HOMELAND

TOM LITSTER

Image: Salama Nasib

We want to call a geography and a culture that inhabits it our 'homeland;' a place to belong, to sustain life, a place to care about, to create a meaning for ourselves. Of course, we also belong to the deep time of everything that happened before us.

I—Stratigraphy

IN THE LONG AGO OF CHILDHOOD, I belonged to the desert country of southeastern Utah. Wallace Stegner, said it is "our most beautiful and least useable landscape," and hoped it would have "a civilization to match its beauty." Edward Abbey said, "The heartbreaking beauty of Earth remains where there are no hearts to break." What breaks hearts is geology.

In extremes of elevation, deep canyons reveal a stratigraphy of red, orange, pink, white, tan, dark brown, green, and mauve; and 12,000-foot mountains with high valleys and white caps of snow. In between are mesas, cliffs, looming escarpments, slot canyons, and gulches. Outcroppings of sandstone appear as spires, fins, pinnacles, bridges, and arches. Juniper trees and pinyon pines cling to rocky slopes. Cottonwoods follow meandering rivers and streams, and are, as Bernard DeVoto put it, "blooming only a rifle shot from desolation."

Geographically, it makes up the desert heart of the Colorado Plateau, a semi-arid and arid physiographic region roughly the size of Germany. You could fit Rhode Island, Delaware, and a good bit of Connecticut inside its largest county (population of 15,000, the majority Navajo/Diné). Towns are little patches of green, far apart and covering a tiny fraction of the land.

To tell you about this place as a homeland, I need to tell you about stratigraphies. One is deep, thousands of feet of multi-colored layers of rock that accumulated

over a very long time. The other is thin layers of families and loners that accumulated inside those little green patches over a short period of time.

300 million years ago, near present day Moab, tectonic plates of continental drift, already a work for 200 million years, began to slowly lift a large area of land. After a while, geologically speaking, the plates began pushing up igneous rock as mountains. Between rising mountains, a great basin formed. Time and time again it filled with inland seas, sometimes from the south, sometimes from the west, and then from the northwest. Seas withdrew, leaving lakes, rivers, and vast mudflats; or emptied entirely leaving deserts with great sand dunes. Sediments hardened in place as the Colorado Plateau, with the La Sal, Abajo, and Henry Mountains to the east, and the Wasatch Range to the west.

Rivers—surprisingly small ones if you look at them today—began to cut deep canyons. From bottom to top, the color of a rock layer in canyon wall tells you what was happening in each age of the making of the North American continent: Permian to Cretaceous, and further south in the Grand Canyon, Precambrian. John Wesley Powell could have reached out (maybe he did) and touched the bedrock foundation of the North American continent.

Beyond the canyons, erosion worked rock into forms described by Powell as "other-worldly crags of rock in ten thousand strangely carved forms" that "the graphic arts are taxed beyond their powers in attempting to portray." You have probably seen these other-worldly forms in a science fiction movie as a stand-in for exactly that—some other world where earthlings have landed bravely or by mishap. You have almost certainly seen them in John Wayne westerns, in wide-angle, deep-focus shots of a mythic landscape where western heroes emerge, complete a heroic task, and then return to it in another wide-angle shot.

The second stratigraphy, the thin one, began accumulating in the nineteenth century. Imperial America saw its "manifest destiny" as expanding west to roust Mexico and Britain from their territories. Out there, Thomas Jefferson's "empire of liberty" could be fully realized. Surely the practices of subdividing land into sections, quarter sections, and quarter-quarter sections, and an agriculture of small farms that worked well in the eastern states, could be replicated where far less rain fell. It was a vague dream about California and an illusion about

everything in between, most of it marked “Unexplored” on maps. It was a desert heart of the West.

It was a place no one wanted to go, much less settle. At least not until a peculiar sect of American evangelicals, despised by most of America, went there looking for refuge. In a place no one else wanted, Mormons hoped to build a New Zion and wait for the end of time, which they unswervingly believed was imminent. You wanted to be in the right place. Run off twice in Missouri and Ohio, sometimes at gunpoint, this was the place to try again.

In present day Utah, Nevada, and Arizona they set about surveying and building the towns they would need for all those who would join them. For thirty years, under the direction of one man, it was the greatest coordinated colonization of the nineteenth-century American West. If the rest of America saw this as “the Mormon problem in the West,” the Mormons saw themselves as handpicked by God to be in the West. The skeptical and the irreligious ones came soon enough. They built railroads, started businesses, extracted coal and silver, and made a go of it however they could. Many came with high hopes and returned in disappointment. One hope was that “Rain Follows the Plow.” It did not.

Now to bring myself in to the story.

Late in the 1870s, the Colorado Plateau was the largest area in the contiguous United States still without permanent Euro-American settlements. As his last act of colonization, Brigham Young directed a handful of souls harvested by missionaries from Scandinavia and Great Britain, and a few from the Midwest, to make their way to the ancient shoreline of a late Cretaceous marine sea that was now the arid edge of the San Rafael desert. They ran off Ute and Southern Paiute tribes as they surveyed and platted townsites. On eight inches of rain, and with whatever snowmelt came out of the mountains as little streams, they were determined to make juniper, basin sagebrush, saltbrush, and alkaline soils “bloom like a rose” (my Danish grandmother told me she wondered why any husband would bring his wife to a place like this).

Fathers and sons teamed their horses in pairs, one pair ahead of the other, and hitched them to plows to dig canals. They wore broad-brimmed hats and long-

sleeved shirts in summer, added scarves and coats in the fall and kept digging. When canals were dug and ditches ran along parcel lines, there was a visible skeleton for a town. When ditches filled with water and people pulled up iron gates to flood their gardens, there were celebrations. Canals were extended to fields for alfalfa and pastures for livestock. Cottonwood trees and shrubby willows began to grow alongside them, and soon there was a tenuous greenbelt around a town that had the audacity to be there at all. The desert kept the rest of the land, which was by far most of the land. Zion was only a beachhead.

