

an essay!

The Bridwell Quill

a note from the director



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Note to Readers: The following Quill is a long-form essay detailing a 6,200-mile road trip the author took in July 2020. It constitutes six-months of Quill issues.

PART I: An Introduction to French Socialism with a Cowboy Hat

Shortly before his death in 1837, François Marie Charles Fourier is believed to have coined the word “feminism,” likely scratching away at some handmade paper with an ink pen while drafting another essay on socialism in his Paris flat. At sixty-five, he was well-known and well-regarded. His beliefs were influential, though controversial in



François Marie Charles Fourier (Above) and Victor Prosper Considerant (Right)

some quarters. Among his many acolytes were those who fought against the republican government of the French Second Republic led by Charles-Louis Napoléon Bonaparte from 1848 to 1852. One of those was Victor Prosper Considerant (1808–1893), an energetic exponent of change, who is often described as a *utopian socialist*, or one who sought a future society that was ethically and morally just and equitable. In the summer of 1849, an attempted coup against Bonaparte forced Considerant out of the country, to Belgium, and within the next few years, to the United States. Considerant’s counterpart stateside was Albert Brisbane (1809–1890), another *utopian socialist*, who was an adherent and propagator of Fourier’s works in America. Brisbane, who would also become the patriarch of a distinguished journalism family—including his grandson Arthur Brisbane, a distinguished editor for Pulitzer’s *New York World* and great-grandson Arthur S. Brisbane,

current Public Editor for the NYT—negotiated Considerant’s passage to the United States.

Considerant led a group of French utopian socialists to Dallas and established La Réunion Settlement on the south and west side of the Trinity River, today in what is near West Dallas. Though the socialist experiment failed in the dry heat along the untamed banks of those western waterways, the hardscrabble enterprise was motivated by both aspiration and conviction. Within two years, Considerant retreated to Europe, spent time in jail, and then returned to southern Texas to try another run at the socialist experiment. It too floundered and he returned for the last time to France in 1869.

Considerant would not live long enough to see American women gaining the right to vote in 1920—he died twenty-seven years earlier in 1893. But like his more famous countryman de Tocqueville, he had a vision of what life was like (or *could have been like*) for Americans, if they were to be more *equal* in their treatment of *all* people and embrace a particular brand of French socialism—remember this was in 1855, on the cusp of the American Civil War, in the ‘wild west’ of nineteenth century Dallas. Looking into this unlikely *hero* of nineteenth century



thought, I discovered most of his writings have faded into obscurity, and virtually none have been translated from the French. A cursory look though yields something for us to consider—especially as the American political landscape is one which has erupted over the dichotomous language of so-called “socialisms” fractured into cacophonous and erratic narratives that never come together in any coherent way.



If we were to look, for example, at Considerant’s 1847 book *Principes du socialisme: manifeste de la démocratie au XIXe siècle*, we will find that there is an appreciable social philosophy and political theology (perhaps even the sometimes controversial *Christian socialism*) that exists within his brand of thinking—something that is tied not only to his mentor’s coinage and use of *féminisme* in the 1830s, but in a belief that through some form of universal Christianity, our freedom of self, community, and the state would be fully realized. Of course, these are mere evocations of Considerant’s beliefs and not necessarily the realities of any consensus. For example, he writes “Christianity, which has in fact broken the chains of slaves, and gives women and children the first degree of initiation into freedom, has only sketched out its task,” which could be interpreted as *Christianity can bring one only so far, until social unity and equality are achieved*. His language is full of expressions, which are torn from the political headlines of today, especially his regular use of *droit au travail*—that is, “right to work,” an expression he is sometimes credited with popularizing. But perhaps the most telling of comments in his work *Principes du socialisme* may be “the modern political and social spirit in all that it has raised is only the pure spirit of Christ.” For Considerant and his band of immigrants, travelers, and local fur trappers, he thought the world would only survive if it fostered a system of belief in greater equality of the “pure spirit of Christ,” which was tied into both the political and social *geist* or *esprit* of that moment.

And of our moment? Or the moments when *socialisms* (plural) have been tossed around, demonized, branded, or scapegoated? To quote a recent NPR piece interviewing a Wisconsinite, who was supporting the recall of the state’s governor: “We’re not really into socialism right now, we’re kinda into freedom.” I’m no socialist, but this sounds sort of like “We’re not really into oxygen now, we’re kinda into donuts.” Or as Oscar Wilde reminds us: “I love to talk about nothing. It’s the only thing I know anything about.” I guess I’m not breathing when I’m stuffing donuts down my throat, so maybe the guy has a point. Do we really know anything about this kind of history or how it informs our present, or are we just guessing and

pretending to know something—like socialism with a cowboy hat and spurs?

I would never have learned the story of Fourier or Considerant or the utopian socialist Dallasites, if I hadn’t been wandering around West Dallas this summer and came upon the old commune’s cemetery. But since I’m a firm believer in constant *flaneury*, as part of my job to seek, explore, study, and ask questions, the happenstantial discovery began part of my summer odyssey, and revealed a much greater story than I could have anticipated.

PART II: On the Road Again—Or, *Sweet Baby Jesus* and Margaritas

Driving through rural northeast New Mexico, I stopped at a four-corner town with a small dry goods store. Across the street was a curious building that had fallen into disrepair and had a sign reading “Freedom School,” (below). I wasn’t sure what a Freedom School was, but upon a little research I discovered that it was a school for African-American students in the Jim Crow era. This one was on the crossroads of Des Moines, NM, easily missed if you were speeding by. Already, on my first day of travels I’d come across something I knew little about and was desirous of learning much more. I love to find remnants of history on roadsides that



tell deeper, more vibrant stories of the past—and the lesser known, but more fascinating, the more I want to explore further, excavate, reveal, and tell those stories. Just a block away, the rest of the town seemed to fall into the earth’s desiccation and yielded one-room churches with splintering and weathered clapboards rattling in the desert winds. My first taste of history in the countryside was already enlivening me.

After months of quarantined living, working, and surviving, I’d been consumed by the two-dimensionality of the workplace, and of incessant Zoom meetings that were taking a toll on me and



my colleagues. I considered the options of travel and decided that I would take a road trip to the Rockies. Leaving for the southern foothills of Colorado, I pressed on up through increasingly dry and barren country, passing a dormant volcano and fields of cattle, where the air was thin, but the sky was clear, blue, life-giving, and spirit blossoming. I found a camping pad up on Trinidad Lake just beyond the New Mexico border, where the rugged hills of Colorado broke apart like the top of a sugary New York crumb cake, and I tried my hand at trout fishing. The aim of my trip was to get out, to find quiet, clear the mind, and be away from people so as to remain safe in this contagious world—camping and fishing and hiking were to be a good remedy. But it turned into something else as I eventually sped across more than 6,200 miles of Eisenhower-era highways in a tantric drive to rid myself of the pandemic coma.

I didn't succeed much in the fishing department, as much as I had a go at it, but it ended up being more about the process and less about any number of fish being hooked on my line. Reservoirs in Colorado, streams in South Dakota, lakes in



Montana, and rivers in Idaho all had their special charm, and only a small bass on the shores of Flathead Lake north of Missoula afforded my shattered outdoor sportsman's ego some relief. In between the moments of prayerful reflection on nature, I would regularly stop into little bookshops and libraries and museums, if they were open, and look around, observe, search out books, and talk to people—usually through a mask, before making retreats back to the glories of rivers and mountains. Even though driving up nearly 13,000 feet of Pike's Peak (Big Foot photo above) was fraught with hairpin turns and swarms of tourists like myself, I found the clarity of the thinning air, plummeting temperatures, and alpine flora gave me a mental focus that had rarely entered my mind. Further through the trip, as I'd been driving for a week, and

was heading south from my fishing exploits on the fog-choked inlets of Flathead Lake, I drove by the town of St. Ignatius, MT, which was “established” by the Belgian Catholic Fr. Pierre-Jean De Smit as a mission in 1854. But the reality was that the piece of earth with that Jesuitical cognomen was also rightly labeled on contemporary welcome signs as *ʔa·kikq̄tataʔuk̄p̄tiʔit*—the name in Ktunaxa, the native language of the indigenous Kutenai people, unpronounceable to my incompetent tongue. I pulled off not simply to see the town with this beautiful name and its complex pronunciation, but because the mountains beneath which sat *ʔa·kikq̄tataʔuk̄p̄tiʔit* were imposing and powerfully entrancing like a shaman reeling me in. I drove as close as I could before I stopped my car and gazed piously up at those fearsome crags, peaks encased in summer snow and gradually evaporating mists, like a child staring up at a candy machine, without any change to get what they really wanted.

