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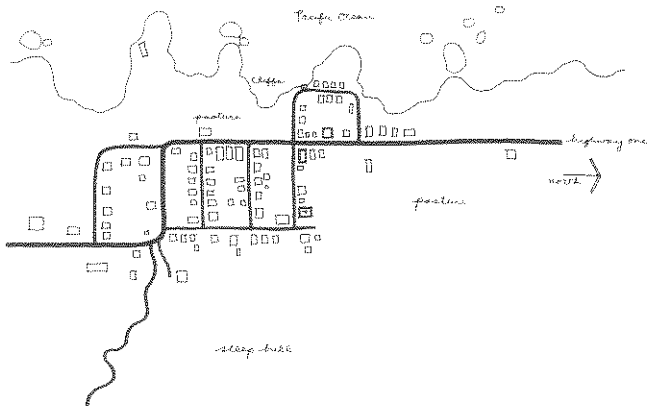
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The Landscape Occupies Us: A Portrait of a Small Town

Randolph Hester, Jr.



During 1986 I lived in Westport, California, a coastal village of ninety-two people, fifteen miles and thirty minutes north of Fort Bragg. The village is tiny. There are about fifty houses. The Eagletons run the single general store. It is the center of community life where, in addition to food and gas, everyone gets gossip, news, newspaper and mail. It often takes an hour and a half to get the mail. Our one small church was built entirely by volunteers and was dedicated in 1986.

Visitors often ask what there is to do in Westport. Once a year we have a chicken barbeque as a fund raiser for the volunteer fire department. The children put on a dime toss, with the help of Nedra Lancaster—this past year they raised sixty-five dollars. We also have a Christmas pageant and a Halloween party. This may not sound like much to do, but the landscape we live in occupies us.

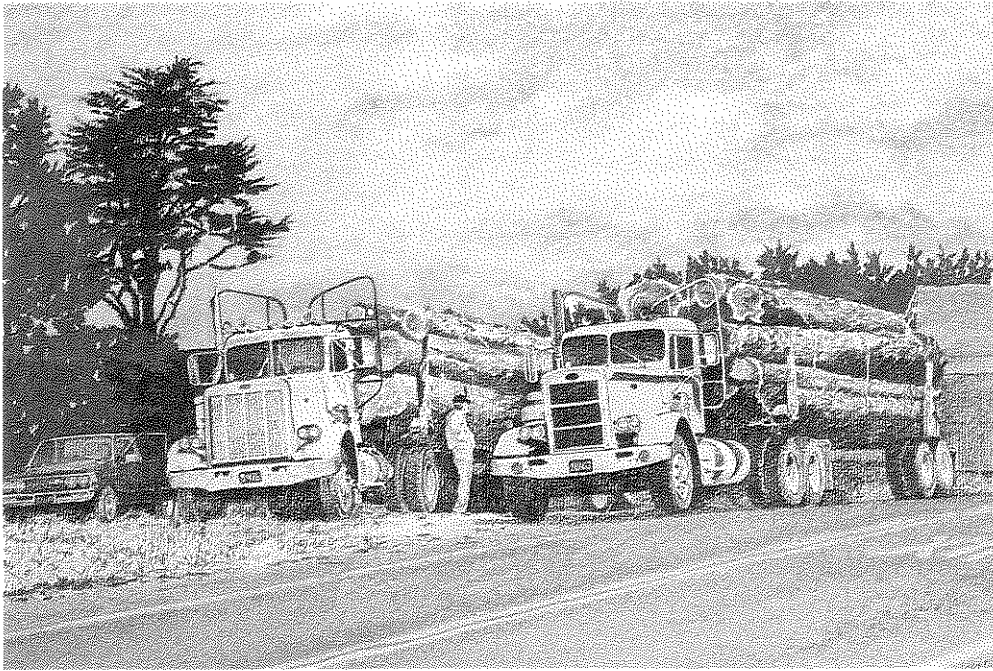
About midyear I began sketching outdoors, first in my own yard, then all around town. After I had done half a dozen drawings of everyday landscapes, I realized I was doing a portrait of the town. The sketching became more self-conscious after that. I wanted the portrait to be realistic and loving. I wanted it to celebrate the daily life of the community. I wanted to draw the town's soul, not

merely its surface. I wanted the sketches to communicate to the people who live in Westport the essence of their community. In December I had the first-ever art show in Westport with an "opening" at the Westport Inn. Almost everyone in town came.

