

IN THE AMERICAN WEST IS HOPE POSSIBLE?

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On the prairie there is sometimes a quiet so absolute that it allows one to begin again, to love the future. Such moments are a surprising blessing because the grasslands, at least in northeastern Colorado where I walk, are weighed by the future—they are recklessly cultivated and overgrazed, and are the location every few miles of nuclear missile silos.

One summer afternoon, in the stillness which seems a part of the cloud shadows that move over the land, I stopped photographing and gave myself to thinking about a dream: what if there were a specific site here where those concerned with threats to the future could come, and in the silence of the prairie, strengthened by the knowledge that others had come here in concern before, focus their thoughts on changes needed to safeguard life? Perhaps the spot could be marked by a stone with a few words, perhaps a stone in dry ground above an arroyo with a little water, or on a hill in a stand of poplars planted for the wind, for birds, for the gold of fall—a place to which we could bring the harmony of our prayers.

It even occurred to me, in the expansive way of hope, that such a place would be better if it were approached the ninety miles from Denver on foot, by a path. I knew that between Denver and the grasslands there were now corporate farms, patrolled and fenced, but the dream was so sustaining that I tried to hold to it.

Part of our difficulty is the extreme to which things have gone. Important qualities common to life through much of history are now almost lost. What does the texture of our experience in suburban America, for example, share with the daily circumstances of those who lived in rural nineteenth and early twentieth-century America? Imagine walking in summer a hundred years ago down a street in a small town in western Nebraska. You might hear almost nothing, or just the wind, or a wagon and children and a dog. It is a scene nearly beyond our reach—farther from us than walking the moon, radios crackling. In the town whole lives were passed, hour after hour, year after year, in quiet. The lives included joys and sorrows that we know, but the context in which these were felt was fundamentally different from ours.

Thoreau in the 1840s took comfort in being able to escape even what he sensed were the noisy intrusions in small towns. In his essay "Walking," he celebrated the fact that he could "easily walk ten, fifteen, twenty, any number of miles, commencing at my door, without going by any house." He wondered "what would become of us if we walked only to a garden or a mall?" He was innocent, of course, of the degree to which the question would be forced, of the fact that eventually no one would be able to find one square mile in America free of the imprint of man.

The sadness expressed about this condition by writers such as Edward Abbey, Edward Hoagland, and Peter Matthiessen, and understood by everyone who has known open country, is equaled at only a few points in the American experience—at the end of the nineteenth century, most notably, when Indians realized that they were defeated for the rest of their lives. There can never be again, for example, as there was for the Oklahomans who lost their farms in the Depression, a California to which to escape.

What is frightening in this loss is the corrosive, alienating bitterness toward which it has led. In the movie *Five Easy Pieces* (1970) there is a sequence that has come to synopsise it: The protagonist, driving north from Los An-

geles to Puget Sound, picks up two young women hitchhikers and asks where they are going. They reply Alaska, where it is "clean," and explain, with barely controlled rage, that things in the lower forty-eight appear to them to be "shit." They reiterate the word, and when the film is shown to university audiences now the students sometimes repeat it as a litany of their own disgust. Who hasn't, after discovering a favorite mountain cut clear, or garbage on the beach, or a hawk torn from a cottonwood by gunfire?

Though distress over such things is shared now in a general way by many, its severity is due to the fact that the cause is always particular, worse than any torment by statistics. As Henry Beetle Hough, the late editor of the *Vineyard Gazette*, said not long before he died, he was sorer about the destruction of Martha's Vineyard than about the apparent fate of the world. We feel worst about losing the specifics of home. The issue is not just that land developers have unbalanced the ecology and made much of the geography ugly. What strikes so painfully is that, at least in the perspective of our brief lives, they have destroyed the places where we became, and would like to continue to become, ourselves. When I was fifteen, for example, I was hired in the summer to help take campers on horse pack trips through Rocky Mountain National Park. The landscapes I saw that season were for me formative, and have remained vivid in remembrance partly because of the hushed isolation in which we encountered them; it was unusual to meet anyone at all on the trail for days at a time. Twenty years later, however, it had become unusual to follow a major trail for more than five or ten minutes—minutes, not days—without meeting long lines of hikers. Officials referred to the place as an "urban" park, and in fact I discovered eventually that there was more privacy in City Park in the middle of Denver than in walking the high peaks. From City Park I could see the back range, white, and I could recall the days I had spent there—the dry clatter of granite, the alpine flowers, the cries of pikas. It remained there in memory, though if I went closer it disappeared.