Nature is a powerful thing—and I know how cliché it is to say that. But you are reminded of that power when you encounter it, like any truly *awesome* thing. So too, though, are events that have dramatic and powerful force, some of which are made in stark contrast to their surroundings. As I drove along the gunpowder grey earth of the eastern foothills of the Colorado Rockies not far from Pueblo, I pulled off with a cup of Starbucks Pike's Roast (a coincidence, I promise) and stopped at a rustic memorial to workers who were slaughtered by an anti-striker militia in 1914, in what has come to be known as the Ludlow Massacre. Perhaps the most troubling parts of the memorial and its history were the horrors of fifty-five women and children, many of whom were either burned to death or buried alive under a make-shift cellar that was meant to protect them. I walked around the grounds, now enshrined with memorial markers, a fence, and a gathering pavilion established by local workers adjacent to the bronze plaques and statue. Surprisingly, the last survivor of the events died last year at the age of 105—Marie Padilla Daley, who had been an infant during the siege. I reflected on what time meant in that space, just as a loud freight train barreled past only twenty yards away. I thought about this memorial and what other



monuments meant in our day and age, especially as furies boiled across the nation over old statues in our collective public square. The questions of what they meant or represented and who should determine their fates had become ever more significant. I thought that I'd be *free* of media and political battles while on the road, but they presented themselves like insidious hotel mints at almost every step of my trip. The Ludlow Monument is a sad reminder out here in the desert. Why doesn't anyone know much about it? In contrast, a Columbus statue was more prominent in Pueblo—it included a bust atop a pillar embellished in extended accoutrements with recently placed bronze medallions embossed on the heavy stone slabs by the local K of C, about ten paces from a coffee shop where old Italian men were sipping espresso and playing cards. It stood proud, no one paying it much attention.

I passed through Cheyenne, WY one evening, stopping at a modest campground on the outskirts of the state capital—a place so small that its population is a fraction of many Dallas suburbs. I gave the site superintendent a \$20 bill and then went into town, before returning to set up camp, peel some clementine oranges, and look at the deep purple sky as campers and ring-fires glowed under the almost full prairie moon. I found a quiet village of a town in Cheyenne, where families were home and the only things you heard were the whirling of maple branches around the statehouse, dogs barking, and an occasional radio in jacked up F150s that passed by. Most people weren't wearing masks. I found one of the few bookshops in town, and it was still open late. Going in, I wanted to buy some offbeat writings on *Wyomingana*—locally published fiction, regional histories, that sort of thing. The shop had a vintage flavor of pale worn grey paneling reminiscent of a high school the Carpenters may have attended in the 1960s. About a dozen men were gathered around, mostly sitting, with awkward

glances and subdued banter. As it turned out, I'd happened upon the monthly gathering of the LP club—where people would bring in some arcane vinyl, play them, and discuss the merits and pitfalls of the recording with the group. College profs, high school teachers, a few students, and a man who looked like he sang for the *Grateful Dead* murmured appreciation of the ballads, while mostly ignoring my inquiries to the proprietor.

Nearly every morning, I'd pack up early and head out on the open road, imagining how it must feel like being a circuit rider a century and a half-ago, only I was lazy and held the comforts of a COSTCO trifold mattress, modern showers, and restaurant-prepared brisket. Though, admittedly, there would come a time when I could no longer stomach the endless repetition of granola bars, teriyaki and honey smoked BBQ beef jerky, and grapefruit LeCroix to get me through the solitary driving of 400+ mile daily hauls. Crossing the western extremity of Nebraska, I passed over pine bluffs and between Cenozoic rock formations that looked like red velvet cupcakes. Nebraska, I recently discovered was

completely submerged under an inland sea seventy-five million years ago. A few magnificent streams slithered through the soft manila wheat fields that would have inspired ancient artists or entranced modern trout enthusiasts with their crisp running waters—though, when I tried to find a spot on one river, all I found was a muddy creek strewn with polystyrene Arby's gulps and an overturned and rusting school bus. I stopped at Chimney Rock, outside of which was a Mormon cemetery and countless memorials to the pioneer class of American lore, whose bones now feed the dry grasses of the prairies, within which rattlesnakes warm themselves in the sun and signs warn travelers like me to watch where we walked (photo above of Chimney Rock and the rattlesnake warning signs near the Mormon cemetery).





I headed north through biblical swarms of black prairie locusts that crackled like wet burning wood on my windshield, only to ooze and stick to the *Safelite* glass like melting hard-shell Skittles. An errant art installation called *Carbenge* (below) popped up outside of a small town—it was in fact a rendering of similar proportions to *Stonehenge* but made out of old cars painted the color of wet ashes. This wasn't exactly a memorial, but rather art. The question, though, of what it symbolized was puzzling, because a few of the art pieces had writing splayed out across them, usually expounding anti-capitalist and populist infused directives purporting yet another form of *socialism*. Industry, modernity, technology, art? A memory of antiquity, *Stonehenge*? A political statement? A nod to the future of memorials and monuments?



When I crossed the border into South Dakota, I had planned to visit the Wounded Knee Memorial. Due to COVID-19, I was stopped at the border, which happened to be the entrance to the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. The local official from the reservation said everything was closed and that they'd have to take my vehicle information and make sure I'd pass directly through the territory back to U.S. land—some fifty miles or so north. I did, though I drove by Wounded Knee, only too quickly on my way to the Badlands, because visitors were barred from stopping and getting out of their cars at this time. It is odd now 130 years later to think of those atrocities and that today people like me pass through as tourists. It made me think that we try and need to remember such evil actions by our being in proximity to those sacred and perhaps even transgressive places—but what do such actions mean? And can we do this without being *tourists*? Because, like with museum collections, this risks the viewer and participant in the *tourism* of becoming something worse than a tourist, something like a participant in the economy of spectacles. Wounded Knee had a big sign by a

gravel parking lot. It felt like the parking lot of a rural auto mechanic or picnic area. That did not feel quite right to me. I only did a rolling stop, and moved on quickly, so as not to be pulled over by tribal authorities. And yet, moving through this space seemed somehow disrespectful.

Driving around the west is something that needs to be experienced. In a place like this it was particularly necessary, because feeling the tension of wanting to obey the local laws during a pandemic while also wanting to experience the hallowed ground and space of history have almost nothing in

common with reading about a massacre in eighth grade as a teenager. I felt something like this for the first time some years ago, when I went to the eastern side of the Sierras, coming up from Death Valley and realizing that this was not something you can convey in mere words or even art or music. The volcanic mantle-fired temperatures of Furnace Creek, CA in that remote salt basin of the valley routinely see temperatures of 130F. It was so hot that my eyes felt as if they were being stung with searing needles. When you are in a place like the Pine Ridge Reservation, there is the added recognition of what *land* and *land ownership* mean. The principals and trappings of Western and European laws from the Magna Carta to modern constitutional law are very different from and in contrast to the ways, morals, and legal visions of the indigenous peoples, and it is a useful lesson for those of us especially who live in cities, to see what it's like to be guests in those lands.

Of course, this was very clearly on display when I happened to be driving through the Black Hills that same afternoon, finding the Disneyfication of those ancient mountains to be engulfed in a tempestuous storm of political alignments and contentious points of historical ownership, colonialism, empire building, and manifest destiny. I drove through the deeply thick, lush, green, piney forests and magnificent rock formations amid a ruckus of



traffic on a multi-lane highway up from Rapid City, SD. The contrast to Pine Ridge was apparent. Rapid City was the gateway drug to Rushmore, requiring a stopover for snacks, bathroom breaks, and a topping off of your gas tank—a veritable sprawl of *Walmartiana* and chain restaurants that served all-you-can-eat bread and overly sweetened cocktails. More utopic styled museums, boutiques, candy shops, fudge conveyers, and Moose Track ice-cream parlors dotted the mountain pass freeway than I could have imagined. A life-size replica of Independence Hall stood proud and erect to one side. Artifactual fetishizations of colonial Americana and ample caricatures of the Founding Fathers decorated billboards at every rounding turn. And scriptural citations from the Constitution populated signs and advertisements as if the roadside landscape were a high school lesson in civics. America had become as sugar coated up here as an Applebee’s Peach Margarita. In fact, it seemed as if the Founding Fathers were the new disciples, the protectors of the faith of the Holy Constitution—America’s new savior—writ large and plastered on billboards from sea to shining sea. I think if I had been among the *Bill of Rights Bros*, I would have likely asserted myself among those fellas and made our motto *In saccharo et arma ibi libertas*—In sugar and guns there is freedom.

I couldn’t get up to Mount Rushmore that first day, because of the president’s rally. I hadn’t planned it that way, but just happened upon it. So instead, I went to visit the Crazy Horse Memorial for a few hours—a monument to *counterbalance* the “heroes” of the Republic with a “hero” of the indigenous people. Though, there is still some controversy, because of the way the project was undertaken and whether or not such a task was sanctioned by any plurality of native representatives in the 1940s who may (or may not) have approved Korczak Ziolkowski’s role and project. It was a fascinating tour, though, and the introductory video plus the



curation of the museum pointed to yet another form of narrative history—the expansive and multi-generational familial enterprise that repeatedly turned down external and government funding to do what was right for this artistic and cultural project. Narratives, we see, know no limits, and in the age where we pick apart opponents like turkey vultures on carrion, the Crazy Horse Memorial was far more than just a counterpoint to Rushmore. It had its own contextual concerns and internal debates and detractors. Nothing was ever going to be clear cut when it came to storytelling and American history.

