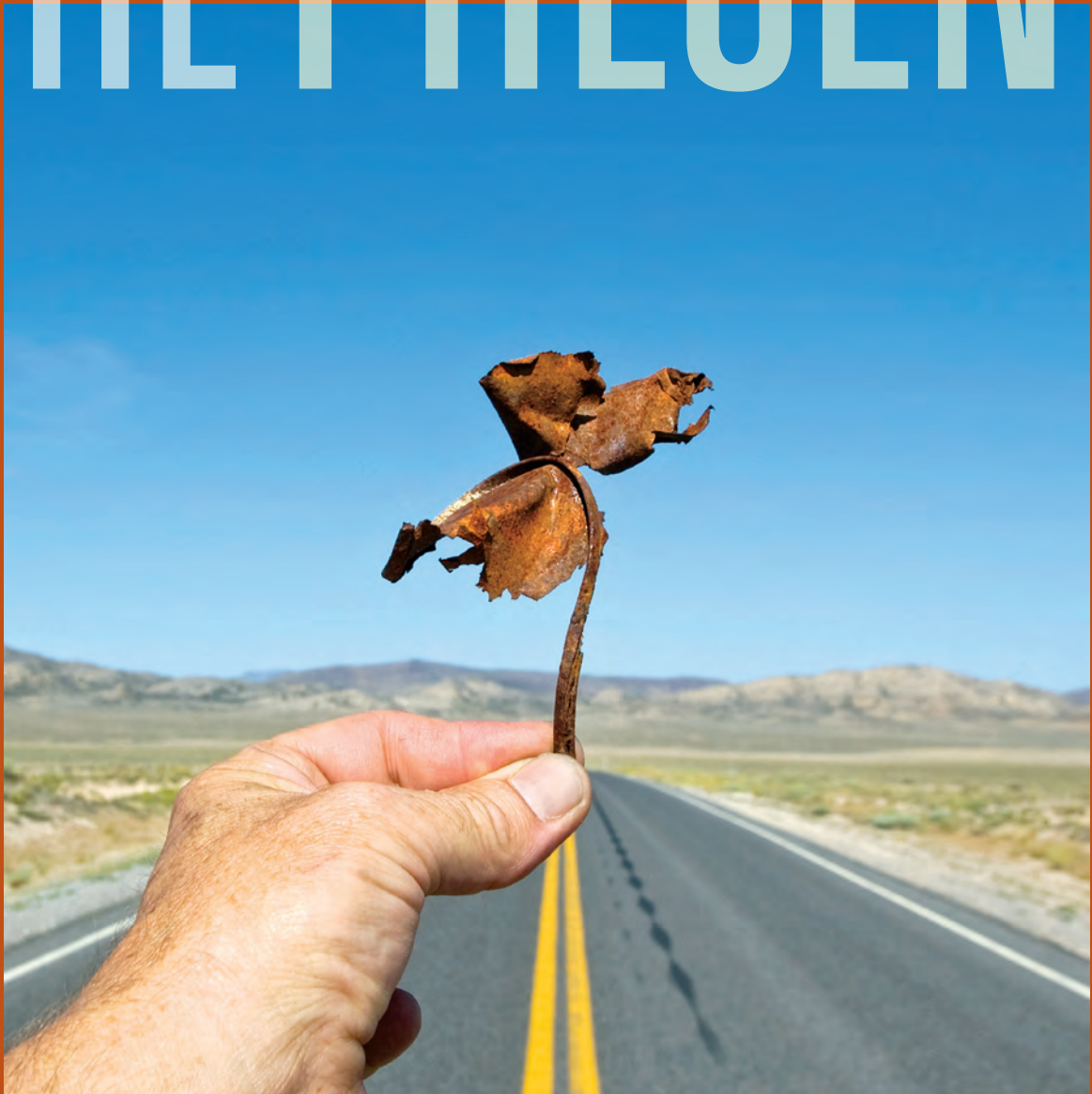


THE PRESENT



Finding Myself in the Middle of NowHere.

JERRY DOWNS

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Address all inquiries to: jerry@thepresentis.it

This book was mindfully assembled by Michael at: signorella.com

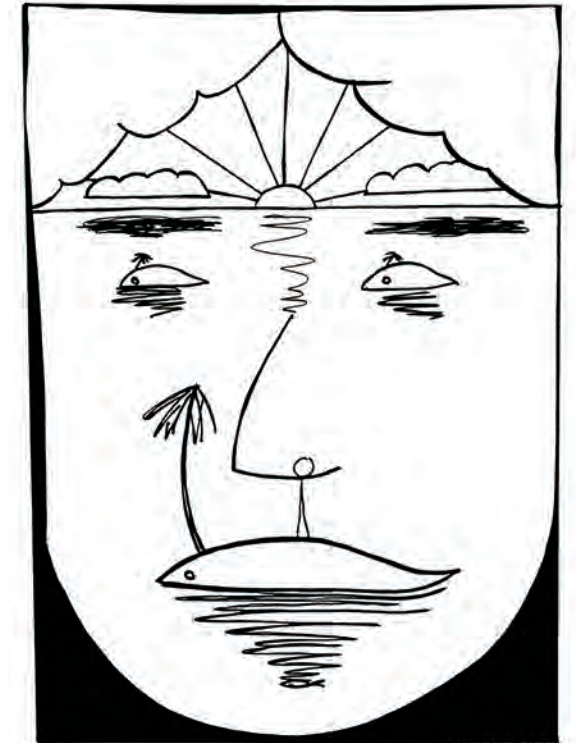
An artist is not a different kind of person. Every person is a different kind of artist.

Eric Gill

This book is dedicated to all of my fellow artists.



Preface



We are all standing on a whale
fishing for minnows.

Polynesian Proverb

In my early 20's I had a dream.

When I went to bed, I didn't have to turn off the lights or turn down the heat. The power company had already done that for me earlier in the week.

That same week someone had stopped by to look at and possibly buy some of my art. He said that I was a genius, ahead of my time and that I would be famous one day and then he left, paying me only a pile of compliments. I remember wanting to hit him. Not him so much, but everyone who had ever offered me encouragement. Everyone who made me think that I should keep going. I was pretty gone. I felt like some idiot savant who could make great art but had a hard time making change.

I fell asleep thankful that I didn't have to

live my life for the next eight hours. I asked for a dream that could help me understand why I would want to get up in the morning. I got it.

In the dream I was waiting in falling snow for a museum to open. Over the door was a banner that read Opening Night. I didn't read any further. I came for the inspiration of art, but even more, in hopes of free food at the reception. I stood outside until, driven by the biting cold, I tried the door. It opened easily. I was inside and instantly warm and dry. Great halls led off to the left and right. Straight ahead of me was a tall marble staircase.

At the top of the stairs there was a man waving me up to the next story. He seemed genuinely happy to see me. He seemed fa-

miliar. He called me by name and descended the staircase to greet me as if he hadn't seen me in years. It wasn't until we were face to face that I recognized his eyes as my own. His full head of white hair reminded me of my father. His smile set me at ease. He said, "Come on in. The gallery is open and the food is already set. We've got shrimp, smoked salmon and, even though I had to argue with the caterer, we've even got those little weenies in barbecue sauce that we like."

Over the gallery doors was the same 'Opening Night' sign. This time I read my own name in Bold Helvetica along with the words 'A Retrospective.' I stopped in my tracks and pulled away from his hand that was holding my arm. With the first words that I could speak since opening the door downstairs, I stuttered, "What is this? What is going on?"

He, me, that future self said, "I guess you didn't see the sign when you came in."

"No. No I didn't. Please...." I couldn't finish the sentence.

"It's a gift. The one you asked for before you went to sleep. I forgot how hard it was. It's okay." Then he laughed and added, "You can trust me."

Remembering that this was all a dream helped calm me down. He backed off and I entered the gallery by myself. It was huge. Hundreds of pieces lined the walls. I saw a photograph of a little black girl on stairs with a poster that said "Black is Beautiful" behind her head. I had taken it years before when I was in art school in San Francisco.

There were photographs that I had never seen. There were large collage works made from thousands of images. There were drawings. There were drawings!

I hadn't drawn since second grade when I was forbidden to do so until I learned to read. I began to cry. I was so happy. Happy for that little kid who had overcome so much sadness and was able to make these primitive, beautiful images.

I turned to face my future self who was holding back tears of his own and said, "Thank you. Thank you."

"You're welcome. Thank you. I wouldn't be here without you. Without all of you." he said with words. The rest was told by his eyes and that self-conscious smile that made me laugh when I felt it on my own face.

"Now for the really good part." He began to speak and stopped, several times, before he said, "I know what you are going through. I know it the same way you know I know what we went through in second grade. I have the power to make you an offer. Okay, here's the deal: in about a half an hour hundreds of people are going to come through that door to look at your life's work. I am completely comfortable with my art and book sales. If you choose, and this is completely up to you, we can change places and you will not have to suffer another worry about money or a pang of hunger. You will be respected and appreciated. I will take your place in bed in your past due rental house without electricity and heat. You will stay here and receive the fruits of our labor."

