Looking Westward

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I was born and raised in north-central Alabama, where the Appalachians taper off into pine-covered ridges and valleys, but then I lived for thirty years in the cold world of northern Illinois. Up there, table-flat land covered by thick layers of black topsoil makes an ideal medium for growing corn and soybeans, often in fields that seem to stretch forever. A very different world from my native one, in terrain and weather alike. It took me years to get used to so much sky and so little land.

When I moved to Waco, Texas, I found the weather to resemble that of my Alabama childhood, but in every other respect the environment was scarcely distinguishable from Illinois. I had merely moved from the northern terminus of a vast, level, corn-and-soybean landscape to the southern one.

But in exploring my new region, I discovered that if I drove even thirty or forty miles west, I experienced something quite strange to me. Farmland began to give way to big pastures; trees grew sparser and smaller, the live oaks of the southeast yielding to mesquite and the variety of juniper known in these parts as mountain cedar. Above all, the limestone bones of the landscape became regularly visible. I realized that I was entering the West. And the more time I spent in that environment, the more fascinated I grew.

For maybe two hundred miles west of my home in Waco, the Texas landscape exists in a peculiarly variable state, the uncertainty of which isn't quite captured by the term *semi-arid*. Even here in Waco, where almost everyone who owns a house wants a lawn, the results are seldom successful—at least by the standards of central Alabama or northern Illinois, where abundant rain tends to keep lawns thickly green. In Waco, the people who manage that look are spending, by my calculations, well over five hundred dollars a month on water. I wouldn't be willing to do that even if my budget allowed it, so my

yard is often sparse and spotty. I stand outside and glower at it, trying to decide whether I can summon the courage to rip up the grass and replace it with wildflowers and gravel paths. It would be the right thing to do. But no one else is doing it.

As you move farther west, toward the 100th meridian, lawns as such become less aspirational and more purely fictional. That wholly arbitrary marker of longitude can seem, when you're on the ground, anything but arbitrary—more like an unalterable law. In 1890, John Wesley Powell, the great scientist/explorer/bureaucrat, wrote, "Passing from east to west across this belt a wonderful transformation is observed. On the east a luxuriant growth of grass is seen, and the gaudy flowers of the order Compositae make the prairie landscape beautiful. Passing westward, species after species of luxuriant grass and brilliant flowering plants disappear; the ground gradually becomes naked, with bunch grasses here and there; now and then a thorny cactus is seen, and the yucca plant thrusts out its sharp bayonets."

Nowhere is this division—minus the yucca and cactus—more vividly seen than in South Dakota, for instance at the point where I-90 crosses the Missouri River. I made that crossing for the first time when I was still living up north, and in a few seconds I seemed to move from a landscape that could easily have been in Illinois to a different planet. Flat farmland yielded with a disorientating rapidity to big sweeping oceanic waves of tallgrass prairie and wheat fields. A different planet and a far bigger one, it seemed.

In central Texas things are a little more complicated. The landscape promises and deceives. Even a hundred miles west of Waco you still come across the occasional cropland, though I have to wonder how successful such farms are. In the first volume of his biography of Lyndon Johnson, Robert Caro describes how the late president's ancestors first came to the Hill Country in one of those periods of relatively frequent rainfall, believed themselves to be occupying a fertile paradise, and bought as much land as they could:

> The tall grass of the Hill Country stretched as far as the eye could see, covering valleys and hillsides alike. It was so high that a man

> couldn't see the roots or the bottoms of the big oaks; their dark trunks seemed to be rising out of a rippling, pale green sea. There was almost no brush, and few small trees—only the big oaks and the grass, as if the Hill Country were a landscaped park. But a park wasn't what these men thought of when they saw the grass of the Hill Country. To these men the grass was proof that their dreams would come true. In country where grass grew like that, cotton would surely grow tall, and cattle fat—and men rich. In country where grass grew like that, they thought, *anything* would grow.

But it wouldn't. They didn't know how long that grass had taken to grow. They didn't know how unpredictable the rains were, how thin the topsoil was. The apparent paradise was, Caro says, a trap. In a generation they went from hopes of great wealth—one of LBJ's ancestors built a huge plantation house, believing that he would become a cotton magnate—to hardscrabble poverty. Only over time is the truth of a landscape told.

One of my favorite places in the world is a Christian retreat center called Laity Lodge, deep in the Hill Country, almost on the 100th meridian. When you're driving to it, south on Texas Highway 83, you're obviously moving through a near-desert landscape: short dry grass, short scrubby mesquite, rocks sticking up out of the ground. And then, at a certain point, everything turns green. You don't see the bones of the hills anymore, you see trees—even, in some places, maples, maples that flame wildly in November. What has happened is this: you are driving over a huge underground aquifer, from which bubble up the East Frio and West Frio Rivers, one on each side of the highway. (That's why they are *frio*, cold, because they arise from underground.) In this green world, you may think, anything is possible. But the water doesn't make the topsoil thicker; and when the rains come in torrents, as they sometimes do, what little soil there is gets washed away. Even the grazing of herd animals is iffy.

The promises and deceptions even extend much farther west. If you turn your car around and head west on I-10, three hundred miles and more, you'll come to an interstate rest area in Pecos County

that looks exactly like the ones you see in southern Arizona: sand and dirt, no blade of grass, a yucca or two, a low cactus. You're near the northern end of the Chihuahuan Desert. But get back on I-10 for a few miles, exit onto Highway 17 South, and in less than half an hour, I promise, you're back in a world of green grass and tall trees: the Davis Mountains, home of a big state park and the University of Texas's McDonald Observatory. You're now nearly seven thousand feet above sea level and on what meteorologists call a sky island: a place high enough to capture the moisture that evaporates before it reaches the plain below.