Later that same evening, I found one of the last available overnight sites in the valley. I camped near a stream with small trout, grilled some ribs and green peppers, and watched as Marine One and a military entourage circled above the tightly packed hills that seemed to smother us all. My campsite neighbors gingerly said “you know, doesn’t matter what your politics, it’s still awesome to see that power.” I ate my grill-burnt pork ribs and stared into the fire blankly.

I finally did see Mount Rushmore—what was originally called the Six Grandfathers (*or* “*T̥h̥uŋkášila Šákpe*”) in the Lakota language. The flags, signs, and t-shirts of those protestors and supporters had mostly dissolved into the countryside the next morning, though a few remained as I polished off a cream cheese schmeered bagel like a good New Yorker at a coffee depot in the hamlet of Keystone. I overheard political conversations between sips and bites, but I preferred the politics of rye vs. pumpernickel.

Up at the National Monument, I looked in curious consideration at the mountain. What did it mean? It’s hard on the one hand to say “that’s astonishing,” while also realizing the historical



problems of its origins, its sculptor’s biases and ethical failings, and what the implicit meanings of this space were—a space that has been negotiated, visited, photographed, and utilized as a backdrop by the full spectrum of humanity for a host of reasons. Heading out of the Black Hills, I gazed wondrously up at the magnificent rock formations and stunning avuncular pines, as if they were looking down and protecting me. I thought I’d catch site of a bear or wolf, but instead I met retired civil servants from the Jersey Shore, who chatted mercilessly about nothing. In a small town to the south called Custer, SD, there was a Fourth of July parade with all the pageantry, color, and sugar mills of cotton candy and trinkets being sold by peddlers. I realized earlier in the morning that a poor finch or cowbird from a flock swarming with the locusts above the Nebraska plains the day before had cemented itself into my vehicle grill—and now its rot was blowing through my AC system. Gagging, I found a local car wash and pressure washed that poor bird off while silently delivering a sending prayer: *Let ye go to Eternal Flight, where thy shall meet your Maker...*



Back in Wyoming I drove to Devil’s Tower—the ancient core of a volcano featured in Spielberg’s *Close Encounters*—where I hiked for a few hours. It’s an incredible work of natural art that inspires anyone who comes across it, and where rock climbers were scaling and repelling from its sheer cliffs, appearing like ants on a Bundt cake. Prairie dogs stood erect like jerky protrusions out of dirt cellars in the shadow of the tower, while tourists stopped to gawk at and photograph the happy rodents. Hot and exhausted, I decided to drive all the way to Billings that day—still many hours away. There is nothing but big sky, dirt roads, and double vision in this part of the country. On the border between Wyoming and Montana I saw many cows and out of boredom decided to stop and sing to them. *Ode to Joy* is good, but Verdi is better. *La donna è mobile* is a bovine favorite, except singing

without the sexist lyrics made all the lady moo’ers happy. They just came over to the fence and looked at me. True confession.

Gas stations are rare out here, but I managed not to run out of fuel. A few hours outside of my destination I stopped at Little Big Horn (left) where

Custer got whooped and still they named a *grassland* and *park* and *county* and *town* after him. I was surprised to learn that wounded U.S. soldiers were evacuated by steamboat on a small river half a mile from the battlefield—and couldn’t imagine any body of water in this limitless expanse. It was one of the most serene

and beautiful spots I had yet seen—the sky was like a dome of azure and the grass stalks were tall and free. I bent over and ripped some wisps from their roots and held them in my hand like an offering. The soil was dry and firm and cars and semis whizzed by at 90 mph as I looked at yet another monument and let the deracinated grasses hang from my hands. A few hours later I pulled into a shaded KOA, which turned out to be the original, set up by local businessman Dave Drum in 1962, under the amber bluffs of Billings. Because my fire would not light, like a good boy scout, I scrubbed out a can of chili with a silicon spork from REI and scooped some premade cold rice from a plastic container, before passing out with choking swarms of mosquitos above my head.



There was a burial mound in Billings for transients, gun fighters, and cowboys called Boothill Cemetery (above)—it had served the now extinct Yellowstone River town of Coulson, which ran the same steamboats that ferried wounded servicemen in those days and battles. Boothill was a common term that came from *old west* violence that resulted



in the death of gunslingers and cowboys, who were “buried in their boots on the hill.” The Boothill was placed on the National Historic Register in 1979 and the official government forms preserve a poem by the local Congregational minister’s wife, Mrs. B.F. Shuart, that is inscribed on a fieldstone obelisk standing atop the burial mound. In the fashion of narrating the pioneer spirit, the final stanza reads: *In memory of those who blazed the trail / And showed to us our West / In boots and spurs they lie / And on this hill find rest.* Just as we might consider the *land* around other parts of the west, it’s no surprise to see it written as “our West.” Indeed, this road trip had turned into a reflection of the meaning of ownership, contested land, and possessing natural space.

I settled the following night in Great Falls, Montana. The small city is about 110 miles from the Canadian border and by this time I had now traveled a circuitous path of some 2,200 miles. I originally wanted to drive into northern Canada, but the COVID travel restrictions prevented that. I made my way north by way of Livingston, Bozeman, Butte, and Helena. Livingston was a visual treat with bucolic fields, rugged snow-capped peaks, and a town with a fabulous bookstore that sold *socialist* t-shirts in the tradition of Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov that read *The People’s Republic of Livingston*, replete with bear in star—how nice to support capitalist enterprises in the business of marketing *socialism*. Bozeman was a college town with a fine sampling of independent bookshops, a beautiful modern city library, public sculptures of recycled steel, and a fabulous taco shop, where I splurged on sriracha soaked beef and chuckled at a restroom decked in a *Big Lebowski* theme—the dude abides. Butte felt like an episode of Laverne & Shirley. Like a mid-century Milwaukee, the old town was all brick, hilly, and almost empty of people. High above the city is one of the world’s largest copper and zinc mine towers sticking out from a precipitous hillside like the horn



of a rhinoceros more than 200 feet tall—and plumbing the earth to depths of 4,300 feet below the surface. More than a hundred years ago in June 1917, one of the shafts burned up, suffocating some 168 miners—the deadliest hard rock mining accident in U.S. history, known as the Granite Mountain-Spectacular Fire. There’s a stone monument there now too.

I had wanted to fish in the headwaters of the Missouri, in a town called Three Forks, MT just east of Butte, but I was short on time. Heading north on Rt. 15, an almost imperceptible 90-foot statue called *Our Lady of the Rockies* glanced down on Butte at a distance, from the heights of the Continental Divide. Her alabaster sheen makes her look like a giant piece of carved Ivory soap stuck on the hilltop. An hour or so on, after perhaps the most glorious drive through hill country that was strewn with molasses and caramel colored boulders the

size of office buildings, I arrived in Helena. The state capital seemed subdued late in the day, and the setting sun wrapped the city in a golden blanket. A statue in front of the statehouse depicted an Irish patriot (left), who later became Montana’s first territorial governor, Thomas Francis Meagher (1823–1867). He had been involved

in more land conflicts with Native American tribes and one day vanished—some accounts have him drowning in the Missouri after falling overboard from a ferry. The statue is heroic but peculiar, especially in these times of *monumania*.

Few people were out in Helena as I tried to find the bookshops and libraries—all of which were closed. But I paused for two slices of margherita and basil pizza and a locally brewed pilsner served in a short-stemmed globe, while listening to the local Catholic church toll its 6pm bells. Sitting on the sidewalk tables, I struck up a conversation with a professorial chap, who’d seen more than a few seasons of life, wearing rough-cut tweed, a blue button down, and an ascot tucked into his t-shirt. He had a pile of old books and was reading



Baudelaire. He looked like and had the demeanor of Ezra Pound and sniffed unceremoniously at my inquiries like someone fond of Victorian salts. So, I gulped my pilsner and left.

Great Falls was a pleasant diversion with no major revelations—though, I was pleased to find that the local library had been the home to Montana’s first African-American state librarian, Alma Smith Jacobs (1916–1997), who was being celebrated by the city’s main library with a thirty-foot image of her across its façade (right). Across town I went to buy a new fishing permit at the local sporting goods outlet. Outside there were statues of the Founding Fathers with plaques about Freedom and Patriotism. Inside a group of teenage Army recruits were sipping black coffee and eating donuts. I bought my permits and invasive species prevention pass and headed out of town, forgetting the jolly bronze George Washington outside the sporting goods shop, as if he too wanted a donut.