Local people told me that I had indeed painted much of the soul of the town. However, they were quick to point out my oversights, creating a list of paintings that must be done next summer: the Westport cypress on Omega Street, the old house behind the Killions, the view north from Lee and Doreen's and the Morgan's house. Locals were clear about the sketches they did not like: the fog and suggestions of changes in the village. They were also embarrassed by some of the drawings, particularly a row of rusting cars that have been abandoned on the main road. A butterfly is no more beautiful than a caterpillar; the butterfly just looks better on paper.

At the opening of the show in Westport, one local resident told me that before I showed these drawings in Berkeley I would have to do some abstract ones. He expected that my devotedly realistic drawings would not be seen as art in that academic environment. That comment struck me as a valuable insight about the role of art in celebrating and making places.

Westport, California

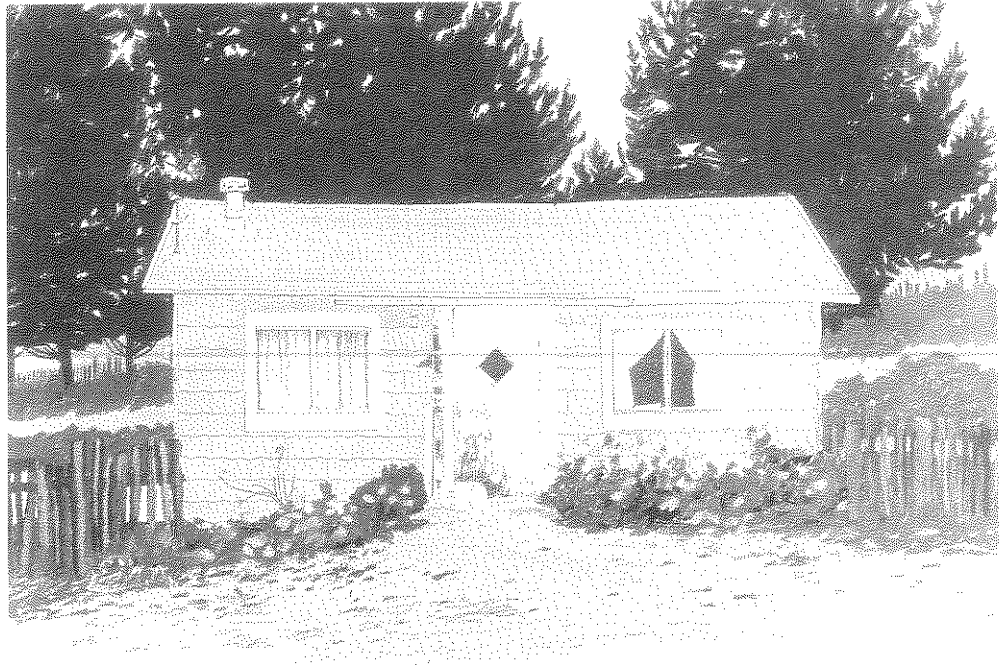


It is not easy to make a living in Westport. At the turn of the century over a thousand people gained their livelihoods from logging. Today only three families are supported by the timber industry; tourism, not timber, is the town's largest employer. The Westport Inn and Deli provides seasonal work for seven people. The Deli also serves as the town's family room.



One couple runs fifty head of cattle, but ranching is mostly one butcher cow for the family penned by two strands of barbed wire requiring weekly repair.

If you notice the surf net missing from the stoop at the turquoise house you know that the smelt are running, and the Stillwells are catching them, if anyone is. A lot of people get by fishing. Others get by raising a few rabbits in cages arranged in classical formality. The geometry has no effect on the taste of the meat.



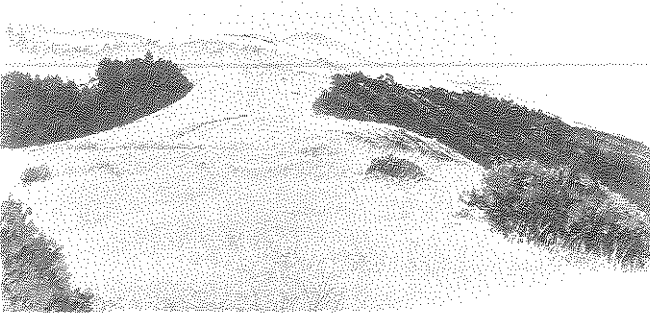
About half the families in town help make ends meet by gardening. In a sun pocket protected from the wind you can grow cool-weather crops in beautiful patterns year round, making both food and art.