There are many such stories, and the end of them all is that, by the mid-1970s, every last secret place was finished. And one's tenderness and hope were lessened. As a boy it never occurred to me, for instance, to take a gun camping for safety (I had slept outside more than a year by the time I was twenty, from Arizona to Montana). Then, however, as the urban population increased and elements of it went on mindlessly criminal forays into the countryside, carrying a gun became commonplace. Some people—pacifists, whom I respect—refuse to carry guns, but I myself would not now camp overnight most places in the West without one, particularly if I were responsible for the safety of a woman or a child. It is a reasonable precaution against the only dangerous wild thing left, people. Having the gun, however, and always remembering the reason for it, deeply mars the experience.

There are so many events that used to bring pleasure and don't any longer. Encountering animals, for example. I remember the joy I knew the first time I saw a cougar, and later the same summer, a marten. And the satisfaction I felt when I realized I was with deer, in rimrock or sunny pines or in a canyon at daybreak. Now if I see deer, as I occasionally do along the Platte, it saddens me. Where are the wretched things to go?—in all directions there are highways, and the risk of attracting guard dogs.

Mention of such concerns to a generation of new immigrants (the population of Colorado grew by thirty percent in the 1970s), who are understandably impressed by the remaining sight of the Rocky Mountains, on smog-free windy days, brings puzzlement to them. And thus worse to me. To have grown up in Colorado and to be middle-aged now is to be old.

And sometimes angry. I think of one gray morning in October when I returned to a spot on the prairie where our West Highland terrier had been caught the previous day in a trap set for coyotes, a hellish device camouflaged

in the middle of a public dirt road (legally, as it turned out). Kerstin, my wife, had been injured in freeing the dog, and I was determined to remove whatever other traps there were nearby; I carried a pair of bolt cutters to do the job.

Can good be made of the anger I feel? Can I be saved from that anger? Can it by some alchemy be transformed to the quality that one critic found in Philip Levine's poetry—a "constructive bitterness"? Might we even somehow learn the hope of the plains Indians who, photographed as if they were lunatics, danced the Ghost Dance, their final celebration of their dream of the land's restoration? The ceremonies were often held, judging by the images we have, in scrappy pastures right at the edge of their enemies' contempt.

Part of our disillusionment is a feeling common to people at any time. Keats expressed it: "To think is to be full of sorrow."

It is also a fact that there are more important issues than the loss of the West, threats that could make its fate minor.

And it is true, with respect to the landscape, that exceptions seem occasionally to mitigate its ruin. When I walk in Southern California, in its wonderful verdancy, I am sometimes reminded of how defiant life is—under the gleaming leaves of eucalyptus trees, for instance, leaves that rustle like paper, and hide mocking birds and lizards and aromatic seeds. It is always the larger juxtapositions, though, that call short one's relief. If you climb firebreaks up through the chaparral above the Los Angeles basin, for example, you are still likely to hear, eventually, the scream of a hawk, surely among the great primal sounds of nature; if, however, the air is polluted, and the cry is superimposed over the noise of dirt bikes and gunfire and the metronomic backup signal from some far-off landfill machine, then the cry will seem, in its acidity, only human.

Philosophers and writers have sometimes said we have to do without hope. The hawk apparently does not need it, and, in the absence of nuclear war, we would presumably hang on in some form without it, animated by our root unwillingness to die. On the evidence, however, hope is necessary to the survival of what makes us human. Without hope we lapse into ruthlessness or torpor; the exercise of nearly every virtue we treasure in people—love, reason, imagination—depends ultimately for its motivation on hope. We know that our actions come to little, but our identity as we want it defined is contingent on the survival of hope.