I was now determined to get to Canada, even though I’d read that travel *within* our northerly neighbor was restricted to Canadians. I didn’t expect the terrain north of Great Falls to be flat, but it was extraordinarily vast and expansive, with wide open fields that were hilly at first, but yielded to a broader horizon of harlequin to lime colored grasses and increasingly regular oases of vibrant cornucopias of blue, yellow, red, and white wildflowers (right). The highway was mostly empty as I drove up to the town of Shelby. In some ways it felt like I was driving to the top of the world, even though I knew there were thousands more miles to the north. Shelby turned out to be a mile long “city” with a diner called Dixie and some rustic Truman-era motels with mechanical cigarette machines. I went to check out the local library, as by this time I had with thirty other small towns across the west. The village was quiet, vacated, and had the radiant energy of a solar-powered



calculator. I snapped a few images and looked around. It felt a bit like being a fourth-rate National Geographic photographer-reporter who only gets published in *Guideposts*, if he’s lucky. Across the street from the closed library, I met a woman who turned out to be the local Lutheran pastor, and surprisingly knew my colleague Andy Keck at SMU, from her days in Minnesota—you think you can run to the ends of the earth and then you meet a friend of a friend! Signs for guns and sweet drinks abounded, so I stopped for some bison jerky and sped back off onto the undulating highway flowing like a ribbon toward the Canadian border.

Sweet Grass, MT was only thirty minutes north. I thought there’d be some bibliographic attraction there, but I also had my sights on Lethbridge, Alberta—about sixty miles north of the Canadian border, which I’d heard was a delightful college town. But Sweet Grass, as inviting as it sounded, was a textbook border town—in the sense that it was a confused patch of earth straddling what some old folks once called *frontier* land. No libraries here. No bookstores. No nothin’. Well, that’s not completely true. There was duty-free alcohol at a rustic dull grey garage turned general store. And a half dozen streets of gravel road where various types of used military surplus vehicles stood on almost every corner. They included jeeps and ATVs and trucks dating back to the Second World War. Locals mowed incongruous swaths around cordgrass and muhly that poked six feet through the rusted lorries, trailers, and military ambulances, and an occasional slow-growing hackberry locked one vehicle or another in like hostages (photo, next page).





I followed a dead-end dirt thoroughfare to an air strip called cemetery road—no irony—and stopped in a field of golden flowers. I got out and breathed in air that tasted like honey and mint, when my phone chimed: apparently, Canadian TeleCom detected my presence on the no-man’s land and seemed to think I was now in Canada: *Welcome to Canada! Your phone rates are....* I peered down and noticed plastic sheathed cement cones every 30 feet, marking the national boundary. I allowed my shadow to run across the border, since I knew *that* was legal. I wasn’t sure what to think about this place: the military surplus, the unencumbered national border, the empty fields, and the fact that I’d just driven thirty miles through one of the most heavily armed places on earth, where nuclear ICBMs were scattered like patient prairie dogs in scores if not hundreds of subterranean silos in slight lifts along Rt. 15.



Wanting to visit the real Canada I went to talk to the border patrol—only to be asked to “step inside.” “A librarian from Texas, on a camping road trip taking photos of libraries and fishing?” “Show us pictures.” “How many libraries have you seen?” “Do you have a gun in your car?” “You’re from Texas?” “Do you have a gun in Texas?” “You must, if you’re from Texas.” The portrait of Queen Elizabeth II was nonplussed and gazed at me from the wall. “Do Canadians all eat bacon?” Actually, I should have said that I was trying to break my Tim Horton’s addiction by confronting it head on, and therefore was driving to Lethbridge. “Please give us your keys so we can inspect your car.”

I’m a diehard *Canadaphile*—if you can believe it, so this was a bit rough. The queen’s men had their way with the ol’ vehicle. The car that’s made me feel like I hatched from an egg each morning sleeping in its interior. Poor fella—those navy-blue brigands didn’t know what they were doing. After more questions and only revealing that I prefer Tom’s of Maine toothpaste to *Crest*, they rejected

my entry as “non-essential,” gave me a warning “not to re-enter” until *the* COVID was over and sent me packing. I gave the bilingual French-English form to the young American who was befuddled by the denied entry and then said “welcome home, fella!” What a relief.

I had been in an ecstatic mood with the anticipation of Glacier National Park just ahead of me. Reading the many touristic brochures and online accounts had made it sound like Glacier was not only a gorgeous and formidable place, but one of the most extraordinary physical and spiritual landscapes on earth—and I now know why. The rustic beauty and sheer rawness of nature that contrasts earth, mountain, sky, and water

is like nothing I’ve seen—even in other parts of the world. Of course, you must contend with the other side of that which diminishes the solitary dream of experiencing nature one on one: other tourists. I’d given in to some greasy fast food as I pressed on toward Glacier. I indulged in McDonalds’ nuggets, the best *chicken product* I ever ate, and after a steady snack diet of dried fruits, almonds, and water, I splurged on the McGrease I knew and loved. My own personal Lord and Flavor. On the way up to the mountains, I stopped a few times. At one convenient store a clerk was forcibly pushing a gaunt and emaciated man, who was visibly befuddled—likely burnt by some drugs—out in the parking lot. It was a confusing moment of the violence that comes from raw power dynamics on the open road, where the marginals find the margins to retreat and survive in vacant stares and empty stomachs. I turned away from the poor wasting fellow, who had captured my attention—I began digging around for some cash to give him only to be drawn into a conversation with a tall young man from the Blackfeet Reservation up the road. He joked about keeping outsiders away “with their COVID” and smiled and laughed as we talked



about fishing. His truck was encased in mud, as if he'd run a derby through some swamp, and he asked me "where's your wife?" I told him: "what makes you think I have a wife? Because I want to go fishing?!" He laughed and then pointed me in some vague direction to fish, while he recommended lures, and the jovial banter soon faded into the dust of his Ford truck rumbling off into the afternoon.

Coming upon Glacier and the range of mountains there was again like a pilgrimage. The wide expanse made my stomach drop and heart pace. I drove in through the Marias Pass and stopped to snap a few photos and read the obelisk and assorted monuments—yet again, the memorial soaked culture of America is one of embossed rocks and texts engraved into stone for the ages. In some cases, it is about the words, but in other cases, it's more about the essence of a natural resource, the rock itself, being placed in a spot that has been given meaning because of some action or passage or event that happened. What do they really mean to us today? And why should it matter? Is it an embrace of Manifest Destiny or a reminder that *without* rugged men and rustic women we wouldn't have Netflix, electric cars, Imodium, or Instagram accounts today?

I could have plunged 30 feet off the docks into Lake McDonald (right) at Apgar Village located at the southern end of the glacial reserve on that warm afternoon. The lake was crisp like a frozen melon as I guided my hand and arm up to my elbow through the spring fed waters. It must have been no more than 50F, but it was a glorious baptism of nature on that warm day. Again, many tourists clogged the tight roads and made the experience cramped. Bear caution signs proliferated. And though I stayed long enough to enjoy part of the lake and trails, the Going-to-the-Sun Road was closed off after 16 miles, at the terminus of Lake McDonald in the



north. But I retreated back south through Apgar and down to Flathead Lake. I went through some increasingly populated tourist towns with an expansive agricultural economy. A few more bookstores and libraries. At one point I passed the property of someone who had put up more than twenty billboards that told the story of Jesus, the Bible, the Founding Fathers, and the Evils of Abortion—all in a cogently disjointed narrative with evocative and shocking images (right). Of course, I stopped. The proprietor had gone out, and though I waited a bit, they didn't return. Too bad—I would have enjoyed the conversation.



The hamlet of Somers on north Flathead was a charming town that reminded me somewhat of the coastal Narragansett out east. A retired hippie with a charming smile had a yard sale under a marquee and a purplish house with painted metal fish and aluminum butterflies adorning the property. We

exchanged a few words, before I drove on and found another KOA for the evening. I'd wanted to fish nearby but was prohibited because it was on native land and would have to wait to find a lawful place in the morning. That night, I sat up on the top of the campground on a hill looking over the great lake down toward the town of Polson that glowed in the night. Around me, campfires flared and crackled, and I bent over making camp bread and Oscar Mayer's best (p. 14 photo). A 26-lb bass—a record—was mounted over the office door of the KOA manager with a placard, and I snacked on some chocolate covered blueberries before kicking off to sleep.

The next morning it was overcast, and I tried my hand fishing at the state park on Finley Point before retreating to Missoula by early afternoon. Flathead



River ran through the hills and sloped vales and split further south where a tributary called Clark Fork River ran—another magnificent and rushing natural flow where I stopped later to fish. Missoula was a nice-sized college town at the confluence of Clark Fork and Bitterroot Rivers, nestled in a rounded valley beneath places called Stuart, McLeod, and Lolo Peaks, though Mt. Jumbo seemed most prominent. Plenty of fine bookshops could be found in town, a vibrant café and bar scene, and countless parks and bucolic New England-style streets reminiscent of Norman Rockwell paintings.

