one

DESERT PLACES

1868–1892

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
. . . I have it in me so much nearer home
To scare myself with my own desert places.

ROBERT FROST,
"Desert Places," 1936

IN 1836, OVER FIFTEEN FEET of snow fell in Carlinville, Illinois. Farmers hauling corn and livestock to the Mississippi River town of Alton frantically reversed their routes, dumping wagonloads of feed and abandoning hogs that, piggybacking against the cold blast, froze in gruesome stacks. Wagons froze, and men with them, trapped in a "polar wave" of blinding speed.[1] Mary Hunter Austin, who wrote about the disaster nearly a century later, grew up in Carlinville during the 1870s. She remembered town elders dating events before and after the Great Snow, and in her autobiography, *Earth Horizon* (1932), she uses the storm to mark her own place in a region's unfolding history. Like the town chroniclers, she visualized the passing of time punctuated by moments, auspicious and otherwise, which marked the lives of her ancestors. *Earth Horizon* opens with a personal image that captures her sense of history. She sees her great grandmother Polly MacAdams Dugger bidding goodbye to her home in Tennessee and clambering into an ox-cart headed to the wilds of Illinois—and to a future that became Mary Austin's birthright.

Polly Dugger's westward trek repeated itself two generations later when Austin's widowed mother, Susanna, or "Susie" (1842–96), dismantled the dark, overstuffed house in Carlinville and with her daughter and youngest son, George (1877–1933), set off for California.[2] To mother and daughter, who agreed on little else, their uprooting recapitulated the great grandmother's

courage, though Susanna's eldest son Jim (James Milo Hunter, 1866–1917) had led the way the year before and waited for them in Southern California. The year was 1888 and, in contrast to Polly Dugger's family, the Hunters traveled "tourist" on the railroad, which meant that they had Pullman accommodations without the dining privileges, green plush, or porters. Like other "Pullman pioneers," they carried a hamper with tin compartments and ate as their iron horse clattered by some of the few remaining buffalo grazing on the prairie.

Averaging a little over twenty miles an hour, the train typically stopped three or four times a day for water and fuel and for passengers to stretch their legs. The Hunters' route brought them through Denver, where they visited relatives, and across the Great Basin, which introduced Mary Hunter to the vast desert lands she came to love between the Great Salt Lake and Sacramento Pass. In San Francisco the travelers stayed at a boarding house run by more relatives, and from there sailed on a coastal steamer, by way of Santa Barbara, to Los Angeles. They found Jim working as a druggist's assistant in Monrovia, one of the half-born foothill towns east of Pasadena. Reunited, the family intended to homestead in the San Joaquin Valley where, they confidently believed, rich farmland was theirs for the asking.

That October, Susanna Hunter and her three children joined a wagon caravan that took them from the garden paradise of Pasadena—a town already known for the lavish estates of patent-medicine millionaires—across the San Fernando Valley and north to the Tejon Pass. For Mary Hunter, aged twenty and newly graduated from college, the hundred-mile, eight-day trek offered postgraduate studies in Southern Californian flora, fauna, topography, and architecture. Beyond the outskirts of Los Angeles, adobe ranch houses replaced jerry-built bungalows, and aromatic groves of imported eucalyptus gave way to wild oats, knobby grapevines, prickly pear, and copses of live oak on sunburned hills. The vegetation could not have made the grain-rich plains of Illinois feel more distant or California more exotic. As the party followed the arroyos' paths of scorched, water-gouged earth and climbed through the whale-backed Tehachapi Mountains, Mary Hunter grew nervous. At every turn, she confronted such frightening beauty it seemed to mock her with visions of grandeur. Perhaps because of the fall light or an awareness of her own frailty, she sensed an ominous presence, "something that rustled and ran" and hung "half-remotely" in wait to leap and fasten on her vitals.[3] She described this feeling not as a waking nightmare but as unappeasable desire, a hunger for whatever lay just beyond her reach.

The convoy rested at the Tejon Pass in the early dusk, as velvet shades cast their net across the San Joaquin Valley. Astride her buckskin horse, Mary, with her oversized features, thick, dust-brown hair, and opaque eyes, looked down from the mountains toward her new home. As the winding descent allowed, she could make out the dry plain broken by marshes of green tulare reeds, which reminded her of hieroglyphs in an ancient desert. To the east she saw a nest of cabins strung together with fence posts. There were no trees, no grass, just scattered balls of sagebrush and the whitish, sandy dunes lining the hollows of the great valley. In the distance, hints of settlements spotted the bare foothills that rose in waves to the peaks of the Sierra Nevada.[4] Mary Hunter believed she had come to a land in which anything seemed possible. Trying to explain for her college journal the sublimity of this stark landscape, "where the tarantulas sun themselves on our front porch," she watched her sentences growing bolder and more personal than schoolroom grammars recommended.[5] Startled by her new voice, she sent back to Carlinville an account that in observations and style anticipated her *Land of Little Rain* (1903), the book that made her reputation.

By the 1880s, the railroad-driven land booms in the West lured a different type of settler than Mary's intrepid great grandmother. When the Santa Fe line opened to California (in 1885) and price wars drove fares from the Missouri Valley as low as one dollar, speculators and entrepreneurs led westward an acquisitive generation of immigrants. Three or four times a day the Santa Fe and Southern Pacific trains deposited their freight of passengers; in 1887, the Southern Pacific alone carried 120,000 people to Los Angeles, the spreading city some dubbed "the seacoast of Iowa." The newcomers sought, according to an 1886 resolution by the California-Illinois Association, health, happiness, and longevity.[6] So many would-be Californians arrived they nicknamed each other by state: those from Connecticut answering to "nutmeggers," those from Illinois, "suckers." Mary thought the Illinois epithet fitting for her brother, Jim, one of thousands of midwesterners who took for granted, as a popular author wrote, that they could "do here more easily what they used to do in Illinois and Indiana—buy a farm, and with their first crop clear all expenses, including the price of the land."[7] In such a climate, con men who had earlier salted mining claims now hung oranges on Joshua trees or sold developments with names like Border City—accessible by balloon and providing views of the Mojave Desert—which sank to ghost towns in the first extended drought.