It might be thought, I admit, that insofar as the landscape is separable from people, hope for it is of lesser importance than hope for human beings; our Judeo-Christian tradition inclines us to this prejudice. I was reminded, however, in a late essay by Henry Beetle Hough of how interrelated these hopes can be. At the end of a discussion of the apparently final deterioration of Martha's Vineyard, the formerly (and, I think, finally) hopeful man repeated two lines from a poem he did not identify except as being by Swinburne, noting that he had taken the lines out of context: "There is no help, for all these things are so / And all the world is bitter as a tear." The lines were so disturbing in their expression of defeat that I looked them up, and discovered their source to be a verse entitled "A Leave-taking," not about the passing of a landscape but about the death of a loved woman. I remembered that Hough's wife, with whom he had shared his affection for Martha's Vineyard, had died not long before, and it was clear the path by which he had come to be thinking of the poem as he wrote about the land. The two—the person and the place—were bound.

Though not as emotionally absolute as the loss of a person, the loss of one's home is so serious, I think, intertwined as it is with the rest of life, that it cannot be borne without learning, somehow, eventually, undoubtedly imperfectly, a faith. That is why we have to begin to conquer our bitterness over the loss of the West.

For generations little may change in the American political and economic system, at least without the impetus of some disaster, several of which are easily imaginable, but their occasion and consequences are uncertain. What does seem clear now, though, is that our government is not presently open to the fundamental reconstruction that would allow correction of the worst failures in our stewardship of the land. In part this is because there is no longer—if there ever was—a center of values, other than material ones, to which a majority subscribe, and in part it is because our political system has been corrupted (bought) by the economic system. Altering that economic system is, moreover, unlikely in the absence of catastrophe, since most Americans are convinced that it offers them opportunity, and thus that capitalism and democracy are appropriate to each other. (I believe that for most people the chance at wealth is illusory, that capitalism and democracy are in many ways antagonistic, and that there is a desirable affinity to be nurtured between democracy and socialism.)

Because our politics and economics aren't likely to change in the near future, I hold no hope that the American West, even significant parts of it, will remain open. The region's central, defining characteristic—space—cannot be retained in anything like its original sense because, in accordance with our system of values, it is not as important as the chance to amass wealth.

Consider the current overpopulating of the Southwest. However much we might wish to continue welcoming all economically disadvantaged people to the United States, uncontrolled immigration from Mexico—a country Edward Abbey has correctly identified as potentially our hemisphere's India—has so seriously exacerbated the ecological crisis in the American Southwest that most who know that crisis firsthand oppose allowing the immigration to continue. But it has been permitted to do so, mainly because wealthy leaders of the American Right prefer that the United States absorb Latin overpopulation rather than let it foment revolution that might endanger investments in Latin America, and because illegal immigrants make up a cheap labor pool in the United States. We have sold a region of our country into further ecological imbalance in order to protect and increase the income of a few.

Or consider our national park system. At present it is mostly a reflection of nineteenth-century interests, amounting in the main to a collection of anomalies, geegaws in the glass cabinet of a Victorian parlor. What we need now and for the future is a system of parks that would allow us to encounter not what have always been geographic oddities—caves, geysers, petrified trees, waterfalls—but what were large-scale typicalities—shores, forests, mountains, canyons, and prairies. To a small degree, we have set aside such places (often the most valuable parts of parks established for other reasons), but not in nearly enough size to convey to visitors the central fact of the undisturbed American landscape—its proportion to us, its grandness. And it is virtually impossible now to win approval for such parks because their creation would contravene economic priorities, witness the futile efforts over many years to create even a tiny park of representative tall grass prairie in Kansas. The land is worth too much for the public to own. Capitalism may not be mentioned in the Constitution, but it is in fact our state religion, and we are ardent in living by it.

So, when I have the strength to be honest, I do not hope to experience again the space I loved as a child. The loss is the single hardest fact for me to acknowledge in the American decline. How we depended on space,

without realizing it—space which made easier a civility with each other, and which made plainer the beauty of light and thus the world.

Admittedly not everything dies outright by crowding. What almost always perishes, though, is a loveliness that sustains our desire for life to go on and on. Think of the tens of thousands of horses penned across the suburban West, imprisoned in bare, cramped lots where they wait their lives for baled hay tossed from a station wagon. I have seen such horses standing at night in the glare of an adjoining shopping center, and wished that their lives would be short.