Looking toward the great northwest as the day wore on, I sped off toward Coeur d’Alene, stopping in a small mountain pass town of Alberton, MT—where a fine establishment called Montana Valley Book Store stood in an antique mercantile, and probably once accommodated lumbermen and cowboys with their basic provisions. I met the proprietor, a friendly and amenable woman, whom I chatted with briefly, and then bought a novel about China by Bette Bao Lorde. I was not far from the Idaho border, and once I crossed over, it was a dense pine forest at the top of mountains that were south of the Kaniksu National Forest range. I stopped to see the unusual monument of the Sunshine Miners Memorial situated between Kellogg and Wallace, which was a glossy black metallic sculpture of a miner holding a miner’s tool with an eternal lamp glowing from its helmet (above). On May 2, 1972 some 91 men died from a fire that broke out in the mines—one of the worst disasters in American mining history, which forced its closure within the year of the conflagration.



The tragedy, though nearly half a century earlier, was on my mind as I drove up to Coeur d’Alene. How fragile human life is especially in the proximity to nature’s potency as we try to tap into

the innards of the earth, extracting this metal or that mineral for some industrial sustenance. My mind wandered till I came over a ridge and into the embrace of Lake Coeur d’Alene and its alpine environs with boaters, cabins, and magnificent gardens. I was back in a land of the present and enjoyed exploring, resting, and eating a hamburger for a little while.

PART III: *Rural Philosophy, Mountain Theology, and the Pope at Target Practice*

It hadn’t much occurred to me at first, and perhaps I am completely wrong about it, but I began to think more about something that had puzzled me for some time and only on this trip was more and more present. The popular press in the United States often names the divide in this country as that which can be found between “coastal elites” and “rural America.” But I don’t particularly favor any of these monikers, because they are simplistic and reductionist. At the same time, though, these terms get to the core of my quandary: *what exactly do environment, geography, and topography have to do with human thought?* We may generally acknowledge that cities are more liberal and the countryside more conservative—sociologists and political scientists have teased this out for years, by articulating questions about community, purposefulness, family structure, identity construction, and meaning. But what can be said about the physical land, the chthonic meaning and connection to the earth, its socio-topography, and the emotional and spiritual conveyance that grabs a person so tied to that physical place that it not only informs their meaning as a person, but enlivens their humanity to such a degree that it makes them oppose abortion, obey the pope, or shoot a semi-automatic rifle? Or, likewise, read the *New Yorker*, watch foreign films, or debate the literary merits of cancel culture? Of course, this is an unfair casting of factions and behaviors, and is meant to provoke some reaction—it too is simplistic. But the point is still there: can space, place, land, and the physical environment of the earth affect, influence, and guide us in a way that makes us think, consider, decide, hold opinions, and vote in specific ways? I am in no way espousing the problematic idea of what’s known as environmental determinism, but



instead questioning the sense of human social geography.

Maybe this is an unanswerable question, but I bring it up for two reasons: first, in the second half of my trip, I had many more encounters and nuanced conversations with people on the road. In these encounters there was a deep, perhaps even religious tissue that drew out a particular attachment to nature—its adaptability, its cultivation and stewardship, its awe, almost as if nature itself were simply an extension of the self and by that, (what some monotheists might say) God’s intentions and being. Secondly, even from the beginning of my trip, I found myself thinking differently, as soon as I got out into the expansive grasslands of Northwestern Texas, in the panhandle and out beyond Amarillo. When I crossed over to



New Mexico and the earth changed from a sweet yellow to a tenderized red, I felt my mind and body adapting to the color and physical scheme. It didn’t suddenly make me want to vote differently or watch alternative news sources. No, but it did make me feel as if I were using a different part of my brain—and my mind’s map was reoriented. When I saw mountains, things changed again. When the sky turned colors of a Crayola box, of which I had never seen, I saw the world like a vivid dream. When I passed through each of the different geographic regions, saw a beautiful new river, a startling rock formation, or incredible object of nature that was truly inspiring and instilling awe, I paused and wondered what it was I was looking at. Even returning from the trip, several months on, I possess a high level of positive energy and a quotidian outlook that sets me off each morning toward a highly ecstatic engagement with the world. The mountains and land changed me, certainly for the better, and friends and colleagues who have done the same have also attested to this sort of sensorial euphoria.

Shortly after Thanksgiving, I came across a video by Andrew Huberman, PhD., who discussed the ideas of forward movement and receptivity of light and images through the retina—the only part of the body that is made of brain matter and “connected” to the outside world, as he describes it. In his presentation, he explained a variety of lab tests that demonstrated the biophysical core of our bodies through the experience of images, light, and forward motion, including how the human being

reduces stress and fear through these encounters. This made me think that perhaps there is something very innate in ourselves that affects the way we think as we encounter spaces. I’m sure there is further research to be done in this area, but from what I can tell, there may just be something to this idea of vision, spaces, and light.

Heading out of Coeur d’Alene there was the lingering smell of a giant *Whataburger* in my car. The main library (above) was gorgeous, the lake pristine, and city’s landscaping exquisite. The bookstores were interesting, but they also demonstrated characteristics that prove even the most seemingly innocuous things like *bookshops* are politically stylized institutions. In one, for example, there were no used books, and the orientation of the literary fare leaned toward the stay-at-home Jodi Picoult demographic. It also positioned overtly political books in a way to lure in readers, who would likely vote in one political persuasion in contrast to other bookshops, which were more prominently swinging in the opposite direction.

Like clockwork, as soon as I crossed the Washington state line, it started to rain. *How did that happen!?* I pulled into the outskirts of Spokane an hour later, and thought I’d make the evening rounds to a few bookshops. As my luck had it, the first shop, whose name seemed peculiar to me on the GPS, turned out to be a derelict *adult bookshop*, replete with colorful paint jobs across the front—



so I promptly sped off without stopping! The whole area was dead, except for a cargo train passing nearby. Trains, it turns out, are an integral and very conspicuous part of the west, which are not always paid much attention. Unlike in the east coast though, in the west, trains are visible, and powerfully obvious symbols of expansion and American connectivity and growth. I stopped several times during this trip to observe how trains made their ways through narrow passes, across metal trusses, above steep embankments, or into complex railroad track exchanges. For me, it was often a somewhat contemplative performance of industrial art—though most of my friends would say: “Tony, it’s just a damn train!”

Spokane sat under a grey blanket of soft rain that gradually tapered off as the evening wore on and yielded the bright glow of sunset. I spent a few hours catching up with an old friend with whom I hadn’t spoken in years, while nibbling on wheat crackers washed down with an Odyssean sea dark *Cab Sam*. We bantered about travels, hiking, nature, road trips, the library world, COVID, and the merits of camping in national vs. state parks. The conversation turned to politics, invariably, and the complexity of the way in which our world is constructed and how we operate within it.



Soon enough, I was off again to find another bookshop or library in Spokane and wander back south through the lush hill country that was eastern Washington. On the way out of town the next day, I stopped at a commercial bookstore and caught sight of Matthew Crawford’s curious *Why We Drive: Toward a Philosophy of the Open Road*. To some extent, what Crawford argues for is mirrored in my own vision of not just the road, but the country itself—the sense of individuality, a concocted, centuries-old feisty entitlement to *freedom*, as if it’s the only oxygen we know, and the redolent and vigorous

resistances to certain forms of authority. I recognized in Crawford that all of us seek incremental measures of *freedom*—however it is variously defined. And obviously, some have more freedom than others. The notion of our paradoxical nature, that we seek to be both part of something (a group, a people, a country) and separate (individuals, independent thinkers, uninfluenced spirits) is something that includes not just a particular political persuasion, type of person, or rural population—it’s fundamentally a very human desire. People are walking paradoxes with internal and external conflicts.

The legacy of protestant certainty and categories is that *we should have clearly defined selves* and not be messy, complicated humans. But we are messy. And that’s that. We may often think that an *evangelical* is x or a *Catholic* is y or a *Methodist* is z, but when we encounter more people in more places, with more ideas, we find that clean categories don’t always work. Our ideas of *freedom* and *individuality* often bubble in a cauldron of reactionary determination that sometimes confuses these terms with the right of the common good—like the debate over wearing masks. Yet, Crawford sees a deeper seed of truth in *driving* that marries self-governance, sovereignty, and radical independence. In some ways, then, I wondered if I was more like those fierce constitutionalists by Crawford’s standards than I would have ever admitted. I still believe there is a deep phenomenology to driving—but I recognize it comes with all the privileges of who I am.

The eastern part of Washington state is a surprising discovery: like bunched up fabric, it is an expanse of undulating hills with the fourth greatest concentration of wheat production in the country. It is also penetratingly gorgeous. I’ve never seen a land like this. It was slightly lighter than the golden back of a crispy Thanksgiving turkey. It entranced



me. And I thought: *would this also make me think differently?*—and not just because I was driving! I drove throughout the day, taking photos of bookstores, libraries, and monuments. I stopped in a small town with an antique shop and bookstore, where I met a lovely retiree named Betty, who with her co-worker, passed the time staffing the shop on weekends. They recounted in modest detail the history of the town and region. When it came time to pronounce a century-old politician, whose name was associated with the town, Betty simultaneously blushed and whispered “he was a Democrat,” almost in the same triplet rhythm as a Barbershop Quartet alto: *high-high-high-low-low-low!* I smiled, thanked her for the history lesson, and walked down the street toward my car. I drove off and followed some signs up to a hill above the town near some sports fields that overlooked the Rosalia Railroad Bridge that was built in 1915 and now sits on the National Register of Historic Places—even train trestles have protections to keep them in place and the memory of historic concrete strong! I parked on the hill at the foot of an equally old obelisk—in fact, the monument was erected by the Esther Reed Chapter of the DAR in Spokane within a year of the construction of that now historic train trestle down the hill.



