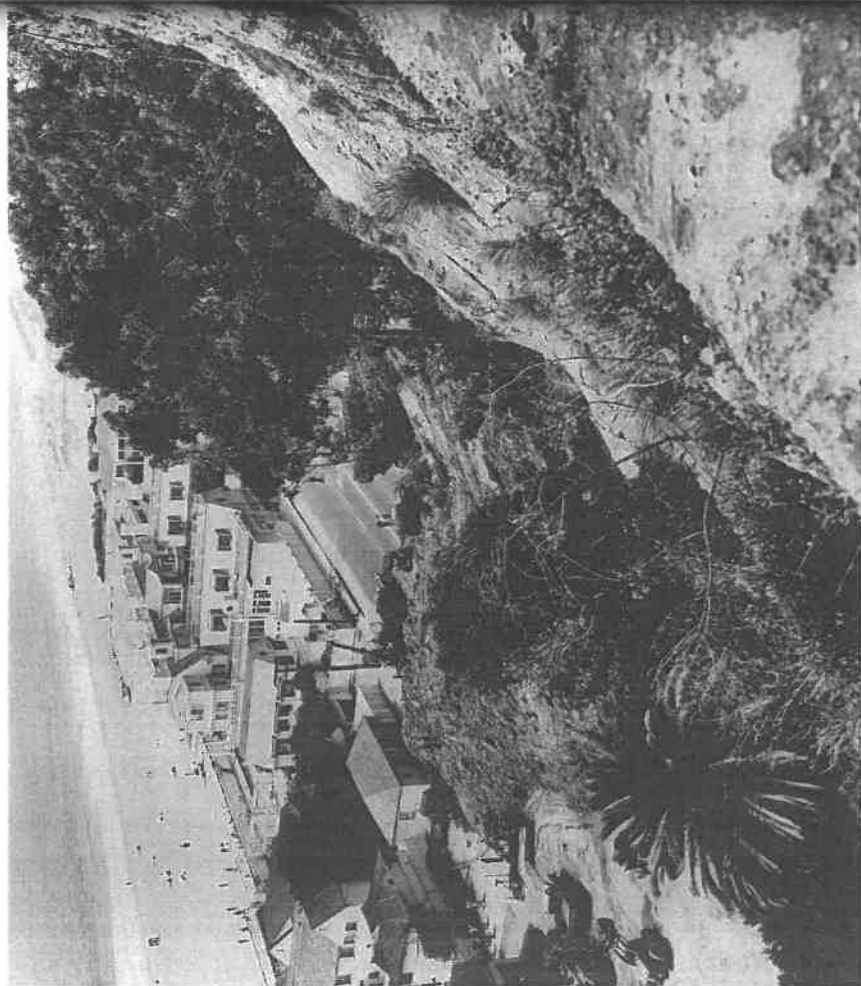
IMAGINING LOS ANGELES

A City in Fiction

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Landslide on the Pacific Coast Highway at Pacific Palisades, 1956.

5

DOWN THESE MEAN STREETS

The Tough-Guy Detective Story

Down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. The detective . . . must be such a man. He is the hero, he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be, to use a weathered phrase, a man of honor, by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it. He must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world. . . . He is a lonely man and his pride is that you will treat him as a proud man or be very sorry you ever saw him.

RAYMOND CHANDLER, "THE SIMPLE ART OF MURDER"

The wish-fulfillment fantasy that fuels the mystery-detective genre is the wish to penetrate façades, to know secrets forbidden to ordinary mortals, and the "private eye" takes us to such places and describes what he/we see in such ways that the "seeing" is both information and sensation.

JOYCE CAROL OATES, *LOS ANGELES TIMES BOOK REVIEW* (OCCASIONED BY THE PUBLICATION OF THE WORKS OF RAYMOND CHANDLER IN THE LIBRARY OF AMERICA SERIES)



The tough-guy detective came to California in the 1920s. He came as the violent private eye who worked both sides of the street in *Black Mask* stories of writers like Raoul Whitfield and Carroll John Daly, as the Continental Op in Dashiell Hammett's early fiction, and as Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon*. He has real-life local antecedents in detectives like William Burns, who worked the 1910 *Los Angeles Times* bombing, and Harry Raymond, whose investigation of municipal corruption led to his near-assassination by a car bomb in 1938. It was Raymond Chandler, though — himself a *Black Mask* story writer — who established Los Angeles as the permanent home of the tough-guy detective in seven Philip Marlowe novels from *The Big Sleep* in 1939 to *Playback* in 1958.¹ Ross Macdonald followed, midway in Chandler's career, with his first Southern California detective novel in 1947. Two years later in *The Moving Target* Macdonald established Lew Archer as the Marlowe-derived California private eye who would be the hero of nineteen novels written over the next three decades. And in the most recent two decades the genre has spun off a number of new, and new age, versions of the Southern California private eye. Among them are Roger Simon's Jewish ex-hippie, Moses Wine; Joseph Hansen's gay detective, Dave Brandstetter; women sleuths like Sue Grafton's Kinsey Millhone, Wendy Hornsby's Maggie Macgowen, and Jan Burke's Irene Kelly; and African-American detectives like Car Anthony Haywood's Aaron Gunner, Gary Phillips's Ivan Monk, and Walter Mosley's Easy Rawlins. With Joseph Wambaugh as a literary model, James Ellroy and Michael Connelly have brought back the Los Angeles police detective story, with its good cop/bad cop dichotomy, grisly murders, and high-tech forensics.

Although there is no inherent reason that the tough-guy detective story should have retained such vigor and staying power in Los Angeles, there are compelling causes. Detective fiction, for one thing, is essentially an urban form, dependent, as Edgar Allan Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle have shown, on a dense social matrix — on crowds, strangers, and anonymity. There are exceptions, of course — the village and country estate settings of Agatha Christie and in contemporary America the small-town Montana of James Crumley and the Navajo reservation of Tony Hillerman among them — but most prac-

titioners of modern detective fiction have appropriated the large city: London, Amsterdam, New York, and Chicago. Most conspicuously in twentieth-century America, that city has been Los Angeles, the sprawling up-for-grabs city lying at the end of the frontier.

Los Angeles was, in the 1930s, a big city layered on a Wild West frontier town. Its booster legacy encouraged a get-rich-quick mentality that even the depression didn't shake. And supporting its ambitions was a corrupt municipal government. Under Mayor Frank Shaw and his henchmen, notably Police Chief James Davis and Lieutenant Earl Kynette, the city supported, and colluded with, a vast network of underground activities. Everything was for sale, from phony petroleum stocks (the Julian oil stock fiasco was recent memory in the thirties) to police protection of rackets. Scandals rocked the biggest local industries—oil and movies—and gangsters who migrated west controlled gambling, drugs, and prostitution. Headlined warfare between reformers like Clifford Clinton and the mob and between state attorney general Earl Warren and Tony Comero Stralla's offshore gambling ships turned a national spotlight on local crime, graft, and racketeering. Since the 1920s pulp magazines like *Black Mask* and *True Detective* had been creating an urban mythology of gangsters and detectives. Increasingly, these magazine stories found their way to the West Coast city—San Francisco and then Los Angeles. When Chandler made Los Angeles the locale of his fiction, he was stepping into a city that had already established itself in myth and literature as America's new Babylon.

Moreover, as a decentralized built landscape stretched across a vast basin and inhabited by a largely migrant population, Los Angeles could offer the detective novelist a seemingly unlimited range of physical and human geography. Frank McShane, who has written the most authoritative biography of Chandler, explains the concomitance of Los Angeles and detective fiction.

There is something appropriate in Chandler's choosing the detective story as his vehicle for presenting Los Angeles. . . .

The detective story, so peculiar to the modern city, can involve an extraordinary range of humanity, from the very rich to the very poor, and can encompass a great many different places. Most of Chandler's contemporaries who

wrote "straight" fiction—Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Faulkner, for example—confined themselves to a special setting and a limited cast of characters. The detective story, however, allowed Chandler to create the whole of Los Angeles in much the same way that such nineteenth-century novelists as Dickens and Balzac created London and Paris for future generations.²

One line of descent to Los Angeles detective fiction leads from the traditional, or "classical," detective story invented by an American a century earlier, Edgar Allan Poe, and carried into the twentieth century by British practitioners like Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, and Dorothy Sayers. The classic detective story posits an essentially rational and orderly society; crime is an aberration, usually the act of a single deranged person. The detective, using powers of logic and observation beyond the reader's scope, solves the crime the way an intricate puzzle is solved. (And then, conventionally, he gathers all the suspects in a room, reconstructing the crime, establishing the motive, and pointing the finger at the guilty one.)

By contrast, in the brand of detective fiction pioneered by Hammett and the *Black Mask* writers, and anchored in Los Angeles by Chandler, crime is not just an aberrant act—a murder in the vicarage or country estate—but a pervasive feature on the urban landscape, a network that crosses neighborhood, class, and racial divisions. The city itself is corrupt, and the private detective is not there as meliorist assuring readers that society (thanks to him or her) is correctable and essentially sound but as a social critic, a proletarian hero (to Chandler, a knight) battling forces of urban corruption rooted in the rich and powerful. No longer the rational problem-solver, the detective is the street-wise, hard-hitting tough guy who digs for answers in the urban muck, mixes it up with people of all classes from the criminal rich to the exploited poor, gets beaten, drugged, and shot at for his trouble, and often comes away without really "solving" anything. For Chandler, who likened the solution to the crime to the olive in the martini and noted that a good detective story is one that can be read for pleasure even if the last chapter has been torn out, the city itself was always more interesting and book-worthy than the solution to the puzzle or the apprehension of the perpetrator of the crime.

