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INTRODUCTION

Space, as anyone with an empty closet or an abandoned heart knows, has a tendency to fill itself up as quickly as possible, often without much conscious awareness of means or consequences. So it was with the western regions of America, once a wilderness frontier that was in effect a line drawn existentially in the sand that tempted, goaded, and by subterranean signals and heraldic entrapments, electrified dreams that had lain numb, and threw open the doors on lives that had become claustrophobic. To talk about the West, how and why it was settled—in truth, colonized—and how it is now after our first full century of widespread settlement, may be a little like dissecting a creature still alive, still moving: parts of it dying or already dead, while others are developing compensatory muscles, adapting, and one hopes, surviving.

Russell Rowland and I crossed paths several years ago in Montana and out of that meeting, and that landscape, (which at the time, I recall, was on fire, as much of the West is each year), grew the idea of a book. It was a solid, if modest, idea—a handful of writers talking about what it means to be a Westerner. Could we open it up and examine the parts, and the sum of the parts, and arrive at some sort of composite that would let us see more or less honestly who we are become, to invoke an arcane syntactical truism? Russell and I kept working our way up the cliff until we found ourselves on top of a mesa where the view was big—very big indeed. Letters of invitation had gone out to members of the literary tribe, the numbers mounting as those who accepted then suggested others, and one day we realized that we had ourselves an old-fashioned fence-painting in the best Tom Sawyer tradition. Sixty-seven writers, each of whom could talk credibly about living west of the 98th meridian, and when and in what form that sensibility of being Western was born in upon them. Among other things, the initiating letter suggested that what we were after was a kind of Greek chorus that might define, remark upon, and otherwise characterize the West as each of us grew to know it, and, equally important, the West that is still becoming. A declaration not of our independence this time, but of our interdependence. In one of the pieces contained in this volume,

Gretel Ehrlich quotes the poet Joseph Brodsky—"that the sole purpose of evolution is beauty." If that is the case, then we have lost a great deal of the West's native or given beauty as we evolve toward another order of beauty, perhaps simply the beauty inherent in a mutually sustainable relationship with landscape and the obduracy of its own rules, and a bond of justice with the peoples who were either displaced or used or abused, or inveigled to serve the purpose of plundering another field of oil, another slope of timber, another vein of mineral wealth.

Let me back up and ask a question that may seem obvious: Why writers? Why not geologists, biologists, historians, or cultural anthropologists? Or, in view of that definitively defining condition of the West, the underscoring beneath the Bottom Line, aridity, why not hydrologists?

Because *how* a thing is conveyed may end up being of greater value than *what* is conveyed. We might have given you the West in what scientists call its general life parameters, its rainfall totals and populations, its geophysical anatomy; we could have exhumed historical facts and factoids, what Kris Saknussemm calls the "theme park" of history; we might have invoked the megafaunal extinctions of the short-faced bear, the giant ground sloth, the mastodon, *Bison antiquus*, the Dire wolf, as lessons in halting the extinctions occurring right now, this very day, like the pika or the sage grouse, the Guadalupe fur seal, or the brown bear, which is disappearing across its entire range largely because our species has been picking them off with guns. We could have talked about water and the preemptive definition that is aridity, and then gone on to the fluid dynamics of the Great Basin, and the collateral water/power wars; or, in a more lyrical mood, conjured the visual blatancy of the West that draws tourists from around the world, the literal dirt in all its colored layers, clinal lifts and folds, mountain ranges thrusting up and toppling monumentally down, plateaus and buttes like stepping-stones across eternity. Or we could have invoked, by a form of synecdoche, the ecology of a lodgepole pine forest infected with pine beetles to illuminate the dying West, as Beth Lofreda does in her piece, "Pinus Contorta." We could have done all of this, but about the *experience* of how it was, the pages might have ended up patched and half blank. *How it was, how it is*, here, in the West—just that.

It is the difference between drinking the glass of water and *knowing* the thirst. And it may be that knowing the thirst, imperfect or misguided as it can be, carries more truth finally than what's in the glass.