By the time of my childhood, people had adapted as best they could to a nearly uninhabitable landscape. The adaption they had not made is the hardest adaptation: learning how to see. A temporal unfolding was all around us, in plain sight as layers of rock that told you by color what was happening at the time. I suppose it was partly a problem of scale. It is difficult to consider the human and geological on the same scale.

Perhaps it was also a failure of imagination. With a handful of names, people tried to fix ancient rocks inside their own history: dolls, goblins, Mexican hats, needles, arches of angels, rainbows, bridges, Temple Mountain, Assembly Hall, and Capitol Reef. There was no reason to imagine a history outside of the one that was about to end, and was centered on them.

Terry Tempest Williams went to the red desert around Moab to live for a few years as part of an old and durable world.

> *"Time and space. This partnership is holy. In these redrock canyons, time creates space—an arch, an eye, this blue eye of sky. We remember why we love the desert; it is our tactile response to light, to silence, and to stillness.*
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> *Hand on stone—patience.*
>
> *Hand on water—music."*

BY THE 1950S, the end of time had not come. America no longer thought it had a Mormon problem; it had a Russian problem. It tilted West again as federal dollars slid toward defense industries, mostly in California, and water projects

that once again promised a paradise of cultivated acres on semi-arid land (if rain had not followed the plow, surely it would follow the dollars). A few dollars stopped with us to look for uranium, which was part of a new national defense, and to build a new dam on the Colorado River. Two-lane state highways had fastened little desert towns together like beads on a string. It was "the sticks," as Wallace Stegner put it in *Mormon Country*.

For a short distance, a highway was our Main Street. If you knew how to look, there was a history between signs that changed the speed limit. The old cooperative mercantile store was where you could have bartered with eggs, grains, or labor if you had no money during hard times, and where I could buy Levi jeans. A New England-style church with a belfry was built by the first congregation of harvested souls. They built it of brick, and local craftsmen did the intricate interior woodwork. It was an expensive church.

A two-story town hall was built with Roosevelt's dollars and the Civilian Conservation Core (CCC) during the Great Depression. It provided offices for whatever civic administration was needed; and, for the first time in the town's history, a post office with real mailboxes. The postmaster left a note in your mailbox if you had a package to pick up. Local men worked alongside CCC workers to build our town hall, another post office in another town, a county courthouse, and bridges and roads. Public assistance kept many families going. In the hard times, two-thirds of the county registered to vote as Democrats.

Next to the town hall was an old seminary building, meant to ensure that public education included a daily hour to study "the truthfulness of the gospel and associate with others who uplift and encourage faithfulness." It had been converted to a library. A white-haired woman sat at a small desk. She told me she volunteered to be the librarian because she knew a lot about books. When I returned a book, she would suggest another one, "Why don't you take this one home? I think you're ready for something like this." And next to the library, a turn-of-the century school had burned down and been rebuilt. "Your grandpa had a lot to do with getting that done," the librarian told me.

The movie theater with a canopy marquee sign was built during the Second World War. A lot of our coal was mined for use in a plant seventy-five miles away

that made steel for the war, while people drove around town on rationed tires and gasoline. The drugstore had a hamburger grill in the back where the druggist's wife already knew what I wanted when I sat down on a soda fountain stool; and the grocery store owner always let me pick up Swanson TV dinners, and he settled later with my father. A tavern owner claimed to have played one season of professional baseball with the Chicago White Sox. If high school boys talked baseball with him, he let them play pool in the back room. They sneaked six-packs of beer out the side door (as would I at a certain coming of age).

Modest houses extended green front lawns in western hopefulness. At the rough edges of the West, a green lawn was a sign of respectability.

Irrigation ditches still ran along most streets. One street became a paved road into the mountains where the coal was, coal that now fired a local power plant rather than a distant steel plant. Another street became a gravel road into the desert where the uranium was. Any amateur prospector with a Geiger counter could look for it.

Skinny legs and a bike got me past our greenbelt, and a short distance into the drab gray of Mancos Shale. The transition happened suddenly. Fields with thickets of willows and cottonwoods along their ditches, and a few Russian olive trees native to Europe brought here because they might stand up well to the desert, gave way to tufts of saltbrush and small dry washes cut by heavy summer rains. It looked more or less like any other 'badland.' The spectacular red landscapes of the now famous national parks of Arches, Canyonlands, and Capitol Reef were out of reach.

Two centuries before me, two Spanish priests, Francisco Silvestre Vélez de Escalante and Francisco Atanasio Dominguez, and a company of twelve men left Santa Fe, expecting to find a folklore landscape of abundant plants and animals,

possibly even treasure, and beyond that, a northern route to California. Water bedeviled them; it was in plain sight and out of reach in deep canyons. When water was in reach, the company struggled to cross it, particularly the Colorado River. When they finally found a crossing place and proceeded northwest, winter snowstorms in the Wasatch Mountains turned them back. Lost, dazed, and defeated in their purpose they boiled cactus and ate their horses as they made their way back to Santa Fe.

Traders eventually established a southern route to California. Not far outside of town, traces of the Old Spanish Trail were still visible; and you could still just as easily freeze to death as die of heat and thirst.

I learned to drive a 1948 Dodge that had been the main family car until it was replaced by a newer Dodge. My expeditions went deeper into the desert, sometimes as deep as the Anasazi had once gone—their petroglyphs were visible on tall escarpments of sandstone. I followed a haphazard network of 'washboard' roads constructed during our uranium boom. My Dodge and I kicked up a trail of dust like an oversized "desert rat"—a common term for a jack rabbit. There was usually a shotgun in the back seat in case I had a good shot at one.

I drove to the top of a solitary and trapezoidal mountain—not really much of a mountain compared to the continuous Wasatch range. It had been named after its cedar trees, which were not actually cedars at all, they were junipers. The summit gave way abruptly to a steep south and southeast flank revealing sedimentary strata from the Middle Jurassic to Late Cretaceous ages. I could sit down and put my hands on the rock of ages. Around me were three thousand square miles of the San Rafael Swell, and thousands more square miles of desert beyond in the colors of time and space. The only visible traces of us, "the sticks," were the tall cooling towers of the power plant.