Seen from the historical perspective of American fiction, folklore, and film, the tough-guy detective is not so much a new hero type as an urban recasting of the traditional Western American hero as outsider and individualist. With the end of the frontier and the growth of cities, particularly after World War I, the frontier hero migrated to the city, entering it not as society's representative, the man inside, but as the man standing outside. He lives in the city but maintains his independence from its sources of power, relying instead for his validation on his own instinctive sense of justice and morality. He belongs neither to the police nor to the criminals, neither wholly to his clients nor to those who prey on them. (The "he," it should be added, could be a "she" in some recent detective fiction.) With Chandler, the solitary western hero found a permanent home in America's fastest-growing city.

Frederic Jameson has written suggestively about the linkage between Los Angeles and the kind of detective fiction Chandler wrote. Los Angeles in the years between the wars, he noted, "is already a microcosm and forecast of the country as a whole, a new centerless city in which the various classes have lost touch with each other because each is isolated in his own geographic compartment." Since there can be no "privileged experience" to take in the entire city, he goes on, a "figure must be created who can be superimposed on the society as a whole . . . to tie its separate and isolated parts together."³ That figure, Marlowe, the first motorized private eye in the most thoroughly motorized city in America, is analogous to the picaresque hero who moves from one place to another, linking neighborhoods, characters, and episodes together. In a mobile city Marlowe moves with the kind of fluidity encouraged by the city's network of roads and highways into every enclave. (By way of coincidence, the first, and only, pre-war freeway, the Arroyo Seco, was laid out in 1939, the year Chandler's first novel, *The Big Sleep*, appeared.)

II

Chandler, who arrived in Los Angeles in 1912, knew the vast reaches of the city as it extended itself across the basin. Marlowe's beat stretches from the affluent coastal cities like "Bay City" (Santa Monica), the most thoroughly corrupt enclave in Chandler's geography, to the hills

and canyons of the Santa Monica Mountains laced with the temples of sham spiritualists and the fortresslike houses of the criminal rich, and to the inland regions—the derelict inner-city neighborhoods harboring the city's large underclass. His beat extends north to Pasadena, home to old money, and to the gated, suburban San Fernando Valley communities of the new rich like "Idle Valley." Beyond the basin Marlowe races as far as Big Bear Lake in the San Bernardino Mountains to find the "Lady in the Lake" (in the novel that bears that title). Characteristically, though, his territory is closer to the city's commercial center—to the shabby office buildings in Hollywood, along Wilshire Boulevard, or downtown, places where medical quacks hang their shingles, "mail order mechanics with a license to cut corns or jump up and down on your spine . . . [where] a well-heeled patient with incipient DTs could be money from home to plenty of old geezers who have fallen behind in the vitamin and antibiotic trade."⁴

Chandler, like almost everyone else in early-twentieth-century Los Angeles, was a migrant. He was born in Chicago in 1888. When his father, an alcoholic and womanizer, deserted the family in 1897, his mother took him to England where they lived as poor relations with his mother's sister. With some financial backing from his uncle, he attended public school in Upper Norwood and then Dulwich College from which he graduated at seventeen. He traveled for a time in Europe, then worked for a time as a newspaper reporter and wrote poetry. He returned to America in 1912 and with the encouragement of a couple he met on the ship went to Los Angeles where he got work with an independent oil company, first as an auditor and later as a vice president in charge of acquisitions. He lived with his mother in Los Angeles and shortly after her death in 1924 married Cissy Pascal, a woman eighteen years older than he. Lively and attractive when they married, Cissy became a semi-invalid late in her life. She died in 1954, five years before Chandler's death. Chandler, then living in La Jolla (north of San Diego), fell into a deep depression, attempting suicide at least once.

Biographical and psychoanalytical critics have had a field day with his marriage to Cissy, commenting on the Oedipal bond, his mother complex, and a need both to take care of and be taken care of by older women. Conversely, they cite the misogynistic portraiture of women in the fiction as evil, threatening, wholly deceptive figures.

The negative depiction of women, though, would seem to derive more from traditional American literary stereotyping than from biographical sources: women, conventionally, were offered up by male writers as either sexual temptresses or domesticating agents (or both); either way they spelled trouble for the male. Whatever the source of Chandler's representation of women, McShane stresses the strong, caring bond between the Chandlers and the fact that Cissy was a vivacious woman before her illness.

In 1932, in what now has to be seen as a break for Los Angeles, and American, literature, Chandler was fired from the Dabney Oil Company, owing to his heavy drinking and frequent absences. Almost immediately he began publishing stories in *Black Mask*, learning his craft by imitating the plots of the stories in the magazine. His first story, "Blackmailers Don't Shoot," came out in 1933, and in the next five years he published sixteen stories, apprentice work for the novel he was to begin in 1938, *The Big Sleep*. The stories not only served as warm-up exercises for the novels, but provided their plot lines. In a practice he called "cannibalizing," he recycled plots from his stories into the novels. Often several different stories found their way into a single novel. The attempt to integrate multiple plot strands led to some byzantine and almost incomprehensible story lines. Howard Hawks, the now-familiar story goes, when working on the 1946 screen adaptation of *The Big Sleep* (assisted by a William Faulkner script), wired Chandler to ask who killed Owen Taylor (the chauffeur whose car was run off the Santa Monica pier); Chandler replied that he didn't know. Careful plotting, the kind one finds in Ross Macdonald, was not Chandler's strong suit, a point Chandler himself acknowledged many times.

Readers disagree (as they do about most good writers) about what is his best work. The strongest contenders are *The Big Sleep*, *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940), and *The Long Goodbye* (1953)—his first two novels and one published near the end of his career. As confusing as it is in its details, *The Big Sleep* offers an accessible path to an understanding of the version of the California story Chandler was to tell in all his novels. At the opening of the novel Marlowe is summoned to the hilltop mansion of General Guy Sternwood, to protect the family from blackmail threats engendered by the reckless acts of his younger daughter, Carmen. What Marlowe finds out, though, in the novel's final revelation, is that Carmen's real crime, the secret and "primal"

crime—and the real reason for the blackmail—is neither gambling debts nor the nude photos she had posed for but her murder of Rusty Regan, an Irish roughneck and young friend of the general, who had spurned her sexual advances. Carmen has killed Regan, long before the novel begins, in the oil field that lies below the Sternwood mansion. The corpse in the oil field is the family secret (secret even to Guy Sternwood) that must be discovered, the crime lying hidden in history and buried deep in the landscape. As in all of Chandler's fiction, the plot moves in two directions at once: forward in time to the discovery of clues and backward in time to the discovery of the original crime, hidden in past time (a narrative structure Macdonald employs with more psychological complexity). Marlowe discovers the buried truth by having Carmen reenact, with him as intended victim, the original crime on the same landscape, the oil field, and for the same motive—this time, though, with blanks in Carmen's gun.

Marlowe's role, as the man who uncovers secrets, is analogous to that of the blackmailer, who knows secrets and turns that knowledge into power to extort money. The role of blackmailer is played in the novel by Eddy Mars, a racketeer who runs a gambling den that serves as a front for his other enterprises, extortion among them. Unlike the blackmailer, though, Marlowe doesn't use his knowledge for power over others; his power derives from his independence from others, his refusal to be bought or to sell anything, a refusal that extends to sleeping with women involved in the case (he evicts a naked Carmen from his bed, angrily ripping out the sheets, and remains chaste until *The Long Goodbye*) or to taking more than his fee of \$25 a day and expenses (raised to \$40 in the later novels).

Tough and independent, Marlowe is also a contemplative man who likes to work out chess puzzles in his apartment and who has a penchant for reflecting on the world around him. He has a nostalgic side, too, a hankering for the older, simpler city of the booster era. "I used to like this town," he reflects in *The Little Sister* (1949):

A long time ago. There were trees along Wilshire Boulevard. Beverly Hills was a country town. Westwood was bare hills and lots offering at eleven hundred dollars and no takers. Hollywood was a bunch of frame houses on the interurban line. Los Angeles was just a big dry sunny place with ugly homes and no style, but goodhearted and peaceful. It had

the climate they just yap about now. People used to sleep out on porches. Little groups who thought they were intellectual used to call it the Athens of America. It wasn't that, but it wasn't a neon-lighted slum either.⁵

With an eye to the growth and changes the city underwent from the time of his arrival in 1912, Chandler invests its physical and architectural landscape with symbolic and moral meaning. In Chandler's geography the corrupt and criminal rich have moved high up into the hills, into large, pretentious houses (done up in a variety of historical, most often Mediterranean, styles) surrounded by high walls that isolate and insulate them from the consequences of crimes they have committed on the flatland below. General Sternwood, not a criminal himself, has nonetheless made millions exploiting the city's oil reserves and then moved up to the high ground, above the site and source of his wealth. In Chandler's next novel, *Farewell, My Lovely*, this kind of geographic relocation recurs. Velma Valenti, torch singer and gangsters' moll, has committed a crime, framed a man for it, married a rich man, moved up into the hills, and taken a new name (Helen Grayle) and identity (wife of a respectable judge), barricading herself in "one of those great silent estates with twelve-foot walls and wrought iron gates and ornamental hedges."⁶

Such movement is consistent with the demographics of the city. In the sprawling landscape of Los Angeles, as commentators from Carey McWilliams to Frederic Jameson have pointed out, status and respectability are achieved not by movement to a higher floor in the same apartment building, as, say, in Paris, or even by movement to a better house or better street in the same neighborhood, but by movement to a different neighborhood. In Los Angeles this usually means one on higher ground. McWilliams put it this way in 1946:

The heights of the town are occupied by the extremely wealthy, between the heights and the lowlands live the well-to-do townspeople, below the middle-class townspeople are the lower middle-class residents, and still farther down the slope, and across the tracks, are the Negro domestics and the Mexican field workers.⁷

Just as James M. Cain's Mildred Pierce sought to erase her past and attain a new identity by moving from middle-class Glendale to the higher ground of Pasadena, Chandler's upwardly mobile migrant families seek the abrogation of past time, and past acts, by movement to the high ground.

