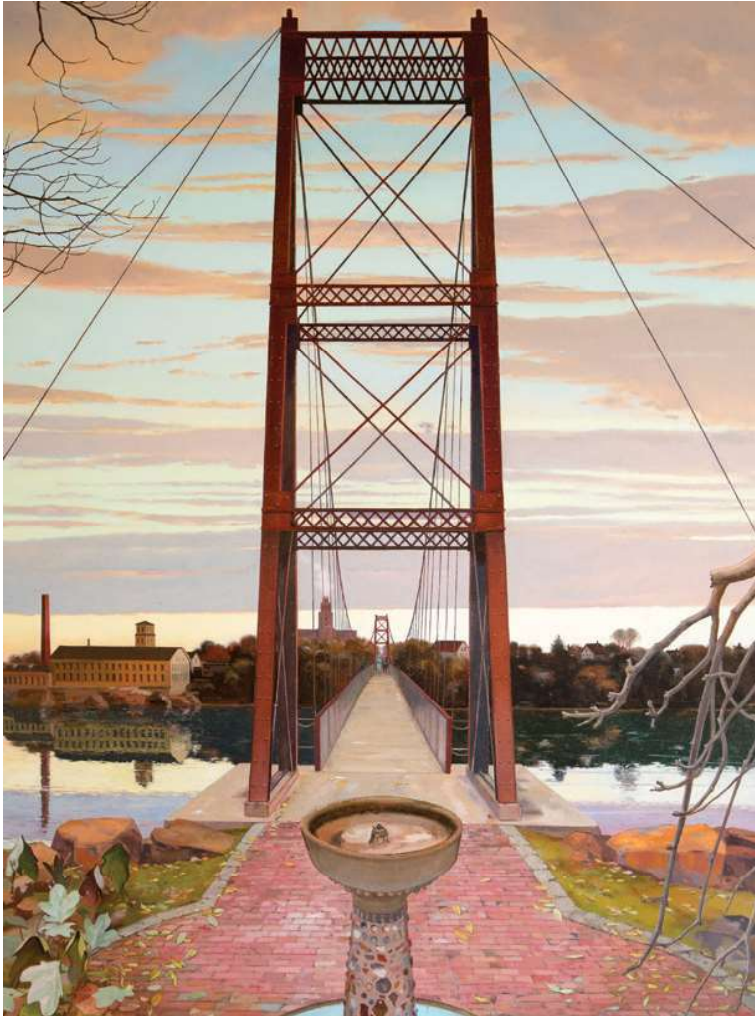


## JOHN MOORE

*Fountain and Footbridge*, 2019  
Oil on canvas, 72 x 54 in



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND HIRSCHL & ADLER MODERN, NEW YORK  
PHOTOGRAPH BY KEVIN JOHNSON

## JORY POST

### Creek Views

Exploring the Central Coast's Big Creek Nature Reserve over the decades

**F**ifty years of reflection necessitate some degree of distortion in the retelling.

Thus I approach the semicentennial anniversary of my lengthy affair with Big Creek on Swanton Road without revisionist intentions, right hand placed on a stack of memoirs as bibles—*The Townie*, by Andre Dubus III; *Wild*, by Cheryl Strayed; *Autobiography of a Face*, by Lucy Grealy—on which I swear to minimize fictional embellishment and recall details as best I can.

I lack photos of this journey. In remembering that some ethnic tribe members don't like their pictures taken for fear their soul will be captured in the reflective image and removed from their bodies, I never felt comfortable bringing a camera to record, capture, and remove the soul from this place I felt lucky to have found.

My introversion as a twelve-year-old narrowed my social choices and exposure, found me sitting in the living room of our new Twin Hill home, spinning in a rocking chair facing the window, watching the boys on the street below playing driveway basketball, wobbly hoop and backboard mounted above a garage door. Eventually one of them waved and I slouched down, hid behind the curtain, pretending I wasn't there.