To be polite, I let him finish. My mind was made up before he finished speaking. The comfort and accolades were not even part of the decision. I simply could not be denied the experience of seeing every photograph, collage and drawing come into being. I didn't even have to answer. He knew himself well enough to know what I would say.

To this day I remember how it felt as we laughed together looking at the art, comparing notes and munching on those tooth-picked barbecue sauce-drenched weenies we both like so much.

I remember being happy to wake up as myself and looking forward to all the years that would pass, all the experiences that I would have, all the artwork that would come into being, and the book you now hold in your hands.

Introduction

Hi!



Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads.
Henry David Thoreau

Thank you for being here. It is no small matter, given that it required the creation of an entire Universe. It is a miracle that we made it. Every atom of this book, our bodies, the Earth, the stars and all of the hundred trillion galaxies all once fit into a mass of energy that could fit into the period at the end of this sentence. We are all different vibrations of the same energy that burst forth at the first instant of creation. The consciousness that accompanied the creation is the same consciousness that now per-

ceives this page.

This, of course, is true of every other instance of our lives. The miracle is so precise, so perfect and so pervasive that, for all practical purposes, it has become invisible.

1990

Twenty some years ago I wrote another book called *The Present*. What you just read was how it began. I don't mind that it was never published. I might have gotten stuck making the same wordy argument about the nature

of reality for the rest of my life. The truth behind all those words was completely invisible to me at the time I wrote them. The first book was about what I thought. There wasn't a lot about how I felt. I feel differently now. Life is just as complex now, actually even more so, but my approach is simpler, as is this book. It is not just about looking at the miracle. It's about being in it.

Thank you for joining me. It is going to be a trip. You, of course, will do most of the driving. Go at your own speed and stop for a picture whenever you like. I'll play navigator. There will be no need for me to pull out the map. I've made the 3,000 mile journey we'll be taking dozens of times. I've seen every mile of road at every time of day and night. It is always different. Each time I see it in a new light.

We'll start from my home just north of the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco and weave our way across the American West to Colorado. The thread that will hold our conversation together is a trip that I took to my childhood home for a family reunion. Being the fifth of eleven kids has

definitely shaped the way I hold the world. While we're there we'll make a quick visit to some of my best friends in beautiful Boulder, Colorado, the place that was my home for 30 years. I'm sure everyone will make you feel right at home.

We will make lots of stops along the way to take new pictures and, occasionally, do a little time tripping when I include pictures that I shot at different times on the same road. It's not important to keep track of the time. Just sit back and enjoy the ride.

When we leave Boulder it's California here we come, right back where we started from. We'll take a different route and follow a different thread. I've made the 1,400 mile trip in as little as 19 hours when I was going to see my girlfriend and as long as four days when I wanted to find myself in the middle of nowhere. We'll take all the time we need. That's enough talking about it. I don't know about you, but I feel like getting things on the road. I don't mind if some things are left in the dark. If we start now we will be somewhere we've never been when the sun comes up.



It could have been yesterday, or years ago, that I was a thousand miles and a time zone away in Colorado. I was there to celebrate the lives of my parents, my brother, Shawn, and granddaughter, Gabrielle. It would have been cheaper to fly, but I wanted some time alone to contemplate life and my connection to the world. I needed what only a road trip, alone, could provide. I left in the dark, just as I had done most of the 50 plus times that I had crossed the vast open space of the American West between San Francisco and Boulder, Colorado. Some of Shawn's ashes, along with Gabrielle's blanket, were tucked safely into the back seat. In my reflective mood, all the pictures and personal revelations that I had experienced over the last 30 years on this familiar road began to reappear with the passing of each mile marker. I took notes. I took a lot of pictures. My mother would have been proud.

My friend, Joe, had given me some tapes to play in my CD-challenged car. I considered listening to a book-on-tape of Eckhart Tolle reading his book *The Power of Now*. It was, however, way too early for Tolle's tone talking about Nothing. I'd save that for the middle of NowHere. Instead, I popped in a Talking Heads' tape and David Byrne'd my way down Interstate 80. By the time the Earth's rotation began to bring on the dawn, I was rolling past Davis, California.

As I passed the "Milk Farm" sign, I remembered the first time I had seen it when I was hitchhiking to California thirty years ago, and the dozens of times I had seen it since. Each time I thought it would be great to shoot a full moon behind the sign at dawn, when it was still dark enough to make out detail on a full moon and yet light enough to see the sign. I always imaged that at some point in the future I would find myself in the right place at the right time to take that picture. This time, I passed the sign, looked in the rear view mirror, saw the moon telling me that the time was NOW. I moved out of the fast lane, took the next exit, turned around, got back on the highway, and raced to a spot I had pictured a

hundred times. I set up the tripod and took the first shot as a stainless steel milk tank truck sped down the empty highway.

It felt like a gift. I felt enormously grateful. I found myself saying, "Thank you. Thank you." As I got back on the road I turned on the Talking Heads tape. It started up in the middle of the same song that was playing when I turned it off to go take the picture. Mr. Byrne was singing, "Thank you. Thank you," as a chorus of voices behind him repeated the phrase, "When you get to where you want to be."



A dozen miles down the road a magpie was making a meal of fresh road kill. I remembered trying for years to capture the graphic beauty of these splendid birds. When I was staying in my family home after my father died I took this picture of a magpie flying above the snow. In his beak is a morsel of food left over from my father's wake. I remembered how my father snickered when I told him that the magpie was my "totem animal" and how he laughed out loud when I told him why. "The magpie," I explained, "can make the most of many different environments. They can make a living from scraps and refuse, and they do it all in a tuxedo!"



By the time Sacramento came into sight, the thermos was empty and the caffeine was kicking my central nervous system into high gear. I passed on getting off at the Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area where I had once, unsuccessfully, tried to get a picture of a couple of egrets in a small pond. I was in the mood to keep moving. It was only with passing interest that I turned my eyes off the road to see whether the two solitary specks of white were still stationed there. They were and they were not alone. It turned out that this was the time of year when hundreds of their feathered relations flew in from across the country for their annual family reunion. I still had five days--plenty of time--until my own family reunion. I turned around at the next exit three miles away and made my way back to the rookery. The jubilant celebration of life and rebirth got me excited about seeing my remaining eight brothers and sisters who were still very much alive.

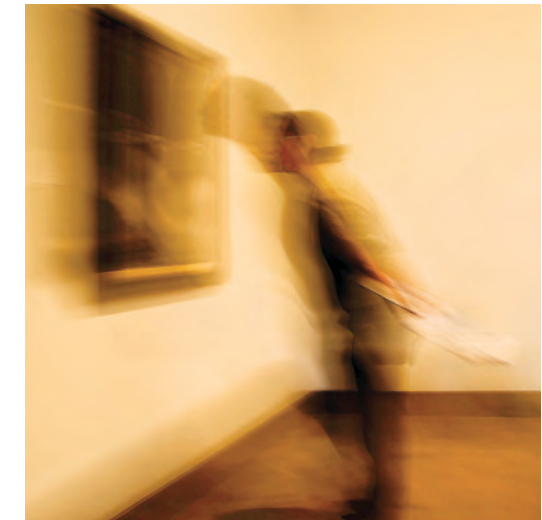
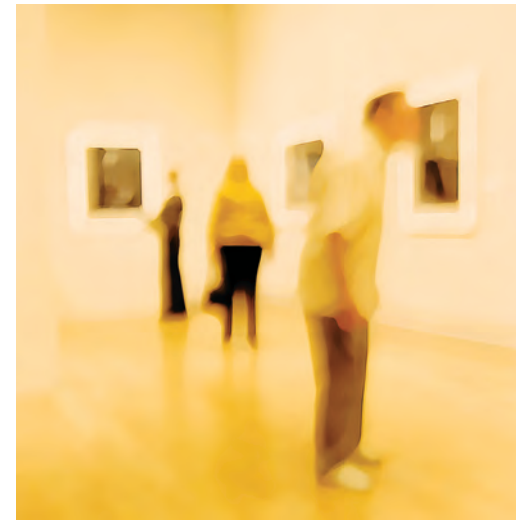
With the Sierra Mountains in my rear-view mirror I rolled into Reno, gambling that the Nevada Art Museum would have a good show. The odds were definitely in my favor. It's an excellent museum. I had some extra time on my hands while waiting for it to open so I decided to spend it driving around town, betting that the next turn of the wheel would take me to the next picture.