To move up the hill in Chandler's fiction is to move away from the scene of the crime. Living in the hills is living with a "prospect," which taken literally means living with a *view*, and metaphorically with a *future*. In Chandler's world both the view and the future are purchased by the gains of brutal acts committed in the past. The job of Marlowe, as detective, is to drag the criminal rich *down* to the flatland, carry them *back* to their histories, their crimes. He destroys their view, their prospects, and anonymity. He makes them remember past acts, sometimes, as in *The Big Sleep*, by forcing them to reenact those events. Marlowe's task is to cure them of their amnesia. This is what makes Chandler's novels so distinctly Californian: in the land dedicated to the proposition of the fresh start, the detective is there as a reminder that history is inescapable. One carries one's past into the present, and however successful one is in burying that past for a time, it resurfaces. There are always blackmailers and detectives.

The case is clearest in *The Big Sleep*. Near the beginning of the novel Marlowe, having just penetrated, room by room, the pseudomedieval trappings of the Sternwood mansion, and having interviewed the general and encountered his two daughters, looks out and down from the patio to the oil fields below that have made Sternwood his millions:

On this lower level faint and far off I could just barely see some of the old wooden derricks of the oilfield from which the Sternwoods had made their money. Most of the field was public park now, cleaned up and donated to the city by General Sternwood. But a little of it was still producing in groups of wells pumping five or six barrels a day. The Sternwoods, having moved up the hill, could no longer smell the sump water or the oil, but they could still look out of their front windows and see what made them rich. If they wanted to. I don't suppose they would want to.⁸

To look out is to enjoy a prospect, a rustic mountain view; to look back down the hill is to see the past, to see where one has come from. Beneath the house are the covered-over wounds of the oil derricks and the site of the murder. Although ignorant of that murder, Sternwood has made deep gouges in the city's bedrock and fathered, late in his life, two reckless daughters—"the moral consequences," Richard Lehan has written, "of a state of mind founded on commercial exploitation, the movement from the desire to control the land to the desire to control other people."⁹

When Marlowe interviews Sternwood in the first chapter, the old man is sitting in a wheelchair wrapped in a faded robe and blanket in his greenhouse, existing like "a new-born spider." The air is "thick, wet, steamy, and larded with the cloying smell of orchids in bloom." The flowers that surround him have "nasty meaty leaves and stalks like the newly washed fingers of dead men." (5) The image is an example of one of Chandler's trademarks, the ironic simile in which things are like other things in revealing and surprising ways. Such similes, often tossed off as wisecracks, are always suggestive, carrying hints of truths that lie beneath the surface. The hothouse flowers, personified this way, evoke not life and growth but death and decay: the "newly washed fingers of dead men" suggest the living death of Sternwood himself and the corpse beneath the house as well.

Throughout Chandler's fiction surfaces are simultaneously deceptive and revealing. Marlowe discovers truth by both observing and penetrating exteriors, looking at and beneath surfaces. Nothing is what it looks like at first, and people are not who they appear to be. The pervasive performative behavior found in Hollywood fiction runs through the crime fiction of Chandler, as well as his followers, providing the strongest link between the two dominant genres in Los Angeles fiction. In *The Big Sleep* the blackmail attempt is not about gambling debts or nude photos but murder; the rare book dealer Arthur Geiger runs a pornographic lending library; and the flirtatious ingenue is a dope addict and killer. In the other novels as well role-playing preempts reality: the wife of the judge in *Farewell, My Lovely* is a killer, the little sister from Kansas in *The Little Sister* (1949) is a swindler, the corpse rising from the water in *Lady of the Lake* (1943) is not who she is supposed to be, and the respectable widow in *The High Window* (1942) has eased her husband out of that window. Doc-

tors, more often than not, are "barred window boys" operating dope-dispensing hideaways fronting as "clinics" (one would have to go back to Hawthorne to find a more cynical appraisal of doctors). The police, more often than not, are on the take. Lawyers are usually crooked and incompetent, the kind, Marlowe says, you hope the other guy has. And spiritualists (who label themselves "psychic consultants") are in business to bilk rich, bored, frustrated housewives.

Chandler consistently underscores the rampant deception and masquerade by using architectural details emblematically. "Dope doctors" like Sonderberg in *Farewell, My Lovely*, Almore in *The Lady in the Lake*, Lagardie in *The Little Sister*, and Verringer in *The Long Goodbye* cater to alcoholics, drug addicts, and criminals on the lam in establishments disguised as ranches and country estates. Their job is to make sure that those who want to get lost stay lost. The sham spiritualist Jules Amthor in *Farewell, My Lovely* consults his rich clients in a mountaintop aerie with rooms designed, like the Gothic out-of-time-and-space rooms of Edgar Allan Poe, to obliterate any sense of ordered space. The elaborate houses of the rich, though, are Chandler's most compelling images of deception and disguise, architectural façades behind which criminals live as if past acts were of no consequence. The Grayle house in *Farewell, My Lovely* is Chandler's consummate image of the monumental, impenetrable, and wholly counterfeit fortress. Inside the high walls is a garden with stone benches, crouching griffins, a pool with water lilies and a stone bullfrog, a sun dial against a wall designed to look like a ruin, and "a special brand of sunshine, put up in noise-proof containers just for the upper classes." (101) Here, and throughout Chandler's fiction, description fuses objective detail with subjective reaction; through Marlowe's eyes we know both *what*, in a literal sense, a place looks like and *how*, usually in the form of a wisecrack, Marlowe responds to it. The response to place is a response to the people who inhabit that place.

Inside the pretentious, counterfeit Grayle house, down a long corridor, Marlowe finds himself in front of a French window that reveals a patch of blue and remembers with a sense of shock that he is at the border of the Pacific. The vast emptiness of the ocean stands in violent opposition to the man-made dream castles perched at its edge. The proximity of the ocean beyond and beneath the house is the reminder that one has reached the end of the line: there is nowhere

else to go, nowhere else to hide. As in the fiction of James M. Cain and Horace McCoy, the ocean is the place where the dream runs out and history catches up. In dragging criminals from their mountain-top or beachfront sanctuaries, Marlowe forces them to confront their pasts and acknowledge what all California migrants must acknowledge: that history may be side-stepped for a while but never escaped.

III

"It makes me wonder if certain things aren't fated. Do you think they are?"

"Of course. By the place and the time and the family you're born into. Those are the things that fate most people."

ROSS MACDONALD, *THE BLUE HAMMER*

Ross Macdonald, Chandler's heir to the Southern California detective story, acknowledged that while he derived his detective hero's name, Lew Archer, from Sam Spade's partner (murdered in *The Maltese Falcon*), his detective's character is modeled on Marlowe. The resemblance is more apparent in the earlier novels when Macdonald was most clearly under Chandler's influence. By 1959, beginning with *The Galton Case*, Archer becomes less angry, less bitter, less tough. He emerges as a man more sympathetic with those he works for and with, more emotionally involved with them, more painfully implicated in their lives. The mature Archer seeks reconciliation and restoration more than the punishment of guilt.

Archer's own past difficulties have conditioned his responses, prompting pity more often than demands for punishment. Scattered through the Archer novels are bits and pieces of the detective's personal history. We know more about him than we do about Marlowe. We know he was born in Long Beach in 1914, attended high school in Oakland, belonged to youth gangs and got in trouble with the law, served in Army Intelligence in World War II, joined and then quit (or was fired from) the Long Beach Police, and went through a painful divorce. He is thirty-five in the first Archer novel, *The Moving Target* (1949), and approaching sixty in the late works. He lives and works in Santa Teresa (Santa Barbara, one hundred miles up the coast from Los Angeles) and, unlike Marlowe, has a good working relationship

with local police detectives, who can be both honest and smart. He cooperates with the police and takes advantage of modern law enforcement methods and technology.