This collection of essays, poems, and meditations is about the thirst; about the West grown up in, and loved—or hated—and found and lost and found again. And it's about the old thirsts, too, the vestigial destinies manifest in each of us who experiences the enormous exhalation and ex-

altation that is space. Room to breathe, room to dream, room to exercise the right to make your own mistakes, and not someone else's, especially not someone who happened on the scene before you did. To fail on one's own terms in one's own time. To have a chance equal to those around you. And it's about the cultural atavisms from that brief period in the West's history—I'm speaking, of course, of the rise and fall of the cowboy kingdom and the Olympian myths it spun out, and out of control—that yet express themselves in language, in clothing, in the intransigent transience, in regional personalities that demand stoicism, or in the stubborn insistence on doing for oneself even while that same stubborn insistence says that you help your neighbor, all of you together, because the land will do you in without community.

Part of my youth was spent in the San Juan Archipelago, 450 islands at high tide, an additional 300 at low. It was an easy place to get lost in, especially at tide's turn. Recently I spent a week hiking in the Chisos Mountains of West Texas, another place easy to get lost in. The West may be the place where it is still possible to get lost—and die of it. That's one definition. And not so strangely, a comforting one, too. Against the hard, mostly invisible abrasion that is the proximity of death, lives are shaped and polished and even glittering. But then, it has always been close: we are losing species and ecosystems by legions. Looking away does not stop these ends from arriving.

Ezra Pound, that great democrat, once said, "Literature is news that *stays* news." However the West and its general life parameters may change for better or for worse this century, writers on being Western is news that will stay news.

That being said, it is still my charge to brush in a base coat on the larger canvas in order that the *how* of the West, its fits and starts, its cultural colors and textures, might rise impressionistically from the underlying *whats*.

Let's return to space and the equalizing pull it seemed to exert on the eastern states of the late eighteenth century: because that space was not exactly empty. It was in fact already broadly, though by no means densely, occupied by indigenous peoples, or "Indians," not yet graduated to the appellative status of Native Americans, well over a half million of them, in fact, from approximately 450 different tribes, not to mention Spanish outposts and mission settlements across the Southwest, Texas, and Southern California. Lewis and Clark's expedition of 1804–1806, reporting on the flora and fauna of the West, catalyzed a relatively scattered fur trade; the thirty-year "era" of the Mountain Man commenced and, in the slap of a tail, summarily collapsed. North American beaver would feed the

fires of European millinery fashion until by 1840 the populations were so exhausted they *couldn't* feed that dragon, and in any case, the winds had shifted eastward by then, away from aquatic rodents to Oriental silkworms as the material source for top hats. Out-of-work trappers turned their attention to immigrants seeking guides. Others piled into this new profession, and in short order, westering was a national occupation bordering on the compulsive.

It was a habit that found some of its deepest roots in European rights of primogeniture that left everything to the firstborn and nothing to subsequent offspring. This was not confined to Europeans, for as David Mas Masumoto remarks in his piece, Japanese second sons were also driven to emigrate, knowing that property would not pass to them either. Our earliest citizens, then, were self-selected venturers and gamblers willing to take radical steps toward a better life on no less than an entirely *other* continent.

But a certain, shall we say, unhealthy puissance obtained throughout the opening of the West. Americans, swarming across the Plains, bullied their dreams into being, appropriating, stealing, or indifferently squatting upon lands that seemed to be theirs by virtue of desire alone, and desire many times over. Thirst. Alas, blood-thirst as well. Having been denied elsewhere, disaffiliated, or simply last in line, immigrants seemed to feel that that space meant there was no line, not one that had to be officially recognized. Indians were, regrettably, more welcoming than wary. In California, genocide was a Sunday afternoon pastime, a pre-Anglo population of 250,000 nose-diving to 20,000 within a half century. "Civilization or extinction, has been the fate of all people who have found themselves in the trace of the advancing Whites, and civilization, always the preference of the Whites, has been pressed as an object, while extinction has followed as a consequence of its resistance." So said that old windbag, Senator Thomas Hart Benton, the firebrand behind Manifest Destiny and ravaging western expansion. "The West wasn't settled by nice people," Jim Harrison says, referring to Anglo-American incursions "as a rag-tag invading army of soldiers and settlers." It wasn't enough that Indian populations were suppressed, cheated, removed, and often massacred (mostly by the US Army in defense of citizen settlers), the treaties the federal government established with them were nothing more than tricked-up ultimatums that were themselves only unilaterally binding—on the Indians. The federal government broke those treaties, every single one of them. In view of the record, it's difficult to regard this last, deeply cynical backhander as the White Man's original sin, as Jim Hepworth calls it, because there were just so many sins originating willy-nilly across the region. Our