For the Hunters as for millions like them, California glistened as if gold dust hung in the air. Knowing next to nothing about the state except what

they gleaned from advertisements or travelers' tall tales, or the no less tall tales published by writers like Bret Harte and Mark Twain, they arrived a generation late and more than a penny short. Without farming experience, the family intended not to buy a farm but to claim one, under the terms of the Homestead Act signed by Abraham Lincoln in 1862, which allowed any U.S. citizen or intended citizen, twenty-one years or older, to secure—for a modest registration fee and a commitment to make "improvements"—160 acres of undeveloped federal land. Long before the Hunters arrived, however, arable Californian land had long been wrenched from the Indians and Spaniards, then claimed, sold, or stolen again, and accumulated into huge tracts by the railroads or by a few wealthy men who held the keys to prosperity in the form of water rights.

California emerged, to echo Charles Dudley Warner (Mark Twain's friend and collaborator on *The Gilded Age*), as the "commercial Mediterranean" of the United States.[8] Increasingly resentful of such labels and what they meant for the misuse of the state, Austin remembered her impression that the region could not "possibly be as inchoate and shallow as . . . it appears, all the uses of natural beauty slavered over with . . . purely material culture."[9] California, because of its Gordian knot of capitalism and climate, utopian myths and heart-stopping landscape, nevertheless captivated her, as it still captivates writers like Joan Didion, at once repelled and intrigued by its endless promises.

Despite her limited experience, Mary Hunter entertained few illusions about the likely success of her fortune-hunting family who, though genteel, had never been well off. Mary's father, George Hunter (1833–78) emigrated with his older brother from the small Yorkshire town of West Gilling to Alton, where he worked as a clerk to support law studies before settling in Carlinville. A sickly man and a bookish, half-hearted lawyer, George Hunter raised prize Berkshire hogs and wanted the time to watch his pigs, trees, and children grow to maturity. After years of bad health, he died in 1878, aged forty-five, leaving Susanna to raise their four young children. His decline began with service in the Civil War when, already asthmatic, he hid from Confederate troops neck-deep in the malarial ooze of a Southern swamp. Mary remembered from childhood the ever-present smell of burning pastilles and, at night, the broken rhythm of her father's breathing or frustrated cursing. Preceded by nighttime alarms and doctors' visits, his death had been expected, even by his children, yet the strain can be gauged by Mary's preoccupation with the image of "a dark, nearly black stone house with a tower and . . . people plotting."[10]

No one anticipated the death, two months later, of her younger sister, Jennie (1870–78). Having come down with diphtheria first, Mary blamed herself for bringing harm to the only person who, as she wrote, ever loved her "unselflessly." On the day of Jennie's funeral, her mother pushed Mary away "and cried aloud on God for taking Jennie."[11] Why couldn't it have been Mary? Believing herself the most unattractive and least understood member of her family, Mary clung to the memory of Jennie's love and for the rest of her life looked back on her sister as a benign, living presence.

After her husband's death, Susanna Hunter struggled to keep the family afloat. As a widow in Carlinville who had to walk past the new "drug emporium" and the Dugger building, both owned by relatives, Susanna resented the Hunters' fall in status since the first Dugger—*Daguerre*—came to America with the Marquis de Lafayette.[12] Although George had served by popular vote as magistrate of the police, the position brought more respect than reward. He left little behind, and the allotment of his military pension and back pay gave the family only a temporary safeguard against poverty. Susanna, with her knack among other talents for trimming and pressing clothes, could turn a nickel into a dollar and a daughter into a drudge. When her mother rented herself out as a nurse, ten-year-old Mary took on the pot washing, potato peeling, and care of her two-year-old brother, George.[13] "She was always an oddity," a neighbor remembered. "She had two great braids of hair on top of her head and used to wander around the yard staring at everything. I always wanted to see down into her, but I never felt that I could. I couldn't fathom her. My husband used to look out the window at her and say to me, 'I wonder what will become of Mary. I wonder what she will be.'"[14]

Raised by her mother as a Methodist, Mary absorbed (and later rejected) the tenets of Protestant religions. She accompanied Susanna to meetings of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, or WCTU, an evangelist group providing rare political platforms for women in the years after the Civil War. Reliving those years in her novel *A Woman of Genius* (1912), Austin has her heroine ask: "Does anybody remember what the woman's world was like in small towns before the days of woman's clubs? There was the world of cooking and making over . . . of church-going and missionary societies and ministerial cooperation, half grudged and half assumed as a virtue . . . [and] a world all of care and expectancy of children overshadowed by the recurrent monthly dread."[15] Susanna herself lost three babies. One relative remembered a picture of Susanna, knitting stockings for the children while she rocked a cradle with her left foot and read a book balanced on her right

knee.[16] Not everyone had her strength or will. In Carlinville, the Hunters knew a Mrs. Rogers, who, learning she was pregnant with her tenth child, jumped to her death from the roof of a buggy.[17]

Mary Hunter had seen with what pride her mother and fellow "temperancers" wore their white ribbons and tackled, or earnestly debated, issues of poverty, sex education, and birth control in accord with the popular *Robert's Rules of Order.* From an early age, she knew the Carlinville classification of drunken states: "chicken" or silly drunk, "owl" or stupidly drunk, and "hog-in-the-gutter" drunk. She recalled the tears on her mother's face as she treated a woman whose besotted husband had "accidentally" given her a bloody bruise; and, "in one of the few natural gestures" she extended to her daughter, Susanna took her hand as they listened to the first woman allowed to speak to their congregation about a woman's right *not* to bear the children of a drunkard.[18]

Susanna idolized Frances Willard, founder of the WCTU and a leader in the suffrage movement. As president of the local chapter in 1882, she invited Willard to Carlinville to address the ninth annual convention. Austin described Willard as a terrific saleswoman with "a verse of Scripture for every type of spiritual aspiration." Part of Susanna's temperance work involved similar proselytizing. A few decades later when supporting herself on the lecture circuit, Austin came to appreciate her mother's power to move an audience: "No matter . . . how taken unawares, how privately embarrassed she might be, in public Susie was never *gauche,* never anything but simply right and dignified."[19] Her Sunday school pupils clung to memories of Susanna dressed in black alpaca and exhorting them to resist sin. Observing her mother's participation in the church and the WCTU, Mary learned how small communities of women could have a hand in shaping national policies; she later urged similar models on the Hoover and FDR administrations. When she joined the Broom Brigade, the girls' division of the WCTU, Mary vowed to keep her chastity and, lest she be taken lightly, signed a pledge with other members of a group called the Caldwell's not to marry for a minimum of five years without consent of the other signatories.[20]

Until the day of Susanna's abrupt announcement that she had served her time as wife and mother and that they were bound for California, Mary had given little thought to where she might live. In times to come she argued the regional nature of art, which grows from the artist's association with a specific landscape and its past, but as a young woman she intended to write or, if necessary, to teach, either of which she could do as well in one place

as another. The first sight of the thirty-thousand acre Rancho El Tejon changed her horizons and marked the beginning of her understanding, not only about who she was, but where she needed to be.