Crime in Macdonald's enactment of the California story is not ordinarily rooted in gangland activity and racketeering but in family histories. Characteristically, the detective is hired (sometimes by someone he knows) to find a missing person or recover a stolen object. The search carries Archer into the past. Present problems are the consequence of acts committed in the past—acts motivated by greed, egoism, jealousy, love, or hate that may have occurred a generation or more earlier. The past acts are hauntings, ghosts in the family attic. Archer discovers the original crime, brings past acts into the present, links one generation to another. To some degree Macdonald is reworking the Chandler story told in *The Big Sleep*, but he invests his tales with deeper psychological insight. The children, the sons and daughters in the present generation, bear the sins of their forebears, suffer the trauma of historical violence. Archer sees his role as analogous to that of a psychotherapist; though haunted by his own past, he seeks truth by discovering the secrets of others. He reflects on his task in *The Blue Hammer* (1976):

Take a look at your own life, Archer. . . . My chosen study was other men, hunted men in hunted rooms, aging boys clutching at manhood before night fell and they grew suddenly old. If you were a therapist, how could you need therapy? If you were the hunter, you couldn't be hunted, or could you?¹⁰

As in Chandler's fiction, the California myth of new beginnings, with its corollary of the irrelevance of history, is undercut by the detective's revelation that past acts give rise to contemporary disturbances. Moving through a labyrinth of mistaken and assumed identities, he finds historical truth by distinguishing the real from the counterfeit. The assumption of a new name, a new home, or a new neighborhood fails to insulate people from history. Macdonald in the Archer novels doesn't invent a new story or a new genre but extends beyond Chandler the bitemporal California story, realizing its full potential in the family crime narrative.

Macdonald's work reflects not only the influence of Chandler but also his own academic training in literature and psychology—graduate work at the University of Michigan culminating in a doctoral dissertation on the psychological criticism of Coleridge's work. His interest in Freudian psychology, vogueish in the post-World War II years, derives from personal sources, too: his own sense of doubleness and exile. Like Chandler, he was American-born but raised in another country, the consequence of a father's abandonment. He was born Kenneth Millar in Los Gatos, California (near San Jose), in 1915 but was brought up, after his parents' divorce, in Canada (first in Alberta, then Ontario). The parallels with Chandler's early life are striking: the boy, suffering the father's abandonment, grows up in poverty in another country, dependent on the support of the mother's family. Moved from place to place, raised essentially by women, he grows up feeling the loss of both father and home. Macdonald, aware of the parallels with Chandler's childhood, identified with the sense of exile in the older author, noting in *The Writer as Detective Hero* that "[it] is Marlowe's doubleness that makes him interesting: the hard-boiled mask half concealing Chandler's poetic and satiric mind. Part of our pleasure derives from the interplay between the mind of Chandler and the voice of Marlowe."¹¹ He saw this doubleness, a migrant quality, as informing his own work. In a foreword to a three-novel compilation of his novels, *Archer in Hollywood*, he writes that his hero, like Chandler's, has "the fresh suspicious eye of a semi-outsider, who is fascinated but not completely taken in by the customs of the natives."¹²

The "natives" on whom Macdonald casts his suspicious eye are themselves wealthy California migrants, men and women who have made their fortunes in other places—sometimes in the flatland below their hilltop houses, sometimes in other states. They have moved up into the hills above Santa Teresa in stratified communities, insulated by walls and mountain terrain, close to but segregated from the Mexican field hands and working-class whites below, who have made the hill dwellers' affluence possible. In the first Archer novel, *The Moving Target*, the drifting haze in the mountains and canyons is like "thin smoke from slowly burning money."¹³ Archer in this novel is hired to find a missing alcoholic oil man named Sampson who has disappeared after getting off his private plane in Los Angeles. The

source of family troubles, though, goes back in time before the kidnapping. The trauma lies in family history: the wartime death of a son. It lies, directly or indirectly, behind the whole chain of events in the novel: alcoholism and adultery, the hatred between husband and wife, the alienation of children, the drifting into occultism, then the kidnapping itself, and ultimately the killing of Sampson by the family lawyer. Everything leads back in time, has antecedents.

The search for the missing father, for paternity, is in some of the novels fused with, or transformed into, the search for the missing son—or grandson. In *The Galton Case*, Macdonald's favorite of his books, the search touches three generations: an old, wealthy Santa Teresa widow hires Archer to find her missing grandson, her only heir. Her son, the boy's father, ran off with a woman twenty-three years earlier and is presumed dead. In the present his decapitated skeleton is uncovered and identified; he was murdered by a man who then took on, as protective mask, the role of the boy's father, marrying the mother. The young John Galton, victim of the false father, becomes avenger of the real father and in the end returns to reestablish his place in the original family. Disappearance and reappearance, exile and return, are themes that recur in Macdonald's novels, themes that may well have their sources in the author's own childhood exile. Seeking historical truth, Archer moves through a web of true and false fathers, true and false sons. In the novel's strangest twist on the missing son theme, the young man is set up by gangsters to impersonate the man he really is—but isn't sure he is—to claim an inheritance. Similarly, in *The Underground Man* (1971) domestic conflict reaches back three generations. A son, witness to the pickax murder and burial of his father in a Santa Teresa forest clearing, attempts years later to dig up the body and is killed and buried in the same spot. The original crime, as in Chandler's *The Big Sleep*, has been committed in history and the victim buried on the landscape; the attempt to uncover that original crime leads to its reenactment. Archer's task is the same one he performed in *The Galton Case*: to restore order by linking past and present and returning the grandson, the child-victim, to the family.

The vulnerability of the mountain and forest landscape of Santa Teresa is linked in Macdonald's fiction with human vulnerability. Through much of *The Underground Man* a forest fire rages in the

hills close to the site of two murders and burials. Fire, a natural and recurring event in the chaparral-filled hills ringing Southern California (now, however, more and more the result of arson), functions as metonymy for, and ecological counterpart to, human transgression. The fire in Macdonald's novel was started by a carelessly tossed cigarette, but in larger terms it signals man's violation both of the landscape and of his fellow man: the heedless real estate plunder of the vulnerable hills, the greedy attempt to dominate nature and other people. The drive for power over others is reflected in the drive to transform the landscape, to commodify and exploit it for what it will bear. There is in Macdonald, as Jerry Spier has written, "a developing tension between nature and man, between the eternal landscape and its temporal inhabitants."¹⁴ The fire in *The Underground Man* is followed by heavy rains, pouring mud down the denuded hills onto the houses of the violators. The house of Kilpatrick, a real estate agent, is buried in mud, and Lennox, who has made his fortune in oil, has stains of ooze on his windows. Nature and human nature bear a correspondence; the harm done to the fragile ecology of the coast, mountain, and forest through greed and carelessness is the consequence of, and counterpart to, violations inflicted on other people.

Fire—what Joan Didion has called the city's deepest image of itself and what Nathanael West's painter-protagonist Tod Hackett envisions in his painting, "The Burning of Los Angeles," as the force that will accompany the city's destruction—is in Macdonald a reminder that the houses built by the rich in the hills have no power to immunize them against either the destructive force of nature or their own greed. In *The Underground Man* fire is equated with war. "Under and through the smoke," Archer comments, "I caught glimpses of fire like the flashes of heavy guns too far away to be heard." The fire, he says later, "hung around the city like the bivouacs of a besieging army."¹⁵

War signals disruption in Macdonald, the end of one time and the beginning of another. In *The Moving Target* war lies at the root of modern history. World War II is the real source of family troubles that are unearthed years later. A painter, a returning veteran, has murdered his brother in 1943. The killer camouflages that murder by assuming the dead man's identity. Seven years later the murderer has to kill again when his act is discovered by another. He buries the sec-

ond corpse in a greenhouse and once again assumes a second dead man's identity. In a perverse version of the California myth of the fresh start (reminiscent of Cain's *Double Indemnity*), the murderer must kill and kill again to secure his fresh start, which is dependent on his anonymity. He takes on a series of disguises. Identity is never fixed but fluid, contingent, assumable; one becomes who he or she wants or needs to become in order to escape the consequences of past acts. Archer, like Marlowe, is the agent of history, forcing people to remember and acknowledge the past. Hired to recover a stolen painting, he moves back in time to the identity of the missing painter, the model for that painting, the corpse in the greenhouse, and finally the identity of the man killed during the war, in 1943. In the inward-turning plot, the history and fate of two families, one upper and one working class, intersect. The families mirror each other, the rich and poor families linked by spousal hatred, alcoholism, adultery, and the Oedipal love/jealousy of alienated children. In the final revelation the families are shown to be even more intimately connected: they are the same family.

As the place at the end of the West, California is the final destination of five hundred years of European westward movement, movement first across one ocean and then west across a continent to another ocean. At the Pacific the European American makes his last stand, builds, in Macdonald's appropriation of the myth, his dream house in a stratified community in the hills and canyons fronting the ocean. Even the sea, though, is no barrier to man's advance. The ocean itself is vulnerable. In *The Sleeping Beauty* (1973) an oil spill, the product of the heedless exploitation of offshore oil deposits, turns the beach at Santa Teresa into a black, thick, slick liquid. Surfers, bathers, and sun worshipers stand at the edge of the ocean, staring in disbelief at the dark sea, an image of the violent apocalyptic end of the dream that harks back to the finale of West's *The Day of the Locust* but set here—appropriate to Los Angeles disaster fiction—at the very edge of the continent.

In an interview for *Esquire* in 1972 Macdonald elaborated on the notion of the California coast as nexus of nature and man, the place where the natural world confronts human desire and the ability to transform it: "Here in California what you've got is an instant megalopolis superimposed on a background which could almost be de-

scribed as raw nature. What we've got here is the twentieth century right up against the primitive."¹⁶ Psychological and ecological vulnerability merge in Macdonald's fiction; the fate of characters is reflected, doubled on the landscape. The land heals in time, just as the detective, in time, uncovers the truth that leads to the healing of selves and families.