Other times, I sat at the rim of a deep and wide canyon (in a show of local pride, we called it Little Grand Canyon). A thousand feet below, a meandering tributary stream on its way to the Colorado River seemed impossibly small to have done all of this. If you were to sit where I sat, and think in very large numbers, you might understand what John McPhee means in *Annals of the Former World*: "In six thousand years, you could never grow wings on a reptile. With sixty million,

however, you could have feathers, too." Sixty million years is the geological estimate for how long that river has been at work making its canyon.

My acts of attention were changing. I was beginning to pay mindful attention to distance and proximity in a geography of deep time, and to the pace of the Earth. Zion had already missed its mark for the end of time. Its towns and everyone inside them seemed ephemeral, and too small to hold me.

I MOVED AWAY, from one desert to another—the Great Basin that stretches from the Wasatch Mountains to the Sierra Nevada Mountains. It is roughly the size of France, and none of the small amount of rain that falls or mountain snow that melts into streams has a way out to the Pacific. You can still kick up a long trail of dust with a car.

Zion's geography was slipping away. Salt Lake City, its biggest patch of green, was meant to be its center; its Main Street and temple square meant to symbolically connect all of Zion's Main Streets. But human nature works against a utopia, and so does cultural momentum. Mormons aged out of their millennial fervor of apocalypse, and America accepted them as respectable though peculiar, and easy to do business with. A church president was on the cover of *Time*. In turn, Mormons wanted to be good Americans, just less sinful, and to enjoy the prosperity of the nation. They added it as a providential blessing.

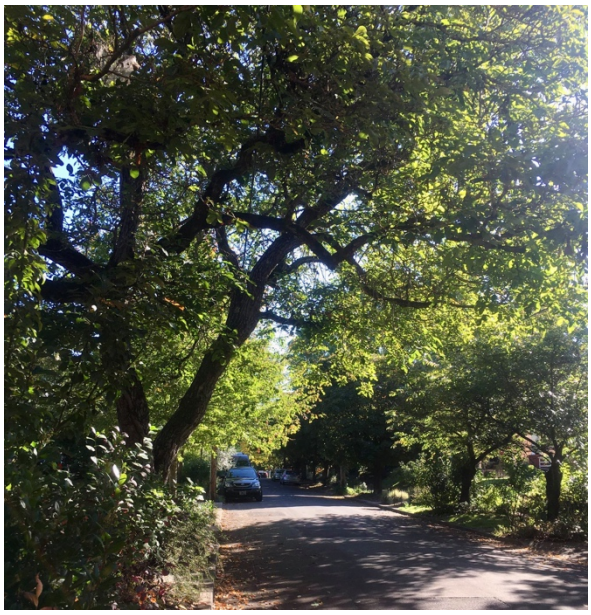
I enrolled at a university not especially friendly to the political clout of the mid-century Mormon church that wanted to harmonize theology and conservative politics, and not talk about its investment portfolio. I read literature and history, and the skeptical voices about the West. There was a dismantling of the myths of the frontier, and of the providential transformation of a landscape into something it had never been, and of the illusions about climate and water. Wallace Stegner

on living dry in the West: "And what do you do about aridity, if you are a nation inured to plenty and impatient with restrictions and led westward by pillars of fire and cloud? You may deny it for awhile. Then you must either adapt to it or try to engineer it out of existence." You do not live in this desert as much as you occupy it.

I took university friends who came from other states to see the heartbreaking beauty, and to see the time it took to build a continent. We sat down together and put our hands on a past physically in the present. Sitting on the rim of a deep canyon we saw nothing but light and shadow and space, and we felt the calm of the pace of the Earth. More than ever, I understood the stratigraphy of the Colorado Plateau as part of the grand narrative of a planet. Rocks are not nouns; they are verbs to tell us about processes of uncertainty, happenstance, and movements over immense timescales. It's a temporal literacy about how the world came to be.

We came to regard the desert as a state of being and a spiritual ally, and we were determined to protect it, as if that's what it needed from us. We vowed to join Edward Abbey in letting our decomposing carcasses nourish the roots of juniper trees and vultures. We were young and crisp, with little sense of our own erosion—one day entirely from the planet.

I MOVED AGAIN, this time to a moist city in the northwest corner of a country in the middle of a continent that used to be over the equator. I belong here now, in a neighborhood of leafy streets, squarish houses with robust front gardens, and well-kept apartments. Almost no one wants a green lawn, and everyone expects to complain about too much rain. I walk to the same café every morning. My friend, O, walks with me and says, "This is our little village, isn't it?"



When the cherry trees outside my front windows begin to bloom in an overabundance of pink, I know the desert country will also be in bloom—Claret Cup Cactus, Yucca, Mountain Phlox, Indian Paintbrush, and more—and cottonwoods along streams will show their bright green leaves. When I look up at night, I think about the stars and the moon over the desert, and how you really can read a book by moonlight. It was a night sky not much different from the one the Anasazi saw, or the ones before them.

From a thousand miles away, I can see that our story of the West is still harmful, dangerous, and in shambles; distorted, misunderstood, and abused. The nineteenth-century lasted too long. The twenty-first-century West is a story of too many people, searing heat, existential shortages of water, and failing ecosystems. It is depicted in maps as red and deep red, the colors of crisis: a medical term for the crossroads a patient reaches, at which point they will recover or die. Great Salt Lake is dying right before our eyes. The overused Colorado River, serving forty million people across seven western states, and irrigating six million acres of farmland is drying up. Anything left of engineered optimism is drying up.

> *"We have taken the West for about all it has to give. We have lived like children, taking and taking for generations, and now that childhood is over, it's time we gave something back to the natural systems of order which have supported us, and show some care and tenderness."*
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> —William Kittredge, "Who Owns the West."

Wallace Stegner would not find the civilization he hoped for. We need to rethink the West and living dry, and fashion sustainable relationships not just to the land but to each other. This may or may not happen.