native populations have been badly dealt, and many of this book's contributors call for some manner of recognition or reparation, if only (once again, cynically) to shore our sagging credibility in a global environment where we are often critical of behavior indistinguishable from that embedded (or enshrouded) in our own historical record.

Along with the certainty that territorial expansion had been somehow ordained, that "Progress is God," land was conflated with the pursuit of happiness as the American desideratum. There were no reins or even brakes on this juggernaut of dreams, and once the railroads crossed the contiguous United States, immigration rates leapt to warp speed. Who had time to develop a symbiotic relationship with the land, as the Indians had over many centuries of semi-nomadic ways? Who could take seriously endless variations on a theme of brown? A little water would fetch up a garden as green and as giving as any self-respecting Yankee's back forty in the East—right? But among the many things the West was about, as my co-editor points out, was bad information. Except for John Wesley Powell's report that few wanted to believe: "Nobody told the pioneers that 160 acres of this land, the amount available through the original Homestead Act [of 1862], couldn't possibly support a family because there just wasn't enough water [to irrigate it]." That was the so-called free land available to settlers, which had to be "proved up" in five years. The railroads were also offering land at four to fifteen dollars an acre. Because in exchange for building the railroads (with 6 percent public bonds and thirty-year loans), the federal government had ceded every other section for every mile along the line to the railroad companies, which quite logically then became *de facto* real estate developers as they made haste to unload that land to pay off their debts. It ought to be noted that the value of those railroad land grants represented four times the cost of transcontinental line construction. The sirenic flyers of the railroads along with the Immigration Bureau's tall-tale posters and handbills sown across the Atlantic states and Europe lured immigrants into the Western wilderness. Bad information? How about *disinformation*?

But the human heart is a lonely hunter, and it will believe what it seeks, it will latch onto the smallest threads of truth in an eye-dazzling fabric of lies. For social and religious freedom, for better prospects, for land and wealth, for the past to be mercifully expunged and a new day to dawn, the siren song needed be hardly more than a jingle—which is exactly what it was.

What did those future Jeffersonian yeomen find? How much land did the stockman think he would need to feed his fifteen hundred head of English cattle on the Central Plains?

What the farmer found was soil without rain enough to quench it, and when successively plowed, not enough even to hold it in place; the cattleman discovered that in many parts of the West it could take as many as forty or fifty acres to feed just one of his ill-suited steers. West of the isohyetal line, which fairly closely follows the 98th meridian, rainfall drops below the twenty inches a year required to farm without irrigation. This is where the hard-and-fast West begins. No wonder pioneers made a bee-line across the Great Plains to Oregon Territory and California, where something of what they knew about crops and farming might find useful purchase. The prairies were said to be good for grazing animals, not growing food. But free land is free, after all, and the “era” (again, that oversized word) of open-range cattle ranching, of cattle drives and cowboys with all their Byronic romance, lasted little more than a couple of decades before the settlers began patching together settlements, and, with the help of newly invented barbed wire fencing, protecting their homesteads from range cattle. If anyone had bothered to read, or take seriously, Powell’s 1878 *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region of the United States*, they would have met both the gatekeeper and the rulemaker of the West—aridity. Except for the swath of country west of the Cascades in Oregon and Washington, an area equal to no more than one-third the land in both states, and a few intermontane areas of the Rockies, the remainder of the West is arid. I have heard educated Westerners exclude California from this equation, but they are simply wrong, as any vineyardist during the 1976 drought found out soon enough. True, it rains in California, but nary a drop during the growing season. For the cattle business, the proximate end came on the hooves of overstocking and overgrazing the land, what John Daniel refers to as “cow-burnt rangeland,” together with exacerbating calamities like the 1886 drought, which was dogged by a horrific winter and what became known as “The Big Die-up,” and finally, a collapsing beef economy. The cattle and the cattle economy were both dying. But by then, the soddies were in town and they too would soon fail—in their own fashion, to be sure—the core curriculum of the West.