IV

One of the themes that I have been stressing in this book is the migrant theme: Los Angeles as the place to which people have come in search of new lives. Characters come to the new land with histories in, and memories from, other places. Like the characters in all immigrant and migrant literature, those in Los Angeles fiction are poised between imagined futures and remembered pasts. What they learn is that history has a way of remaining in the present tense; the quest for the new beginning comes up against a past that surfaces in the present. In the tough-guy detective fiction that is the subject of this chapter, criminals have committed brutal acts in the past, individually or in collusion with others, that have permanently defined and disfigured them. The move into Southern California in the fiction of Chandler and Macdonald is a deliberate move away from a past life and the consequences of past acts. The Los Angeles detective story is in this sense part of, and in response to, the larger story of American literature and mythology: freedom in the national myth has always been identified with mobility, with the open road—the road that points west, away from the history-bound East and into the open, future-oriented West. The West is the geographic site, the destination, of the invented self, the new, free, self-made American. For Twain's Huckleberry Finn traveling west was "lighting out for the territory"; for Fitzgerald's Jay Gatsby, in the imaginative reconstruction of his narrator, Nick Carraway, the West was linked with the journey of the earliest European explorers of the New World who came astonished upon "the fresh green breast" of America. The West has been rendered in European and American literature and mythology as the fresh, green garden, ready for occupation by adventurous travelers. But in twentieth-century versions of the story, the past is always present to challenge the notion of a fresh start, unen-

cumbered by history. *The Great Gatsby* reminds us that history has already happened; the past is paradoxically both irrecoverable and inescapable.

In the Southern California detective novel the past is as deterministic, as fatal, as it is in *The Great Gatsby*. Chandler's Marlowe and Macdonald's Archer, hired to investigate present troubles in the arcadian setting of Southern California, find the source of the troubles lying deep in history, in long-buried corpses that surface in the present. As urban heroes who have arrived by way of the frontier adventurer, the western hero, and the tough, unreflective *Black Mask* gumshoe, Marlowe and Archer reveal little of their own pasts, but unlike the reticent western hero who rides into town, rids it of its villains, and then rides off, they have histories in the city. In a city of newcomers they are old-timers. The migrants in the Chandler/Macdonald tradition are the detectives' guilty clients and antagonists, men and women who have moved from somewhere else into exclusive estates and neighborhoods in an attempt to erase their histories. The luxurious, gated houses they inhabit are sanctuaries they believe will isolate them from soiled pasts.

Houses stand between the self and the world. They are man-made interventions on nature, impositions of human will exerted on the landscape. In the Los Angeles brand of the detective novel—as in the Hollywood novels I discuss in the following chapter—the architectural landscape is represented not only as the preemption of nature, as takeover and makeover of the land, but also as metonymy for pervasive masquerade and performative behavior. Unlike the Thoreauvian notion of the house representing, organically, the authentic self of the builder/dweller, houses in Los Angeles crime fiction (and Hollywood fiction) represent the desire to construct a new self-image, to erase former identities and to be what one wants others to believe one to be. Chandler's ironic similes, as tropes, are analogous to the architectural façades, suggestive of the erasure of boundaries between organic and made worlds; they mediate the space between the natural and the constructed, the landscape and its representation in language.

Traditionally in American writing the open, unbuilt landscape has been linked with the timeless, with what endures and is outside history (as in much conventional western fiction). But space is always altered by history, by natural forces or by human need or greed; land-

scapes change in time. The houses of Chandler's and Macdonald's rich, butting up against raw nature, are built as stays against the ravages of time, but time and history intrude either because the black-mailer knows past truths or because the detective finds hidden truths. The inescapability of history is the lesson of the Chandler/Macdonald California crime story, one that would be carried into the present by dozens of followers.

V

To be sure, there have been significant changes in the form since the time of Chandler and Macdonald. For one, the contemporary Los Angeles detective may no longer look like a Marlowe or an Archer. The white Anglo male no longer occupies the dominant position he did in earlier decades. The detective today can be a woman, a Jewish ex-hippie, an African American, or a homosexual. For another, the detective's tastes have sometimes been elevated: he or she may be educated and bookish, wear fashionable clothes, be a gourmet cook, a connoisseur of fine wines, or owner of a large, well-furnished house. He or she may be an environmentalist, yoga practitioner, opera fan, or outdoor adventurer. The genre, as one observer put it, has moved from "mean streets to Easy Street."¹⁷ The detective as proletarian hero persists in inner-city detective stories of writers like Walter Mosley, Gary Phillips, John Shannon, and Gar Anthony Haywood, but the characteristic new detective has definitely been mainstreamed. And in contrast to the loner like Marlowe, the new detective has personal and sexual relationships that sometimes constitute a significant part of the narratives.

The new detective story has come, in other words, to reflect contemporary, postmodern America's, and Los Angeles's, diversity. Issues of race, gender, and class have been foregrounded and highlighted. Racial and ethnic minorities, relegated to the margins in Chandler and Macdonald, have become major characters. Women are less often stereotyped as threatening figures, bearers of dangerous sexual allure, deception, or (worse yet) domestication. In the fiction of Sue Grafton, Jan Burke, Wendy Hornsby, Faye Kellerman, and others, the female — and sometimes feminist — detective has found a place in the genre.¹⁸ And in the novels of Haywood, Phillips, and Mosley, the African-

American detective, operating out of South Central Los Angeles, has found a place in the fiction.

Closest in tone and setting to Ross Macdonald among the newer detective writers is Joseph Hansen, whose Dave Brandstetter appears in a two-decade series of novels beginning with *Fadeout* in 1970. Brandstetter is a gay and more refined Archer — rich, sophisticated, and famous (having appeared, as a successful insurance investigator, on talk shows and magazine features). He is about sixty in the later novels, drives a Jaguar, drinks Glenlivet, and lives comfortably in a rambling three-building ranchlike compound, converted from stables, in Horseshoe Canyon (probably Laurel Canyon). Independently wealthy (having inherited money from his father, who owned an insurance company), he lives a very different life from the spartan, financially strapped Marlowe, and as a homosexual detective, he represents the antithesis of the characteristic homophobic detective in the tough-guy detective tradition from *Black Mask* through Hammett to Chandler. In Brandstetter the detective has become a liberal. He has none of the racism or misogyny that runs rampant in the tradition either; he is not threatened by women and has female companions as well as male friends and lovers, including, in the later fiction, Cecil Harris, a black television technician who becomes Brandstetter's lover in the novel *Gravedigger* (1982) and remains so in subsequent novels.

In another transformation of the Chandler/Macdonald tradition, Brandstetter's investigations carry him into a world seedier and poorer than his own. In *Gravedigger*, for instance, he confronts Arazel, a totalitarian, homophobic leader of a cannibalistic religious commune in the desert. Deserts and mountains are, as in Chandler, refuges for an assortment of cultist and occultist practices, but the city itself, in Hansen's representation, is not pervaded by crime, not a microcosm of a "world gone wrong," as it was for Chandler. Los Angeles, except for its lunatic fringe, is generally a tolerant, cosmopolitan, and civilized place. Crimes are linked, most often, to the city's poor nonurban margins. Hansen's vision is an "anti-pastoral" one, as Ernest Fontana has written: threats to urban stability come from "rural and primitive settings and atavistic belief systems that are totalitarian, religious, and violent."¹⁹

The urban and urbane Brandstetter, though, finds much that is wrong with the city. Living in a designer house in the hills, he finds

much of the architecture of the flatlands appalling. He responds disparagingly, for instance, to the kind of buildings that the architectural historian Reyner Banham called "dingbats"—the squarish, two-story, nondescript stucco apartment houses built from the 1950s to the 1970s in every neighborhood of the city:

The buildings were beige stucco boxes propped on tall steel pipes, living quarters above, parking below. The structures turned square blind faces to the street. Stairs climbed to galleries along the side, where doors and windows showed. . . . the main effect of the street was of dreary tidiness.²⁰

As with Chandler and Macdonald, description functions both as information and as personal response.

The updated Macdonald-like plots of Hansen center on bizarre killings committed in the past and unearthed by Brandstetter. In *Early Graves* (1987), for instance, the graves of the title are inhabited by six men, all gay, all victims of AIDS, who have, over a period of time, been slashed to death with a knife. Brandstetter finds the sixth victim on his own patio. His investigation leads back to a former lover of five of the men: the killer has killed in revenge for the disease he contracted. But the sixth victim, the corpse on his patio, has not been killed by the same man or for the same reason. The victim has deserted a wife and son in Arkansas, broken out of prison, and migrated to California, where he assumed a new name and identity as a land developer, his life divided between business affairs and leather bars. His killer, it turns out, is his demented son from Arkansas, who has come to California in search of the father, intending to make him pay for his abandonment and his evil ways. In dealing both with greedy, exploitive land development and the "sins of the father" theme, Hansen touches on two of the concerns that were central to Ross Macdonald's California crime stories.

Roger Simon's *Moses Wine* is the proletarian flip-side to the bourgeois Brandstetter. He is a younger man, a tough, independent loner, and a Jewish, heterosexual, dope-smoking, ex-radical Berkeley dropout. Recently divorced, he lives alone in Echo Park, struggles to keep up child support payments for his two sons, and drives an old Buick. His

ex-wife, meanwhile, lives in the more upscale Laurel Canyon, Brandstetter's territory, and has taken on as lover a new-age guru who drives an XKE (parked, no doubt, near Brandstetter's Jaguar). In mobile, fluid Southern California, the kind of car one drives is the clearest sign of status: by their cars shall ye know them. Wine's closest relationship is with his Trotskyite aunt who lives in an old age home in the Jewish Fairfax district. In a comic allusion to Marlowe's solitary chess puzzles, Wine, alone in his apartment, plays the board game Clue.