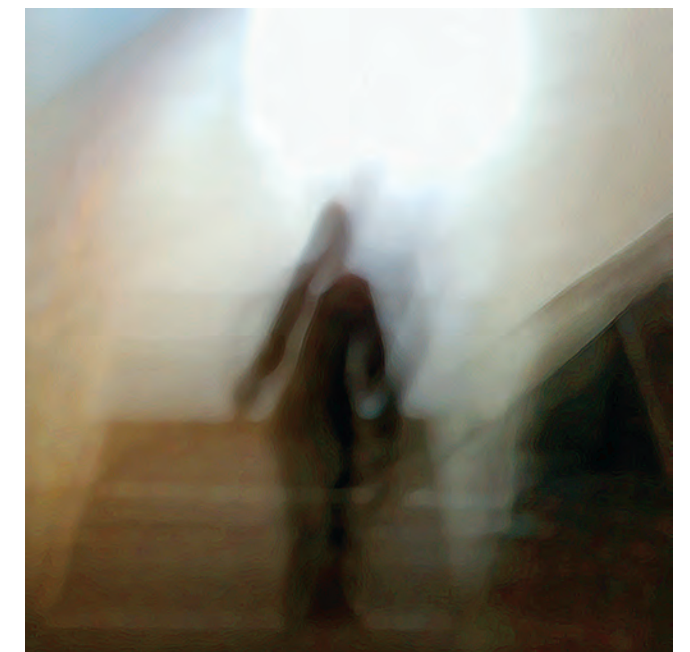
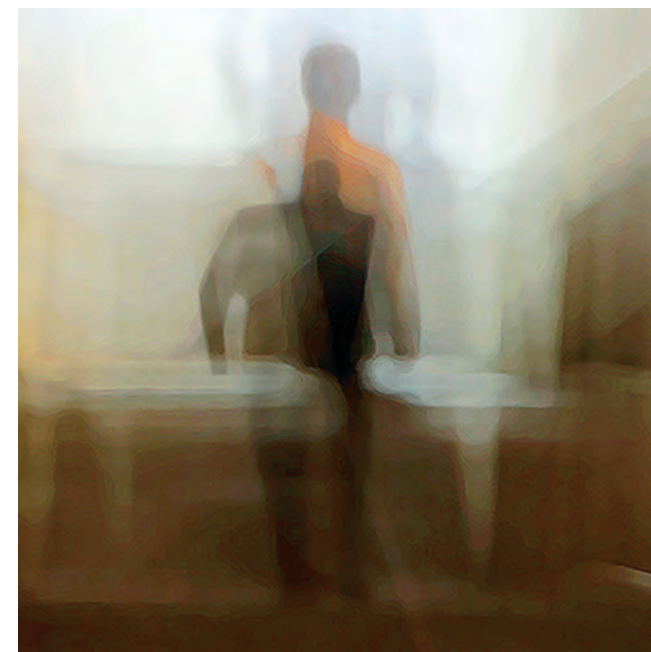
When I saw the classic auto motel sign against the puffy cloud filled sky, I knew I had a winner. I pulled off the road, set up the tripod, poured some coffee and just watched the clouds roll by until the perfect puff parked itself behind the car above the Sandman Motel. It was exhausting.



Though I had been to the Nevada Museum of Art before, I had never taken a good look at the face of the building. Art, of any sort, inspires me and I visit museums whenever I have the chance. When I walk out of a museum I think differently. The world is a different place. Colors are more vibrant, design is more dynamic and I am more connected to the world around me.



In a museum I always consider the patrons to be a major part of any exhibit. I enjoy the reactions, the contemplation and how each person positions their self in relation to the artwork. I created a [whole series](#) of images from my visits to museums around the country to illustrate my experience of how people looking at art become the art.



While looking at the shows at the Nevada Museum of Art I shot a few images from the hip. It wasn't until I got home and began to play with the images that I noticed that in two of the pictures, a man and a woman were entering the light.



I was in high spirits as I rolled out of Reno. I was leaving with much more than I had when I arrived. Even the potholes in the pavement gave me a happy return.



About forty miles from Reno a flying semi-trailer truck hovers above the highway in Fernley, Nevada.

I've taken pictures of the raised Truck Inn sign in every season and time of day and night. I don't always stop. The last time I drove by, it was the middle of the day and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. There was no real reason to just take another picture. Just as I had put that reasoning together I saw a white semi coming up the on ramp. I pulled the car to a stop, hopped out, ran in front of the car, and started to take pictures. The Truck Inn truck rolled right along the top of the semi-trailer. As the semi passed the Truck Inn truck stayed in the air like a character in a cartoon. Sometimes I think the world is playing with me.



Fernley is also the place I stopped on a previous trip to get a meal at the Truck Inn restaurant. I gave the waitress, Nikki, one of my rose prints as a thank you for humoring me and translating the formal Latin-looking script prominently displayed in the diner. With practiced pronunciation, Nikki first delivered the line in its original dialect and then translated the words into a more modern, educated English: "See Willie, there they go, thousand busses in a row. No, Joe, them trucks, some with cows and some with ducks."





Having a companion fixes you in time and that the present, but when the quality of aloneness settles down, past, present, and future all flow together. A memory, a present event, and a forecast all equally present.

John Steinbeck,
Travels with Charley

Whether we're on a road trip or reading a book it's good to have a place to stop. Every once in a while I will have a page with a picture and a quote that made me stop and think. Like my raised hand in the picture, you can read these singular pages as a sign to stop or as a "Hi!" sign welcoming you to the next chapter.



Further down the road from Fernley, across the highway, I saw a sign that I photographed once when I was going in the opposite direction. In the sky there was an inverted cross created by contrails. On a wood post someone had nailed a message. All that remained was the word "TRUST," a small piece of "CHRIST" and half of "HELL." Having deteriorated so far from the original message, its meaning was open to a wide range of interpretations. That, I thought, was true of any spiritual teaching.

Personally, I listen to everything and take a little of this and a little of that and trust everything that can be applied to my own personal experience. Having listened and looked at a lot of things, it pretty much boils down to this: if I walk around damning the world it looks like hell. When I bless this place it looks like paradise. It's personal.



I no longer look for photographs. I just enjoy the looking and the pictures arise from that space. The resulting images are also more personal. Most of my time on the road is not spent taking pictures. Most of the time I'm just looking at the lines of the highway, the landscape and my own lines of thought. Every once in a while they all converge into single point of focus and I push the button. I don't even stop for every "good" picture. Sometimes I shoot right out the windshield.



Because I stop more often and drive faster than most, I often pass the same slower moving vehicle a number of different times on our shared expedition of the open road.



"The City by the 'C'" was my next stop. I drove through Carlin, NV to see if the elk skulls on the fresh façade of a building were casting a shadow on this sunny summer day. The last time I drove through town was in the dead of winter. I saw the skulls, without shadows, on the new building with no sign and no sign of life under a cloudy sky that threatened snow. I told myself to come back someday to take a picture and see what kind of establishment would sport such an interesting storefront.





I found and introduced myself to Bobbie and Terry, the husband and wife co-owners. When I told them about the previous time I stopped by they swore that they must have been open. “Hell,” Terry said “Every damn bar in Nevada is open 24 hours a day, every day of the year.” And added, “We never put up the sign. We’ll do it one of these days. Everybody in town knows where it is. We’re just in no hurry.” I told him that one of the best restaurants in San Francisco, Nopa, has no signage except for a small sign on the door, and that it’s always packed.

After talking with Terry and Bobbie, I accepted their offer of a drink. While I drank my Pepsi, I laid out a dozen of my business cards, each with a different picture, across the bar, and asked people to take their pick. One thing led to another and pretty soon everybody in the bar was outside posing for a picture. It was clear, by the way they behaved with one another, that this was a family portrait. After we all wished one another well, I took the rest of the still chilled soda and headed back down the road. I used the soda to wash down a handful of organic nuts and granola that I had bought at Whole Foods the day before.

Maybe the reason I chose to be born the fifth child in a family of eleven kids was because I so enjoy getting to visit so many different worlds. No matter how different one is from another there is always something about everyone that unites us all. I remember my mother telling all of us that we were “all special” and that “each of you has your own special gift.” I remember her personally saying the same phrase to me, and adding, “Your gift is being an artist. I can’t tell you what that means. But I’m sure you will figure it out.”



After leaving the bar in Carlin the sky was full of beautiful perfectly placed clouds. I began to “work” on getting a picture. I started making a whole series of motions to find a picture in the flat and deserted desert. As far as I could see, there wasn’t a tree, a farmhouse or even a windmill to put in the foreground of those fabulous clouds.

The only things that I could see that stood out in my environment were the semis coming down the highway in the opposite direction. I was driving 80 miles an hour. I’m sure the trucks were doing the same. The road was straight and there was no one on my side of the divided highway for miles. I rolled down the window, picked out any truck that I thought would be interesting, panned the truck through the viewfinder and when we were side by side I clicked the shutter.

Coming down the highway, in the opposite direction, I saw a white “Swift” semi with blue letters. I thought that this could be just the thing to go with the blue and white sky.

For the next mile, inside my head, I heard myself try to make a case for whether or not I had gotten a good picture. My argument went something like, “The Roadway truck was good because of the roadway. The blue and white Swift truck worked well with the blue and white sky and the blurred weeds in the foreground helped show that we were moving swiftly.”