Resignation must be in some measure a necessary preface to hope. I don't feel much resignation, as is obvious from the foregoing, except for brief times—when I'm able to photograph—but I see it and its value in others. Peter Matthiessen lightens his walk through the ecologically damaged Himalayas, as described in *The Snow Leopard*, by noting again and again Buddhist prayer flags, bright in the wind; Edward Hoagland, who has acknowledged that "the age of animals is ending" and that he cannot write about them anymore, nonetheless retains a commitment to write about the complexities of human interaction with the land, a commitment that requires the energy of hope; Edward Abbey, who has been forced to console himself with the thought of a time in hundreds of years when the dams on the Colorado will wash out and the canyons reform, has nonetheless never stopped ridiculing enemies with great old wisecracks ("He's so dumb he couldn't pour piss out of his boot if the directions were on the heel"). Each writer has given up more, I think, than he ever thought he could, but each is still looking, still writing.

For what is it reasonable still to dream?

In the short run—from the perspective of our lives—changes for the better in the man-altered landscape are likely to be small. Maybe, for example, we can reduce some of the noise we make. The sound of dirt bikes and all-terrain vehicles, for instance, is a frantic and monotonous snarl common to large areas of the semi-rural West, and could be reduced by legislation. At least economic resistance to such a change might be relatively slight, and the hardship the noise causes is more and more widely felt. In the longer perspective of a hundred or two hundred years, assuming the country lasts, a variety of difficulties might be eased. This could happen through the engine of selfishness, as people realize that their welfare is threatened by others taking short views. When whole cities begin to die for want of water, for instance, taking with them both profiteers and their idle fellow citizens, there will be a call for tighter restrictions on the use of whatever water is left. Pressure will similarly grow for land-use legislation (something which is now weak or nonexistent through the West, governed as most of it is by Republican legislatures), as landowners who are now unconcerned discover that the value of their holdings is being destroyed by sewage, chemicals, erosion, and the other consequences of excessive and anarchic development.

Eventually there will even be improvement in air pollution. After forests and lakes die, and a great many people suffer respiratory disease, the ongoing price—literally computed, no doubt—will begin to seem too high. Finally, an overwhelming majority of people will personally know victims of emphysema, lung cancer, and other pollution-related sicknesses, and will, in fear for themselves and their families, force a change.

It is hard to remember how the Southwest looked with the skies clear, but I like to imagine the time when it could appear that way again, not only for the cessation of suffering it would mean, but for the painters who would see it and bring it to us. How direct and unqualified their celebration could be, as it was for artists like John

Sloan, John Marin, and Andrew Dasburg in New Mexico in the first half of this century, and later, Peter Hurd. For the new artists the experience could each day be as Kenneth Clark wrote: "Facts become art through love, and in landscape [painting], this all-embracing love is expressed by light." How blessed seem those pictures where the reference is easy, where it reminds us of an incontrovertible and unambiguous beauty that is there at any season or hour, out any door.

Our encounter with the land may also improve as people simply grow tired of their own and others' degraded behavior, weary enough to modify economic and behavioral rules. Hunting is an example. At present, so-called wild animals are "managed," so that those of interest to hunters—who spend more money than bird watchers—are herded, artificially fed, medicated, and protected from predators. Whole ecological systems have thus been thrown off even further from whatever might remain of their original balance by alliances of game departments, hunters, and commercial interests that promote deer and elk hunting (now done with spotter planes, all-terrain vehicles, CB radios, and semiautomatic rifles). Any reduction in this industrial malformation and maltreatment of the surviving animal world would be an enormous gift. Just to be free of the sight of the "harvest," as it is nicely called, would improve autumn. Not to see, for example, as I did once, several men step out of a jeep, and, firing from the road, shoot the legs from a fawn before killing it.

It is possible to hope for even subtler changes. The nature of the buildings we live in, for example, may be altered as we learn respect for the environment. Economic justifications are now given for structures that defy the climate, disregard the original configuration of the geography, and in some cases require the wholesale destruction of adjoining regions for materials (as is presently happening where I live in Colorado, with the mining of gravel for the manufacture of concrete to build cities). But at some point many of us, if given any chance at all, will gladly pay for a place of which it can be said, in Edward Thomas's words, "the house is kind / To the land that gave it peace."