It may seem as though I’m pounding this little nail awfully hard and that the concept and condition of aridity have been driven home and countersunk well below the clear grain of comprehension. Because surely anyone who lives here in the West must know it as *the* proviso that directs matters from behind the green curtain. But beyond the knowledge that it is the Ur dynamic of the West, the source of everything from soil content and stability to the spacing between juniper and piñon, between Albuquerque and Phoenix (what Walter Prescott Webb called an “oasis civilization” and what Mary Austin admired about the Shoshone: “The Shosho-

nes live like their trees, with great spaces between them, and in pairs and in family groups, they set up wattled huts by the infrequent springs. More wickiups than two make a very great number"); that the vastly and deceptively simple *look* of the West where space, as Wallace Stegner observed, "acts as a preservative" of the stereotypical western landscape, life, and character—beyond and despite this nearly two hundred-year, applied education, the West more often than not behaves like someplace east where water is abundant, where the land recovers quickly from the sins of its stewards, and where anyway, the American can-do mentality will serve to put right whatever wrongs it finds, those that came with the land as well as those committed by human occupation.

A couple of broad swipes with the paintbrush are in order: The waddies, or cowboys, along with their cattle, were fenced in—and out—by the settlers, which to a certain extent forced more adaptive ranching practices that included interbreeding with cattle native to the arid ecosystem, like the Mexican longhorn, who could eat just about anything the parched land grudgingly relinquished. Much of the rangeland had been trod up and grazed down to sagebrush, greasewood, shadscale, salt grass, etc., or even to bare rock, the soil, without its binding of grassroots, simply blowing away. Like some kind of occupation-wide experiment in behavioral modification, ranching gradually shunted northward to Montana and Wyoming, where the number of cattle found sustainable balance with available resources and where the country at least *wants* to be grass, even while there are unmistakable limits on how many cows it can support.

And the sodbusters, after decades of disastrous farming practices and cyclic drought, with the occasional dust bowl thrown in, either abandoned their homesteads or stuck, renegotiating, with respect this time, the terms of their contract with the land. In the midst of all this sorting out, there came the California gold rush of 1849. Whatever the West stood for in terms of promise, opportunity, milk and honey, or at minimum, the reprieve of amnesia, the past erased in the blinding sun of a fresh start, nothing could be as elemental, as culturally primitive across the globe, as just plain *old*—and so, as utterly galvanizing—as gold. In the history of human civilizations, this appetite comes turbo-charged straight up from the cerebellum. If gold gave off a scent, our blood could smell it. In less than a year and from all compass points, eighty thousand would-be miners flooded the gold fields. The network of westering trails deepened and branched. And the boomtown in all its inglorious details was born, dashed, born again. Not much, really, has changed. Here is Douglas Unger writing about Las Vegas and its own veins of ore: "It's simple casino logic and the very essence of gaming, that, with each new bet placed, the

past ceases to exist; it's the future that counts, and Las Vegas is a city that keeps re-inventing itself by its own improbable vision of the future."