The bank of clouds was about to be spent. It was time to make a decision. I pulled the car to a stop. I instantly knew that none of the pictures that I had just taken was the one I was looking for. I knew because I was “thinking” about it. When I first saw the clouds I was responding to a feeling, not a thought. I dismissed the case I was making in my head and set myself free to just be there.



I stopped working and began playing with what was right in front of me. I let go of my judgements and just started taking pictures. The weeds that had been blurring by me for the last twenty miles were small wild sunflowers. I tried a number of different angles, moving closer and closer until a single sunflower filled the frame. The out of focus, perfectly-spaced clouds really make the picture pop. For me, the final picture feels exactly what it was like to be there. The photograph of the sunflower was a bright addition to my series of [floral images](#).



At Elko I got off the highway to fill the tank and get something in my stomach. Elko is the home of White King, the world's largest stuffed Polar Bear and the world largest fake one as well. They both reside at the Commercial Hotel and Casino. Upon seeing the remains of this magnificent creature I consoled myself knowing that the real animal, given his size, had lived a long and free existence.



After only a few miles of getting back on the highway I stopped to witness the living miracle of how the shadows of passing clouds changed the colors on the mountainside. As the scene unfolded I found myself reliving a similar event with my father after my mother died. We were sitting on the back deck of the family home on Lookout Mountain above Golden, Colorado. Different clouds were performing the same transformation across the foothills and flat plains beyond. We didn't speak for the longest time. We just listened to the birds and felt the dry, warm wind. When he finally spoke, in an even, calm voice, he said, "Life keeps moving." Then, after a pause, added, "Thank God."



I got back in the car, my home with a view, and kept moving.

When I count the hours, I have lived more than five months on this road over the last 40 years. It feels as much like home as any place I have called home in Colorado or California. Whenever I enter the valley over the mountains from Elko I find myself being grateful that I have such infinite space available in my living room.



There is a spot an hour east of Elko where I have stopped a half dozen times. I couldn't tell you exactly where it is. It is just the next dirt road exit that comes up after I've drained the second thermos of coffee. The only reason I recognize the spot on this deserted stretch of the road is because hundreds of purple swallows fill the sky with aerial acrobatics upon my arrival.

It is quite a sight seeing so many swallows slicing through the sky with their slender wings. Watching these graceful beings, I had the realization that "the infinite" is like the sky. We can point to it, but never put our finger on it. Then I had the added understanding that the sky is actually an accumulation of the entire atmosphere and that it actually starts at ground level. We are all living in the sky.

Before I took off into the wild blue yonder, I took a closer look at the creative constructions that these communal creatures create on the underside of the overpass. Each of the little blobs of mud you see on the nest was once scooped on top of a bird's beak and then sculpted into a place they call home.



Fifty miles from Elko is the town of Wells, Nevada, where the streets are almost always deserted. The casino, many of the local businesses and the theater are all closed. In the middle of town I witnessed a wall returning to nature. The white undercoat and the blue peeling paint mimicked the timeless blue sky and the ever-changing clouds.



The Big Pillow Motel, under a pillow shaped cloud, was also closed.



Not all the businesses in Wells have dried up. There are two legal brothels, Bella's and Donna's, on the edge of town that are still doing a stiff business. The word belladonna means "beautiful woman" in Italian. The hallucinogenic drug, belladonna, was once used by painted ladies to dilate their pupils for a doe-eyed look to help attract the big bucks.



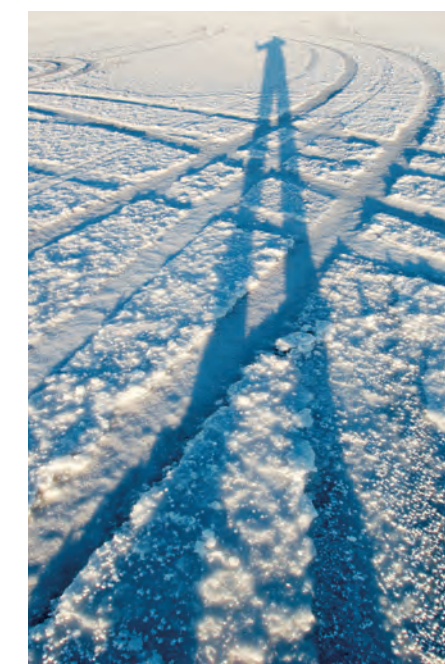
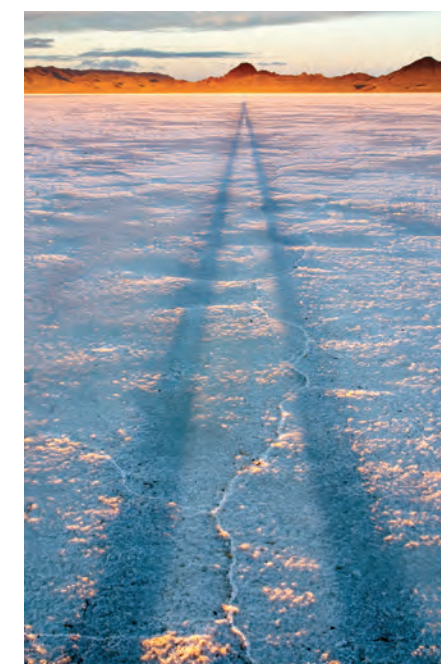


*I would rather wake up in the middle of nowhere
than in any city on earth.*

Steve McQueen



Once I wind my way to West Wendover, Nevada I am half way to Boulder. I wave to Wendover Will and prepare myself to enter another state, time zone and a geological space that defies logic and challenges the boundaries of perception.



I love it when I find myself at the Bonneville Salt Flats just at dawn or dusk so I can take a good long look at myself.



Many times I've slept at the end of a thin strip of a raised dirt road that extends for a couple of miles into the vast open plain. During the late winter and early spring the surface of the ancient sea bed is covered with a foot of water for hundreds of square miles. This is my favorite place to wake up as the light from a single star outshines the Milky Way.

This spot has long been a staging area for setting world land speed records. Once, I arrived in the middle of the night. When I woke up I was surprised to see a string of cars arriving in the predawn light. They were there for the annual motorcycle land speed trials. I was doubly surprised to see a Rolls Royce rolling across the floor of this ancient seabed.



The first time I drove through here, in my early twenties, I was longing for a billboard, for anything, to break the monotony. I thought I would die of boredom before I made it to the other side. Now that I am on the other side of that vast stretch of my life, I find myself on the other side before I have time to even think about it.



The Bonneville Salt Flats is a place where the ordinary rules of perception simply do not apply. Our perceptions are based on our experience and few of us have much experience in such a vast featureless world. A 100-car coal train is little more than a black line on the horizon. A line of telephone poles disappear to a vanishing point like a pencil drawing on a white sheet of paper.

Seeing how relative the visual world is in this surreal place helps me see how our perception of our personal world is just as relative. Several years after I had stood in 100 degree weather on this vast barren plain, I posted the phone pole picture as my *Photo of the Day* on Facebook. One of my international Facebook friends, Veronique, made this

comment: "Thanks, what a beautiful open window on freedom - from a cloudy, gray, Parisian afternoon." I couldn't believe the comment and, simultaneously, couldn't have agreed more.



Even though I took the picture on this page and even though I know what it is, it still takes me a minute to get past what my mind is doing when it tries to make it make sense. Here, I'll show you what I mean: you are looking at an eight-foot length of steel rebar that is bent in the middle. Both ends of the steel rod are stuck in the salty sand. The thin curved line between the two thicker lines is the shadow that the twisted piece of steel is casting under the noon day sun. See what I mean?

The eye is blind to what the mind can't see and the mind only knows what it has been told. Like the words on this page, the objects in our world are symbols that we read and assemble into a story that makes sense of it all.



The picture of the tumbleweed and the barbed wire has been used a number of times as a stock image to illustrate and symbolize the romance of the wide-open space of the American West. For the people who actually lived during the time that is portrayed in movie westerns, these objects had just the opposite symbolic meaning. They were seen as symbols of what would bring the romance and wide-open space of the American West to an end. Cattle drives and the open range ended as cattle were contained with barbed wire. The tumbleweed, not native to America, arrived in the seed sacks of Russian and Ukrainian wheat farmers who planted the prairie and used barbed wire to keep the cows out of the crop.

By seeing how the illusion is created, it becomes visible. The Bonneville Salt Flats help me see that the way I make up the world is directly connected to how I make up my own mind.



At the far end of the Salt Flats, I am always stopped by the same barbed wire fence. The creatures that I see in the reflection always start me reflecting on my place in time. Depending on the depth of the water, the wire draws the outline of many different creatures. I imagine seeing creatures as small as microscopic ameba or as large as prehistoric sharks.

The place I am standing at those moments of reflection was once the floor of an inland sea that reached all the way to Baja Mexico. Sharks, ameba and the miles of salt crystals that I had been seeing for hours were once suspended in the same space as the air above me for a thousand feet.