In December 1888, the family settled seven miles to the north of the Rancho El Tejon, whose celebrated owner, General Edward Fitzgerald Beale, played an important part in Mary Hunter's life. Sixty-six when he met the twenty-year old woman, General Beale could boast great wealth and a legendary past. At the request of the U.S. Army and its commander in chief, President James Buchanan, he had driven a train of camels from Texas to Fort Tejon along the Santa Fe Trail. General Beale struck friends as "a sparkling combination of scholar, gentleman and Indian fighter."[21] Ferociously independent, and quick to anger, he once challenged the commissioner of Indian affairs to a duel. Contemporaries honored Beale as a hero in the Mexican-American War, who—accompanied by his Delaware Indian servant and his friend Kit Carson—slipped through enemy lines to bring life-saving reinforcements for Colonel Stephen Kearney's starving troops near San Diego. Disguised as a Mexican, Beale took to Washington the news of gold at Sutter's Mill. His 1857 surveys of Western wilderness would prove the feasibility of a transcontinental railroad and a wagon road from Fort Defiance, New Mexico, to the Colorado River.

Before accepting his post superintending Indian affairs for California and Nevada, in 1853, Beale worked for W. H. Aspinwall and Commodore Stockton, land barons whose interests competed with those of Native and with immigrant peoples. According to his biographer, he "sought pecuniary success with a single-minded intensity" and profited from "every government position he held."[22] As commissioner of Indian affairs, Beale had a reputation for swift punishment based on firm policies, yet he also set aside a parcel of the Rancho El Tejon—the Mexican land grant he later purchased—for the Sebastian Indian Reservation. Austin praised him for being the first government official to recognize that "it is wiser for Indians to become the best sort of Indians rather than poor imitation whites."[23] A storyteller and something of a philosopher, the young Beale had written in his journal, "Thoughts, feelings, passions and events—these are the real moral timekeepers. What is it to me the mere ticking of a pendulum!"[24] His existential positions on time and meaning in human lives underlie Austin's

lifelong thinking and offered her, as a struggling young woman, the keys to her independence.

Beale fascinated her as a larger than life explorer (like her, he was slightly under average height) and a raconteur passionate about his country, his adopted state, and himself. Whenever Beale, who alternated between East and West, returned to his two-hundred-thousand-acre ranch, he spoke to Mary Hunter about the land and its people he had known as an administrator, proprietor, rancher, soldier, and trained naval officer. Since her father's death, Mary had been drawn to older men, among them a Carlinville scientist whose insect net and specimen case she envied as a girl. (The autobiographical heroine of *A Woman of Genius* goes out of her way to catch a glimpse of a man who reminds her of her father.) At Blackburn College Mary had surprised her family by majoring first in psychology, then botany. She would speak of having "the born novelist's identification with alien personalities, [and] the scientist's itch to understand by getting inside" things.[25] Beale understood her ambitions, and probably her need for a surrogate father. Though he had slowed down with ailments and alcoholism and had only a few years to live when Austin met him, this powerful westerner who did much to bring about modern California gave the young woman a more practical and enduring education than she received from Blackburn College.

Wary of her daughter's interests and companions, and knowing Beale's reputation for manipulating the law to acquire settlers' property, Susanna cautioned Mary about pestering their benefactor. In fact, he liked nothing better than to engage a listener with stories of California, whether past or present, truth or fiction. "A Native by the name of Lopez was working on a ditch and sat under a tree to eat his lunch," Mary quotes Beale in her journal. "He took out his knife and dug up a wild onion to eat with his tortilla and uncovered grains of gold." Beale gave her a basket once used to pan the gold discovered at Mission San Fernando; she in turn presented him with a poem she had written about wild hyacinths. Beale showed the poem to the wife of the Civil War general John Logan, who sent the young author an encouraging note. "I don't know what she knows about poetry," Mary responded. "People seem to think you just want to be praised, but I want to feel sure."[26]

Beale's daughter-in-law described life at the ranch as conducted in the Spanish style, the owner addressed as "patron" and she as "patrona," to whom their wards came for advice or justice. This aristocratic ease bore no relation to the life of the Hunter family, who had left their few comforts

behind. Staking three claims in Kern County for a total of 480 acres—Susanna's and Jim's required tenancy, Mary's did not—they set up housekeeping on Jim's land, situated four miles southeast of the present community of Mettler Station, and made the required visits to Susanna's. "There was something quaintly ancestral in our settling in," Austin wrote of their one-room, calico-curtained cabin, with bunks pressed against the wall.[27] In terms of bad luck, she was right. They could not have come at a worse time: dry, drier, and driest, the locals described the years from 1888 well into the 1890s. In the first year of drought, she observed that "quail mated sparingly; the second year the wild oats matured no seed; the third, cattle died in their tracks with their heads pointing toward the dried watercourses. And that year the scavengers were as black as the plague all across the mesa and up the treeless, tumbled hills."[28] The Hunters' scant income came from leasing grazing rights to nonexistent grass. Mary and young George tried to prop the tenant cattle upright, for once the animals lay down near the settlers' water barrels, they stayed down. It took them days to die before workers from the Rancho El Tejon came to drag the carcasses away. According to the ranch hands, coyotes drank the still-warm blood, buzzards perched on every fence post, and wildcats grew bold. "It is a very squalid tragedy—that of the dying brutes and the scavenger birds," Austin wrote in *The Land of Little Rain.* "I suppose the dumb creatures know nearly as much of death as do their betters, who have only the more imagination."[29]