And there are changes in geography that will cost nothing except honesty. Someday, for instance, we will go back to naming places as they are. It is probably too much to hope for the frankness that gave early Colorado place-names like Lye and Oil Can, but it was those hard names that neutralized skepticism about the sweet ones like Maybell and Pleasant Plains, and this lesson in the value of candor may yet be learned. At least there will come a time when we stop naming places for lake shores that aren't there, and attaching to names eastern suffixes like "glen" and "green." And if we call places by names that are accurate, we may ultimately find it easier to live in them. "The mind rests only on the stability of truth," Samuel Johnson said; rest and stability are aspects of home. Perhaps after we reach it, we may even learn again to compose songs based on names, treasured words made right by observation and history, songs like the ballad "The Rivers of Texas"; listing the places where the singer courts his beloved—by the Pecos, Nueces, Wichita, Brazos, Nacogdoches, Sabine, Trinity, Guadalupe, Angelina . . . "Give me your hand," he invites—"There's many a river that waters the land."

As much as I hope that future generations may enjoy these small and fragmentary changes, I must admit that the adjustments would not guarantee a respectful relation to the land. I take comfort, for that reason, in hope for a change not requiring large sums of money, and for the most part not in need of a majority vote—a reshaping that will come about, I think, as the result of the needs and efforts of individuals: a recognition and enrichment and preservation over the centuries of specifically sacred places. The final goal will remain that all places be recognized as holy, but, as a step on the way, locations of particular intensity will more and more be held dear.

Each of us already knows such places, exceptional in the peace and insight they bring. Until fairly recently, for instance, graveyards could be counted among them. It was understood that in living on earth as breathing compounds of dust we are part of what is eternal, and so marking the location of the dust in gravesites served as a reminder of that consolation. It also afforded others a place to celebrate, with flowers or just attention and memory, the caring of previous lives.

I think of the grave of a man I knew on the plains. He was the editor of a small-town newspaper until, during the thirties, the town withered, leaving eventually just his shop and two houses in the middle of the prairie. He stayed on, operating a tiny post office that served a hundred square miles of farms and ranches. In 1978 he died and was buried in the town's cemetery, an acre by then not easily distinguishable from the rest of the grasslands. His gravestone reads, "Clyde L. Stanley—Keota, my home for 63 years." However terse that is with the honesty of a last thing, it is compelling in its passion. He must have thought about the words for a long time to conclude so unequivocally what mattered most, remembering I suppose the blizzards he'd watched through the front windows, the smell of sage after summer rains, the conversations he'd had with generations of neighbors. . . . The place—that was who he was, by his love for it.

Sometimes one doesn't even have to visit a location to take heart from it. I once bought a vase that had been made from clay dug on Tillamook Head, a promontory on the northern Oregon coast, and fired there in a primitive kiln in the forest on the mountain's slope. Though I have several times walked the headland, I will never find, in its dense growth, the clearing where this beautiful object was made; though when I touch it, I can imagine the site of its origin. Nothing, not even the lashing storms of winter, nor the thought of the storms we ourselves bring, disrupts the quiet of the place I know is there, with its faint smoke drifting through conifers.

If there is anything lacking in such places, lovely though they are, it is a community of observers. By the paradoxical mathematics of beauty, they are, like songs, more ours if we share them. But this is difficult in our time because relatively few people care, and because those who do are thinly dispersed. Calling such places to public notice can, as well, risk their destruction by vandals.

There are some activities now, though, that seem prophetic. A group of photographers is, for example, paying new attention to places that have been venerated by Native Americans. The reward to the photographers is not only the satisfaction of giving us truthful pictures, but the experience of being, with all their attention, there. Rick Dingus described in a letter an afternoon when, while working in the desert, he waited out a cloudburst "in a cave with Coyote painted on the ceiling. Bear, Turtle, Bird, Plumed Serpent and others were there too. Lightning crashed, the ground shook with thunder, water dripped into the catch basin carved near the Serpent. Then the storm passed, with the sun back out, and the wet earth drying, clean-smelling, regenerated." He has discovered that he can share some of these experiences with Indians: "We talked about my dreams and his, the stories connected to the place. All of this related not only to where we were but to where our time is—where it came from and where it is going."