Simon's debt is both to Chandler and to Macdonald. His detective is as tough as Marlowe, and in his best-known work, *The Big Fix* (1973), he is enmeshed in a Macdonald-like family plot focusing on the evil parent and victimized son. Hired to investigate and prevent a threatened freeway explosion, allegedly a plot to smear liberal presidential candidate Miles Hawthorne by linking his supporters with violent anarchism, Wine finds that the true motive, the real "big fix," is the scheme of a rich man who has bet \$10 million against Hawthorne in the primary election. Oscar Procari, the gambler, has murdered those who have stood in his way and bullied his weak-willed son, who has been working for Hawthorne's election, to go along with the plot. As frequently happens in Macdonald's novels, the detective in Roger Simon's novel is brought into the case by someone he has known in the past. Lila Shea, a Hawthorne campaign worker, is a former lover and fellow Berkeley activist. "The first time I met her," he recalls, "we were being firehosed down the steps of San Francisco City Hall at the HUAC protest in May, 1960."²¹ Shea's car is subsequently run off a cliff into the Pacific; she is one of two murder victims who meet the same fate—an echo of the coastal highway murders that turn up regularly in Cain and Chandler; cars, in the California crime story, are both status symbols and death instruments.

Wine drives across a vast landscape in his battered Buick from the Mexican-American barrio in East Los Angeles where he gets involved with an agitprop Chicano theater company, to a Hollywood Hills satanic cult run by a faded movie queen, to a Nevada desert gaming/prostitution resort for members only. He covers more territory by car than either Marlowe or Archer. After driving all day through the hot desert to the Nevada ranch, he gets drugged, beaten, and imprisoned before untangling the truth about the fix. Simon, working in a tra-

dition closer to Macdonald than to Chandler, focuses his tough-guy tale on two interrelated Macdonald themes: the victimization of a son by a ruthless parent (Wine himself feels like a failed parent to his two boys) and the representation of California as destroyed Arcadia. The idealism represented by 1960s Berkeley (Wine's past) is set off against political corruption and patriarchal greed in 1970s Los Angeles (Wine's present). Even the name of the liberal candidate, Miles Hawthorne, may be Simon's allusion to failed idealism, evoking the name Miles Coverdale, the disillusioned idealist and failed utopian dreamer in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance*. Wine, who was an English major, imagines Miles Hawthorne as looking like "a New England transcendentalist who got lost trying to find the twentieth century." (46)²² There may be something ludicrous, even parodic, about the erstwhile radical Moses Wine, a man whose life is in such chaos, going against the real lines of urban wealth, power, and privilege with nothing more than a pistol and his old Buick, but Simon makes it convincing. *The Big Fix*, whatever the excesses and twisted convolutions of its plot, holds up well as a gritty exploration of the nexus of politics and greed, idealistic 1960s California dreams and 1970s corruption.

Kem Nunn's *Tapping the Source* (1984) and T. Jefferson Parker's *Laguna Heat* (1985) are not private eye novels as such but like Simon's and Hansen's novels involve searches deep into Southern California's demonic underworlds. The site of both novels is the beach community, where glittering surfaces betray, as they did in Brinig's *The Flutter of an Eyelid* and Hallas's *You Play the Black and the Red Turns Up*, dark and satanic realities. Nunn's book is about eighteen-year-old Ike Tucker's search for his missing sister in the surfer and biker world of Huntington Beach, a search that leads to drugs and to a satanic cult on a Santa Barbara ranch that links sex with human sacrifice. The novel culminates in a bloody, apocalyptic massacre as a biker attacks the ranch, rifle blazing. Grisly and melodramatic, Nunn's novel, his first, carries some real power in its exploration of the dark side of beach culture. Parker's *Laguna Heat* also explores the violent and sadistic netherworld of the Southern California beach town in a Macdonald-like story of the crimes in one generation coming back to haunt the next: here, in a highly implausible plot, a man named Azul Mercante, framed for a murder he did not commit (the killing

of the Laguna Beach detective Tom Shepard's mother), comes out of prison seeking revenge against the men who colluded in the frame, including Shepard's father, an ex-cop who accidentally shot his wife when he caught her with Mercante.

The California beach town is also the turf of the best-known local female private eye, Sue Grafton's Kinsey Millhone, who, like Macdonald's Lew Archer, is stationed in Santa Barbara (and like Macdonald calls it Santa Teresa). Grafton has been naming her Kinsey Millhone series alphabetically since *A Is for Alibi* appeared in 1982, followed by *B Is for Burglar* in 1985. She has reached, at this writing, the letter "O" with *O Is for Outlaw* (1999). Her detective is a twice-divorced former insurance investigator who lives alone in a "bachelorette" — no kids, no pets, no plants. She combines a tough-talking exterior with a compassionate, caring interior, particularly in dealing with female victims, in front of whom she is likely to get quite emotional. Millhone works by gaining the confidence of women, by getting them to talk, and by intuitive hunches, verified by tedious computer checking and cross-checking. One of her strengths is technology; another is her contacts. Although a loner in her private life, she knows and works with police detectives, Department of Motor Vehicles workers, newspaper reporters, and forensic experts. She makes mistakes sometimes, trusting the wrong people. In *A Is for Alibi*, for instance, she gets sexually and emotionally involved with a murderer and barely gets away with her life.

Grafton is one of several women who are writing novels featuring a female detective. Her best-known contemporaries are Sara Paretsky (creator of Chicago-based detective, V. I. Warshawski) and Marcia Muller (whose Sharon McCone mysteries are set in San Francisco). Recently there have been a good number of women writers writing about women detectives in Southern California. *Detecting Women 2*, edited by Willetta L. Heising, lists more than two dozen Southern California women detective series.²³

One of the hottest writers in new Los Angeles detective fiction is Robert Crais, a Louisiana-born writer who lives in Encino in the Santa Monica Mountains. More than a half dozen Elvis Cole novels have appeared since *The Monkey's Raincoat*, published in 1987. Cole is a tough, wisecracking, and smart but sometimes hapless detective who lives in Laurel Canyon (the neighborhood of choice, it would

seem, for the new detective), does yoga and Tai Chi on the deck of his "A-Frame" house, and has a decided preference for *salade niçoise*, Evian water, and Falstaff beer. He shares an office with his enigmatic, taciturn partner Joe Pike—who appears as *deus ex machina* to rescue Cole when he fumbles, which is often. Cole is a blend of Chandler's Marlowe and Robert Parker's Spencer—the knight who can't resist trying to save a woman in trouble and the detective who loves the good life. His 1966 Corvette is part of that good life, and when the garrulous detective isn't tracking down leads, karate-chopping evildoers, or rescuing damsels in distress, he drives the city. He truly loves Los Angeles and describes it lovingly from the windshield of his car, measuring distance traveled, as Angeleno commuters tend to do, in minutes, not miles. In *Free Fall* (1993) we get this description, with only the slightest irony:

Driving along Santa Monica Boulevard through West Hollywood and Beverly Hills is a fine thing to be doing in late March, just at the end of the rainy season. It was warmer than it should have been, with highs in the mid-eighties and mare's-tail cirrus streaking in the sky with feathery bands, and there were plenty of men in jogging shorts and women in biking pants and Day-Glow headbands. Most of the men weren't jogging and most of the women weren't biking, but everyone looked the part.²⁴

Free Fall takes its story from the Rodney King case—the videotaped beating of an unarmed black man, the acquittal of the police of criminal charges, and the subsequent urban uprising of 1992. One of the policemen in the novel, part of an elite squad with the acronym REACT, is named Mark Thurman (Mark Fuhrman was the policeman whose racist remarks heard in the courtroom during O. J. Simpson's trial enraged listeners). The novel's Thurman, though, is not a seasoned racist cop but a young, inexperienced member of the squad who clearly is in over his head; he stands by and does nothing while several other members of the squad beat to death a young black pawnshop operator in a sting operation. Drawing on recent history, Crais depicts in this novel racism and violence in the Los Angeles Police Department. Several African-American crime novelists have

been representing the African American in the empowering role of private detective, investigating crimes inside and outside the ghetto—without the cooperation of the Police Department.

VI

In the 1990s fiction of Gar Anthony Haywood, Gary Phillips, and Walter Mosley the African-American detective operating in Watts and South Central Los Angeles has come to represent a significant component of the local tough-guy novel. Haywood writes about detective Aaron Gunner, who works out of the back of a barbershop in South Central, his office separated from the barber by only a bead curtain. Gunner is tough, violent, and smart. In *When Last Seen Alive* (1998), the fourth in the series, the detective's search for a missing man takes him into an inner-city milieu of lost people, hidden and mistaken identities, a murderous black liberation group called Defenders of the Bloodline, and a lethal hit man named "Razor" Jack Frerotte, who is locked throughout the novel in a death struggle with Gunner. While the center of Haywood's activities is the inner city, he deals with the larger contemporary Los Angeles in which black and white worlds intersect. Phillips's Ivan Monk is also enmeshed in contemporary multiethnic Los Angeles. In *Violent Spring* (1994), for example, he investigates the murder of a Korean liquor store owner (followed by other murders) near the corner of Florence and Normandie, the site of the Rodney King beating. In *Perdition USA* (1996) he offers a nightmarish postmodern inner city of gangs, serial killers, and skinheads. Mosley, by contrast, looks back to an earlier Los Angeles in a series of novels set between the late 1940s and the 1960s, when Watts, the heart of the black community, was a more isolated, segregated zone.