It had been a long day. My thoughts were getting a little bit over my head. It was time to get back into my body. It was time to take a break, get a warm meal and recharge my batteries. I drove to the first exit that had a town, found a diner, found a table near a wall socket, ordered dinner and downloaded my impressions of the day onto the computer. I don't remember what I ordered. I do remember how the waitress laughed when I showed her the sign at the Sandman Motel with the exhausted cloud. By the time she brought the check and the filled coffee thermos, the camera and computer batteries were fully charged, I had a good meal under my belt and I was good to go.

When I got back in the car I gave my sister Eileen a call. She said that my sister Maggie had already flown in from Rhode Island and that the rest of the family would be back in Colorado in the next two days. She knew me well enough to add, "I know that you're always stopping to take pictures, so I know that you telling me that you are just short of Salt Lake City doesn't tell me anything about when you'll actually get here." When she asked if I was going to stop for the night I answered, "Probably not. I'm too excited. I'll pull over for a few hours when I start to get tired." She laughed, we told one another that we loved each other and closed the conversation with a wish for a "Good night."



*The secret of seeing is to sail on solar wind. Hone and spread your spirit,
till you yourself are a sail, whetted, translucent, broadside to the merest puff.*

Annie Dillard



As I crossed the Wyoming border, the last rays of sunlight were creating long shadows across the open prairie. I got off the highway and headed down a dirt road toward a wind farm in hopes of finding a picture in the last light of day.



The sun had set as I set up my tripod for the first shot of the scene. The colored clouds were still above the curvature of the rotating earth. Soon, they too, could no longer see the sun.



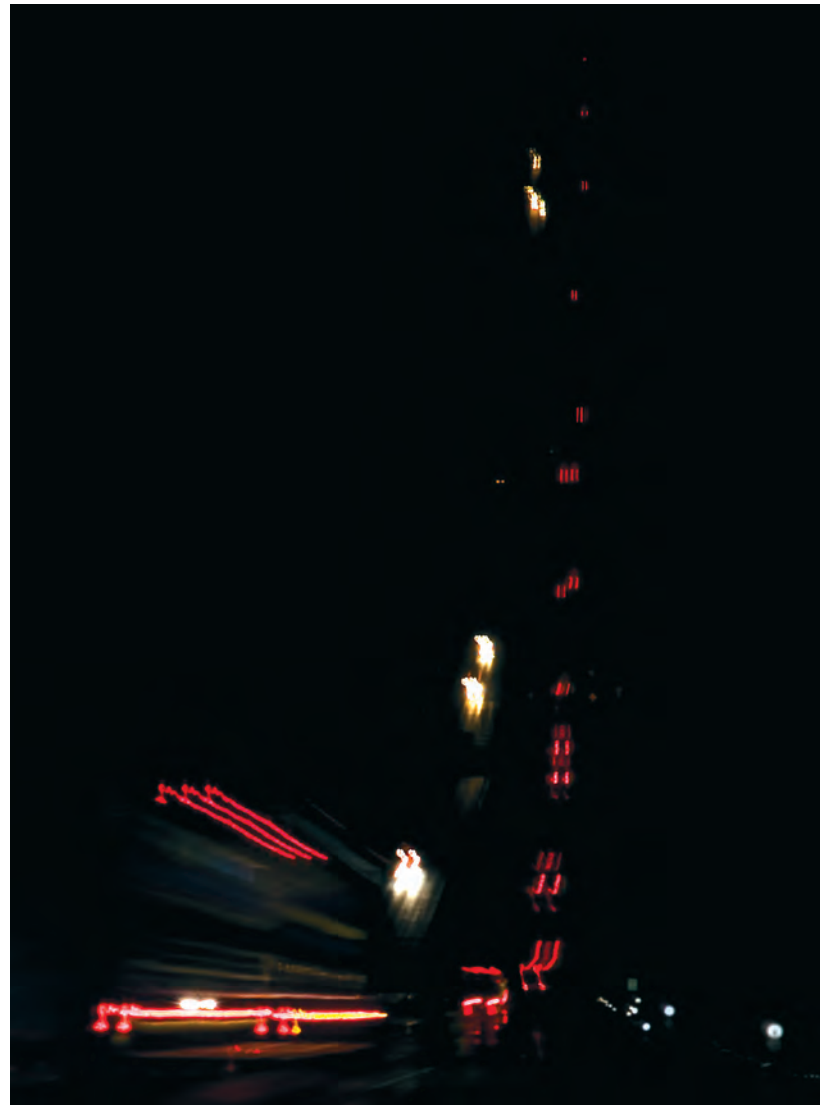
With my camera on the tripod, I made four different exposures. With each exposure I increased the amount of time the shutter was open and made the opening of the aperture smaller. The same amount of light was hitting the light sensitive sensor. Everything station-

ary in the scene stayed the same. Every time I slowed down the shutter, the blades of the turbines had more time to speed across the sensor. Each image generated a different energy.



Back on the highway I took pictures out my windshield of my colorful family of fellow travelers. During the long exposures, I imagined the side lights of the semis streaming across the camera sensors. Once, at a photo seminar I was giving, someone asked, "Why did you start taking pictures at night?" I answered, "Because it gets dark." The whole class burst into laughter. Exposing myself to teaching has helped me see things about myself that have become invisible.

Soon I was in my favorite place in the world: in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of the night, all by myself. I love the space. I'm free to just let my mind wander. I just sit back and enjoy the show.



Just east of Evanston, Wyoming, there is a really steep incline, followed immediately by just as steep a climb. I remembered driving on this same hill at night years before. Just like this night, there was no moon. The tail lights in the distance did not appear to be receding. They looked like they were being shot straight up into outer space. In the fifteen minutes it took me to travel from the top of one hill to the next, moving along at 80 miles an hour, I considered my place on the planet.

It seems obvious now, but I had never put it all together before. As we all know, the Earth makes a full turn every 24 hours. The Earth rotates at a speed of 1000 mph while traveling at 67,000 mph around the Sun. Which is, of course, moving 500,000 mph around the center of our galaxy. So (even if we disallow for the relative speed of the galaxy and the expansion of the universe), by the time I reached the spot where I thought the vehicles were being shot into space, I was, literally, at a spot -in space- that was hundreds of thousands of miles away from where it was when I began to go down the hill. Suddenly, the dots of lights were no longer just dots of light. Each was a space vehicle that was piloted by a real person. We were each related, each on our own journey of universal exploration.



Every couple of hundred miles I made it a point to stop and take a long look at the Milky Way. When I am really out there, hundreds of miles from the nearest city lights, there are so many stars that it is easy to confuse the density of distant stars for clouds. This experience always brings home a realization that I have every time I take the time to look to the Heavens: looking at the stars is a lot like looking at life. It can make me feel small and insignificant or it can help me see that I am part of something Monumentally Grand.

The real trick is to integrate that experience back into the rest of my personal universe. When I get back in the car, it's a completely different story. I know the stars surround my world in every direction but the only thing visible in my personal space is the area illuminated by the headlights.

Cars had all but disappeared. Every once in a while I passed a semi. At least once an hour I passed a double-trailer Fed-X truck filled with thousands of urgent packages that would be delivered into twice as many waiting hands the next day.

As you can clearly see, the scarcity of visual input gives me very little to think about. It is a kind of meditation, a kind of quiet conversation with my surroundings.

I passed a billboard and complimented it on the way it illuminated a giant rock outcropping in the Wyoming prairie. Ten miles later I was still thinking about how it would have made an interesting image. My quiet conversation exploded into full blown mental noise. I kept trying to invent a story to justify my behavior. I said to myself, "I can't go back. Ten miles is twenty minutes back to where I am right now. I'm not even sure digital can capture something that subtle." I even tried to belittle it into insignificance, "Oh, it wasn't that great." I tried every mental gyration and new age methodology to 'let it go.' One of them worked.

I took a breath and remembered that I had a body. I put the body in the driver's seat, the driver's seat in the car, the car in the middle of Wyoming, Wyoming on the face of the Earth, and the Earth floating in the Milky Way. I didn't have to go any farther. I turned around, quieted down, drove the ten miles, set up the tripod and made long exposures until the image I saw in the back of the digital camera could speak for itself.



At 1:00 AM I pulled off at a spot nestled in the long arm of the Milky Way and slept for a couple of hours. I was unaware when I stopped and closed my eyes that I was 50 feet from a set of railroad tracks. Two trains, each with 80 coal cars came by during my nap. It wasn't too much of a disturbance because they were really moving! When I awoke the moon had risen and its subtle glow was just enough to make the rails perceptible to the eye...but not to a camera. Fortunately, I heard a train coming. I set up the tripod between the two sets of tracks. I waited until the headlight of the train began to hit the tracks, clicked the shutter and hoped that the 30 second exposure would finish in time for me to get out of the way of the oncoming train. I had plenty of time. I had a full 10 seconds to get off the tracks, reset the tripod, frame the image and push the shutter for the second 30 second shot.