Mr. and Mrs. Jones own this whole ephemeral landscape; over a thousand acres that give eastern definition to the town. They are not sure what should be done with all this land. I think she would like it to be preserved as a state park. When I go by to

see her, she talks about the novel she is finishing. Then she always asks why people do landscape art when the landscape is already art. When she asks me that, she pokes me with a finger and her eyes twinkle.

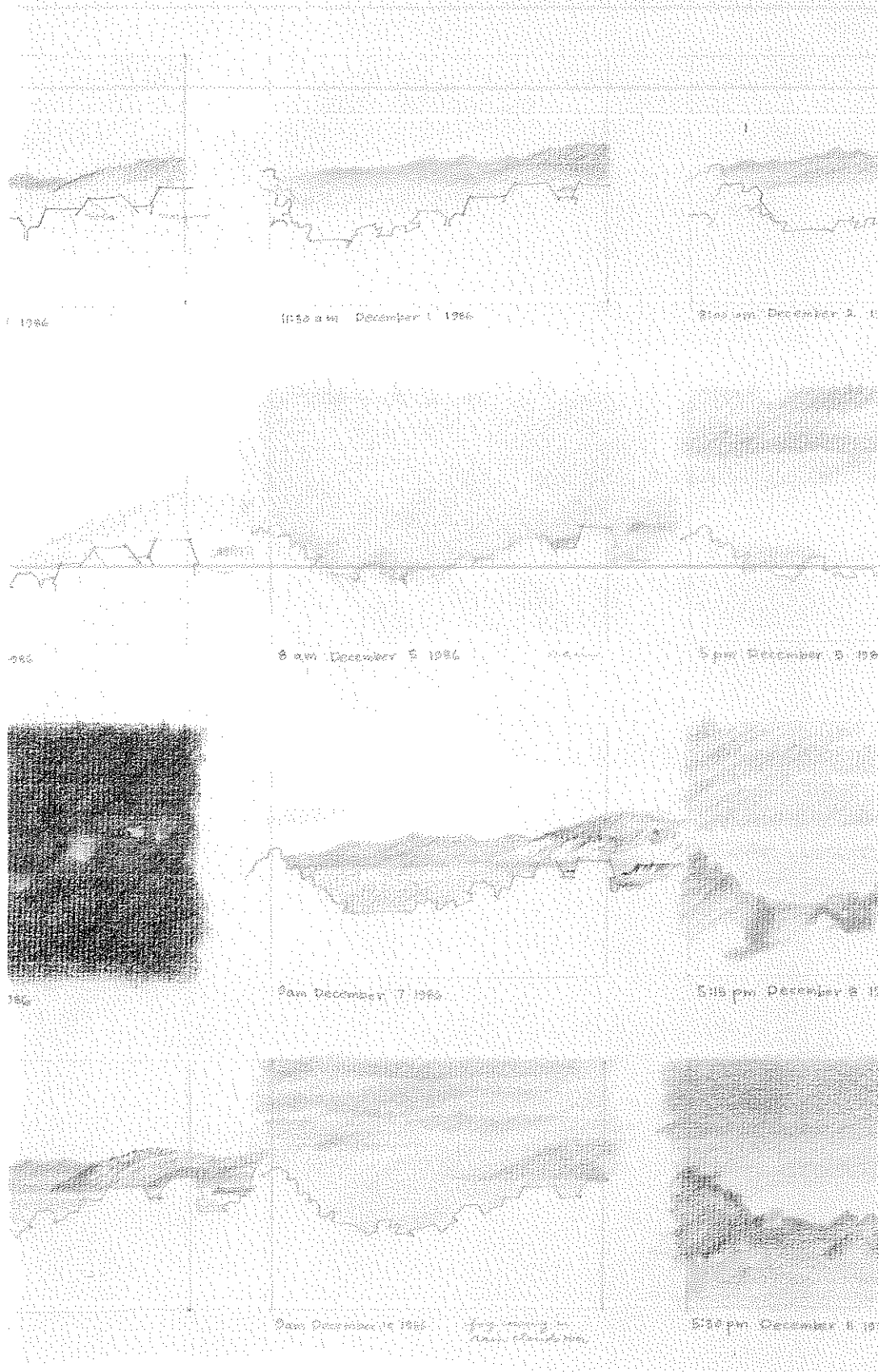


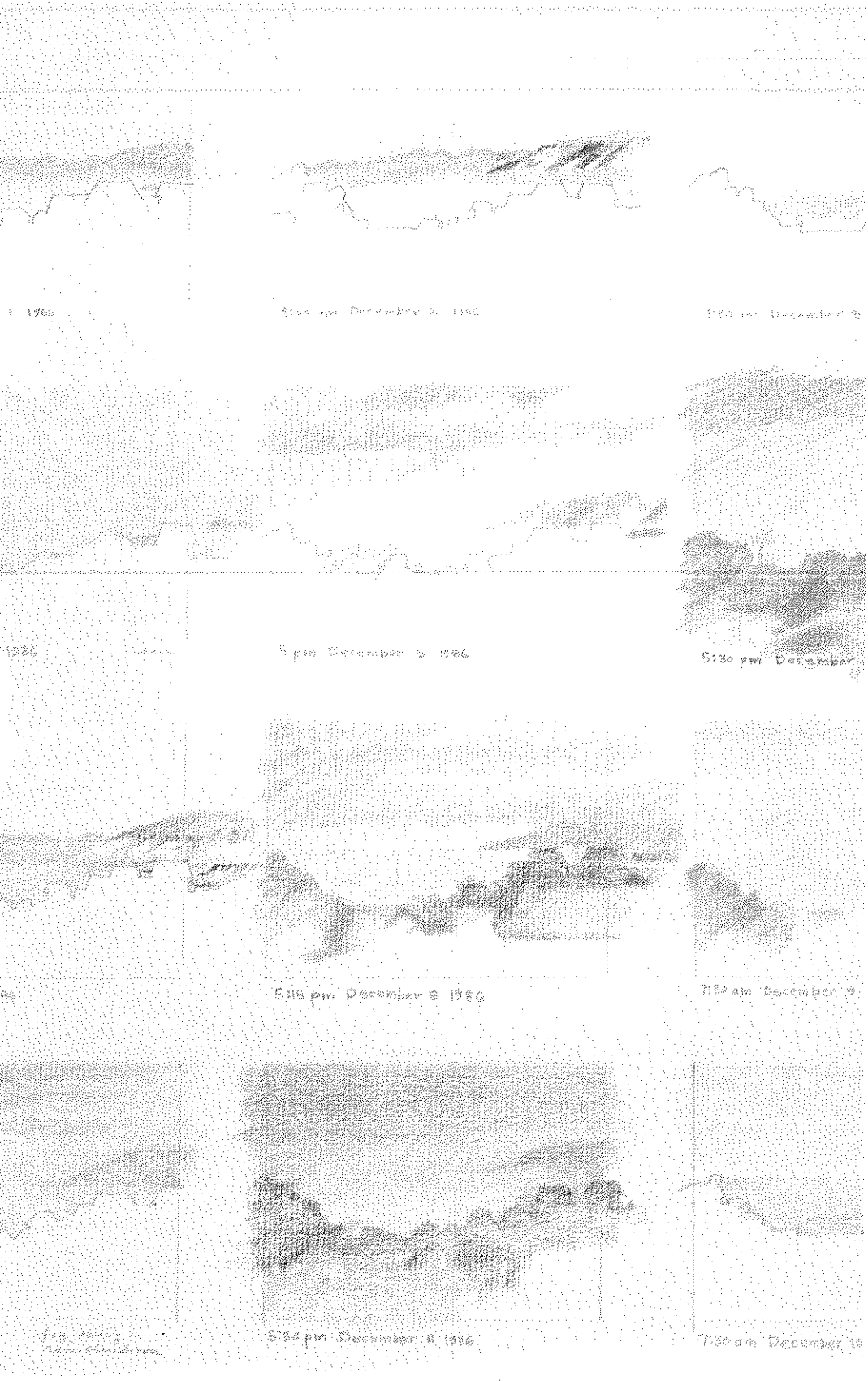
If you turn and face south, the landscape resembles Mother Earth with her head in the clouds, body-hair and flesh exposed. Thom Alcoze remarked that he loves this earth, not because she is like his mother, but because she *is* his mother. Small children experience their first freedom

in this pastureland. By age five you can tag along, playing a minor role in a game of G.I. Joe. By seven you can cardboard-slide down the steep ravine. By eight you can hike two miles to Death Valley. By ten you hide in the evergreen forest to be alone with this view.



Westport is a panoramic landscape, but no one in town likes this sketch. It does not match the sunny postcard from the same viewpoint. "The fog," they say, "you can see it and feel its cold everyday without a picture to remind you."