My primary source of introversion, my extrovert life-of-the-party father, was instrumental in getting me out of the chair, forcing me to walk down the steps and across the street, where he introduced first himself and then me, saying, "It looks like you need a fourth for your game." This was how I broke out, and in.

One of the boys, Chris, was responsible for my introduction to the magical slice of Santa Cruz County known as Big Creek. His uncles, Bud and Lud McCrary, were the legendary North Coast lumbermen, founders of Big Creek Lumber, perched over the ocean, owners of thousands of acres of North Coast property, including the land that Big Creek coursed through.

Once I became a regular though quiet member of the group, we moved from street basketball to riding fence boards down the dry grass on the hills behind our houses to mat surfing at the cove on Seventeenth Avenue, until one scorch of a summer day in 1963 when Chris's mother, Iris, invited us to drive to Swanton with her, where she would visit with her family while we would have the afternoon to explore.

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Of the four teenagers piled into the car, none of us other than Chris had taken that Highway 1 drive up the coast before, through miles of brussels sprouts fields, past the county dump, and through the sleepy town of Davenport, where the cement plant towers then spewed plumes into the sky, toxicity levels unknown to us and others at the time.

When we veered off the highway a few miles past Davenport and New Town onto Swanton Road, we entered more virgin territory, what felt like the entrance to worlds created by C. S. Lewis, Norton Juster, or J. R. R. Tolkien, a fantasy adventure with our little quartet as main characters. After winding a few miles through Swanton Valley, we came to an unmarked road with a metal gate that impeded passage. It was covered with the typical rusty signs: Private Property and Keep Out and No Trespassing.

Chris jumped out of his front-seat shotgun position, clearly having been through the drill before, and pushed open the unlocked gate, holding it proudly as his mom drove forward. More Narnia-like terrain as we snaked through the densely thicketed entrance to this private piece of McCrary property. On the right side of the road we came across a small stone house where I imagined Bilbo Baggins could easily have lived. Iris stopped the car and we bolted

from open doors, having been cooped up too long, and followed Chris through a gate that led to a back porch of the stone house, a small table next to the door containing an open guest book. We were instructed to sign our names, Iris explaining that sometimes the creek was dangerously swollen due to high rainfall, and they needed to know that whoever went in made it out. As I signed my name last under the others, I noticed that we were the first and only visitors of the day. It was all ours.

And we were off, leaving Iris behind to visit, Chris—the most athletic of us—in the lead racing up the road, the remaining foursome trying to keep up as he ducked into a dense thicket of brush onto a barely passable trail, vines and branches scraping our uncovered arms, until we were emptied into Big Creek. The trail continued for a hundred feet, where it disappeared into the creek. Chris screamed out—screaming the key to being heard over the water smashing against rocks and fallen branches—“It’s faster IN the creek!” Rock hopping became the norm for the next hour—rock to fallen branch to rock to slipping into cold water up to our ankles, then knees.

The climax of this first expedition was reaching the lower falls, where an ancient redwood that had fallen across the creek—or maybe had been placed there intentionally by the McCrarys—created a pool that felt like it could only have been imagined by fantasy authors. This couldn’t be real. It was more than eyes could see, more than the mind could conjure for twelve-year-olds. At the back of the pool against a sheer face of moss-covered rock crashed down a white wall of water that looked one hundred feet tall. And here is where I feel the first degree of necessary distortion might occur. I’m guessing now from desk and keyboard that the falls are at best fifty feet tall, maybe even forty, but young eyes and minds want what they want, imagine what they will.

With no serious injuries—just tired ankles, a few bruises, arms filled with bloodied scratches—we headed back toward the guest book, where we could add our exit signatures to the book, indicating safe return. The descent pace was not nearly as quick as our sperm-like ascent to the falls, given tightened leg muscles stretched from toes to thighs. After signing, we fell into the car, wiped out, soaked, in possession of something none of us could yet describe.