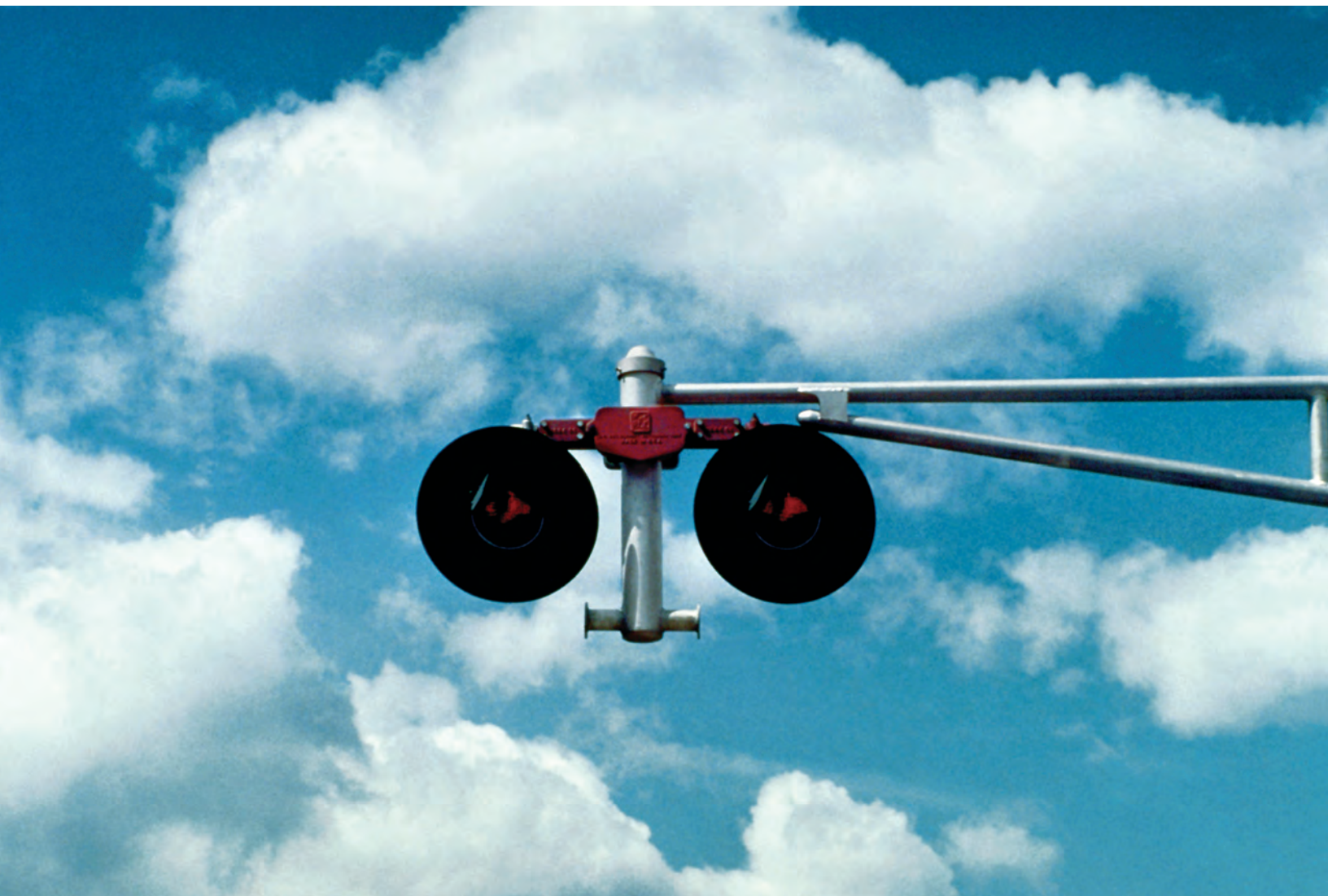
I was back on the highway just in time to greet the first rays of sunlight that had traveled 93,000,000 miles to illuminate this stretch of Wyoming prairie. I began looking for something in the foreground to position against the glowing atmosphere. At the next rest stop I stopped to shoot a silhouette of a series of trucks whose drivers had stopped to get some sleep. I framed the shot and waited for a trucker to pass me to add the red streaks. I couldn't have guessed that the moon would rest so perfectly on one of the red lines or that one of the truckers in the picture would turn on his headlights during the exposure.



When the time came for the sun to rise, as far as I could see, not a single object broke the flat horizon of the Wyoming prairie. I set my sights on a truck pull-off area down the road and singled out a milk tank truck on the far end closest to the highway. To my surprise and delight it turned out to be a Horizon Organic Dairy truck. At the time, Horizon was my largest and favorite corporate client. Dozens of different times I had gotten up before dawn so I could be out standing in a field surrounded by a herd of contented cows at sunrise.



Given that the truck was coming from Idaho, there was every possibility that some of the milk in the two 10,000 gallon tanks was from cows whose picture I had taken. Everything in the world, the Milky Way and All That Is felt connected. It was very moving. I felt utterly blessed as I merged into the fast lane, laughing my way towards the next horizon.



Perhaps the mission of those who love mankind is to make people laugh at truth, to make truth laugh, because the only truth lies in learning to free ourselves from the insane passion for truth.

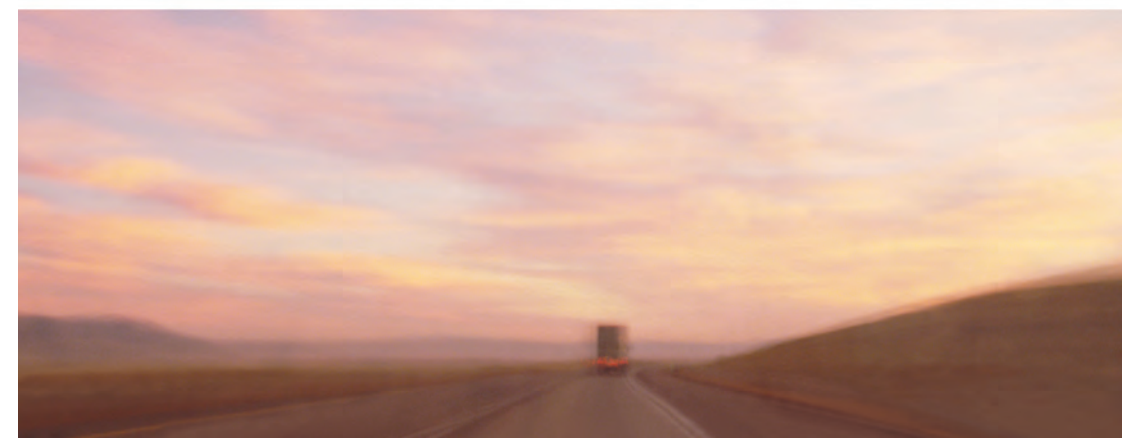
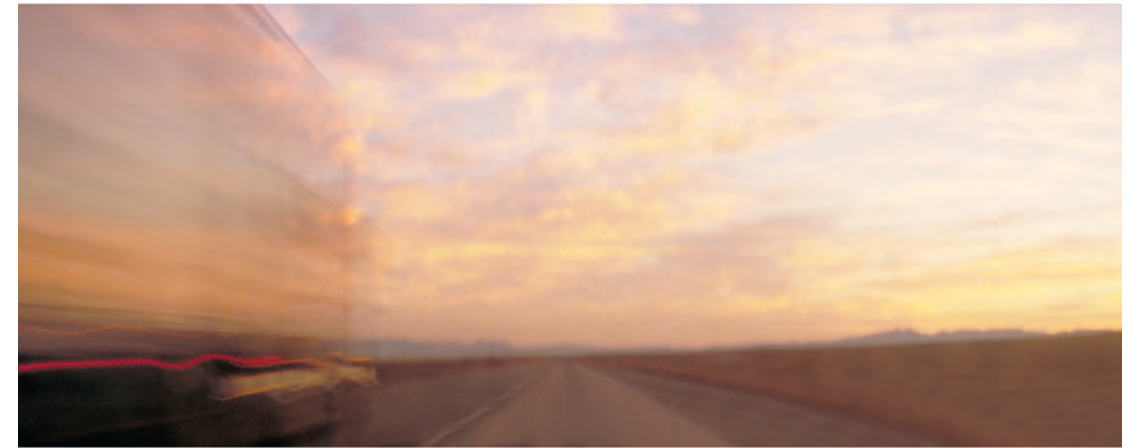
Umberto Eco *The Name of the Rose*

About fifty miles short of Rawlins, Wyoming, I was thinking about a time I was in the same place some thirty years before. My friend, Joe, was living in Boulder at the time. We were both at a place where making a living, dealing with the latest girlfriend or having no girlfriend and just living, called for some sorting out time.

Road Trip! We had both just read the Seth book *The Nature of Personal Reality* and were primed to test our powers of manifestation. We loaded up my square back Volkswagen, which had four balding tires and no spare, and hit the road with enough film and gas money to last a week. We decided to start from the beginning. The first day out would be about birth.