Co-evolving with westering and its indisputable wonders was an unparalleled raid on natural resources, beginning with the obvious, like timber, fur, and fish; then the less obvious hiding beneath the surface—gold, silver, copper, coal, and the not-so flashy minerals like molybdenum or uranium that may end up having greater value; followed by the surface itself, the literal dirt either worked until the life was worked from it or driven away by drought and the ceaseless, often violent weather of the Plains; and lastly, resources like water, found above and below the ground. This was what David Guterson calls "the era when I was king." When we were all putative kings who, just as Charlemagne, so crowned ourselves. Entities like the Bureau of Reclamation were created to expand and extend the pattern of plundering that mere mortals had already set in motion. The appellation itself is almost childishly inspired, as if all things in the playground of the western world belonged perforce to the US id, and suggesting that a federal agency would *reclaim* water that had somehow been *taken* from us. The process of damming rivers and ground-pumping aquifers, sending the water places where water was not and people and crops were, had the effect of killing those rivers and of degrading the soil and subsoil to the extent that not even native species could survive, and, furthermore, of despoiling what was fast becoming a commodity—the scenery itself. (Our first—and the world's first—national park, Yellowstone, was established in 1872 in response to the natural beauty early Americans found in the West.) In the Owens Valley during the late twentieth century ground-pumping was finally curtailed, in part because, besides the imported fruit trees and crops, even the native cottonwoods that lined every creek and traced in shimmering green every seasonal wash, were dying, one after another, for lack of the water that was being channeled down to Los Angeles. My husband was working on a piece in 1979 for *Harper's Magazine*, about western water and power wars, and we were in the Owens Valley as those great cottonwoods were dying. Just outside Lone Pine on our first afternoon, we stopped to talk to a woman gardening in her front yard. At one point during the conversation, she walked funereally over to the faucet from which the garden hose emerged, turned the handle, and the three of us watched the hose snake about, hissing and spewing nothing but air.

Today, the implausibly vast Ogallala Aquifer that underlies the Great Plains has been so aggressively tapped and depleted, far outstripping the rate of recharge, that even optimistic calculations predict that it will dry up within the first quarter of this century. These are not the crimes of technologically advanced, hard-hearted latecomers either, people with

no appreciation of what used to be. As Greg Sarris, writing of his native Sonoma, points out, "By 1903 most of the landscape was transformed. Gone were the vast wetlands. The water table throughout the region had dropped an average of two hundred feet: creeks went dry in summer. The big trees were gone. Many of the great animals were extinct in the region, not just the grizzly bears, but the herds of elk and pronghorn, and the mighty condors gliding the thermals with their fourteen-foot wingspans." Quantitative differences eventually do lead to qualitative differences, and the subtractions from our paradise have begun to add up. To borrow from Patricia Nelson Limerick, "a river of melancholy runs through Western experience."

The concept of *use* in this region arrived fully formed and with no call for amelioration—no whitewashing, soft selling, or apology. "Creating" wealth was what we Americans instinctively did—and perhaps do—with our land and its resources. It was what we did too often with its native citizens as well, and with immigrant minorities, like the Chinese, who built our railroads and—quietly, with great dignity—enriched our culture. There is an area of psycholinguistic study that looks at how our language, our syntax, shapes our actions, and it may be that this habit of *use*, of greed dressed up in the finer raiments of ingenuity or resourcefulness, can begin to change by changing the language. If the word "resource" were replaced with something like attribute, or quality, we might begin to perceive what is here in the West not as invincible givens that can never be used up, or as things given *to* us, but as the fragile characteristics of a living entity, to be understood and appreciated, and to whom we must first do no harm. As the saying goes, habits are often only the antiquity of error. And habits can be broken.

Both the riches as well as the obstacles to those riches that our early citizens encountered in the West were nevertheless essential to the Western experience, and by extension, to the development of the Western character and culture. A theology of landscape, of place-specific practices and beliefs, cannot be avoided here. To a certain extent we are all converts simply by virtue of the dirt under our feet. Several years ago I was asked to come up with characteristics that might help define Western literature, and the first determinant I mentioned was that they are narratives that could not have taken place anywhere else. Place acts as character, as friend and foil, as parent and progeny, as legacy and legatee. Place is never a movable backdrop; it is actor.