As the first six months wore out, Mary Hunter collapsed. Since she had been unwell before the trip, Susanna attributed the "breakdown" to lingering anxieties from Carlinville. Two long periods of ill health during her college years notwithstanding, Austin would blame malnutrition.[30] "For settlers on the Tejon there was not as much as a mess of greens to be raised or gathered. . . . There was no butter," and canned milk had to be "diluted with stale water from a dry-season waterhole."[31] They ate mostly rabbits and venison, purchased from the grizzly-looking "derelicts" they more generously called "Mountain Men." Mary, who could not bring herself to eat canned food or game, stumbled one day on a profusion of wild grapes growing in a canyon, and after a week's gorging began to revive. "Malnutrition" seems the perfect metaphor for a young woman starved for meaningful work and affection. If nothing else, the incident brought the realization that "there was something you could do about unsatisfactory conditions besides being heroic or a martyr to them . . . and that was getting out to hunt for the remedy." This came as "a revolutionary discovery" for a young lady in 1880s.[32]

With regained health and energy, she now felt plagued "by an anxiety to know."[33] Some mornings she awoke to a voice calling her to explore secret places. Her mother, repelled by the vastness of the San Joaquin Valley, preferred the social amenities of Bakersfield where summer temperatures soared to 120 degrees Fahrenheit. Then a growing town with manure-thick streets, plank sidewalks, and no indoor plumbing, Bakersfield was a notorious breeding ground for malaria and typhoid. According to Norman Angell—a young ranch hand who later won the Nobel Peace Prize—Bakersfield claimed about two thousand inhabitants, five hundred of whom were prostitutes serving the needs of men from a hundred miles in every direction.[34]

Susanna could not grasp her daughter's dislike of the town or her affinity for open air. "I am not homesick with the sky, nor with the hills," Mary wrote in her journal, "though sometimes I am afraid of them." In this she differed from Susanna and from those many newcomers to Southern California who nursed a profound nostalgia for the landscapes they had left. Mary felt homesick in her own house, or in any of the houses that Susanna called "home-like" and "beautifully furnished."[35] She saw the whole aesthetic history of the Midwest enshrined in the "whatnot," an open-shelved cabinet used to display a hodgepodge of treasures from Indian arrowheads to tropical shells engraved with the Lord's Prayer. Not only at odds with her mother, she baffled her peers, who shrugged off a young woman reluctant to dance (her personal choice and a Methodist prohibition) and preferring earnest talk to flirtation.

Looking at the new environment from her double perspective of poet and scientist, Mary compared in her journal the blue shadows of bush lupine to the rusty, brown-black shadows of sage brush. She noted the white crest of the Sierras almost floating above the flatlands, the changes in season and sunlight (the air dripped with light, and night seemed to come not from the sky but up from the land), the ways of animals and men, and how the Indians made canoes from saplings and reeds. Her explorations, alone and with others, to hunt game-birds in the tulares or to camp overnight on the road to Bakersfield, allowed an inventory of her surroundings. She roamed the Rancho El Tejon and the lower San Joaquin Valley as another woman might tend her house and garden. The sketches she made of wildflowers and sheepherders' equipment, and the photographs she took of people in the landscape, became her way of marking territory. They suggest the road not taken, a career she might have chosen as a visual artist. California had, for several decades, lured painters such as the German Albert

Bierstadt, the Scot William Keith, and before them perhaps the most compelling of American landscape painters, the English-born Thomas Moran, who confronted the majesty of Western landscapes in a way that Austin came to mirror in her writing. Family troubles and poor health aside, she knew that she had found her place in this bleached, profitless land of natural wonders.

General Beale, no longer the administrator of resettled Indians, had come to know and respect those living on his property. With the help of Beale, and later of Charles Lummis, whom she met in Los Angeles, Mary found friends among her Indian neighbors in a region where tribes shrank daily in size and power, at the mercy of any white man ready to kill or rape or steal. Within a year or two, few beside Mary—and almost never, in her mind, the Bureau of Indian Affairs—knew the customs and characteristics of California's Indians: how they had lived and how they needed to live. As the "Ishi" case suggests, not many could tell one tribe from another, or cared to do so. Only the intervention of the anthropologist Alfred Kroeber allowed Ishi, believed the last survivor of his tribe, to live out the remainder of his short life, albeit in the University of California's anthropological museum. Like Kroeber, though aggressively an amateur, Mary dedicated herself to understanding the customs (and to a lesser extent the languages) of California Indians, whose diverse tribes had long ago parceled out the region. Yet however much she learned from the writing of anthropologists or from Beale's wide experience, she learned more from first-hand observation. She encountered Indian tribes local to the southern San Joaquin, including the interior Chumash and Yokuts. A village next to Fort Tejon, she discovered, was home to members of at least four tribes; and she soon became familiar with the Serranos, Cahuillas, Gabrielenos, and Mojaves in areas near Bakersfield.[36]

Mary Hunter befriended cowboys, Basque sheepherders, and Mexican *vaqueros,* along with men like Kern River Jim, who went by one of the place names of his Yokuts people. She met Pete Miller, the renowned bear killer of El Tejon, whom tradition credited with three hundred kills; and José Jesus Lopez, a descendant of early Spanish colonists and manager of the ranch, himself celebrated for driving eighty-five hundred sheep across the Nevada desert to Green River, Wyoming, during the drought of 1879. Mary especially liked General Beale's store manager, James Vineyard Rosemeyere (sometimes spelled *Rosemyer*), and his part-Serrano and part–Gabrieleno Indian wife, who spoke both languages and sang songs of mourning during the fiesta of the Day of the Dead (Dia de los Muertos). When Jimmy

"had a good horse under him, a saddle of carved leather-work, *botas,* deep-roweled spurs and a silver-trimmed sombero, [he] knew himself a handsome figure of a man." Rosemeyere gave Mary a treasured camel bell and cord from Beale's Camel Corps, which, hanging above her desk, set "in motion all the echoes of Romance."[37]