Barry Lopez wrote, "I know that in a truly national literature there should be odes to the Triassic reds of the Colorado Plateau." Whenever I can, whenever someone leans a little forward across the table with a willing ear, I do my best to add a few lines to the odes.

II—Arcs Comes Down Somewhere

I WAS NOT SURE which of two world wars the cannon came from. Tires that had rolled it into battle were fixed in concrete blocks on the town hall lawn. Someone kept them pumped full of air. My legs barely dangled past a long gun barrel and short recoil cylinder when I sat where no one at war would have sat and imagined myself in a great battle in a faraway land. A bronze plaque displayed names of men who had left town and fallen to ground faraway in each of those wars. At home, we had *Life's Picture History of World War II*, so I knew something of the names, geographies, and nature of its battles.

The cannon was integral to our soldiering when I and a friend, who everyone called Jimmy Too because his father and grandfather were also named James, played at being soldiers. We began most of our battles with a proclamation of what we understood to be American ideals worth fighting for, and a disdain for their opposites. We fell to the ground and rose on command in order to fall again in the next battle. If we were fighting off Indians the plot was not so different, though it did not involve cannons or distant geographies.

The cannon's barrel aimed straight at the old church. It was the tallest building on Main Street, and still proclaimed the spiritual identity of a community. The foundation was failing in soils which don't bear heavy weight well, and it had closed its doors to Sunday congregations, funeral mourners, and the Tuesday evening meetings meant to promote self-improvement and service. All of that had moved to a new church, built in an unremarkable western architectural style.

But each summer, on one specific day, the old church galvanized Main Street. A parade celebrated our pioneers, who were "hungry, almost naked, footsore and nearly done for; all their worldly goods loaded into a wagon," when they arrived to complete "the bulwark of Mormonism." Barely a century later they were

mythologized as what it meant to be a faithful Mormon in a world of opposition. These memorial memories were never questioned. They were proof of worth. (In another context, it might be asked if these footsore ones, especially the European immigrants harvested from the economic margins, were as inspired by the promise of America and an equitable agrarian society as by Zion. I will leave the question to you.)

On the day of our parade, those who "answered the call" to come here to bad soils and eight inches of rain were specifically remembered. Anyone who could trace a branch of a family tree back to a pioneer family gathered in front of the old church to be photographed. The parade assembled on the town hall lawn. No one had an actual covered wagon, but there was one old buckboard wagon that still had its wheels, and a few flat hay wagons. Teams of horses could still be assembled. Men on wagons dressed in western wear that was more like Roy Rogers and Gene Autrey than hungry and ragged pioneers; women managed to come up with freshly washed bonnets and long cotton dresses. The Welfare Quilting Society displayed some of their quilts. A handful of men from the American Legion rode on horses and carried banners; one man always rode his registered paint stallion.

Jimmy Too and I clipped playing cards to the spokes of our bikes and rode at the back of the parade. We modulated the flapping of the cards with the speed of our pedaling. The parade moved past a high school and a grammar school with broad steps and big front doors, and then the old co-operative mercantile store, the drugstore with the diner in the back, the new church, the tavern, and front lawns where people sat on chairs and waved. It turned around at the feed and hardware store, just before the speed limit sign changed to highway speed. Back at the town hall lawn, hamburgers, frankfurters, potato salad, and soft drinks were served. The American Legion men put little American flags on sticks around the memorial plaque. Jimmy Too's grandfather had fought in the first world war, his father in the second one. They both came home and never left town again.

My grandfather was the town's only attorney. If he had business at the town hall and saw me sitting on the cannon, he asked how the battle was going that day. He cautioned me not to fall off. My grandfather was a coal miner's son, a coal camp peddler as a teenager, and for a time, like his father, a member of the Utah

Socialist Workers party. He went halfway across the country to a law school, and when he came back people were happy to have an attorney right on Main Street. When the grammar school burned down, my grandfather led a march on the school board to demand a new school rather than have the children bused to a school in the next town. They got their school, and people said my grandfather was a credit to the town. He never left again, and I never once fell off the cannon.

Sometimes, I wondered how far out of town that cannon could shoot me. I understood that an artillery shell arcs upward and then always falls to the ground, and its arc can be calculated.

When I was in high school, driving that Dodge and then a ’57 Chevy, the county newspaper ran a series of articles titled "He Made Good.” They were accounts of those who had left to make good as lawyers, doctors, engineers, businessmen, professors, economists, geologists, government officials, and even musicians and artists. In the twentieth-century West, you had to go somewhere to make good.

I went to that university in the other desert. Many of us were noisy in our protest about another of America’s frontier misadventures, another war against people with black hair and brown skin. I sat in an all-night cafe with new friends and plotted a new America. Jimmy Too went to Vietnam, where the battles were real in a real war, and if you failed to ‘fight them off,’ you died for real. There weren’t simple rules about anything. Unlike his grandfather and his father, Jimmy did not come home. The letter said he fell to ground in a place called Quảng Nam.

War never gets nobler or finer. We still carry them on stretchers. I’ve hated every war fought in my lifetime.

And now here I am, in this leafy city with more than enough rain, and fifty different microbrews, and not a single business with Zion in its name. My hair has gone as white as my grandfather’s, and my arc is falling within its calculated time in the air. I like to fancy myself coming to ground somewhere altogether different than that small town. But perhaps it is not altogether different for any of us when coming to ground.

NOT SO LONG AGO, I drove the thousand miles and fifty years back to where I was from. I was looking for old footprints; footprints I could recognize as belonging to me. Out in the desert or walking along Main Street to the drugstore diner and the cannon. They were harder to find than I had expected.

Towns and fields still occupy a tiny fraction of the landscape. If a town is lucky enough in their location, they have cashed in on millions of annual visitors to the national parks of southern Utah. My town, one of the less lucky ones, has done its best to remain hopeful and respectable. There are flourishes on Main Street: new acorn streetlights with banners, new street signs, and a few front lawns have borders of summer flowers. New businesses are in new buildings, or in old buildings reimagined. The movie theater has been spruced up inside and out by new owners. They kept the old marquee sign. The Chamber of Commerce gave them a New Business of the Year award. There is a realtor, a car dealer, a new grocery store with a pizza joint attached, a UPS Authorized Shipping Provider, and a gift shop that advertises “enchanted rocks.”