The photographic work being done at these sites is also important, of course, because the places are unavailable to the majority of us. Even those locations to which we might make our way by long travel are now mostly being destroyed or, in order to save them, closed. They ought to be barred to us, I think, once we have learned from their example, both so that Native Americans can use them without distraction, and so we will be compelled

to develop our own places of respect and harmony. Only insofar as we are forced by our need will we realize that there are things more appropriate to mountain tops than climbing registers, that there are trees it is right to touch only as if they were human, and that there are prairie draws as true to the opening of the Psalm 23 as any green valley in Judea.

I'm encouraged by artists brave enough to attempt the creation of sites similar to those developed for worship by earlier cultures. Though some of the "earth works" done in the 1970s were extensions of commercially inspired aestheticism common in painting and sculpture, others originated in sources far removed from the usual frivolity of marketable "art." I haven't visited them, but pictures suggest that Walter De Maria's *Lightning Field* (1970) and Nancy Holt's *Sun Tunnels* (1973–76) are creations of a serious order, as is James Turrell's current Roden Crater project. Each is located in a spot that is inherently awe-inspiring by virtue of the sweep it affords the eye—over a plain, across salt flats, and from within a volcanic cone, respectively—and by the silence of isolation. Each has been, or will be, brought to focus by the addition of humanly shaped objects that relate the spot to a wider context—to clouds, to the sun and the constellations, to the cosmos as a whole.

Someday not only will there be more places that encourage a harmony with nature, but there will be, I think, new sacred sites originating in the principal religious traditions of our culture, Judaism and Christianity, the correction of which seems to me imperative because their abandonment is impossible (one cannot walk away from the center of one's culture and survive; Judaism and Christianity embody insights that are unique and, at least in my experience, true). Years ago, when I found myself with time to spare in Cologne and Aachen in West Germany, I decided to visit several churches, recommended in a guidebook, that had been built by an architect of whom I had not heard, Rudolph Schwarz (I later discovered a startlingly heartfelt testimony to him by Mies van der Rohe). One church, located in an otherwise drab suburb, was said in the guidebook to call to mind—as Schwarz had mysteriously permeated the structure with natural light that seemed to have no source—the Eastern Orthodox definition of a church: a building, analogous to the mother of Christ, containing the uncontainable. To my wonder, it proved to be so. This church, St. Christophoros in Cologne-Neil, was unlike any modern American religious building with which I was familiar. At the back of the chancel was the barest sketch, in otherwise blank concrete, of the risen Christ; to the side of the pews there was another, equally simple, of an angel, her face turned toward worshipers and her finger raised to her lips for silence.

My memory of Germany, which is otherwise of a mostly lost geography, is transformed through the recollection of my visits to a half-dozen churches designed by this one man. Recalling them helped suggest to me, when I returned to America, that not just churches, but whole urban and suburban landscapes might be revealed as sacred if we brought to them a measure of the same passionate regard that Schwarz had brought to his specifically religious commissions. It was, in a way, why I started photographing, to see if I could find, by pictures, an emotional equivalent to the churches. The goal was in many ways naive, however, and over the years I have found myself looking for churches in America of the quality of Schwarz's in Germany. Working on Colfax in Denver or Pico in Los Angeles, I sometimes think that if they are here they are small, even anonymous on the outside, focusing inward, holding a stillness removed from, but redemptive of, the street.

On the Japanese island of Shikoku there is, as described by Oliver Statler in *Japanese Pilgrimage*, a footpath that follows the thousand or so miles of shoreline, linking shrines celebrating events that occurred during a walk there

by the Buddhist saint Kobo Daishi (A.D. 774–835). Pilgrims say that they are accompanied by him as they travel; the route eventually leads back to the start and thus to a central aspect of his wisdom.

Part of the trail, according to Statler, now runs along freeways. Unpleasant as that may be, the walk next to cars and trucks apparently does not carry with it, however, the threats of violence—shouts, things thrown, Dobermans lunging against fences—that it would along highways such as those leading to the grasslands of northeastern Colorado.