Characters from these years fill her stories. The "walking woman," for example, whom the cowboys called Mrs. Walker, roamed the southern San Joaquin with a black bag attached to a stick slung over her shoulder. The men said she was a good woman and would not allow liberties. Susanna had her doubts and said she looked suspiciously like a woman who had borne a child. Some thought the walking woman mad; others thought she made sense most days and had reasons for her solitary walking. Austin tells her story in *Lost Borders* (1909), where she also writes about an Englishman in search of a cure for tuberculosis, a husband abandoning his family to find a cache of gold, and a woman who surprises herself by coming to appreciate the maternal passions of a prostitute. The sheepherders, scum of the earth to many, won Austin's affectionate respect. In hindsight, it seems odd that when she cast herself as playwright and director she never wrote a play about the people who contributed to her book about sheepherding, *The Flock,* known as "the book of Johnny Rosemeyere" and indebted to the other sheep owners and herders "who, wittingly or unwittingly, have contributed to the performances set down in it."[38]

Among the tales Mary heard, she took to heart a story from a man named Sebastiano, a Serrano Indian acquaintance and later a character in *The Flock*. Sebastiano told her how John C. Frémont, the Western pioneer known as "Pathfinder," cheated him when he ferried Frémont safely across the flooded Kern River and got nothing for his labor. These first-hand accounts of early pioneers and California lore took her beyond other greenhorns, who knew Southern California mostly through reading Helen Hunt Jackson's popular *Ramona* (1884). The romance about a part-Indian orphan raised among the Spanish aristocracy, *Ramona* established the myth of the benign era of Spanish settlers, above all missionaries, whose presence ironically if not intentionally began the decimation of the Native population. The book's popularity drew thousands of tourists to towns where the heroine, in the manner of George Washington, had ostensibly slept—or, in Ramona's case, married.

Mary read *Ramona* but drew more from local writers, especially those publishing in the *Overland Monthly* on practical, everyday matters such as dairying in California. She determined to write her own book about the

region, regardless of how long it took, and with that goal in mind she kept a notebook about sheepherding, separate from one about plants and local wildlife, and another into which she poured torrents of unconnected words like so much "automatic writing."[39] The explorer and California surveyor Clarence King claimed that his field, geology, posed religious, aesthetic, and moral issues in addition to the scientific; it trained the imagination, he argued, because one person could not look deeper into the ground than another. If not deep into the ground, Mary looked widely and intensely, training her imagination and jotting down on any scrap of paper words and images that represented a constant assault on her sensibilities. Only when she came to use these notes in her writing could she put them aside.

At the beginning of June 1889, the Hunters moved to Rose Station, a small junction eight miles south of Mettler Station and eighteen miles from Susanna's favored Bakersfield. Life at Rose Station brought some physical comfort to the family. The generous Edward Beale lent them two cows along with a dilapidated but comfortable adobe house. In exchange, Mary and Susanna were to cook for travelers passing through, while George watched the livestock. Susanna hoped to save money by selling hay and provisions, such as freshly baked bread and eggs at thirty cents a dozen. Jim bought another ten acres, speculating against the odds on future irrigation.[40] Their surroundings changed daily at the station, where migrants and tradesmen rested overnight and moved on the next day. Susanna thought that anyone stopping would think that all Californians lived in wagons. In the morning light she saw "whole families rolled up in blankets like mummies lying on the ground." She never realized that people on the ranch, and many beyond it, considered homesteaders, including genteel ones from Carlinville, Illinois, marginally superior to gypsies.

At the best of times, Mary Hunter felt herself a changeling. Her needs and tastes differed so drastically from those of her siblings and mother that she thought of herself as two separate people: "I-Mary," a confident young woman embraced by the world, and "Mary-by-herself," an outcast, as her phrase suggests, isolated from society and from her kin. It did not help that Susanna made a cult of her handsome older son. The fiercely competitive Mary resented the deference paid to Jim, who expected and got what she had to earn twice over. Taking to the role like a duck to sewerage, Jim liked nothing better than to make pronouncements about the qualities or roles of "women," knowing full well his sister conformed to none of them. Hardly docile or self-sacrificing, Mary responded by claiming areas he had staked out as his own—notably, college oratory and essay writing—and

then openly pitying his failures. "I could be abased, I should be delighted to be imposed upon," the heroine of *A Woman of Genius* says, "but if I paid out self-immolation, I wanted something for my money, and I didn't consider I was getting it with my brother for whom I smuggled notes and copied compositions."[41] After Susanna's death, Mary found a scrapbook full of work she herself had written for her brother, signed with *his* name in her mother's hand.

Mary Hunter took pleasure in her contrariness at a time when women won praise for their altruism, purity, and piety. She rebelled against the strictures of her sex as well as the middleclass, Midwestern life she and writers such as Sherwood Anderson and Sinclair Lewis would pillory. Illinois friends and neighbors she labeled "Carlinvillains." Insisting that she had never wanted to be a man, she demanded a man's rights, in this case her older brother's prerogatives, and argued a woman's need for money, which she understood as power. Naturally quick herself, she took Jim's measured responses as a sign of intellectual inferiority. When looking back to these times, however, she recalled with affection their arguments about everything from Herbert Spencer's version of evolution to why oysters make pearls. "For the source of the unhappy alienations of later years," she wrote, "one must go further and deeper."[42]

Her story of the four-minute egg, told in *Earth Horizon,* captures the family tensions. Hating soft-boiled eggs, Mary asked her mother to cook hers for a minute or two before adding the others to the pot. Tending to her daughter's egg was something her mother refused to do. "Oh, Mary," she would say, "why can't you take your food like the *rest* of the family?" Or, when Mary prepared her own food: "Do you always have to have something different from the *rest* of the family?" Jim, "playing his part as the complaisant favorite," delivered judgment. " 'Somehow you never seem to have any feeling for what a HOME should be.' " Mary decided that mothers like Susanna drove their daughters away from domestic life by letting them know that "a different sort of boiled egg was more than a woman had a right to claim on her own behalf."[43]

Apportioning praise or blame about any family rarely makes sense, and it makes less sense when only one person's account speaks across a century. Unlike Mary, Jim and George left no record of their feelings, though George's pained letters to her in later years indicate how much his story differed from his sister's. Each of the Hunters had more than his or her share of hardship. Jim longed for the life of a country doctor, while Susanna, who distrusted doctors, refused to borrow the money necessary for his training.