But this is an anomaly—a beautiful one, to be sure, yet be not deceived. The yucca-dotted rest area is telling you a truer story about where you are. You're in the West: on the other side of that definitive 100th meridian.

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Still, that more spare world has its own appeal, does it not?—an appeal captured in the title of Edward Abbey's famous book about some seasons spent working at what was then Arches National Monument in Utah: *Desert Solitaire*. I feel that appeal myself. I think of Darwin's first encounter with such a landscape, when at the outset of the voyage of the *Beagle* he came to Santiago, the largest island of Cape Verde: "The island would generally be considered as very uninteresting, but to any one accustomed only to an English landscape, the novel aspect of an utterly sterile land possesses a grandeur which more vegetation might spoil."

If, leaving the McDonald Observatory, you continue south on Highway 17, you come down from the Davis Mountains and end up in Marfa, which trades heavily on its desert landscape as an ideal backdrop for Innovative Art. I dislike Marfa, so I typically head back east a little, to Alpine or Marathon, or south toward Big Bend National Park. In the summer afternoons I find a place off the side of the road to watch wild lightning storms—rain is rare—or, after dark in any season, I take a dirt track, on someone's property, where I can get completely out of sight of the road. At such moments I am in one of

the darkest places in America, and on a clear night lie on the hood of my car and let my eyes adjust to the spectacular show above—first a few stars, then hundreds, then thousands, then points of light beyond counting. I want to lie there for hours but am usually forced back into the car at some point by enormous invisible insects that knock into the side of my head. (On a memorable occasion several years ago one got stuck between my glasses and my face, and when I snatched off the glasses it didn't fly away because in suddenly squinching my eyes shut I had pinned it in place.)

I love visiting the West, as this environment indubitably is, in all its capitalized glory, but I can't quite imagine living there, simply because there are no truly reliable water sources. Such is often the case west of the 100th meridian, a location that gave its name to an exceptionally fine book, Wallace Stegner's *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the West*. Stegner begins his narrative by establishing a contrast between Powell and a man named William Gilpin, a friend of Andrew Jackson's who had, by the late 1860s, become one of the most famous and passionate advocates for that variety of magical thinking summed up in the phrase "Rain follows the plough." (Many Americans in those days sincerely believed that this was true.) Gilpin wanted to encourage as many people as possible to move to the West because, he always said, it was a land of milk and honey and rain and grass and everything else a person could want: a land of unimaginable and inexhaustible abundance. Powell, spoilsport, pointed out that it doesn't rain much out there, at least until you get to the last mountain ranges before the ocean. His insistence on this point—and on its inevitable consequences—made him sufficiently obnoxious to the boosters, con artists, hucksters, and Congressmen who had been mesmerized by the patter of Gilpin and his like that they eventually drove him from his position as director of the United States Geological Survey. It wasn't until the Dust Bowl of the 1930s that Powell was vindicated and pronounced a True Prophet.

But of course, today there are once again more Gilpins than Powells. Human beings never learn anything permanently. For the Gilpins of the world the Chihuahuan Desert is an excellent location

for a golf course, the irrigation of the grass being a minor problem that can be easily solved with the proper combination of technology and financial lubrication. For people like me, it's the fact that you *can't* build golf courses, or many of them anyway, in the Chihuahuan Desert that constitutes the place's appeal—but also makes it intimidating. Stegner, in the introduction to his collection of essays *The Sound of Mountain Water*, wrote: "*Limitation*, *deprivation* are words we must keep in mind when speaking of the reputedly limitless West." Between those of us who head to the West because we are drawn by limitation and deprivation and those who perceive it as a blank canvas for building out their dreamscapes, there is a great gulf fixed. The West for me is not an invitation to adventure but rather a reminder of constraint, of what can't be overcome by will. As W. H. Auden once wrote, "Thousands have lived without love, not one without water." If I could be more sure of the water I might very well move to the Chihuahuan Desert in order to ensure I had a slow internet connection and would never again hear a leaf blower.

But the problem of water won't disappear, though much of the water itself might. Aside from a few odd places—like that aquifer that yields the two branches of the Frio River—the West is dry and getting drier. Indeed, the peculiar inconsistency that I noted above may well be yielding to constant aridity. And that aridity is coming my way.

More and more often, people who study these matters are saying that the 100th meridian isn't any longer what it was for Powell, a clear marker of a great climatic change. That marker is slowly moving east. In 2018, Richard Seager of Columbia University and several coauthors published two papers on this theme: "Whither the 100th Meridian? The Once and Future Physical and Human Geography of America's Arid-Humid Divide." They argue that, insofar as there is a dividing line of the kind that Powell described, it is now closer to the 98th meridian than the 100th. And I live at 97°9'21" W.

I don't want to be *in* the West so much as to *perceive* it, to sense it like what one of Thomas Pynchon's characters calls "the far invisible"—I like the West as something that speaks to me from afar, that reminds me of certain key truths about the world without forcing

them upon me. I like being able to reflect on its arid message and then return to my humid life. But it seems that the West is no longer what it has been for generations of Americans, a place to go to. It's something that comes to you.