When you look north, the weather constantly changes the landscape. For weeks, everytime I walked into Nate's room, I would look north and sketch the change. The panorama is broken only by hedgerows that form along drainage paths, by cross fencing in the ranch landscape, and by privacy hedges in the residential landscape. On the individual lot in the smallest subunit of the Westport landscape, north-south priver blocks the wind and stops the eye. Only the most creative home gardeners can get both wind protection and an ocean view.



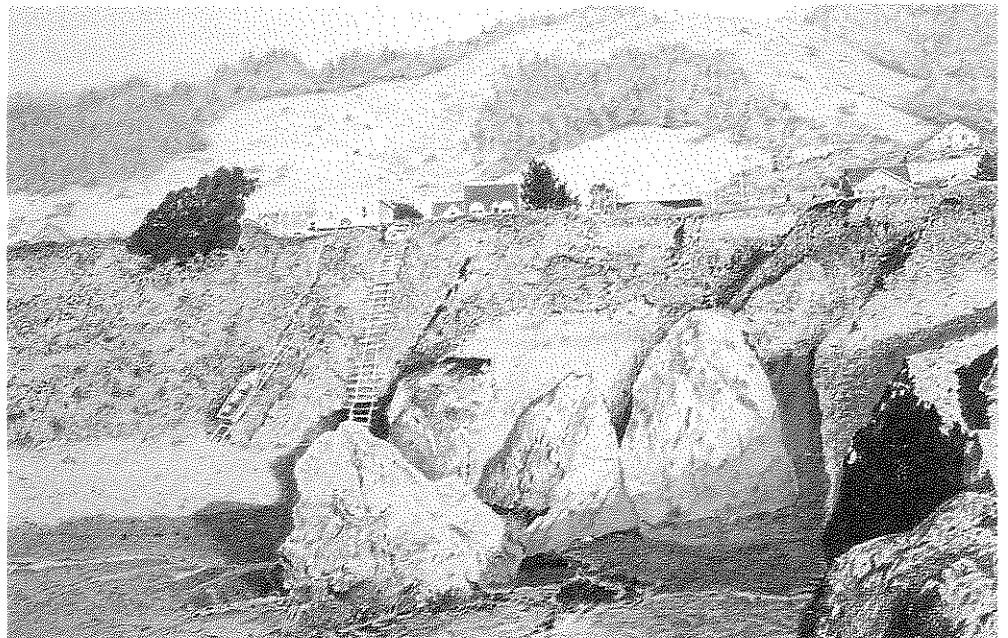
Pacific Avenue is the ideal of nearly everyone in town. There is beauty in its ecological underpinnings and its egalitarian simplicity. Does facade formalism have nothing to do with landscape aesthetics? A walk around town is a daily ritual. The walk always leads by Dutch's

house and someone always tells the story:

Dutch and his girlfriend were fighting because he had parked his 1953 Mercury too close to the house and she wanted him to move it. The fight escalated. Dutch stormed out of the house,

into the car and drove it off the cliff into the ocean, jumping out just in time. He walked back inside inquiring, "Is that far enough out of the way?" The difficulty in trying to draw the soul of a place is that it is easier to see the surface.

The view from Bridge Rock back to town recalls everyone's adolescence. Bridge Rock is where you hang out as a teenager, connected to society by the ricketiest of redwood timbers. The boats represent masculine daring, ongoing adolescence, details in the landscape that evoke both love and fear for women in town.





Seen from Clay Road, the town is viewed as protected by a mountain womb, in great contrast to the exposed panoramic reality. The longer I stayed, the more I, too, came to see the hills to the east as a protector. Metaphorically, evil threatens not by sea but by land, not nature's storms but influences from the continent on the other side of the mountains.

Coming and going is an important part of life in Westport. Because of the direction of the sunlight and sentiment, the cypress allee is always warm and womblike when you are coming home. It feels cold and harsh when you are leaving Westport.



The ephemeral landscape changes all the time and is seen as a comforting constant. Why then, is social change so terrifying? Since Westport is unincorporated, the sewer plant's capacity represents the only institution of control over community change. Westport's thirty-six remaining sewer hookups are a sought-after prize, essential for real-estate speculation. It is hard to believe that only fifteen years ago, the entire town was assessed at \$100,000.

"Change is coming, I can feel it."

"Westport will never change, not in my lifetime."