Another half dozen or so similar trips occurred during

junior high and high school. The adventures expanded once we had an understanding of the creek, had succeeded in a circumnavigation that generated a set of expectations. We carried backpacks strapped to our shoulders, full of canteens and Coca-Cola in bottles and tuna fish sandwiches on Langendorf white bread with Fritos corn chips stuck between lettuce leaves and mayonnaise for added crunch. Butterfingers and Hershey almond bars and pocketknives and dry socks. We could plan. We could predict what we might need or might be helpful on our next trek. By the third trip, we knew we were ready to tackle the steep incline up the side of the falls to find what was beyond, to discover the source. We imagined we were scaling El Capitan, without ropes and gear. It was slick and muddy and we often made ten feet of progress, then slid back five feet. We hunted for places to stick our shoes for leverage, grab roots to pull us upward, inch our way to the top, until we finally made it, tumbling over sideways, rolling onto the flat granite rocks at the top that had been smoothed by thousands of years of water polishing their edges.

Once replenished with a shock of sugar and swig of water, we made it to our feet, edged our necks over the falls for a quick glance down, and continued up the creek, with less of a path to follow as few hikers had made the effort to scale up and beyond the pool below. On this trip we discovered the second falls, what had been until then only a rumor that Iris had mentioned. It was not a sheer ninety-degree drop like the first one, instead more of a forty-five-degree angle, cut from smooth granite rocks, centuries of friction forming a V where the stream rushed through, a natural water slide. Lane was the first to strip to his shorts and toss himself in, shoulders and thighs sliding down the fifteen-foot expanse of granite until he blasted into the shallow pool at the base, rock burns and gashes painless due to the ice-cold water that hid the pain until later that evening when we applied Bactine and Band-Aids where necessary before we eased into cold sheets.

On the next trip we wanted more. We wanted to follow the creek to its source, wanted more falls, wondered what else we might find along our own private creek (and by now it clearly was *our* creek, regardless of signatures in the guest book and others we might see along the way). We wanted more. We stopped briefly at the lower falls for snacks and liquids before scaling the vertical path. We

skipped the waterslide falls and continued onward, blasting our own pathways through rock and brush. Forgers of new frontiers, Leif Ericksson and Sir Francis Drake and Galileo, we tromped on, lacking only machetes, moving farther away from civilization, looking for new territory never before seen by humans.

That’s when our expedition ended, our imaginations stripped and expectations crushed. A huge, impenetrable metal fence topped with a vicious strain of barbed wire fencing appeared, running perpendicular through the creek, with signs every few feet reading Lockheed—Private Property. We didn’t understand how a creek could be private property, especially our creek. But we were mostly unnerved about Lockheed because all we knew about them was that they made missiles, which was a little beyond the weaponry of Tolkien and Lewis, frightening to think we were only a barbed wire fence away from what could be the end of the world if the right buttons were pushed.

When we turned sixteen and converted our learner’s permits into driver’s licenses and got our first cars—a blue-and-white ’57 Chevy for me—things changed. Without mothers around, our preplanned supplies changed. We’d sneak a beer or two out of our parents’ refrigerators or find a way to get an older friend to buy a bottle of Ripple or six-pack of Schlitz Malt Liquor and stop at the lower falls on the big fallen tree, slip into the pool naked, no need of climbing up the side of the falls or reminding ourselves of the limitations of our magic by revisiting the ominous barbed wire fence.

Then came girls. Now the creek was something to share with select others, a secret, a mystery, something we possessed that we could keep to ourselves or use to impress as needed. When we were thirteen, there was no hint of how romance might connect to our creek exploits, but we learned. It was an aphrodisiac. In a time when guys joked about Spanish flies in locker rooms, having no idea what they were, what they meant, what they did, or what they looked like, what we discovered is that the creek had the same effect. The pool at the base of the lower falls invited anyone looking at its reflective surface to disrobe and jump in, an attraction that couldn’t be denied. And for sixteen-year-old boys with girls, *disrobe* was the key word.