The commemoration was one of the Battle of Pine Creek (or *Tobotonimé*) and the crux of the conflict had to do with incursions of mining settlers onto Nez Perce, Walla Walla, and Yakima lands, and an 1855 conciliar decision by the U.S. government that led to several local wars. This particular monument was different than others I’d come across, and what it said covered layers of other histories. Particularly interesting was that it commemorated not simply a particular stand-off or battle, but that it *also*—at first glance—recognized the Native peoples. But upon further inspection, this century-old monument actually said: “In Memory of Chief Tam-mu-tsa (Timothy) and the Nez Perce Christian Indians, Rescuers of the Steptoe

Expedition.” Under a siege, Brevet Lieutenant Colonel Edward Steptoe was cornered on the hill with his men, when a Native American and first Nez Perce convert to Christianity, Chief Timothy (Tamootsin, 1808–1891) found a way to aid the stranded troops away to safety. In 1914, there would have still been “fresh” memories of the event, older townsfolk who knew of the tensions or even of people who were part of the conflict. It was, in fact, between 1900 and 1920 that the greatest number of monuments were built in the United States—as several books, like former Harvard President Drew Gilpin Faust’s *This Republic of Suffering*, detail. And a majority were funded and constructed by the power of women’s groups. Remembering fathers and grandfathers, uncles and brothers became part of the American social consciousness—for those who had the means, power, and connections to do so. The Steptoe monument on this hill is also of distinction because it not only presented a vision of a prior generation’s “conquering” of lands and “overcoming adversity,” but it extolled the Christian conversionary prowess that afforded Chief Timothy to save these cornered soldiers. Weathered stone could tell many stories, apparently, but it could also conceal them.

And sometimes, stone was wood, and the locals appropriated some ancient artifactual monument, like the codger pole in Colfax, WA (left), which is reminiscent of the more famous *totem poles* of the Pacific Northwest. This rather recent monument from the late 1980s was carved by Jonathan “the Bear Man” LaBenne, and depicts the players of a football team, who re-matched fifty years after a high school game they lost in 1938. Memories of stone, of wood, and of the imagination. You never know what you’ll see next.

I drove on to “the valley”—that area where the Snake and Clearwater rivers converge by Lewiston and Clarkston. I kept thinking about the



complexity of monuments and their stories, and how there was so much more to consider about the history, politics, and social implications of stone, wood, and earth.

Within the hour I pulled into the gravel driveway of my college buddy, a spirited New York Irish-Italian, who landed in North Idaho a dozen years ago as a doctor just out of medical school. Now a decade and some on, he has one of the largest families in the region, a successful medical profession, and an admirable collection of firearms for one of the top five most heavily armed counties in America. He's also a devout Catholic, who teaches catechism at a local church and engages in theological jujitsu with whomever dares to partake in his acrobatics. After a few days of hiking, swimming, off-roading ATVs in the wilds of Waha (above) and taking on class three+ rapids on the Snake and Salmon, my friend and I took to dusk target practice in the desolate hills outside of town. Amid the steadied but sporadic bursts from Dirty Harry pistols and an AR-15 semi-automatic that tore up the distant hill targets, my buddy articulated a vision of justice, law, and political discernment laced with reflections on Dostoevsky, Solzhenitsyn, and Leo XIII. As the evening wore on and we headed back to his place, we hashed out various arguments and debated the extensive playground of contemporary debates in the public square right now over grilled salmon and pilsners. By the time I left a few days later, I was charged up with a new-found energy to dive back into the Catholic *apologia* genre and papal encyclical literature.



The next few days were a blur of time and space into the empty earth of southern Idaho, the pined woods and sulfuric populism of western Wyoming's great national parks, and the bare desert beauty of Utah's caramel gold stone lands. A rock-slide blocked the major North-South highway Rt. 95 to Boise, so I had to go a couple hundred miles out of the way to get there via Oregon. I drove through countless small towns, stopped at a bookstore in Washington state, and bought a

volume of John XXIII's sermons. An hour later I consumed a brie and green apple sandwich at a printing-shop & café before spending a long day on highways leading to Idaho's state capital. Boise is a pleasant city that was bustling, despite COVID restrictions and the mercury topping out at 103F at 7pm. I popped into a Mexican fusion restaurant and chowed down on a Korean-style taco of braised pork and kimchi sauce, before walking around the state university's campus. A few hours on, the sun set across the undulating hills and plains, as I was driving over Malad Gorge just outside of Twin Falls. The land and sky melted together into a maroon and orange Van Gogh. Finally crossing Snake River Canyon (below), I pulled into town as the world went from red to jack-o-lantern dark. The cool air was refreshing. And that night I slept well in a local motel.

The next day was an unusual one, inasmuch as I had for many years wanted to go to the place where I was about to



end up later that morning. Ketchum, ID was a good hour and a half drive north of Twin Falls and was best known for being where Ernest Hemingway lived in his last years, died, and was buried. This then was in fact a pilgrimage of sorts. Nowadays, many people have questioned Hemingway's legacy, his unbridled masculinity, machismo, and what in recent years has been described as toxic masculinity. A few years ago, even, I had the chance to talk to a composer who wrote an opera based on a Kurt Vonnegut book, and who knew Vonnegut, but had said that Vonnegut neither mentioned, confirmed, nor denied anything about Hemingway—in fact, Vonnegut spoke of all writers, authors, and composers, but never even hinted an ounce of breath about Hemingway. My take was that the



book (*Happy Birthday, Wanda June*) and opera based on the novel were both obviously searing critiques of Hemingway, and Vonnegut was very much a Hemingway hater. This all aside, I was bound to make the pilgrimage, because no human is perfect, and the nuance and complexity of Hemingway is something beyond these contemporary barbs. I remember being compelled with a power and ferocity to visit Nîmes in France twenty years ago, and happened upon a real live bull fight, where they killed the bulls in front of me, their blood pouring like spilled chocolate milkshakes on the amphitheater's dirt ground. I left in a mist of confusion, anger, and disgust. But thought back to Hemingway's own accounts. My kids and I visited his birthplace in Oak Park, IL when I lived in Chicago. And here I was now, not in what I'd imagined, a somewhat isolated "wilderness" of nature, but instead a ski resort town in rural Idaho with high end shops, a magnificent public library, dozens of cafés and bakeries, and some local bookshops. I found the modest but well-tended cemetery and made my way to his family plot. I had stopped at a Walmart earlier to find a bell, for which I could ring over his grave—for whom the bell tolls! Indeed, I did, solemnly. The flat stone marking his tomb was covered in empty whisky bottles and beer cans, desiccated flowers, piles of coins and Mexican pesos, and a cigarette lighter. I had wanted to place a plastic bull on there but could only find a toy surrogate at Walmart—a unicorn with a rainbow horn (top photo). I knew it was somewhat hokey, but why not? I'm sure Hemingway would have fought one if he could, or perhaps just watched with a whiskey in hand and written about it; I'm sure he would have seen the humor, or alternatively given me a bloody nose for suggesting it. It was also a subtle twist on the modern adaptation—I mean, what better way to both honor and nod to



the pall of toxic masculinity than celebrate the *Death in the Afternoon* with a rainbow unicorn? I made sure it was also in the upper left—to reflect the correct placement of his politics.

I left the well-attired tourists sipping lattes and spent the remainder of the day speeding through lunar landscapes of the Craters of the Moon National Preserve and surviving errant sandstorms in eastern Idaho, before I made it to Yellowstone. Bison, elk, bears, and hundreds of cars backed up in clogging traffic painted the scene that was laced with the odor of pungent white pines and the sulfurous clouds of boiling phosphorescent ponds (below center) and streams the color of dyed blue and orange taffy. I hiked to one trail where a man stood chatting with a group of Israelis who were intrigued by the diminutive fellow's .44 Magnum long barrel that hung on a strap from his neck like a child on a swing. As someone said, the *ammosexuals* were out in force that afternoon. As the sun shrank down yet again, the elk sauntered across roads like absent minded coworkers all the way down to the Grand Tetons, where I stopped at deep dusk to look at some horses roaming in front of the glorious peaks, when the sky was the color of Merlot. Jackson Hole was a bustling town—but very pricey. I found a place to stay, had some pizza, and took some notes about where next to go.

I made my way out of the small city expediently, after stopping for a croissant in the morning, betwixt and between a throng of above average nubile couples wearing Ivy League alumni embossed sweaters and Brooks Brothers button downs. I drove and drove through unremarkable hills and finally got onto a highway that led straight to Salt Lake City, where many things were closed down due to COVID. I stopped on the hilltop near



the state capitol to view some monuments and consider their triumphant and imperial tones. The pure rock seemed transformed into a trumpet of glory and enunciations about overcoming hardship and surviving in the inhospitable desert, where it was now conquered and built as a beacon for others.