What was most conspicuous is what was missing. The old church has come down; the cannon aimed at it removed from the town hall lawn. In its place is a public restroom, a little self-help information center, and a sign declaring the lawn is now a city park. City hall and the library are a block away in a low-slung brick building with a metal roof. I don’t know who replaced the white-haired librarian who knew what books I should read. She probably fell to ground in the small town where she did a job because she wanted to.

The drugstore and diner are gone altogether, replaced by a dollar store, and the tavern was purchased and demolished for an expansion of the church. The old high school has been converted to offices for an energy company that is a subsidiary of Warren Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway. They bought up most of the

coal mines that fuel the power plant. The mercantile store has a completely new façade as a men's and women's clothing store—Buckles & Lace.

The town is frayed at its edges. Ruins have accumulated; not grand ones, just unimposing ruins of old fences, derelict cars and tractors, a boarded-up Cash & Carry store, a played-out flour mill, and collapsing old houses from which someone just went away. It's a landscape that does not allow human artifacts to remain for very long.

What remained reminded me of what no highway traveler would see: it had been a *place* and a *people,* with stories to explain why anyone was there. Religious misfits the rest of America didn't want, ordinary homesteaders who wanted cheap land, and anyone else who wanted to move a thousand miles west to see what turned up. Greeks, Italians, and Finns harvested from the economically dispossessed of their geographies by mining and railroad agents, as determined as missionaries, who brought them to work in coal camps and on the railroad. Mother Jones once came to town because they were here. More than once windows were shattered and shots fired in a dispute between a labor union and just about anybody. Finns were quiet; Greeks and Italians had their own card room and clubs, most of them closed now, and a couple of brothels, the last one closed in 1976. Their churches still hold services.

I remembered the smell of summer rainstorms. It was the smell of geosmin, juniper, and wet rock. My mother always said it was the smell of promise, as if heaven had touched earth. Without a reason to leave the desert, you don't. My father never left; my mother not until her last and infirm years. I had my reasons for leaving, and for going back that once.

III—Lost Worlds

> *We Americans have been enthralled with the future. It's a habit of mind, and a way of thinking. When things change, we adjust the parameters and reposition ourselves in a new future. It's a concept of hope.*

YESTERDAY, A STORM BLEW IN. Warm and wet Pacific air filled the neighborhood with the smell of wet leaves and soil. I thought about my father, and about the time he left that desert town, the only town he had lived in, long enough to visit me in my leafy city. Over and over, he said how green everything is, and how the ground always feels moist. Fathers and sons are one way to think about America. I thought about when a world of wonders seemed possible.

Image: Aaron Douglas, "Aspiration," 1936

The hard times of the Great Depression were nearly over. The price of coal was going up again, and so was the money earned from hardscrabble agriculture. People around town were getting back to work without federal assistance, and small businesses, including my father's, might finally recover. He could finally build a house on a lot not far off Main Street. He and his wife and two children who barely walked (the two before me) could have property of their own.

New York City could build a world's fair. A thousand acres of wetland and ash dump in Queens, acres already immortalized in *The Great Gatsby* as the "Valley of Ashes," would be a tribute to progress and modernity. It would showcase how command and control of science and technology would shape the future. A committee decided to call it "The World of Tomorrow." It published a pamphlet promising "the visitor may get a vision of what he could obtain for himself, and

for his community, by intelligent, co-operative planning toward the better life of the future."

Pavilions were built by Westinghouse, RCA, General Motors, Ford Motors, and the federal government built Constitutional Hall. Master craftsmen, industrial designers, and sculptors made tomorrow gorgeous to behold. Salvador Dali designed a pavilion that was essentially a surrealist funhouse. The Soviet Union, still trying to get international recognition, built the Artic Pavilion to show their triumph of technological progress in taming the last blank spot on the world's map. A Jewish Palestine pavilion was formally dedicated by Albert Einstein.

President Franklin Roosevelt made a speech to open the fair: "The United States stands today as a completely homogeneous nation, similar in its civilization from Coast to Coast and from North to South, united in a common purpose to work for the greatest good of the greatest number, united in the desire to move forward to better things."

The 1939 World's Fair was a celebration of what David Gelernter, in *1939, the Lost World of the Fair,* calls an "American civic religion." The central belief was in progress as the proper view of the world and of how to behave in it. A world of wonders was possible in a time when there were still cultural distinctions between sacred and profane, and between high and low culture. "As we study and contemplate the late-1930s United States," Gelernter writes, "it comes to resemble out own country less and less."

My father was an optimist. A world's fair of wonders would have put a shine on things for him. He told me it would have been exciting to cross two thousand miles of America and come home with a pin that confirmed "I Have Seen The Future." Two small children and a house to build made that impossible as more than a thought.

Much of the world was a field of ruin when I turned up as a third kid—a postwar 'baby boomer.' A hundred million dead in wars, millions more taken from their homes to be murdered in death camps, and Stalin had killed a million of his own people outright and starved another ten million to death in Russia and Ukraine. As an exclamation point, atomic bombs had functionally annihilated two

Japanese cities in an instant. We were huddled under the mushroom cloud, trying to make sense out of being Pascal's thinking reeds who can study the universe, and then eliminate ourselves from it.

My father kept his optimism. The ruins were elsewhere, and like most of postwar America, he was ready for a world of new technologies and products. The Great American Barbeque was on. Consumption was a principal role of citizens in a democracy that would now lead the free world. As Richard Nixon would put it, "We will bury the Soviet Union in consumer products."

A natural gas furnace, advertised as having "steady state efficiency," replaced our old coal-fired furnace with cast-iron doors—one for fire, one for ashes. An array of tools hanging on the wall of the basement furnace room were now useless: shovels, pokers, a clinker grabber, and a hand-held trouble light with a long orange electrical cord for going into the dark and narrow coal bin. There would be no more coal delivery trucks and the noisy clatter of black rocks sliding down a metal chute. Now it was a flip of a switch for a flame and the whoosh of a blower.