As we each trickled past our eighteenth birthdays, the original team of four had become individuals who landed

jobs at grinding wheel factories, joined the Navy to avoid the potentially worse outcomes of the lottery and what awaited soldiers on the ground in Vietnam, went to college, got married. The creek was no longer a “we” event. I never again went on a Big Creek adventure with any of my original explorers, instead discovering how to experience it in new ways.

I continued to bring college friends, girlfriends, male friends, and on passing my twenty-first birthday, I could bring legally purchased alcohol, upgrading from Ripple to Lancers or Mateus, although illegal substances in the small pouches of the backpack became more common than the legal substances. From Acapulco Gold to Maui Wau to the ever-increasingly sticky buds making their way to Santa Cruz from Humboldt, pot became a favorite creek appetizer.

It was around this time, during my college years, when William Everson, formerly known as the Dominican monk Brother Antoninus, was teaching *Birth of a Poet* and running Lime Kiln Press at the University of California, Santa Cruz. With my double major of psychology and education, I never had the opportunity to fit him into my schedule, but I did get to experience his guest lecture in my Transpersonal Psychology class. He was recognizable in his mountain-man uniform, thigh-length leather coat with dangling leather fringe, long gray hair and beard, a little palsy from his Parkinson's disease. His presence in the front of our lecture hall with 150 undergrads was at once piercing and calming. He scanned the room for over a minute, making eye contact with each of us before speaking. In a soft but deep voice, “Put away your pens and notebooks. You won't learn anything from me, or anyone, like that.”

On a hike with a friend, I discovered that part of my pathway up Big Creek, the piece that veered through a meadow with an A-frame next to a house, Kingfisher Flat, was the home of William Everson, his young wife, and their child. The three of them were sitting outside at a bench on the front porch. Shaking, he nodded and said, “Kahn's class.” I nodded back, answered, “Yes,” never broke stride, nervous that I wouldn't be able to hold a conversation with him if I stopped. A half dozen other times I'd see him at work inside at the kitchen table, through a window in the A-frame, or under a tree with a notepad. I never had or took the opportunity to speak with him again, one of

my life's regrets. Whether I saw him or not on future visits, I always carried with me a sense of humility and awe as I passed through Kingfisher Flat and inhaled air that might have been exhaled by Bill Everson.

It was the process of writing that convinced me I didn't need a team or a partner to visit Big Creek. It was the introspection and value of solitude I learned from Joe Stroud and Morton Marcus that propelled me north by myself, to walk quietly and silently along and through the creek, a single signature in the guest book. These trips were not encumbered by the hurried pace of youths trying to impress each other with speed and balance. Instead they were slow and measured, opening myself to the creek, allowing it to impress me, inspire me. I'd pay attention and observe, staying at the lower falls writing furiously in my notebook, usually until the sun was about to disappear in the narrow circle of sky held up by tips of redwoods above the pool.

When Monterey Bay Salmon and Trout Project opened a hatchery on the creek in the late 1970s, I had mixed feelings. I took my sixth-grade class there as soon as they began offering tours. It was a life-changing experience for some of the students, leading to future professions closely connected to nature. And while it was an inspiring tool for me, allowing me to teach subjects in a thematic, integrated fashion, there was something about the visits that diluted my personal vision and relationship with the creek. I didn't know that then, but I selfishly quit taking my students to the hatchery so I could hoard my own reflections and feelings, those that occupied a unique and protected area of my brain, one that I didn't want merged with the openness and communicativeness of teaching and learning with a classroom of students.

I've returned over the years and have checked in at the little stone house, new names in the guest book, same superlatives describing the amazing creek, superlatives that don't come close to describing my visions. I think of myself as a member of a small, exclusive club who has had the good fortune to stumble upon an undiscovered wonder of the world.

As explorative teenagers we expanded and modified the nature of our quests. We crossed the footbridge to the west side of the creek to investigate the abandoned shacks. We looked for signs of past lives of those who may have occupied the spaces, made up stories about the young couple

beginning their lives together there in the late 1800s, delivering their firstborn with water from the creek heated over logs chopped from trees on the property. Of the old man who lived there by himself, alone, only companions the creatures of the night and changing sounds of water over rock identifying seasons.