She preferred immediate income to distant wealth—and acquired neither. George, by every account a good-natured, if scapegrace child, grew up almost like the ward of his grudging sister; he did become a doctor, with unforeseen consequences.

Still without her teaching license, Mary stayed a year at Rose Station before she found a temporary teaching position at the Old River Primary School, not far from Bakersfield. Darius Pyle, a former teacher and manager of the Mountain View Dairy, oversaw the school. The owner of the dairy, indeed of a chain of ranches, James Haggin made his fortune from moneylending and investments in Wells Fargo, the Anaconda Copper Company, and George Hearst's mining ventures. His business partner, the Bay Area politician William B. Carr, was said to belong to "a ring of mercenary bandits who steal to get office and get office to steal."[44] At the time Mary boarded with Darius and Mary Pyle in the fall of 1889, Haggin owned more than four hundred thousand acres in the Central Valley.

Mary took charge of the Pyles' three children and particularly liked their daughter Dena. For them she composed the poems that form part of *Children Sing in the Far West* (not published until 1928), including one about the Australian ladybug imported to control aphids:

> Ladybug, Ladybug, fly away home,
> The scale bug is down in the orchard alone,
> He is eating his way to the topmost limb,
> Ladybug, Ladybug, go and eat him![45]

The dairy farm, sprawling across five thousand acres, employed Swiss immigrants to tend cows and Chinese laborers to cook, garden, and irrigate. The house itself, a five-room ranch, sat on three acres of lawn and trees. The situation suited Mary so well that, when she failed to pass the licensing examination in December and lost her job, she stayed on at the dairy, contemplating a textbook about teaching and supporting herself as an itinerant tutor. To visit her new students, she drove a cart from house to house and in the process taught herself about the "intricate interrelations of land, water, crops, politics, and personal life in the great Valley." Nothing, she learned, figured so prominently in Southern California as the presence or absence of water, the evidence of which she saw in the chicanery and violence of men "skirmishing over water rights."[46]

One of the major skirmishers, Henry Miller, a friend of General Beale, was a slow-mannered, German immigrant given to business suits, cowboy

boots, a diamond tie stud, and the exclamation "Chesus!" He began his American life as a butcher's assistant in San Francisco. After cornering the beef trade, he and his partner, another former butcher named Charles Lux, bought huge tracts of land for grazing, one hundred thousand acres near Los Banos alone. People claimed that Miller, whose holdings were said to equal the area of Belgium twice over, could travel from Idaho to Mexico, camping each night on his own land. As chief of the San Joaquin and King's River Canal and Irrigation Company, he controlled—along with men like Haggin and Carr—the price *and* availability of water to small farmers. Miller and Lux had come into conflict with Haggin and Carr ostensibly over a piece of swampland on the Kern River west of Bakersfield. The real issue came down to water, and so did the ensuing court case that lasted from May 1879 through multiple appeals to its inconclusive end in 1886. The courts offered little help and were, in any case, beyond the means of ordinary farmers. As an old man, Miller would say that *Lux v. Haggin* had cost him twenty-five million dollars. For observers seeking to protect their own interests, the case, which managed to legitimize competing water-law systems—the English riparian law (of riverside ownership) and the Spanish doctrine of appropriation based on prior use—underscored the confusion of the state's water-distribution policies.[47]

While farmers protected their ditches with shotguns, employees of the land barons destroyed dikes and tore out water gates. Elmo Pyle, a member of Mary Hunter's adopted family, found himself looking into the muzzle of a settler's gun when he went out to mend a gate. Battles over water affected everyone. Even John Muir, his name synonymous with conservation, supported the so-called reclamation of the San Joaquin Valley. The term essentially meant *claiming,* rather than *re*claiming, or more accurately, the grabbing of land that may or may not have been arable. Writing for the *San Francisco Bulletin* in 1874, Muir argued that irrigation mimicked the natural flooding process, whereas failure to irrigate "degraded" the land by allowing "atmospheric weathering." It appeared to Muir that "all the physical and moral brightness" of Tulare Basin landowners flowed "directly from a ditch," and he predicted that "true homes embowered in trees and lovingly broidered with flowers" would eventually replace "cheerless shanties."[48] Muir's comments illustrate some of the personal and public complexities of reclamation—and how its supporters tended to couch their arguments in platitudes about home and progress.

In their modest way, the Hunter family's fortunes speak to larger issues of the arid West, where the confiscation of land and rerouting of water

made multimillionaires of those with the luck or daring to steal what they could not buy. As Mary soon learned, the prefix *pa* in Northern Paiute means "water," the key to survival for Indian tribes and for those who came after. With few accessible lakes or, in the south, year-round rivers and creeks, the Hunters and other newcomers relied for water on the uncertain rainy season from November to March. According to Austin, many homesteaders believed that wherever enough people settled, an irrigating ditch magically followed. She suspected that "pipe-dream" to be driving her brother and their neighbors, the would-be developers reduced to gamblers. Water controversies would play a continuing and at times a central role in Austin's life, including her literary life. She published *The Ford,* her novel about these issues, in 1917.

During the two years she spent at Mountain View Dairy, Mary saw little of her family, who had moved closer to Bakersfield. She had clashed with her mother when Susanna invested her share of the family's shrinking capital in a farm that Susanna and Jim owned jointly. Angry about the waste of money, Mary believed that her overworked mother should move to Los Angeles where she had relatives and that George should enroll there in a Methodist college. Susanna and Jim had intended to make their first year's mortgage payment on the farm from the sale of grapes, which in their innocence they supposed to be raisin, not wine stock. Out came the vines, and with them Mary's hope of at least a small nest egg or dowry. Austin compared the relationship between the mother and son to a bad marriage. She avoided Susanna until the eve of her wedding in 1891.[49]