A Zenith console television had a turn table for records and fabric over the speakers. It came with a Flash-Matic remote control that looked like a small ray gun. "A marvel of the electronic age," the box said. A TV room was a new domestic space in American households. A television screen placed us at the center of a world made from new faces, places, and entertainments.

Evening news was part of our family life—Douglas Edwards, or Huntley and Brinkley. One night in October, when the desert was turning cold, there was only one news story: the Russians had put Sputnik, a metal ball about the size of a beach ball, into orbit 400 miles above us, going around the world in an hour and a half. It emitted a hypnotic beeping sound that any short-wave radio could pick up. One newsman said it was a "deep beep- beep that had forever separated the new from the old." The newsmen admitted "the Russians have won the race into space." That night, in TV rooms across America, optimism was less certain.

A new Dodge with tail fins, push-button drive, a V-8 engine, and fifty pounds of chrome was advertised as "a swept wing mastery of motion." My father drove us across the bottom of Utah, the bottom of Nevada, and into a future already

underway in southern California. It was a future fashioned with those federal dollars for irrigation projects, and spacious facilities and gleaming research institutes of a new aerospace and defense industry. We planned to spend a week with an uncle, a new kind of engineer working in one of the gleaming buildings, and an aunt who wanted us to see the house their new prosperity had built.

Las Vegas had also cashed in. Once billed as the "last frontier," it was now "The Atomic City." Testing nuclear weapons was an extravaganza more popular than Elvis Presley's first gigs. The Atomic Energy Commission provided a schedule of detonation times. The Chamber of Commerce published it as "shots," with safe names like Harry, Betty Grable, Sedan, and Knothole. It was a public relations campaign: nuclear weapons tests were not only essential to "the shield of the republic," but fun for the whole family. You could drive fifty miles to a designated viewing area, spread a blanket on the ground, and wait for an unearthly predawn flash of light. Hotels offered rooms that assured early morning glimpse, and casinos hosted "dawn bomb parties."

For a night and half of a day, we were in a desert garden of swimming pools and blossoms of blinking lights. I didn't see a shot, but I put a nickel in a slot machine. "Just one," my father said, "Don't gamble your future away."

Uncle Ray and Aunt Bessie enjoyed America's new ambition: suburban respectability. Everything about their house was a visible marker of postwar abundance: white stucco walls and a red tile roof, a wrought-iron fence and border of trimmed plants along the street, two cars in a wide driveway, and a modern kitchen—another newly important domestic space.

Aunt Bessie's kitchen was a domestic paradise: "built-ins" and cabinets, large appliances with stainless steel, small appliances with polished chrome and hints of aerodynamic contours. Displays and knobs rose from the stovetop like a car dashboard. Countertops, walls, and floors were sunny colors. Around a small kitchen table Ray and Bessie could tell their son and daughter that the future was theirs; they could be whatever they wanted to be.

My mother said "Nobody has a kitchen like this back home. It must have been expensive. You and Ray have done well for yourselves out here in California."

Aunt Bessie demurred, “We wouldn’t want to appear to be living grand or anything, but Ray and I agree it’s been worth the expense. There are so many new things today, something for everybody.”

Disneyland opened two years earlier. Tomorrowland pointed the way to everything from futuristic houses to space travel. Two mothers and a daughter went to the House of the Future. On a central pedestal, four wings cantilevered outward, each one white and constructed of synthetics. Inside everything was in bright colors: ultramodern kitchen, living room, family room, master suite for the parents, and two small bedrooms side by side for the boy of the future and his futuristic sister. As E.B. White had put it: “Rugs do not slip in Tomorrow.”

The fathers and two sons went to the 75-foot Rocket to the Moon building, I blasted off in a seat on the TWA Moonliner; departure from Earth was on the lower screen, arrival at the moon on the upper screen. It was a 10-minute trip to where no man had gone before. Uncle Ray said, “I don’t think TWA will be flying us to the moon ahead of the Russians. If it’s a race to space, the government was asleep at the wheel. We have to spend money to put our best people on it.” My father more or less agreed; more about the government, less about spending lots of money. Both men reminded me about Sputnik and grudgingly gave credit to the Russians.

Back across the Nevada desert, I was on the road to tomorrow. This was a beautiful car, I thought. I imagined a rocket in motion, the tailfins were stabilizers. Bright lights of tomorrow soon dimmed, and cracks in the road to tomorrow showed. There was a shattering of faith.

Things got ornery. People were saying the social fabric of the country was being torn. Police with dogs and batons, and Black people bloodied for no other reason than being Black, and for being where they weren’t supposed to be; nightly news of riots, looting, thousands of arrests; and neighborhoods burning while police snipers set up on rooftops. Millions of kids were in the streets because America went to war again but couldn’t sell it this time as a ‘good war.’ People spoke of tears of rage, others demanded law and order. Polarization and tribalization, and loneliness and alienation seemed to be the way of a modern life. There was political capital in dividing people according to their outrage.

Joan Didion went to Haight-Ashbury in San Francisco to investigate what she called "social hemorrhaging," and hoped she could explain a national unravelling. She couldn't explain it, so she wrote ""Slouching Towards Bethlehem." She knew she had failed to really get the story.

My father gradually gave up. I could see it in his eyes. The sky had fallen before, in the 1930s, when it was hard times everywhere, and in the 1940s, when it was war everywhere, and it was falling again. I suppose he saw the beginning of the End Times. It may have missed the mark in Zion but at last the ominous signs were here. In the only hopeful future, angels would prepare the way.

I SLIPPED AWAY to become part of America's next future, the one after a World of Tomorrow and a Great Barbecue. 'Baby boomer' kids grew up to be the fed-up kids; fed up with consumerism, conformity, a lack of public goodness, and white hegemony. We were the ones Tom Hayden, in the "Port Huron Manifesto," said were "bred in at least modest comfort, housed now in universities, looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit." We had an argument with America. There was much to argue with.