These obstacles to peace exist, however, because of who we are, not what the land inherently is. Perhaps someday America will have trails like those found in Japan, or England, where public paths commonly cross private land, or Sweden, where any citizen at all can walk to within sight of any house. Pilgrimage routes in America come easily to mind—walks to clapboard churches on the high plains, to adobe chapels in the Sangre de Cristo mountains of New Mexico, to locations along the Rio Grande that have served as painters' motifs, to sites on the Northwest Coast that inspired the poetry of Theodore Roethke—though the paths for which I hope most are between places as yet unrecognized by us, to mountains celebrated by novelists who haven't yet written, and along streets in cities loved by filmmakers whose work we haven't yet seen. By that time travelers might enjoy a community of spirit with each other and with residents nearby who, strengthened through the privilege of living there, would trust visitors. Eventually—why not hope?—there might even be retreats, as on the route encircling Shikoku, where part of the welcome offered would be to share a community's practice of silence. Or its calendar, where a painting or sculpture might be brought out only once a year, or where things might be said at appointed times as they had been said for hundreds of years.

The circular pilgrimage route in Japan leads to an emotional understanding that I want very much to come to know, especially as I am an American, the dangerously empowered legatee of Western, linear ideas of time and progress. I think of a circular walk I would like to make along the Platte River, west from the Missouri River to the Rockies, and then, by another pioneer trail like the Smoky Hill, back to the Missouri again; I would like to walk prairie grass with the setting sun at my back for a while, day after day. Not that at my age it would convince me to go east to live, but it might encourage me, wherever I must live, to think of that place as home.

Most of my hopes are for the amelioration of problems—a more conservative pattern of land use, a reduction in air pollution, a more prudent consumption of water, a lessening of animal abuse, a more respectful architecture. When I think about the possibility, however, of a landscape enriched by specific places to which we have responded imaginatively and with deference, I find myself thinking that we might be permitted to call it improved. Samuel Johnson wrote once of a place he visited called Hawkstone Park in which he found the geography so untamed that "the ideas which it forces upon the mind are the sublime, the dreadful, and the vast," compelling, in "the horror of solitude, a kind of turbulent pleasure between fright and admiration;" for a visitor there, "his walk is an adventure and his departure an escape." Johnson contrasted Hawkstone with another estate, a garden set below mountains, a scene in which there was "grandeur tempered with softness." I remember sensing for the first time, the summer I was eighteen, the pull of those two kinds of geography. I was working for the Forest Service in the San Juan Mountains of southwestern Colorado—on precipitous, timbered slopes, and often in storms. Late on Saturday afternoons we would leave that setting for a few hours in town. It was a long trip, down thousands of feet through warming air, eventually leading to a point from which we could see our two-block-long destination, situ-

ated in the center of an ideal ranching valley, gold in last light. The community promised a milk shake, a haircut, and a movie (always a western), all of them wonderful, but the overlook would hold us for a moment, even in our youthfulness, by its serenity.

Many times and places since then I have tried to photograph the quality in that scene, having slowly been brought to realize that however much I loved what I saw of the western American wilderness, to have loved it raw best, lifelong, would have required a misanthropy that I couldn't have borne. Like many, I have come to hope to find a valley, in sight of peaks but gentler than they are, and to be permitted to make the valley even more itself, better consonant with a harmony in nature that seems finally more true than nature's violence. To try to do this is, I know, in consideration of our history, to embark on another failure, but I believe that our weakness is at least understood, and that we may hope to be forgiven.

If most of the larger possibilities we have considered are beyond the span of our lives, for what is there to hope within their span? If as individuals we can improve the geography only slightly, if at all, perhaps the more appropriately scaled subject for reshaping is ourselves.

The evidence is cautionary. Those little reforms that I have managed in myself and that for the moment seem more or less in the right direction have been slow and late: for a half-dozen years as a young man I was a hunter; for many more years I enjoyed photographing cattle on the plains, diverted by what seemed their part in an attractive myth, never thinking of what they did to the land or of what we did to them; I also used to take pleasure at the sight of the graceful sprays from center-pivot irrigation systems, machines that were in fact mining irreplaceable aquifers. What, I wonder, am I not seeing now? What in this essay will I wish in five years, in embarrassment, to revise? If only I knew.

I do know, nonetheless, people who have grown, if not to sainthood, to become better than they were, and better than I am. Against the weakness of my own anger I see their achievement—an opposition to evil made steady by their provisional truce with the part of it they cannot change. It appears often to be a victory requiring a whole life. We recognize their success in an evenness of voice, a serenity of hand, a kindness in small things that require patience.

