

WHITE MAIDEN'S WALKWAY

KATRINA HAYS

Late spring, and the Kern River is edgy and massive with the memory of winter. Thin Southern California sun pours down on my head, offering no warmth through PFD and wetsuit.

I'm sitting front-left in the bow of the raft, paddling hard for the next rapid, part of a crew of six wanna-be river guides, each vying over a single job. Physical strength is the invisible mantle of worth we wear. Crude jests and overconfidence are the emotional flotation devices we employ.

A river has a voice, a constant sound all her own: murmur or croon when the gradient is flat, but when the bottom drops away and canyon walls constrict her throat, she develops a bass-note roar, a snarl that twists the belly into a sick knot.

As I paddle toward the horizon line and the next rapid, the sound crescendos past cacophony. We are silent, jokes abandoned, straining to hear directions yelled from the guide in the stern. White Maiden's Walkway is the gnarliest rapid on this run. It is a boiling maw; a river-wide hole of whitewater that throws rafts into the air and snatches bodies and gear between its teeth.

How was it named, I wonder as I face it for the first time. Did some early river pioneer spot a lady in white pacing the huge boulder in the middle of the river; was she staring at him, long dress rippling in wind rising from the rapid? Did he turn his head back to the river too late, find his heavy dory had slung sideways into a fatal angle? As river clinched boat and body in a cold embrace, did he see her again, the maiden watching him intently...

But I am in a flexible craft designed to best the worst a river can produce, so I shrug the fancy away, brace myself, and stroke faster. Our boat drops over the edge into a turbulent valley between mountains of whitewater. The guide screams a command and we punch the standing wave hard. I am cantilevered over the thwart, clawing my paddle into the face of the wave, and for a breathless moment it seems we have cleared it, but the angle is wrong and the raft snaps a quick pirouette, showering neoprene-clad bodies like confetti onto the water.

I was taught to hold onto my paddle, ball myself up, point my feet downstream, and look for the boat.

I was taught the current would carry my buoyant body out of the rapid.

I was taught if I got stuck in a hole, where the river pours back upstream upon herself, I must stay calm, believe she will spit me out.

I was not taught the roar of the rapid when I am inside its belly will be twenty times louder than when I was in clarifying air.

I am not prepared for the violence and the way my body is flung about. I can't hold onto my paddle; I can't force myself into a ball; my body is no longer my own. Up-down, back-forward—for an instant my head breaks out and I gasp—

but am yanked back and my mouth fills with water. I spit it out, holding my breath. I fight to regain control of body and mind. I try to ride the roar, the tumble and slam. But there is no controlling this, there is no up or down, or way out.

And there is no air.

After a time I stop trying to ball up; I begin to forget the world above. The roar fades. My heartbeat slows into a red throb. My mouth opens, the water a bitter broth. My chest heaves and I suck in liquid.

I say: *No*.

Even though I have expected to die young, when actually faced with death at 23, I say *No* to that, and *Yes* to all that is coming. *Yes*—even to the bathtub and the razor against wrist. And *yes* to the beloved I will find too many years in the future; *yes* to the agony of children I will long for too late. And oh, *YES* to blue water sailing into Caribbean sunsets; *yes* to manta rays sliding centimeters from

my skin; *yes* even to my kayak dropping into whitewater that will again scare me speechless. *Yes* and *yes* to moments of excruciating living sweetness that will run away from me like water.

As my chest drags river into lungs I thrust out my legs, and by some miracle of desire the downstream current snatches my feet and wrenches me out of the hole. In the encroaching blackness, before I am plucked from the water, I see a young woman in white, watching.