The second significant feature of both Western literature and of the region's personality involves motion. Whether because it informed our coming here as a people, or because, once having arrived, many settlers

had to keep moving on for one reason or another, transience and social fluidity are located (an ironic usage) somewhere in the DNA of a Westerner. The frontier was once a physical reality correlating to the land itself, and as that line between the civilized and the wild was pushed clear to the Pacific, it left a psychological residue, a ghostly presence of the frontier mind and myth that drifts past the window and seduces or haunts us just as surely. Across a landscape that is universally thought to be epic, peopled by characters who have become, at least in the telling and retelling, proportionately heroic, the frontier myth has been supercharged practically beyond recovery. *Our* recovery. If we can't stop thinking that there is something just around the bend that needs conquering or that might be fractionally better, we'll never learn how to save what is now ours to actually treasure. "The Real West will finally begin when both the name and the habits we now cherish in our films and other fictions are erased," Charles Bowden writes. "Maybe it will be called something unthinkable now. Say, something like Home."

And even if some of us may no longer believe our myths, as Larry Watson suggests, our characters still do. Here is Page Lambert writing similarly: "In what ways do our stories defend who we believe ourselves to be?" The history, however brief, of this region has us roped, thrown, and piggin' strung, ready for branding.

The light of many of these truths may expose without yet providing final illumination. What more is there to say, for instance, about the ethos of the cowboy? He still rides among us! It's time we evolved away from that whole collection of what are now, for all intents and purposes, maladaptive traits. As Wallace Stegner once said, "our principal folk hero, in all his shapes good and bad, is essentially antisocial." Competence, courage, independence—all certainly attractive qualities. But lace these with notions of unbridled freedom, of the absence of commitment that that freedom can imply, and of cooperative ventures questioned only because they represent some form of authority, and you end up with a country of wayfarer rats. Louis B. Jones observes that "we're all immigrants, or come from emigrants, and somewhere back there somebody had to gnaw off something essential in order to free himself. Immigrants are immigrants for a reason." Back to self-selection. During the fifteen years when my husband and I were running a lot of Western rivers, we used to say, as the rule against which we measured the character of people we met, "He'd be a good man to go down the river with." That meant not that he was competent or self-reliant or particularly fit; it meant that he struck us as a co-operator, as someone who was not emotionally booming and busting, but who was steady, reliable, responsible. In other words, not a cowboy.

The American West is still a metaphor mill serviced and maintained not only obviously by the entertainment industry, by literature, clothing companies, makers of gallery art and roadside kitsch, by regional architects featuring the Western "style," but also by insiders and outsiders worldwide. Recently I heard an interview with a Russian plutocrat who had been asked what it was like in his country after the collapse of communism and the Soviet Union: "It was a Wild West," he said. "It was a territory with no sheriff, no rules." As critical as this was intended to be, it is also part and parcel of what makes the idea of the American West still attractive to many of us, the wildness in human nature, the semblance of freedom in a world that demands relentless adjudication between personal desire and social responsibility. No one of us strives to be "domesticated" because such a state of affairs would rob us of our basic creaturely dignity. And the West, with its actual and metaphoric wilderness, has always kept us in contact with that defining essentiality. Tom Miller, writing of *la frontera*, says, "I need the border for its anarchic sense of reality." Will any of us ever not need some expression of anarchy or, in a scaled-down format, at least weekend emancipation? Even the freest among us feels bound by old wounds, or choices that have gone stale, or even the tyranny of too much freedom, too many choices. As myth, the American West still conjures a great mainspring of hope, and our dreams, our thirsts, may be, by their very nature, impossible to slake. The legend of the West is integral to who we are; as Larry McMurtry says, "lies about the West are more important to [readers] than truths." Or perhaps the lies are truer than truths. They tell us not what we have, but what we want; not who we are, but who we wish we were. Leaning this way, into the wind, is a known factor in the human equation. And more often than one might imagine, the wind will hold us up, even if the ground beneath our feet is falling away. "The real West," says Kris Saknussemm, "is somewhere you never actually get to, it's always where you're going."

The myths *are* important, so long as we know that they are myths, that they play only a bit part in the modern West and had only a marginal reality in the Old West, where human lives were crushingly lonely, hard to the bone, damaging of heart and habitat, and dependent not upon self-reliance but upon the not-nearly-as-romantic act of cooperation. If we know this, then Western myths may have their value just as any set of founding myths does, and the parables that those myths spawn may be educative of right living.