We declared a revolution in consciousness; vowed to consult within ourselves to *see* more, *hear* more, *feel* more, and be *free* within ourselves. We espoused a belief in a new community and brotherhood. Even if we didn't "drop out," we talked about it, and about those who did. We discovered Jack Kerouac, thought Whole Earth Catalogue deserved its Book of the Year Award, and did not see any incongruity in that. We raged against technocrats, bureaucrats, and "the machine," basically the IBM machine —'don't' fold, bend, or mutilate us!' We costumed ourselves—hippies or Beats, depending on individual sensibilities—and we sat down, sat in, and occupied (even if it was only on weekends or outside of exam week). Ronald Reagan called us "undergraduate malcontents." We celebrated ourselves as a cultural turning point. The future would look like us and be better for it.

Reagan won, Goldwater didn't; but Nixon did. He said he would get our soldiers and bombers out of Vietnam. When it wasn't just the kids that were fed up, he finally did. It was a calamitous exit; and then Nixon turned out to be just what he

said he wasn't—a crook. When we looked up, gas prices were up more than anyone had imagined they could be. Tens of millions of beautiful cars on transcontinental highways were promised at that world's fair. Now they seemed bloated and heavy. People wondered if they could afford to drive anymore. The promise of "metropolises of skyscrapers" had turned into talk about urban decay and news stories about garbage piling up in streets. People started wondering how society was going to function.

We 'baby boomers' repositioned ourselves. Reagan was president now, and we still hated him, but a 401K plan seemed like a good idea. Ladders had been put in front of us, and we would climb them in a grown-up game of Chutes & Ladders (you wanted to avoid the chutes and get close to the top of a ladder). Meritocracy had more to offer than dropping out. Power was also personal and intimate, a circle that you could draw around yourself. We studied up on therapy and yoga and meditation. We took cooking and cholesterol seriously. As essayist Edward Hoagland saw it: "We learn to skitter under the radar everywhere, in evading rush-hour highway jams or airport security shakedowns, or tax audits, or insurance cancellations. . . . We want our numbers to be in order—Social Security, passport. Zip and PIN, area code, driver's license." (Not all of us, of course. I have a friend who reminds me that she met her soon-to-be husband at a protest, married him within a year, and they are still protesting together.)

There was a discomforting awareness of new battle lines and widening divides, and that some rights and wrongs had not been settled. We should probably take as side, but it was okay to be a little tamer, quiet some of our uneasiness. Circling our wagons in private as well as public life was not cowardly, just prudent and professional. Everything didn't have to be done on principal.

Bill Clinton won an election. We repositioned ourselves again. "We're in charge now!" beamed a colleague at an office where "knowledge work" was done (it was the new future of work). For a while it seemed as if we were in charge; not just a political class with outsized influence, we were a new world class. The proper view of the world was technocratic, meritocratic, and therapeutic. The mystique of the personal computer, a clattering of keyboards, and information shot up to satellites and bounced back again would define a new century. Optimism was

back behind this president with a boy's face who talked to us about a renewal of hope.

Maybe E.B. White was right when he said of the 1939 World's Fair, "Between the two of us there was a mixup . . . Tomorrow seems strangely like the day before yesterday."

Twenty-first-century transnational capitalism that was supposed to lead us to an interconnected global good turned out to be complicit in global crises of climate and extreme inequities. A World Wide Web of communication became glib, disingenuous, mocking, self-righteous, and derogatory. Clinton's neoliberal economics turned out to be a new form of colonialism. Emerging technologies did not solve social problems, and we are not sure of our relationship to the poor, the sick, and the elderly. Loneliness and alienation seem to be the modern way after all. Ideological battlelines are matters of life and death. We skidded off the road to tomorrow on bad tires. The car might flip.

We concern ourselves with borders—between countries, between us and them, between bodies, and even truth and lies. We concern ourselves with identity, and with who controls the narrative. Whose country is this?

The Spanish poet Fernando Valverde has a poem, "The Wound before the Tomb of Walt Whitman," in which Whitman makes an appearance.

> "Tell me if it is still
> possible to announce triumphant justice
> and deliver the lessons of the New World."

What are the lessons? Who do we Americans think we are?

HARDLY ANYONE IS OPTIMISTIC ANYMORE. We have a balcony seat in a world gone wrong. We expect to read daily news of the breakage.

In social disunion, angry white men march with torches, armed men march into state legislatures, our national capitol building is sacked, and school board meetings are riotous. Assertions of personal liberty are undisciplined, and people

punch flight attendants. We read about nationalism, authoritarianism, disinformation, and fake news. Trump still makes the air acrid. Notions of democracy and equality that always seemed malleable, seem doomed. Throw in a mass shooting every week, and someone driving a car through a crowd of people they don't like, and once again people are asking if society is coming apart.

How will we stitch up the fabric this time? "The social fabric" was coined in the age of the machine loom, when people worried that factories and cities luring people from farms and towns would leave them isolated and alone. Turns out, the world wide web may be the twenty-first century's machine loom. We think it has more tools to rip apart the social fabric than to weave it.

In those hard times before The World of Tomorrow, the federal government paid for a program of civic education across America. There were local meetings where people debated all sorts of things, some of them broadcast over the radio. The idea was that the only way to save democracy, which seemed to be failing everywhere around the world, was to argue about it. This time the argument doesn't seem self-correcting. What is Roosevelt's common purpose?

A stream of photos and graphs of data show us the catastrophes and disasters of our new climate. Catastrophe: a word from a root that means a sudden overturning. Disaster: which originally meant "ill-starred" or "under a bad star." Think of Shakespeare's Hamlet: "Disasters in the sun; and the moist star / Upon whose influence Neptune's empire stands / Was sick almost to doomsday with eclipse." News of it comes in apocalyptic language; proper apocalyptic, end of the world stuff: "Time running out until the world's people will face untold suffering" . . . "Judgment Day" . . . "Apocalypse Becomes the New Normal."