Near the end of the day we stopped at a deserted hot springs in Southern Colorado. The picture I took of Joe held everything that we had talked about that day. The nature of the womb where we begin by floating in space, then become cramped against the walls, then, as we are born, are once again surrounded by space. The tie-dyed curtains and blue light from the window became the embryonic fluid. The splashes at his feet represented the idea that we are all born from stardust and light. Even the wobbly reflection on the right of the picture retold our discussion about the billions of cells that are dividing every second in the womb and continue to do so every second of our lives.....which is to say we are continuously being born. It was very deep.



On the second day we, being our simple-minded selves, chose to look at death. We found ourselves in Dead Horse Ranch State Park in Arizona. We found a dead horse. We rode the theme until we were beating a dead horse. We examined the phrase, "beating a dead horse." All that thinking was killing the experience of just being. We let it go.

Out of that revelation came the most profound understanding of what was in front of us the whole time, the road itself. Part of the magic of being on the road is that it is always new, it is always being born. And it is always new because we're letting the past die behind us. Birth and death are simply different aspects of the same experience. That shut us up. It was, in the vernacular of the day, "orgasmic." Or as the French call it, "petite mort" ... a little death....a semi passing.

After being gone for a week on this enlightening road trip to California, at about two in the morning I was passing this semi doing about ninety when I hit something in the road. Both tires on my side of the car blew out. I danced the car to the edge of the highway. Nothing was going to happen that night. In the morning we assessed our situation. We had twenty dollars which was just enough to buy gas to get the 150 miles back to Boulder. We had two flat tires and no spare. We were in the middle of nowhere and the creators of our universe. I also needed to pee. I went down to the fence line and while I was standing there I saw a 20 dollar bill tangled in the tumbleweed. The only other thing I had of value was a few of my San Diego Zoo bird posters from my days as a collage artist.



I stayed with the car. Joe hitchhiked the fifty miles to Rawlins with two flat tires, twenty dollars and a couple of bird posters. About noon, a tow truck pulled up behind my car. The

driver stepped out one side and Joe stepped out of the other. This guy from the tire store had sold and mounted two used tires for the twenty bucks and drove Joe back so he could meet me and have me sign the poster for his sister who just loved birds.



Okay, back to our current trip to Colorado. I'm driving along, thinking about this event in my past, romanticizing and recreating it in vivid detail and, in what could have been the exact same place.....POW.....a flat. That didn't let the air out of my experience. I mean really, what could I do but laugh. To add to the humor, I went to the back of the car, opened the gate, took out all the pictures, travel bag and road supplies to get to the spare. I lifted the cover and the wheel well was empty. I gave Joe, who sold me the car, a call. He laughed as I recounted the event and then said, "God, are you powerful." Then he asked, "Ok, are you ready to look really stupid?" "Always," I replied. Then he said, "Close the gate." I did. And, there it was. The wheel had been in front of me and behind me the whole time.



I finished changing the tire and walked back to see if I could find what I had run over. Sometime in the past someone had lost the entire contents of a toolbox. Screwdrivers, awls, drill bits and pliers littered the road. As the event disappeared in the rear view mirror I let it all go. At the next rest stop I saw something to illustrate my new understanding that reliving the past can be a useful tool and sometimes even entertaining, but ultimately it just creates a circle of more of the same.



Having grown up in Colorado I always thought of the Continental Divide as being on the top of 14,000 foot peaks. It was funny to see a sign with so low a number and odd that the number was so even. When I stopped to take its picture I looked down at my odometer and saw something even odder.

I have never been that good at math, but have always loved playing with numbers.

When my father died I inherited his car. I was coming back from visiting my brother Shawn's family when the car passed over the 100,000 mile mark. It was fitting that I was driving on the Avenue of the Giants in the Redwood National Park. I know he would have laughed if he saw me, with the car turned off, the lights on, a tripod in the driver's seat, in the middle of the road, recording the event in the last light of the day. That night as I drove the last 200 miles home to San Francisco, I did what I did every time I drove the car until it too left the road for the last time: I looked at the odometer and saw the number of miles that had passed since that sacred event.

Twice a year since my younger brother Shawn died, I have gone to Oregon to see his wife, Lena and the kids. In the summer I take Patrick and Kiera one way or the other to

visit their cousins who live not far from me in the Bay Area. On one of our trips south, after stopping at Mt. Shasta, we awaited, with great anticipation, the monumental event of watching the odometer change to 123,456.



Every time I come into Laramie, Wyoming I look for the McDonald's billboard I shot years ago with cows taking a break that day in the shade of the sign. It still makes me smile.

Shortly after turning South at Laramie, just past the Wyoming/Colorado border, I saw an interesting cloud and a field of horses. Past experience told me that if I stopped and waited long enough, the horses would come to the fence and give me an eye.

As I drove off, I wondered what other interesting creatures would appear down the road. When I first saw this scene I had to back up to see if my eyes were deceiving me. When I got back to California and was looking at the picture thinking it was just a bit too obscure, I asked Joe, “Why do you think I stopped to take this picture?” Without hesitation he said, “Because of the dinosaur.”

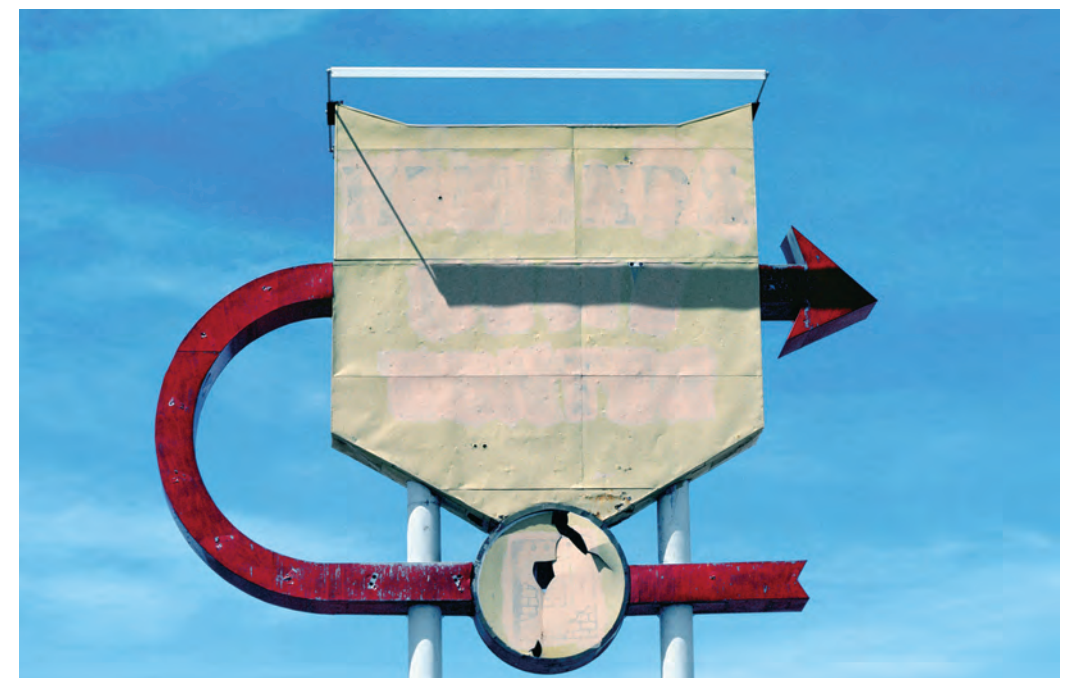
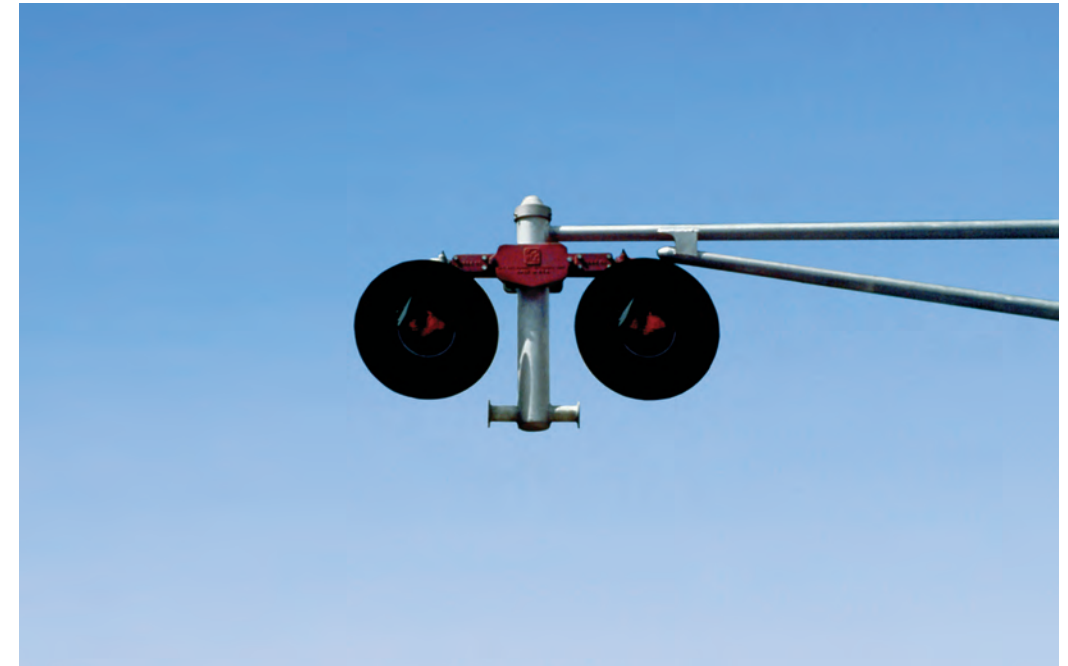


Coming into Colorado I felt the connection and also found myself creating some sort of separation simply because I was born, raised and lived there for so many years. Having crossed so many state lines lately it just seemed odd that this one would make any difference. I couldn't quite put my finger on why it felt different. Then I remembered that it was all in my mind. It had nothing to do with the environment. It was just something I made up to make sense of the world around me.