When Mary Hunter agreed to marry Stafford Wallace Austin (1861–1931) in the summer of 1890, she surprised no one more than her mother. She was not conventionally attractive with the "wax-doll prettiness" valued in that era, and to Susanna she seemed an ungainly and isolated girl destined for "spinsterhood." In retrospect, Austin did not accept that she had been as homely or awkward as her family led her to believe. *Intense* she could understand, and overly sensitive, but not, as Susanna charged, unfeminine, immune to the wisdom of pleasing, or fundamentally unfit for marriage. "What would I do with the people after I have drawn them to me?" she had asked.[50] In *The Basket Woman* (1904), a book of Indian tales for children, Austin makes a parable of her experience. "You should try to be

natural," the meadowsweet—sounding like Susanna Hunter—tells the little sugar pine, "do not be so stiff, and then everyone will love you though you are so plain." The flowers chime in, "If only you were not so odd." The sugar pine protests, "I would do very well as I am if they would let me be happy in my own way."[51] Now, optimistic in her hope or inexperience, she decided that love would come naturally in marriage. Years later she would write of a woman author in her story "Frustrate" (1912), who, if she "had known a little more, just a very little," might not have gone through with her wedding.[52]

Seven years older than his fiancée, Wallace had grown up on a sugar plantation near Hilo, on the island of Hawaii, where his father served as a high-ranking government secretary before losing the bulk of his fortune in 1885. His mother's family traced roots back to the Revolutionary War hero Edward Clark. Wallace, a graduate of the University of California, Berkeley, was shy and noncommittal, which may explain why people thought him absentminded. Dena Pyle, only ten when the Austins courted, remembered Wallace as "a strange man, a million-dollar dreamer," and may have known that, like Jim Hunter, Wallace speculated in land.[53] The Pyles referred to Wallace and his fellows as "remittance men," those paid by their families to keep their distance. Intellectually inclined and fascinated by winemaking, Wallace seemed superior to Mary's other suitors, among them a cheesemaker who worked for a company dairy, a locomotive engineer, and an ex-cowboy turned farmer.[54] Wallace might have reminded her of her father, whom she idealized for his "fine intellectual attainments," "rare conversational powers," and "remarkably retentive memory—a man to whom it was a pleasure to listen."[55] The couple, who shared an interest in botany, met at the home of friends at a time when men in the West outnumbered women fifteen to one. (During the 1870s only half the men in California could expect to marry, and those who did ran the risk of losing a wife to a better prospect.) Statistics mattered little to Wallace, who was smitten by the intellectual young woman, while she appreciated a man with whom she could talk. Alienated from her family and with few friends, she was also at a kind of crossroads. Still without her teaching certificate, she learned in July that the Haggin firm, which had been selling off parcels of land in the area to people like Wallace, intended to close the dairy and evict her adopted family.

After a short courtship, which consisted of buggy rides and conversations on the dairy lawn, Mary went home to her mother's house to be married. "My family thought I was doing well to marry Henry," her character says

in "Frustrate." "He had no bad habits, and his people were well-to-do; and then I wasn't particularly pretty or rich. I have never been very popular with young men; I was too eager. Not for them, you understand; but just living and doing things seemed to me such a good game."[56] The wedding took place the evening of 19 May 1891. Over fifty people attended, with Austin's student, Dena Pyle, as the single bridesmaid. Jim Hunter served as best man. The Austins' wedding photograph shows the bride and groom in profile with their shoulders touching and eyes not meeting: he sporting wire-rimmed glasses and cropped handlebar moustaches of the day; she with curling bangs, dark brows, and a bit of festive white lace pinned to her drab shirtfront. The bride and groom did not exchange rings. Wallace gave Mary a velvet box containing a pearl-handled pen, which she valued more than a pearl necklace: "it means I am to go on with my writing."[57]

The couple took a three-day wedding trip before returning to their new home, a one-story board-and-batten house, to be at some imaginary time surrounded by alfalfa fields and vineyards. Taking her husband at his word, Austin devoted her days to writing, so much so that the dishes piled high enough to shock the sensibilities of neighbors. Dena Pyle remembered the new bride washing dishes in a trance. She'd "look out the window and not know whether she had a cat or dish in hand."[58] After barely four months, the Austins admitted failure and gave up farming. Early in 1892 they moved to Bakersfield, where Wallace got a job with an irrigation company and Austin wrote her early stories "The Mother of Felipe" and "The Conversion of Ah Lew Sing," a spoof about religious hypocrisy and, more seriously, traffic in Chinese women.[59]

From the beginning, Austin naively assumed that she could earn a living by writing. Apart from Bret Harte and Mark Twain, few writers maintained themselves and their families without inherited wealth, or success with plays or lectures, or plain good luck. Harte, having accepted ten thousand dollars a year to write exclusively for *The Atlantic Monthly,* wrote little and lived to see his literary coin drop to almost nothing. Twain's lectures, and his wife's allowance, supported their lavish Connecticut house at Nook Farm, while William Dean Howells, one of the era's most prolific writers, drew a steady $5,000 salary editing *The Atlantic* and later a guaranteed $10,000 (or well over $200,000 in today's dollars) for writing a novel a year and a column for *Harper's Weekly.*[60] Harper & Brothers also put him to work soliciting and reading manuscripts.

Austin began to understand that good writing did not guarantee either income or readership. The experiences of the last two years had sharpened

her awareness of the world and her sense of who she was. Determined to write about the West, she concentrated on sorting out her voluminous notes on Spanish folklore and winnowing lists of adjectives; she wanted "to find the exact word for the cries of mules—'maimed noises,'" she called them in *The Land of Little Rain*—or "the difference between the sound of ripe figs dropping and the patter of olives shaken down by the wind."[61] When she looked back at these early writings, Austin singled out an unlikely model, the Indian-born Englishman, Rudyard Kipling. In the year of her marriage, the twenty-four-year-old Kipling, after thousands of miles of traveling throughout the United States, published (like Charles Dickens before him) a book called *American Notes.* Kipling, who decried the West's unchecked growth and waste of natural resources, appealed to Austin because of his language and his method. She had never read any short stories resembling "their slightly mocking detachment, their air of completely disengaging the author from any responsibility for the moral implications of the scene." Kipling's "strange and far away" tales set a standard for Austin's own.[62]