Unavoidably, many of the pieces in this volume talk about change, about newness, which, after all, is nothing new. What *is* new is the rate of change. The American West was opened and settled in a single cen-

tury. Another century saw the region stippled in, with 80 percent living in urban centers and the rest dotting the empty geography between. Two hundred years of industrialization and exponential population growth can't be ignored and, beat for beat, simply can't be adapted to fast enough. And I don't mean just ecological adaptation, I mean emotional, psychological. "How do you capture the heart and soul of a place, not to mention *your own place* in that place, when it transforms itself every couple of years and becomes somewhere else?" Page Stegner asks in his piece, "The Sense of No Place." And we are learning now that even human evolution has been speeding up since *Homo sapiens* started planting crops about ten thousand years ago. We are not only subject to the forces of Nature, we have become one of its phenomena, like volcanic activity or climate warming, which is actively, measurably, changing the planet, but with the added element of consciousness. The West is our home field, and each of us has a dog in this fight.

We must know enough, learn enough, in order to have hope of not becoming an indicator species, like the canaries in the coal mines, who signal not that they are dying their individual deaths—though they are—but that the whole ecosystem has been irrevocably compromised.

With each successive crop of stewards, the West does gain a little. It was never intelligence we lacked, it was information—or perhaps more honestly—belief in that information. There are still those, for instance, who will not accept the data that establishes the reality of climate warming, or *climate disruption*, as Paul Ehrlich insists we call it so that it doesn't sound so cozy. But we have not yet drawn even with our environmental consequences; we're like a man running uncontrollably downhill, trying to catch up with his own momentum. Falling is likely; surviving is in question. Because of history and a shattering evidentiary record, we know now, truly, that the West is arid. And on the human, sensory level, we can feel that knowledge of aridity in the sear wind against our skin and taste it in the alkali water and, to steal a line from Ursula Le Guin, smell it in "the holy sage, that purifies." We can hear it in the windy silence of a seasonal wash or in the roar of a spring flash flood, chocolate colored and bristling with debris, as it barrels down a slickrock side canyon into the San Juan or the Yampa or the Colorado River. Mostly, though, as a vision-based species, we *see* aridity. Of all the senses that the West stimulates, it is sight that enlarges even while it falters and loses itself across the landscape, loses as it gathers up the bigness and the mystery of the space that aridity defines. Even in its seeming cure, you can see the aridity in the rain that doesn't reach the ground, those sooty veils of *virga* that tatter down from skies boiling with late summer weather. The space itself sug-

gests a kind of primordial virginity, as though here, across these limitless plains, in these improbably high mountains, through those rolling yellow hills that fall softly to the sea, anything can happen. The trouble is, anything *has* happened. Now, something needs to be done. Something responsible and responsive. Something that begins to approach a sustainable Western economy, together with a trend Barry Lopez invokes, “the movement toward a civil society.”

What I haven’t mentioned is beauty. The West is so beautiful in so many places that sometimes you can feel the seams of your heart straining and tearing against it. Beauty is restorative. Much of this beauty resides in the fragility of the West, which makes it as contingent as the noble land itself. Part of that fragility, one of its parents at least, is wildness. And as a region with a broader regional personality that supersedes our individual place personalities, the West with its frontier past and frontier subconscious continues to whittle out our character and ineluctably cathect it.

Perhaps we are due for a prayer: May we keep the wild and beautiful places and keep them healthy; may we enter what Charles Wilkinson calls the Fourth West during which we realize fully “the importance of land to our humanity”; and may we let the manner of the country determine our usage of life here.

Russell Rowland and I have let these pieces settle the way the West was settled, east to west, beginning with Louise Erdrich’s “lowly assertion of grass” and crossing the Great Plains, some drifting southward, others heading due west across the Rockies toward the coastal states. Like the tracks and traces of western expansion, the arrangement may seem to have a hither-and-yon quality, though in view of the remarkable variety of content and tone that seemed to defy grouping and analysis, as well as group analysis, this plan made the best sense in the end. If some of the pieces sound elegiac, and some do, others have that clear-eyed alertness that a brush-up with loss can inspire. This place is worth saving, worth cherishing, because this place is now home.

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