The central public library was closed due to COVID too—a remarkable and iconic building I last saw in 2006, which had an impeccable design, full of glass, desert stone, and steel. I wandered around the streets looking for bookstores and coffee shops. I happened upon the perfect place: Golden Braid Books, which had an adjacent café, where I got some zucchini bread and black coffee. It was the surprise amid that perception of a more “traditional” Salt Lake, where one could pick up bamboo saplings, reusable shopping bags, incense, candles, and hand lotion, while also finding classic biographies of Joseph Smith, political autobiographies of Joe Biden or Barack Obama, and an assortment of memoirs by Catholic nuns, transgender writers, and international celebrity chefs on the same shelf. *This isn't your grandparents' SLC!* I struck up a conversation with the barista, a young man from Utah, who had come from a “split” family of LDS church folks and a smattering of Baptists and other post-Reformationists. He briefly recounted the dual nature of both the normalcy and quandary of being part of such an institution, but then confessed that he was no longer part of it. “It’s interesting, complicated even,” he said. The Buddhistic and New Age flavor of the bookshop sprang forth with the energy of a healing crystal as I walked out and bid adieu to my new LDScapalian friend, and soon went off into the desert again...or at least to Provo.

That city to the south was also quite remarkable, having arrived amid the rush hour traffic. I sought out the best bookshops and library sales and found a coterie of engaging LDS interlocutors willing to

hash out some Mormon theology in its most contemporary contexts. I first came across a pawn shop with a Cantonese proprietor, who talked about democratic politics and handguns, before I was interrupted by a group of 25-year-olds who wanted to buy pistols to shoot in the desert. I found a bookstore nearby, where I had a vibrant conversation about covenantal theology, the U.S. Constitution, and the meaning of promise and commitment—and how these were congruent with gun ownership.



Filled with enough ammo-theology for the afternoon—I thought!—I ordered a plate of *papas* and spicy salsa from a Salvadoran joint on the same street and finally fled “civilization” for the butterscotch and brown hills. I stopped on the outskirts to watch some freight trains snake through the mountain passes and gobbled up my dinner and

continued onward. A half hour on I passed one of those roadside attractions that you often read about—approaching around a broad bend in the mountain passes I read great big letters painted in white “HOLE N’ THE ROCK,” (above). As I sped past the words, I slammed on the brakes and turned back to see that there was in fact a “Hole in the Rock,” which happened to be a novelty-gift-and-ice cream shop attached to a small museum. Albert Christensen bought the land in the late 1930s and started drilling out a cave that turned into both a roadside diner and then his and his wife Gladys’s 5,000 square foot cave-home—replete with the face of FDR carved into the entrance, built-in cabinets, a taxidermic horse that Christensen found frozen in the desert one morning, and countless renditions of Warner Sallman’s famous “Head of Christ,” painted by Christensen himself. One of the people on the small tour was a gregarious woman who introduced herself by talking about her love of pistols, gossip, and men. I made sure that my 12-minute tour was *just that*, and I quickly fled from this hole in the rock back into the desert where I belonged—alone.



For several hours the world of rock and sky enthroned me in the embers of a setting sun. Soon the world was purple and dark and I pulled into a remote hotel 40-miles from Moab. I'd read some of the famed "wilderness" author Edward Abbey's writings—his *Desert Solitaire* is a classic. He'd spent time in Moab in the 60s and wrote of both the glory and fury of "nature and man" in conflict. His work conjures up images of contrast and conflict between the peculiar dualities of "nature" and "progress," or whatever it is that humans do when we find something attractive and thousands of us rush to see it. I wonder now what Abbey would have said about the "metal obelisk in the desert" phenomenon that shook the Internet in November and December of this year. His season in the Moab Arches National Park (photo right) in the 1960s, just as paved roads and modern travel were ramping up, is a testament to the frustration and resentment that some purists have felt and harbored since the ideas of natural pristineness and societal ruin collided. I spent the day driving around the desert, visiting this land of giants, like the vision of *Star Wars* All Terrain Walkers and Gulliverian monsters. It is a remarkable place, with formations of nature



remarkable, sublime, and mesmerizing. But the people, so many people—even though I am one of those hoards, the majesty of such a place is extraordinary. And yet, too, it makes you wonder how we think about nature, about the earth, about spaces, and how we as human beings occupy or invade them. And what are we to think in ethical terms of these plains and valleys? When I went back to re-read *Desert Solitaire*, even in 1968 there was a sense of impending doom of the planet that Abbey was trying to convey. What could be imagined for today or the far future? It occurred to me that my whole trip had become a discussion of *monuments*, ones that tore into nature in order to create a long reminder in stone, and yet here, this formidable park was itself among our *national*

monuments—carved by nature, of nature, and yet its own gradual decline or demise is nature itself, *and* human incursions into it. The irony. The socio-political narrative of Abbey to the present is one that could produce volumes more. My passage was just one small voice reflecting those realities.

That part of Utah, of the southwest, of this country, is a place of rugged and evolving beauty. There is a conflicting sense of seeing spaces of the natural world while concurrently recognizing from the side view, from the corner of one's eye that the human species is wandering around all over this damn planet, like ants and swarms of murder hornets. And that was our destiny—maybe just not acting so ferocious to this globe.

There is a conflicting sense of seeing spaces of the natural world while concurrently being conjoined to the less natural world—that human-made world. After finding a kiosk in the small desert tourist town of Moab itself, where I chowed down the greatest pulled-pork quesadilla of my life under a cool water misting machine, I made stops at both the *Back of Beyond* Bookstore built in honor of Abbey by his friends and the local public library where I bought two dozen used books. I

crossed away from Moab toward the Utah-Colorado border, where another local library on a roadside had a book sale and I loaded up on a trove of *Mormoniana*—some two large boxes full. Finally, the day grew on and the sun went quicker beyond the horizon, and I went into greener hills, into land with vegetation, and found my way through small towns in Colorado—including little Mancos, which had a revitalized printing press and arts community, and then to Durango, where I met a cousin of mine, and enjoyed the small mountain town life for an evening. It was a short passage through the great mountain state and then a day's drive through New Mexico—soon rounding out my trip. Just a few more days. But in these last days, I found comfort and curiosity in the dry earth where I traversed,



with the people I met, and with the things I observed.

Coming down through New Mexico, a full-day's drive was a curiosity. The land and people seemed different than other places. I drove past a place called the Ghost Ranch (right), well-known among religious circles, and donated to the Presbyterian Church in the 1950s, it's been a mainstay for the theologically minded seeking solace and comfort in the dry richness of the vacant desert miscellany. It is not far from the isolated Benedictine Monastery of Christ in the Desert on the Chama River, where the Abbey Brewing Company, run by the local monks, produces some 2,000 barrels of ale every year. Up the road from there I found a modest and decorative adobe-style public library on a hill, next to an antique rug shop and by total chance, a few dozen paces from the compound and retreat where the famed artist Georgia O'Keefe spent many of her last years.

Santa Fe was an anomalous destination of sorts—one of the most unique places I'd yet visited. It was still under stringent restrictions due to COVID. I walked around the old town and found the few bookshops that were open. I then passed a man who was soliciting extemporaneous poem craft, to which I first dismissed, but then quickly returned after adding more coins to my parking meter. I struck up a conversation, discovering a fine conversationalist and raconteur named Gerald Marchewka, who was also the author of several books on the Chinese poetry of Li Bai. I gave him three words ("*Methodists, Money, and Libraries?*") and he wrote a poem—for inspiration: *A place of solace, hidden behind the books, digital, brick and mortar, the salvation for a wanting soul, critical and creative thinking, self-realization and acknowledgement within the mind.* We chatted and I thanked him for his poetic art.



I enjoyed the poet's tools and craft, shared right there on the square amid all of that. And I left filled with a bit more confidence in humanity. I strolled

a bit more around the city square and came upon the Cathedral Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi. Out in front of the building was the prominently displayed statue of Kateri Tekakwitha (1656–1680), the first Native woman to be canonized as a saint (below left). Though it was surprising to see such representation in the extensive statuary, monuments, and memorials I'd encountered along the trip, I was not surprised also to find that there is ample controversy around this statue, or specifically the representation of Tekakwitha—from Protestant anti-Catholicism and skepticism of the Church's beatification of indigenous persons to Mohawk anti-colonialism and Tekakwitha's conflictive symbolism for native peoples.

Before departing the ancient town, I drove up the hilled outskirts of Santa Fe and checked out the campus of Saint John's College—the famed institution that teaches the fundamentals of "Western Classics." Only a few facilities folks were around in carts, and a non-verbal student watered kale in a community garden, even as I said hello. I left it all behind, analyzing what students would do at a college like this in the desert hills and how "Western Thought" played out in the space of traditional native land.

