



PASTEL BY HILARY BRACE / COLLECTION OF PHOEBE BRUNNER

They had said it would be bad, with winds from the southeast, rain, and high waves on top of high tides. Two mornings before the highest tide in January 1983, Mrs. Knight, who was then my landlady on Fernald Point in Montecito, phoned to say she had made me a *café au lait* and I should come up to her house right away. Putting on her hat and coat, she came out to meet me in her vegetable garden.

Inside her fence at the edge of the sea was a garden that yielded baskets of carrots, zucchini, spinach, chard, onions, beets, tomatoes, lettuce, and artichokes, which she gave to her many friends. Neat rows of vegetables were planted among paths bedecked with potted lemon trees. There were ceramic rabbits among the carrots and rare poppies whose seed had come from the far corners of the earth.

by Hillary Hauser

WINTER WEATHER

Lessons of resilience and forgetting from the savage storms of 1983.

I arrived straightaway, and Mrs. Knight and I watched the enormous waves as if they were a Cinerama movie, oohing and aahing each one. We were confident that the line of sandbags on the other side of the fence, put there by the faithful gardener, would protect the ceramic rabbits from the ever-stormier sea.

On the morning of the third day, though, the sea did what it was not supposed to do. When I arrived for our new morning ritual, *café au lait* and

storm watching, Mrs. Knight's fence had been pushed over, and seawater was swirling around the potted lemon trees. I raced into her house to call my abalone diver friends to help. The men were there in fifteen minutes, each with his own coffee.

With its audience in place, the sea began to behave as if angered by the puny humans on the beach with their cups. The wind shrieked and howled, and the gray sky lowered and merged with the sea, now a maelstrom of dark brown mud and debris, tempest-tossed and foaming at the mouth.

With white fury, a wave smashed over the already broken fence, funneled up the brick walkway between the neat rows of vegetables, picked up the potted lemon trees, and continued up, up, up—into the house.

The abalone divers had already dropped their cups and scrambled over

mercial fishermen, stuck in the harbor, swore at the city for allowing this to happen.

Then one night late in February, a second storm hit with a fury that matched the first. The skies opened up with electric force, and a raging wind knocked over towering eucalyptus trees as if they were matchsticks. The power went out all over town.

On the day of the queen's arrival, harbor officials had to admit defeat. It was as if someone had turned on the washing machine out there. The surf was breaking fifteen feet over the end of Stearns Wharf, and adventurous sorts gathered at the Moby Dick Restaurant on the pier to watch the action of the sea. The booths were packed.

Stearns Wharf swayed and rocked,

*News came through that
Santa Barbara was one of
many coastal cities in trouble
up and down California.*

and restaurant owner Al Steinman alarmed his customers by running around in a life jacket. A daring windsurfer zoomed past over the riotous ocean. Not long afterward, a daredevil surfer went by, towed out to sea by a motorized sea scooter. Cheers went up, and another round of beer was ordered for all.

The next day, the Moby Dick was sagging and Stearns Wharf was closed. The waves had knocked out pilings underneath the restaurant and torn up planks on the deck. Still, the human spirit rose, as it usually does, above the obstacles. The queen flew into Santa Barbara and had a marvelous time. Steinman told a crowd of onlookers along Cabrillo Boulevard his restaurant would reopen in no time flat.

In the aftermath, surfers flocked to ride the waves that had caused such ruination—a sign of rejuvenation and recovery in the midst of havoc, pleasure in the face of disaster, innocence that

came from not knowing, then, about the danger of polluted runoff from coastal creeks. The harbor channel was reopened, and the fishermen went happily to sea. Walls were rebuilt, trees replanted, rugs replaced. The sound of hammers and saws filled the air as houses were rebuilt on Miramar Beach. Sand, heavenly sand drifted down the coast to heal the wounded beaches and restore a calm that seemed like it might stay forever. The beaches of Santa Barbara filled again with blissful grownups, children, and dogs. The sun warmed our backs. Mrs. Knight replanted her vegetable garden, complete with ceramic rabbits and potted lemon trees, and the following summer once again was giving her friends baskets of tomatoes, carrots, zucchini, and chard.

Ah, peace! We were like betrayed lovers who learn that a wounded heart eventually regains its strength, that a nightmare fades and no longer grips the throat. Weather is like that—up and down, in and out, always changing, always doing something else.

Pounding our beaches, our homes, our hearts, these winter storms will come again and again. We are still reeling from the El Niño deluge of 1997-98, and another winter has now arrived. What, oh what, is in store for us?

As we consider this question, let us be like the artist who understands that the price of art is often the pain of a stormy mind. Let us remember that so-called "bad" weather is part of the miracle of earthly life.

Every winter the changing winds and tides will push aside the calm of summer, but we will face what we have to face. As we struggle with leaking roofs, fallen trees, and flooded gardens, we will think once again that it's never been this bad. The storms of winter will, however, pass, and gradually, like the drifting sands that heal the beaches, their havoc will become once again a will-o'-the-wisp of the memory. ≈

Santa Barbara writer Hillary Hauser is a founder of Heal the Ocean. Artist Hilary Brace, inspired by nature, paints imaginary landscapes.