When I have hope that we may improve a little, each of us, it is often after some personal contact with the land. By gardening, for instance. Our back yard has a common mixture of vegetables and flowers—zinnias, cosmos, squash, tomatoes—but as the places we enjoyed in the mountains have been lost, the garden has become a substitute for some of them, particularly for the space of the mountains' quietness.

There is, too, the common satisfaction of walking, which can sometimes be as unalloyed as that of working in the back yard, but more often leads into the diversity of modern life. Among the best descriptions I know of the rewards of exploration on foot is a small journal entitled *Of Walking in Ice* by the filmmaker Werner Herzog. In it he records a hike he made in winter from Munich to Paris, as a kind of sacrament for the health of a friend. Along the way he notes the frightening oddities of our landscape ("low-flying airplanes overhead all day, one of them coming so close that I think I saw the pilot's face"), he observes the coldness of our society's positivism ("How I long to see someone kneeling before the roadside crosses"), and he experiences a sense of isolation and confusion ("If I actually make it, no one will know what this journey means"). There are, however, moments of gain: "The mice rustled

very lightly in the flattened grass. Only he who walks sees these mice." He had recorded a little earlier that a new compass "does not have my friendship yet," but, after studying the way the mice tunnels lie exposed between grass and snow, he realizes that "friendship is possible with mice." It is an observation worthy of Kafka, as befits our age, but more significantly, worthy of St. Francis as well. It is synoptic of what we can enjoy by walking—a kind of friendship with things, made possible by a pace that allows regard for the least conspicuous miracles.

Art, too, is a source of pleasure to be taken in the landscape. Making art—being able to say what one sees that is whole—is an enormous relief, as if one had been held dumb by an impediment of speech, and then abruptly cured, enabling one to say, and thus understand better, what it is that is most important.

Studying the art of others helps too. When we discover, in a landscape toward which habit has made us uncaring, a Hopper sky or Cézanne rocks, the terrain is suddenly compounded into something fresh and larger. Even minor art—songs, for instance—can reawaken our affection for places, and our belief in the certainties they offer. I cherish a ballad—half funny, half sad—describing a man who gets a letter from the East asking why he works on a ranch for low pay, speculating he "must have gone crazy out there;" the man answers to himself in the refrain, "You've never seen spring hit the Great Divide." It reminds me of my season there, and, in the loveliness of the song, the place and I both seem—I don't know how—safe.

Finally, centrally, there is the joy to be found in a landscape experienced with family and friends. There are days that become, in the urgent and hushed sharing of a wonderful place with someone else, as much as I expect to know of the world for which I dream. To hear one's name, and the invitation, spoken with the assurance you will together see the same gift—"look."

I write this on a year of retreat in a small Oregon town next to the Columbia River where it enters the Pacific. Because of the river's size—it is three and a half miles wide—and the ocean, and the town's location on a hill, it is a place of extraordinary beauty, though even it has ghosts. From my desk at an attic window I can see the riverfront that used to be, when we first came here twenty-five years ago, lined with working docks and canneries, but where now there are mostly rotting pilings and empty buildings, the salmon having been decimated by overfishing and by the destruction of their habitat. On the main street, where trucks used to pass carrying a single enormous log, they now carry twenty-five or thirty spindly ones to be chipped for composition board, the whole Coast Range having been cut bare of first growth.

For a century, Scandinavians came here as fishermen, loggers, housewives, and cannery workers, and this morning on the radio there is Finnish music, call-in requests from old people; many in the town are not, even after a lifetime, wholly assimilated. They are loyal to their adopted country, but have held something back, something perhaps beyond their power to give.

It occurs to me that I wasn't entirely accurate to claim that our disinheritance now is especially severe or out of character with our past. Many who came west did not, after all, want to stay once they saw it. Or like the immigrants to this town, they learned that their coming had imposed on them an injury. How else explain the carefully tended birch trees where alders are native?

America was not settled only by those following a dream of profit. Just as often, our forebears' motive was to escape some nightmare of hunger or stultification or violence, and they would always love, with a sudden intensity against which they could never fully guard themselves, the geography where they were raised—the flowers, trees,

birds, clouds, and lay of the land. Ours has never been, really, just a country of easygoing transients. There has always been a counter tradition of learning to make the best of exile, of building from recollections of what was prized and torn away.

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