Albuquerque was sprawled like spilled coffee. I made little of the passage and moved on quickly, heading south through the state as modest rains and darkness crept across the vastness. The places of greatest remark were two towns to the far south—Truth and Consequences (named after a show and a wager) and Elephant Butte, where a Baptist Church called "Church of the Butte" was located. I made it through Las Cruces and finally



across the Texas border to a town called Anthony, TX. As I said to some friends at the time—Anthony in Anthony, *how meta*. But Anthony was just north of El Paso, a city I'd long wanted to visit, and one that was on the border. In fact, the realization was that if you looked at the cities on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border from the sky, it looked more like one large city divided in two. It was remarkable, because the Mexican city on the other side of the wall was Juarez, with a much larger population than El Paso. El Paso did have a certain energy though. It felt alive, and the people were bustling around, working, shopping, talking to one another, and playing cards in front of vibrant murals about local life (above). First thing in the morning, I left Anthony, TX and drove through El Paso and went *south* to New Mexico, in a slight geographical anomaly, where New Mexico slips below Texas—and I drove my car into the border town of Sunland Park, NM. I went down a dirt road and pulled my car right up to the border wall that stood more than 25-feet tall (below). Border patrol vehicles set surreptitiously like savannah cats waiting to pounce on unlikely prey. I was only 20 or so feet from the wall. I parked and drank my Starbucks coffee and ate a croissant. I could see kids playing through the slats and adults and old people walking around and dogs barking. I wanted to reach through the fence. Unlike Canada's border, I didn't get close enough for Mexico TeleCom to mistakenly think I was in the country. Another vehicle approached in front of me slowly, this time it was a Border Patrol vehicle dragging a jerry-rigged pulley system of four industrial tires, cleaning the path in front of the wall, to see if anyone had jumped and left foot prints. The driver looked blankly ahead as he drove. I sipped my coffee and wondered how a wall was even built here in the first place, and how it grew up mountain sides in the distance and separated people and



thought about how our public discourse was so fraught now. The fence was its own monument. And even though it had no words written on it, it told a thousand and one stories of its own.

I drove to the border crossing, back in El Paso, but it was closed to non-essential travel, so I had now been twice kept in my own country and twice kept out of two others. I thought more about what had been reported on in recent months—about the wall, about the custody of children and families, about many things. I decided to look for myself and drove south about two dozen miles to Clint, TX, where the reported holding facilities were for Border Patrol. I found the location, and drove around the compound, but saw nothing. What could you see from outside anyway? Is a detention center a monument too? Aren't all things effectively monuments and memorials, if they remind us of something? I drove back to El Paso, stopping briefly at an old mission-style church and cemetery (above), where the tombs were all whitewashed and painted with blue and yellow designs and art. At the churchyard there was a mock-tomb of Christ with the boulder rolled away—another memorial, another monument.



A final run through El Paso brought me to a taco dive, where I had one of the weirdest tacos I ever ate—one bathed in a mild salsa that tasted like unsalted tomato water. A cop sat in the booth next to me gossiping with the cashier. I was quick to take off to my final destination, before home—Roswell, NM. About a hundred miles of driving



from El Paso, I stopped for pistachio ice cream (and washed down the taste of that awful taco) at McGinn’s Pistachio Land, where the world’s largest pistachio (statue, below) stands a dozen or so feet tall. I got to Roswell in the late afternoon, only to find it mostly shut down, except for a few trinket shops, and a café, where I bought souvenirs—memoires in the form of a glow-in-the-dark alien mug and fridge magnets. I spoke to a proprietor who offered strong words about politicians shutting down business and burned up at the idea that the government was forcing them to do things they didn’t want to do. My cappuccino was average, but my conversation was above average. I saw my share of plastic aliens and extraterrestrial adornments—including lamp posts (below). It was kitschy like I expected. But it fell short a bit, because of the closures. Was I expecting the Smithsonian, for goodness sake?



The next nine hours I drove straight into the brown, grey, and red earth of West Texas, and right into the dark. It was a long drive and called some friends to pass the time—including a Methodist, biblical studies scholar buddy in Abilene, who also talked to me about



guns—and quickly asked me: *why don’t you have one yet?* The lights of Dallas glowed ahead of me, and I pulled into my driveway, and then straight into bed after 1am—and I’m pretty sure I stayed there for the next 12 hours. Whatever I was dreaming, I look back now and wonder, *what was a dream and what was real?* I’m pretty sure most of what I’ve recounted here was real, but then again, what’s real, what we remember, and how we remember it is all part of the bigger story of memories, stories, narratives, and monuments. It is an amorphous

species, the memory. All I know is that I drove the same distance as Seoul, Korea to Madrid, Spain; or Tokyo to Newfoundland, Canada. I also know that I ate a lot of ice cream, saw some beautiful scenery, and met a lot of interesting folks who liked guns, enjoyed chatting, and chafed at socialism.

PART IV: Returning Home—New Visions of an Old Land

Sometime around 645CE, the famed explorer, scholar, and translator of Buddhist texts Xuanzang returned to his homeland in Tongchuan in the Shaanxi province located in central China. The itinerant began his journey nearly two decades early after supposedly having a dream that compelled him to set off for India. Finally returning home, the Emperor Taizong doled out honors to the celebrity traveler, who immediately renounced such lauds and turned quickly to a solitary life in the local monastery, to live out his days in the contemplative work of translation. A millennium later his tale inspired the great Ming novel *Journey to the West*.

I am no celebrity traveler, but I did return from a remarkable journey that has given me new bearing and vision to think about a whole number of things. Throughout my trip I became focused on monuments, statues, and memorials, and began to consider how we see, perceive, articulate, and interpret these objects every day. I thought about how guns and socialism seemed to pop up in various conversations, and the role that the U.S. Constitution plays in our understanding of the country. I wondered what any of this had to do with my own life and work, even the university, theological school, and library. What, after all, can be said of a road trip that was meant to simply “clear my head” of a two-dimensional work environment?

Soon after I came back to Dallas, I got with some colleagues and friends and we formed a *papal encyclicals* reading group, where we dove deeply into the writings of Leo XIII. To my surprise and delight the writings of Pope Leo were full of complaints and directives against socialism, and our group has continued to hash out these problems since. I return to this quandary, and this idea that in many ways a philosophical phenomenon and its



socio-political heirs have raised the ire and hackles of so many, from popes to presidents, and all in between. It occurred to me while finishing this essay and reading the fine volume *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small Peoples of the North* (1994) by Yuri Slezkine, that much of history’s problem with socialism was one of misunderstood “progress” and the human desire to develop in contrast to industrialization and the technologizing of society. Maybe we should blame Hegel and his students, who looked at the human in historical time and frames of progress? Marx looked at the human in relation to capital and industrialization; Schleiermacher tried to understand the human within religion, as Enlightenment and industrialization evolved; David Friedrich Strauss looked at the human Jesus in relation to history; and Darwin explored the human in relation to our species’ origins. It was within this backdrop, the post-French Revolutionary period that *socialism* and its adornments emerged. Slezkine, whom I mentioned above, wrote that the emergence of socialism in rural Russia developed from ethnographic and evolutionary studies “of our living ancestors,” (Slezkine, 124)—and that this was an attempt to *document the human* amid industrial change.

Henri de Saint-Simon (1760–1825), the Frenchman who inspired the *utopian socialist* movement of Fournier and Considerant, mentioned at the start of this essay, informed the thought of the philosopher Pierre Leroux (1797–1871), who is credited with first using the term *socialism* in an essay from 1834. Saint-Simon, like Considerant after him, tied his Christianity to what would become the *socialism* of his followers in his 1825 work *Nouveau Christianisme*, yet throughout the 19th century, even with its philosophical ties to theology and Christian faith, *socialism* lacked the clear focus of unity, and instead was diffusely accepted and utilized by many disparate groups for many disparate reasons. Most of all, it was taken up by those who declared war on the authority of the Catholic Church. Today, more than a century later,



we’re still throwing around a term that belies authority, incites ire, or encourages admiration.

My trip to the west was informative, reflective, provocative, surprising, and transformative. Despite my rambling visions of glorious sunsets, crowded campsites, cold lakes, fast-flowing rivers, and the apophysis of driving thousands of miles, I came

back to my home, to my work, to all those around me with a steady clarity and eagerness to think more about my surroundings and what they meant to me—the library and institution itself. What does the land mean? What does nature mean? What responsibilities do we have to them and their legacies? What is society and what do we as individuals and a collective *owe to* it, if anything—especially as part of a university community? The Latin root of this conflicted term *socialism* that we have bandied about is *sociare*—to share or associate. That is what makes us a society, after all. And in so many ways, my adventure is one which though pursued alone, was anything but that. Of course, after six-months of writing, and many long pages, those who have made it this far in my essay, too, are commended for their patience—a similar patience I’ve had for trying to process and understand my trip and the vestigial trappings of a complex nation and the legacies that come with it. Patience has its rewards, like a sunset. But a sunset is far more beautiful than anything I could ever write.



Pax vobiscum! ~ AJE

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