Headlines are full of ash and wildfire. Epic floods sweep through towns, cyclones sweep towns away, and drought dries up rivers and lakes on every continent. Millions of people flee homelands that no longer grow crops. There are articles about disasters that have not yet happened but are no doubt imminent. Such news no longer astonishes us.

In an ongoing communion song of petition and sorrow, we expand the borders of our grieving to the non-human. We even grieve for glaciers. A spectral haunting

comes with our grief, which is also a sense of responsibility. From such a mourning there may be no return to "normal," no successful completion. We are left with a diminishment of becoming and possibility, a sense that what has been lost is not recoverable. We don't quite know how to make sense of this.

Sometimes grief hints at a future before it arrives. Grief doesn't only happen *after* a death, it often begins *before* death arrives, once it is on the horizon. This is especially true if we're a caregiver for someone terminally ill. We did not expect anticipatory grief over a planet under our care. We did not expect to become a geophysical force akin to a dinosaur-decimating asteroid. But here we are in a new story of us: the Anthropocene, the Age of Humanity.

A new generation of kids is fed-up; fed up with our living too long with a myth of infinite growth, and with capitalism and its Included and Excluded as the default setting. Many kids are in the streets, some in costumes and warrior's face paint. They carry signs that read "Roses are red, violets are blue, our Earth is burning and soon we will too." They sit down and block streets, they sit in buildings because their world of tomorrow seems overwhelming and terrifying. They will put up a fight. "Okay, boomer!" is their shot across our bow. We set the planet on fire, deranged the climate, and pulled the economic ladder up behind us.

The news circles the world looking for stories of human suffering in the crossfires of wars and violence. Millions of refugees flee their homelands, many of them not welcome anywhere else. A sociopathic autocrat is brutalizing the people in Ukraine, and threatening Europe where we thought another great war would never be fought. An old global order is no longer safe. There is even worried talk of the Bomb. The world seems as if it's at the margins of existential distress.

Nearly everyone is wondering how bad it will get, and how do we reposition ourselves this time? What ground will we stand on? It's as if Hermes stole Apollo's cows and drove them backward, making the tracks impossible to follow.

Like a funhouse mirror, our reflection is recognizable, even though it may be stretched and distorted, the features elongated into something grotesque. For whom, exactly, is this funhouse fun?

For 94 years, storms have blown past these front room windows that make up most of three walls in a second-story flat. America went through four or five different futures. People wanted to see the wonder in each one. There is an on-going story of how wonder is lost.

IV—Somewhere Toward the End

> *it was only as the afternoon lengthened on its*
> *dial and the shadows reached out farther and farther*
> *from everything that we began to listen for what*
> *might be escaping us*
>
> —W.S. Merwin

SOMEWHERE TOWARD THE END, I have pins in a map. It's a figurative map, the colors faded and scotch tape on the tears. I can draw a string around each pin between a homeland in the Colorado Plateau desert and this leafy northwest corner of America. An aging man keeps such a map in his mind. He runs his fingers over it and decides what he wants to remember. Deciding to remember, and what to remember, is how we decide who we are.

Art by Jim Cooke

At a café I walk to most mornings, a barista hands me a little plastic flag. On a wooden table distressed from years of cups and saucers, I plant my flag and join my friends. We circle our wagons. For an hour or so this is our territory, a little geography we call "our café." We construct invisible cities on a tabletop: houses, streets, markets, and hillsides all pleasantly colored by the past. We enter the

possibilities of a street where there are experiences, amusements, and events to remember; some of them we all remember—been there, done that—and accept as a shared past. We're happy to have company as we pass an abandoned building or a small ruin where a broken marriage or other hopes were left behind. We what we no longer inhabit will not be abandoned and boarded up.

Our stories are a place to congregate. They belong to everyone. There are long-winded accounts of "befores" and "afters," and if we've heard most of it before, we are patient with the retelling. A few lies might be told, but what autobiography doesn't contain a few lies. The nature of our joys and tragedies has shifted over the years. Our stories keep their sheen only if polished often. In a way, they are as foundational as storytelling always has been.

At the Café Central in Vienna, with its marble tables, plush chairs, and waiters, Lev Bronstein, freed from exile in Siberia, changed his name to Leon Trotsky and returned to Russia to lead a revolution. On her second day in her new city, Emma Goldman walked into a cafe in Manhattan's Lower Eastside and heard talk in several languages about politics, workers, anarchists, and emancipated lives. She lived the rest of her life on fire. Sitting around a little wooden table with our flags, we know we will hatch no plots and threaten no order (not anymore).

Our ideas had their day with us. It may be that we grew tired of the battle, but we still discuss events of the week and the geopolitical affairs of the world. We offer sensible opinions. We vote, make political contributions, and if the weather is not too bad, and if no one expects tear gas (our leafy city is now almost as famous for tear gas as rain), we join a march for or against something. We still know with side we are on, but our responses to the world are more generic. We are more uncomfortable with natural exhibitions of ecstasy or private madness, or anything as reflexive as the howling of a dog. If we ourselves were to bay at the moon, we might wonder what we are baying at.

We wonder if our generation squandered itself. Did we turn into the selfish one? The habit of mind when imagining the future has always been that each generation would be better than the last, have better opportunities. "My son's generation is the first one to not have it better. We screwed up," someone at our table says. Confidence that we shaped a better future stands on wobbly knees.

Our café stories are meant for no other ears than ours. Unsympathetic ears might pick us out as immigrants from a land that no longer exists, caught in the act of speaking of voyages once taken, while all of our symbols are carelessly swept away. That's not fair. We know the world moves and cannot be recalled to a previous state. But it's not the world pulling away from us, we are pulling away from the world. I am happy to be out of it. I appreciate the upside of *conspicuous* aging: free to do as I please, think only what *I* think. I no longer feel the yearning for approval. I take comfort in the murmur of a cafe.

Our circled wagons are holding, even though arrows could come at any time from any direction. Comanches? who else might be circling us? the arrow of time has been aimed at us all along.

Life looks for the simplest and most complete structure and system it can assume under given conditions. Somewhere toward the end, an ordinary cafe is one thing I can assume. Another is that there is still something to stir wonder occasionally.