Not only have I used the creek as a place to write, the fallen redwood my chair and desk, the falls and gurgling water my inspiration, but I've also carried away mental snapshots as passengers on blood cells, where I have used it as a character in stories and poems written elsewhere.

My last physical visit was in my early forties with my wife-to-be. We drive past Davenport, where my friends Bill and Rose lived before their divorce, both gone now from different strains of cancer. We had all been to the creek together. We turn onto Swanton Road and pass Al Johnson's place, where the corn roasts were an annual event. And before we head up Big Creek Road, I tell her about Gary and Kay, friends of Bill and Rose and my ex-wife and me, all six of us spending sex-drug-and-rock-and-roll trips to the lower falls in a former life with former husbands and wives.

I stay behind the wheel in front of the gate and tell her to ignore the signs and push. She waits as I drive through before she closes the unlocked gate. At the guest book, I'm not sure why, we sign in with pseudonyms. My suggestion. Maybe it has to do with the marriage license that we will sign soon. The backpack this time contains a Gayle's baguette; sliced salami, prosciutto, and a block of gouda cheese from Shopper's Corner; a jar of pepperoncini from my cupboard; a bottle of Asti Spumante from Zee's Liquors on Mission Street; and a bar of Lindt dark Swiss chocolate a friend brought back from his trip to Europe.

We work our way up the creek. I stop and tell her where Dale twisted his knee or where Larry gashed his leg. We stretch this out. I want this to last, not to race across the tops of slick rocks in the heat of a contest with friends. We savor each step, the known pathways, the new ones we forge. I tell her about Everson and the things I've written as we walk past the A-frame inhabited now by some other family or hermit. I talk of salmon and past girlfriends and make up stories.

I wonder now about the degrees of distortion in this recelling. Do I remember what I saw, or what I wanted to see? When my mind was clean and clear twenty years ago

as we edged our way to the falls, did I embellish or distort with a purpose in mind?

But this is my truth now. This is the way I visit now. As I approach the fiftieth anniversary of this relationship with the creek in a few months, I haven't been there physically in twenty years.

I'll hold on to my current version of the last trek. I'll remember how we walked out onto the slickness of the moss-covered redwood and stared up together at the thirty- or sixty- or ninety-foot-high falls. How we spread our alpaca blanket out, drank the Spumante until we were warm, made rough and exhausting love on the weathered ridges of the makeshift bed. When we signed out—alerting the McCrary clan that we had completed the journey safely—she wrote, “Best ever!” and I wrote, “Same as always.”

Believe of this retelling what you will. It's all told with intent of truth, to let loose of my possessiveness and share what I can of this spiritual and physical wonder of the world that changed me in so many ways.

I vow to return this summer, to pack a picnic—without the drugs and alcohol, clearheaded—to carry these sixty-plus-year-old bones and sagging muscles as far as I can toward the falls. I won't make it to the Lockheed fence or the second falls. I may not even make it to the first falls, may not want to view the true height.

I'll push open the unlocked gate with warning signs, pretend I'm thirteen again, pretend I've never seen this before, allow the soul of Big Creek to enter me fresh.

**Jory Post** is an educator, writer, and artist who lives with his wife, Karen Wallace, in Santa Cruz, California, where they create handmade books and art together as JoKa Press. Post is the cofounder and publisher of *phren-Z*, an online literary quarterly. His first book of poetry, *The Extra Year*, was published in 2019 by Anaphora Literary Press. His work has been published in *Star 82 Review*, *Catamaran Literary Reader*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *Porter Gulch Review*, *Red Wheelbarrow*, *Rumble Fish Quarterly*, *The Sun*, and *Unbroken Journal*. Post's short stories “Sweet Jesus” and “Hunt and Gather” were nominated for the Pushcart Prize this year. His second book of poetry, *Of Two Minds*, will be published in summer 2020. His novel *Pious Rebel* will be available later this year.