"The Mother of Felipe," Austin's first published story, appeared in the *Overland Monthly* for October 1892. It begins panoramically with a description of Antelope Valley, which Austin calls "a country to be avoided by the solitary traveler, with its hard, inhospitable soil, and its vast monotony of contour and color. A country sublime in its immensity of light, and soft unvarying tints—fawn, and olive, and pearl, with glistening stretches of white sand, and brown hollows between the hills, out of which the gray and purple shadows creep at night. A country laid visibly under the ban of eternal silence." (To the southwest of Bakersfield, Antelope Valley today contains the cities of Palmdale and Lancaster and a large military base.) Dropping to a close-up focus, the narrator follows a train of wagons belonging to "the class commonly styled 'Greasers,'" their "mixed origin plainly visible in the dark hue of the skin, the crisp, coarse hair, the high-arched foot and the Madonna-like outlines of the women's heads."[63] Driving the last wagon is a woman, the mother of the dying Felipe. Like Kipling, Austin tends to avoid judgments about her characters and their world. Her oracular if sometimes ironical tone grants her characters dignity without hiding their foibles. This first story differs from, say, Bret Harte's local-color sketches in its lack of sentimentality and condescension; at the same time, Austin's storyteller speaks with intimacy about people like Felipe's mother and the solitary places in which they find themselves. Her understated compassion for the mother, as for the eccentrics, lost souls, and

other dispossessed people she came to write about, seem in a distant way reflections of herself as outsider. Her kin were not the Hunter family, and in time not her husband, but the strangers who lit her imagination.

Whatever their personal difficulties early in their marriage, neither Mary nor Wallace felt comfortable in Bakersfield, where they claimed that neighbors despised them for their college educations. Mary certainly craved better company, especially the writers, editors, and intellectuals she associated with San Francisco. To please his wife, Wallace appealed to his brother Frank, who proposed that they join him in San Francisco where the brothers could work together on a water-reclamation project in the Sierra Nevada. Wallace went first, and Mary followed soon after.

Ina Coolbrith, the first poet laureate of California, called San Francisco the "City of mists and of dreams!"[64] A businessman would have described it as a major financial center since the gold rush days, and it was already by 1860 the fourteenth-largest city in the Union. Religious zealots railed at the unholy city deserving the wrath of an angry god; many believed the 1906 earthquake an appropriate punishment. With a reputation for saloons, sex, and anarchy, San Francisco also offered restaurants such as The Poodle Dog and Delmonicos, where, it was said, Society dined with her husband on the first floor and trifled with her reputation on the second. Whatever happened on the third, where dining rooms served as supper bedrooms, spoke for itself. Mrs. Frank Leslie reported in 1877 "that in other cities the *demi-monde* imitates the fashions of the *beau-monde,* but that in San Francisco the case is reversed."[65] Yet the city outdid Los Angeles in ways beyond unbridled drinking and sexual license; it boasted (with due deference to the much-married Mrs. Leslie) a nascent *society,* and society's backing of institutions like the Opera House.

San Francisco had long featured writers and editors such as Mark Twain and his then friend Bret Harte, contributor and first editor (in 1868) of the West's best-known literary magazine, the *Overland Monthly.* To Austin, as to Frank Norris, her near but unmet neighbor on Telegraph Hill, the city appeared a literary and artistic mecca. Twain, Harte, Ina Coolbrith, and Ambrose Bierce believed they had established a Western literature. Jack London, Frank Norris, and Mary Austin, who was asked to join the editorial staff of *Out West* in 1902, helped prove them right. Then there were the popular if now overlooked contemporaries, such as Charles Warren Stoddard, once Twain's secretary and cofounder of *The Californian,* an early literary weekly. Stoddard's friend, the poet Joaquin Miller, wrote lines that "boomed with the pomposity of a brass band; floods, fires, hurricanes,

extravagantly blazing sunsets, Amazonian women, Mark Twain [and] the thunder of a herd of buffaloes."[66] After Coolbrith persuaded Miller that the muses would not welcome anyone called Cincinnatus, he shed his given name and, with her encouragement, rewrote his poems. Keeping the beaded moccasins and sombrero, "that great vulgar fraud," in the words of another eccentric, Bayard Taylor, cast off his jailhouse past and Indian wife to dub himself the "Byron of the Rockies"—before his elevation to "the poet of the Sierras."[67]

Ina Coolbrith attended to many writers in the Bay Area. A generation older than the twenty-three-old Austin, she welcomed the young writer who sought advice about publishing. When Austin crossed the threshold of the Oakland Free Library on Fourteenth Street, she found its beautiful librarian, with long tendrils of curly light hair and dangling earrings, sitting on her chair as if it were a throne. To a small boy in short knee pants, Jack London, Coolbrith had been a "noble goddess." Isadora Duncan, another Californian, believed her father fell in love with the woman who, in Duncan's words, had "eyes that glowed with burning fire and passion."[68] To Austin, appropriately, Coolbrith had the look of someone "accustomed to uninhibited space and wide horizons."[69] A descendant of the Mormon leader Joseph Smith, Coolbrith had been driven, like other Mormons, from one state to another, eventually emigrating from Illinois to Southern California, where after the death of her only child and a scandalous divorce from an abusive husband, she changed her name. In the years between she had achieved celebrity. Referring to Coolbrith, Charlie Stoddard, and himself, Bret Harte quipped:

> There is a poetic divinity—
> Number One of the "Overland Trinity"—
> Who uses the Muses
> Pretty much as she chooses—
> This dark-eyed, young Sapphic divinity.[70]

Austin found her "entirely kind and matter-of-fact," and the generous Coolbrith taught her how to prepare her first manuscript for the *Overland Monthly.*

At the time she worked on "The Mother of Felipe" in Bakersfield, Austin learned to her surprise that she was pregnant. However unexpected the news, she promised herself that she "would give birth to the smartest child that was ever born."[71] She doubled her working hours, hardly eating or

sleeping. "Secure in the traditional preciousness of the young wife and expectant mother," she did not object when, after two short months in San Francisco, Wallace proposed their moving to the Owens Valley in Inyo County. "Paper and pencil could be had there as well as anywhere," she once again consoled herself. She did not know about the risky and underfinanced nature of the water project, or that the brothers lacked "any experience whatsoever of the work in hand."[72] For the next seven years she would make her home in the long, high valley and the region she named "the land of little rain."