Mosley thus is something of a cultural historian, a chronicler of the buried history of African Americans in Los Angeles, many of whom migrated from the South in the 1940s to work in the defense industry. His territory is one he knew from childhood. Born in 1952, he grew up in South Central Los Angeles at the very boundaries of the black and white city. His mother was a white Jewish schoolteacher, his father a black laborer. The world he puts in his novels, he has said in interviews, is one he knew firsthand as a child and from the

stories his father would tell friends late into the night. Drawing on the memories and oral history of a place and time, Mosley, now living and writing in New York, has evoked a complex cultural landscape.

Easy Rawlins is a reluctant investigator, not a PI with a license but a man simply trying to survive in Watts. He has served in the war (part of the force that liberated the Nazi death camps) and has been fired from his job at an aircraft plant. Like his Watts neighbors, he is a migrant, a transplant from Houston. He shares his neighbors' migrant history, speaks their language, eats their food, drinks with their men, and sleeps with their women. He struggles to stay afloat, pay a mortgage, and raise two adopted kids in a place where the law has broken down and where the racist police cannot be counted on to help. As a man who knows the turf and has an "easy" relationship with his Watts neighbors, Easy is seduced, sometimes coerced, into solving problems, usually the problems of white men who need information or want to find missing people who have disappeared in the ghetto. What he discovers, though, and what he discloses are often two different things, as he negotiates the ground between loyalty to his community and the job he is paid to perform. He acts, reluctantly, as a cultural mediator, as link between black and white worlds. To the whites who represent the city's power elite—politicians, corporate heads, government agents—Watts is terra incognita, a city apart, a black city within a white city, unknown and incomprehensible to them. He is their link, their hired access.

Like so much Los Angeles fiction, the novels of Mosley are about two places and two times: history is a different place, a prewar era in the South that exists in memory and that the migrants try to replicate in postwar Los Angeles. Watts is geographically close to the city's center but culturally a place apart, rendered by Mosley almost as a southern country town. Easy finds information by dropping in on neighbors, sitting with them and chatting. He calls it a "country way" of doing business. "At that time," Easy says in *A Red Death*, "everybody in my neighborhood had come from the country around southern Texas and Louisiana."²⁵

Easy moves through history in the novels, each a kind of time capsule of black Los Angeles, a recovery of a lost time—the postwar forties, the cold war McCarthyite fifties, the social cataclysms of the sixties. Living through changing times, he gets older, acquires rental property, gets divorced, raises his children, tends the fruit trees and

flowers around his house. In the first novel, *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990) (each novel is color-coded), he is a twenty-eight-year-old veteran hired by a white man to find a missing woman. In *A Red Death*, where he confronts postwar anti-Communist hysteria, he has become a businessman, a property owner who is being harassed by the IRS and the FBI. In *White Butterfly* (1992), which focuses on the serial killing of four prostitutes, one white, Easy's marriage has come to an end and he is struggling to support two children. *Black Betty* (1994) engages him again in a search instigated by a white man for a mysterious woman who has disappeared. And in *A Little Yellow Dog* (1996) Easy, now living on Genesee Street in the Fairfax district and working as a school custodian in Watts, is drawn into the disappearance of a woman teacher and the subsequent uncovering of two corpses in a garden on the school grounds. At the end of the book his sidekick, Raymond "Mouse" Alexander, a ruthless assassin but loyal friend, has been killed; it is the same day President Kennedy is shot.

In the sequence of novels Easy is revealed as both a local fixture and a bridge to the surrounding white world. He is an intermediary standing both inside and outside his community. His work takes him into every corner of Watts and also into the affluent Westside white world. His positioning in the ambiguous zone between racial and cultural worlds is brought home in the opening of *Devil in a Blue Dress*. In an ironic reworking of the opening of Chandler's *Farewell, My Love*, in which Marlowe finds himself in a black bar on Central Avenue, Easy is sitting in a bar in Watts when a white man walks in. The perspective is Easy's, the black patron, the insider, not, as in Chandler's novel, the white intruder:

I was surprised to see a white man walk into Joppy's bar.

It's not just that he was white but he wore an off-white linen suit and shirt with a Panama straw hat and bone shoes over white silk socks. His skin was smooth and pale with just a few freckles. One lick of strawberry-blond hair escaped the brim of his hat. He stopped in the doorway filling it with his large frame, and surveyed the room with pale eyes; not a color I'd seen in a man's eyes.²⁶

The white man in Mosley's mirroring of Chandler is a fat blond man in a white suit who represents, caricatures, the power of the white

world. His name is DeWitt ("de white") Allbright ("all bright"), and he is a study in white on white. He is, in this representation, the white devil (one thinks of Hammett again, who called Sam Spade a "blond satan"), tempting Easy Rawlins with money he desperately needs to pay his mortgage in exchange for finding the missing Daphne Monet. Easy becomes the detective, the black Marlowe hired by the white stranger to find a woman in Watts who, it turns out, is herself a marginal figure, literally both black and white.

The sense of Watts as a black community where the appearance of a white stranger would raise eyebrows is strong in the early novels but becomes weaker as the novels follow. Freeways in the 1950s and 1960s diminished the isolation of Watts from the larger city. Migration and urbanization pushed the borders of communities out, partially dissolving old cultural boundaries (black, white, Latino). What were farmland and fields between Watts and the rest of Los Angeles became housing developments. The black community, which, Mosley posits, drew some of its strength and regional identity from its isolation, begins in the more recent novels to erode. In the meeting of black and white worlds racism becomes more blatant and visible. Easy becomes more cynical, more bitter. In *Black Betty* the landscape reflects his mood. Feeling the pain of discrimination after being arrested and jailed by racist cops, and plagued by the traffic and smog in the city, the now-middle-aged Easy responds to a city "dense with smog, gray all around with a deepening amber color hanging low at the horizon." "If I took a deep breath," he says, "I felt a sharp pain in the pit of my lungs."²⁷ He still has affection for his home territory and its people, though. He is repelled by discrimination, consoled by acts of black heroism. We get this in *A Little Yellow Dog*:

Southeast L.A. was palm trees and poverty; little neat lawns tended by the descendants of ex-slaves and massacred Indians. It was beautiful and wild; a place that was a nation, populated by lost people but that were never talked about in the newspapers or seen on the T.V. You might have read about freedom marchers; you might have heard about a botched liquor store robbery (if a white man was injured)—but you never heard about Tommy Jones growing the biggest roses in the world or how Fiona Roberts saved her neighbor

by facing off three armed men with only the spirit of God to guide her.²⁸

With Walter Mosley the boundaries of the tough-guy private eye novel have been immeasurably stretched. However much he is working in the tradition begun by Chandler, he has realized new possibilities in the form. The detective is no longer the lone wolf whose personal life remains outside, and distant from, the criminal world he investigates. The mean streets he travels are his own. Although as cultural intermediary he ventures outside the black community when he has to, he is personally and intimately connected to that community, complicit with and loyal to it. He is implicated by everything he shares with his neighbors—race, language, poverty, a migrant history that began in the South, and the neighborhood itself. He knows who the people are, where they live, where they work. What he doesn't know, he finds out. He learns his neighbors' secrets, solacing and protecting them when he can. The care he gives to his orphaned children and his fruit trees and the pain he feels at the loss of his marriage, the death of friends, and the breakdown of community are qualities of mind that place him at a considerable distance from Philip Marlowe, the loner who stalked streets that were not his own, possessing so little in the way of friends and intimate connections.

Beyond the neighborhood, though, Easy Rawlins finds, as Marlowe does, that the city is impenetrable and ultimately unknowable. "This unknowability is what, Mosley claimed, makes Los Angeles such fertile ground for detective fiction. In a 1995 interview he remarked, "It's impossible to know L.A. It's an extremely diffuse and diverse city . . . a place of hiding. To be able to know a place, it has to at least in some ways want to be known. And L.A. just doesn't want to be known. L.A. is a big secret, which is why it is so good for the genre."²⁹ The uncovering of secrets is the task of the detective story, but Los Angeles remains at bottom impenetrable.

The tough-guy detective story from Chandler to Mosley has always posited an underground city, a hidden, invisible city beneath the revealed city, one that can be only incompletely known. Perhaps one can say this about the crime fiction of any large city, but Los Angeles presents a special case. There are, it seems, at least four reasons. In part it is a consequence of the city's vast geographic spread

and its diverse, diffuse multicultural neighborhoods, in part a response to the city's long history of under-the-table corruption and law enforcement/criminal alliances, in part the fact that its writers have been until very recent times migrants or outsiders, and in part the fact that detective writers, like the Hollywood novelists, have been engaged, collectively, in the act of subverting the Los Angeles as Paradise myth propagated by the boosters.

Boston-based crime writer Robert Parker, who created the Spencer series of detective stories (and completed Chandler's unfinished novel, *Poodle Springs*, in 1989 and subsequently wrote a sequel to *The Big Sleep* called *Perchance to Dream*), offers a sense of the impossibility of comprehending Los Angeles when he takes Spencer to Los Angeles in *A Savage Case*:

I didn't know any place like it for sprawl, for the apparent idiosyncratic mix of homes and businesses and shopping malls. There was no center, no fixed point for taking bearings. It ambled and sprawled and disarrayed all over the peculiar landscape — garish and fascinating and imprecise and silly, smelling richly of bougainvillea and engine emissions, full of trees and grass and flowers and neon and pretense. And off to the northeast, beyond the Hollywood Hills, above the smog, and far from Disneyland were the mountains with snow on their peaks. I wondered if there were a leopard frozen up there anywhere.³⁰

Frozen leopards in the hills or not, the detective's conviction that he or she can know the city, discover its secret lines of power — get a fix on it and then fix it — becomes delusional in much of the fiction. The unknowability of Los Angeles is the theme of the most popular local detective film, Robert Towne's 1974 *Chinatown*. Noah Cross tells the detective Jake Gittes, "You may think you know what it's all about, but you don't." In the end Gittes's not-knowing leads to the death of the woman he has been trying to protect. Restrained by the police who are there to protect the rich and powerful, Gittes, in handcuffs, can only watch as his lover-client Evelyn Mulwray has her face shot away. "Forget it, Jake, it's Chinatown," his partner tells him — Chinatown meaning here, as trope, the unknown and unknowable dimension of the city.

This sense of an invisible city, an urban hell beneath the visible city, is the central, obsessive concern of James Ellroy's Los Angeles detective fiction. Like Mosley, Ellroy in the past decade has been reconstructing the city of the fifties and sixties, a postwar and cold war city in which the detective, no saint with gun, is complicit with the criminal underworld he investigates. But while Easy Rawlins, in the business of doing favors, gets caught up in the violence and killings in the ghetto, he is no match for the corrupt cops of Ellroy's "L.A. Quartet" — *The Black Dahlia* (1987), *The Big Nowhere* (1988), *L.A. Confidential* (1990), and *White Jazz* (1992). In an allusion to Raymond Chandler's remark that he wanted to take crime out of the drawing room and give it back to those on the streets who were really good at it, Ellroy said in an interview:

I wanted to give crime fiction back to the leg-breakers of history, to soldiers of fortune, to bad white men, to racist shit-birds and the corrupt cops. I think the chief rule I've taken is to ignore the old warning of crime fiction editors worldwide: Namely that you've got to create sympathetic characters your readers identify with.³¹

No one would accuse Ellroy of giving his audience — a substantial audience now, since Curt Hansen's successful film adaptation of *L.A. Confidential* — sympathetic characters. The four novels of the Quartet offer a rogue's gallery of psychopathic cops, crooked politicians, corporate thugs, serial killers, violent strikebreakers, paid hit men, and organized crime kingpins. There are no good guys. Los Angeles is a demonic underground city controlled by alliances of the rich and powerful who want to be more rich and powerful and have the police on their payrolls. The legions of his satanic city, his shadow city, are fallen men who, like Milton's fallen angels, would rather rule in hell than serve in heaven.³² Real-life figures (in name at least) like Howard Hughes, Mickey Cohen, and Sam Giancana mix it up with corrupt cops, some of whom — like Ed Exley, Danny Upshaw, Bud White, Jack Vicennes, Junior Stemmons, and Dudley Smith — reappear in different novels. For Ellroy's ruthless cops crime work is an obsession and a route to power, promotion, and wealth.

In the work of this self-proclaimed "demon dog of literature," we are given the darkest, most relentlessly brutal crime writing about

Los Angeles. No one is innocent, no one untainted. In Chandler's fiction the police were often on the take and could not be trusted. But there were honest cops, too. In Ellroy's fiction virtually every detective is eye-deep in slime. *L.A. Confidential* begins with a re-creation of the Christmas Day massacre of 1950 in which Los Angeles policemen drunkenly celebrating the holiday at police headquarters brutally attack a group of Mexicans who had been brought in after the breakup of a tavern brawl. *White Jazz*, arguably the most violent of the novels, is set in 1958. The multiple plot strands range over the personal and political crimes of an entire city, hinging on the red-baiting attempt (powered by Howard Hughes) to break up a studio union, a series of grisly killings by a psychopath, sexual perversion (incest and bestiality), an Iranian drug dealer who operates in the black ghetto, the eviction of Mexicans from Chavez Ravine to build a stadium for the relocated Brooklyn Dodgers, and the internecine warfare between Mickey Cohen and Howard Hughes when Cohen cuts in on Hughes's territory to make a movie called *Attack of the Atomic Vampires*, a production clearly reflecting cold war paranoia with its cast of atomic mutants.

Beginning with *L.A. Confidential* and reaching manic dimension in *White Jazz*, Ellroy evolved a style to match the ruthless subject matter and frenzied pace of his narratives. He described it in the interview cited above as "a paranoid tone, a stream of consciousness style that made the book[s] read like a fever dream." (242) It is what Dave Klein, the racist, homophobic, murderous detective in *White Jazz*, called "mind-jumping," a disconnected, discontinuous leaping from image to image, a semitelegraphic, free association projection of the mind of his characters. Here is the mind-jumping of Dave Klein, the most ruthless cop in Ellroy's lineup—slumlord with a law degree, communist hater and anti-Semite, murderer who has killed eight men and thrown a witness from a high window at the beginning of the novel, and a man harboring incestuous fantasies of his sister Meg as he twirls the dial on his car radio:

Easy: My "crush" stretched me too thin—catch her stealing and snitch her—TODAY. Kicks: Get her a Commie lawyer enraged at big money—Morton Diskant, just the ticket. Arraignment, trial—Glenda plays cunthound. Morty off

in trade. "Guilty," State time, Dave Klein there with flowers when they boot her.

Play the radio, drift

Bop—maybe queer cops prowling Darktown—too jangly, too frantic. Skim the dial, ballads—"Tennessee Waltz"—Meg '51, that song, the Two Tonys—Jack Woods probably knew the whole story. Him and Meg back on; I dumped a witness and she got suspicious—and Jack wouldn't shit her. She'd know, she'd be scared, she'd forgive me. Her and Jack—I wasn't jealous—call him dangerous and safe—and safer than me.

Back to bop—jangly good now—think.³³

Ellroy's police detective fiction has roots in his own tortured personal history. In 1958 the ten-year-old Ellroy, who had been living with his mother in El Monte, returned home to the San Gabriel Valley city after visiting his father in Los Angeles to learn that his mother had been murdered. Her body had been found near a high school athletic field. Years later—after a troubled childhood with his father, the death of the father, and a series of voyeuristic house break-ins, burglaries, and drug and alcohol addiction—he was seized to the point of obsession by the connection between his mother's unsolved killing and that of Elizabeth Short, the "Black Dahlia," whose mutilated body had been found in an empty lot in Los Angeles in 1947. Jean Ellroy and Elizabeth Short fused in his mind.

Ellroy's autobiographical memoir, *My Dark Places*, acknowledges his childhood sexual attraction to and incestuous fantasies about his mother.³⁴ Returning to the memory of these fantasies as an adult, he hired a retired police detective, Bill Stoner, to reopen his mother's case and traveled with Stoner down a long trail of leads that failed to produce a killer. He wrote about the investigation in *Gentleman's Quarterly*, and it became the occasion that propelled him into writing crime fiction. His compulsive quest for knowledge of the past and resolution of the case after all the years that had passed was, he wrote, "his journey into self-knowledge, his exploration of the dark side of

his psyche. By attempting to exorcise his ghosts, he would come to understand himself. His 1987 novelistic revisiting of the Elizabeth Short murder, *The Black Dahlia*—discussed in detail in chapter 8—is his most thoroughgoing probe of the obsessions that haunted him.

Ellroy has also stated in various places that his decision to write about police detectives stemmed in part from the model of Joseph Wambaugh, himself an ex-cop, who in the sixties and seventies wrote several tough LAPD detective novels, the best-known of which was *The Onion Field*, about an actual cop killing. It is, after all, Ellroy has reminded us, police detectives and not private eyes who solve murders in real life. Ellroy went far beyond Wambaugh, though, in his exploration of the underbelly of Los Angeles, beyond his contemporary in the police detective genre Michael Connelly, who has created in Detective Hieronymous "Harry" Bosch a "good cop," though violent and capable of irrational behavior,³⁵ and farther yet from Chandler, pushing the boundaries of the form almost beyond recognition, almost to the point of parody. In tracing the evolution of the genre from *Black Mask* stories of the twenties through Hammett, Chandler, and Macdonald up through the nineties, one has to ask where we go from here.

6

SARGASSO OF THE IMAGINATION

The Hollywood Novel

He thought of Janvier's "Sargasso Sea." Just as that imaginary body of water was a history of civilization in the form of a maine junkyard, the studio lot was one in the form of a dream dump. A Sargasso of the Imagination! And the dump grew continually, for there wasn't a dream afloat somewhere which wouldn't sooner or later turn up on it, having first been made photographic by plaster, canvas, lath and paint. Many boats sink and never reach the Sargasso, but no dream ever entirely disappears.

NATHANAEAL WEST, *THE DAY OF THE LOCUST*

People here
have become
the people
they're pretending to be.

SAM SHEPARD, *THE MOTEL CHRONICLES*

Writers we don't need. Indians we can always use.

—LINE FROM THE COEN BROTHERS' FILM, *BARTON FINCH*