Not far from where I was driving, I remembered a picture I took years before. I have been using it for years in talks and articles to illustrate how “the eye is blind to what the mind can't see.” It's a horse, of course, but which way is the horse facing? (I'll give you answer at the end of the book.) I love [optical illusions](#). They remind me about the malleability of reality. When I remember that I am making up my picture of the world from my own lines of thought, life itself becomes the ultimate creative act.



The world keeps changing. I rolled across the railroad tracks where I had once seen a face years before. Only the pair of eyes looked back. Further down the road I saw that the dilapidated sign I shot 30 years ago was gone. The only thing that remained was the memory of me pulling off the road with Jennifer, my wife at the time, and another couple, Russ and Paola. I remember them being so impressed because I had seen that the line on the sign was actually a shadow created by the light. What impressed me was finding myself there at exactly the right second. The technical name for the illusion is called “the perpetual line.” Even though there is a gap in the line, our mind fills it in because of what comes before and after it. It's the same trick our mind does with memories.



When I took the image of the silhouetted horse illusion I, of course, didn't see it as an illusion. I knew which way it was facing. It wasn't until I saw it through someone else's eyes that it became visible. The horse image was taken when I was at the Hockleys, a farm family that I visited for many years in the small town of Grover on the Eastern plains of Colorado.

I was in Grover to shoot a rodeo. At the gas station I saw a man rolling a cigarette and asked if I could take his picture. He offered me the one he just rolled and started another. I took a few pictures, shared a smoke and talked about having the rodeo in town. Little did I know, at that quiet moment, that I would become a part of this unique individual's family and eventually be a pall bearer at his funeral. For more than a decade, I took hundreds of pictures of Ernie, his wife, May and the kids, June, Genevieve and William.



The license photography has allowed has been such a gift. I appreciate all of the worlds it has allowed me to visit. Going to see the Hockleys was also like traveling back in time. They had no phone, so I always arrived unannounced. I was always greeted as a member of the family. I would bring a few prints from a previous visit and we would share stories over a modest meal of home grown vegetables and a very fresh chicken.



The time spent with this generous family meant a great deal to me personally and greatly contributed to my life as photographer. At least once on every visit I felt the influence of photographers working for the FSA in the 1930's and was reminded how I felt after looking at the pivotal photography book, *The Family of Man*.



Before I reached Ft. Collins, Colorado, I saw two pickups rounding up a herd of horses. I turned down the dirt ranch road and reached the group just as the horses were entering a corral. There I met Chip, Kathy and their son. It was an honor to meet them all. It always surprises me, though I never think of it while I'm doing it, that I can stop complete strangers and ask them if I can take their picture and they always say, "Yes." Perhaps it is because of the way I was raised to think that everyone is the same; each complete in their own unique way. I don't know. Perhaps it's because I act like we are related.



As his parents and I were enjoying doing our own favorite thing in the world, the boy was busy being a boy running on the rocks next to the corral. He was busy simply being. He reminded me of myself when I was a boy growing up in the country. I was, of course not an only child, but as a child I enjoyed being by myself and walking for hours through farm fields and down dirt roads. When I got back home I stepped back into the controlled chaos of a large family. With 11 kids running around, my parents and siblings rarely even noticed that I had been gone.





*Thine own consciousness, shining, void and inseparable
from the great body of radiance, hath no birth, nor death,
and is the immutable boundless light.*

Papmasambhava
The Tibetan Book of the Dead



From Ft. Collins, I drove straight through to my sister Eileen's house in Evergreen in the mountains above Denver. This is always the place I call home when I visit Colorado. Eileen and her husband, Jake, who I think of as a brother, always greet me with open arms. I love waking up in "my" room and looking out the window at our deer neighbors.

Eileen is the oldest of the eleven kids. I'm the fifth. That made me the youngest of "the big kids" and the oldest of "the little kids." I chose the perfect place to develop an appreciation for multiple points of view.



That is Eileen in the middle of the black and white image that my mother called our “Grapes of Wrath Picture.” These are “the big kids.” From top to bottom, according to size are Eileen, Johnny, Joey, Jimmy and Jerry. It is also the only known picture of me as an infant. When I was about 10, I was looking through family pictures and saw that Eileen and Johnny had 8x10 infant photos done by a professional photographer. When I asked my mother about this she said, “By the time you came along we already had enough baby pictures.” After seeing the look that this comment created on my face she added, “We had to spend our money on feeding you kids.”

The picture on the right of “the little kids” was taken with my first camera, a Kodak Instamatic. That’s Mary, Maggie, Nancy, Dermod and Vincent. Shawn, who comes after Mary, was probably out wandering through the fields.

They were welcoming me home from the first the trip I ever took outside Colorado. I was 18 years old. I had gone, with my brother Jimmy, back East to meet my cousins JoAnne, Mary, Kate and my Uncle Jimmy in Massachusetts. The sunburned feet in the picture are mine. I burned them when we stopped in Cape Cod on our way to Woodstock in 1969. Uncle Jimmy was going to drop us off at Yasgurs farm and go look for a motel. That didn’t happen. By the time we got to Woodstock we were half a million strong and everywhere there was song and celebration. How good that stardust turned to mud felt on my sunburned feet. I remember how touched I was being welcomed home by my brothers and sisters.



This picture of my parents was taken about 15 years before the end of their long and full lives. I, of course, still talk to Mommy and Daddy and feel their presence through the course of my life. Perhaps it is because there were always young children around the house when we were growing up that we have continued to called them “Mommy” and “Daddy” into our adult lives.

Both of my parents chose to give their bodies to science. My ever-practical father said, “I’m not going to need it. You may as well get some use of the damn thing.” He was also fond of saying, “The past is over. Take what you learned and let go of the rest.” After “Science” took what they could use, what remained was cremated and sent back to the family. It was our responsibility to return the ashes to our Earth so she could make use of them to enrich another life.



My brother Shawn had died the previous fall. His wife, Lena, and children, Ryan, Kiera and Patrick lovingly created 100 origami cranes for us to use in our ritual. They were well practiced at fashioning the small birds after doing the Japanese tradition of creating a string of 1000 cranes. Shawn was a world renowned horticulturist who specialized in growing seed stock. He made a number of trips to Japan. The symbol above his head in this image means, “to fly.”



Our celebration of life began at Mother Cabrini Shrine above Golden. We clandestinely placed a few of my parent’s ashes at this site which both of my parents held dear and could be seen from their home across the hillside on Lookout Mountain.

The grace and freedom of the swallows against the clouds and sky I had witnessed near Elko, Nevada on my way to Colorado, inspired me to create the symbolic image that began this chapter. Vincent held up a single crane to help me set my focus. Then Eileen, Jimmy, Sally, Maggie and Mary tossed the birds into the sky. Then everyone picked them up and did it again. My parents always encouraged our individual creativity, as well as the value of co-operation. We are all unique and equally blessed.



Everyone appreciates me taking pictures and they are, of course, free to mock the photographer. Vincent's impression of his older brother is particularly funny.



Then Jake took a picture of the 9 remaining Downs kids.

Next we drove and hiked to a private spot in the mountains that has special significance to all of us.



We began with a ritual to celebrate and give thanks to my own grandchild, Gabrielle, who died the previous spring after being with us for eight months. We each held a corner of her baby blanket and placed the cranes on the surface. After I said a few words, thanking her for giving us her joyous spirit, we sent the cranes into the air.



I know her parents, my son, Christopher, and Indira, as well as my extended family in Indonesia would have been touched. I am certain that Gabrielle would have laughed.



Next we placed a few of our brother Shawn's ashes with those of our parents, Eileen and Jack, and returned them lovingly to the earth. We also said a prayer to include the second oldest child, Johnny, who died some twenty years before.



On a limb above the site, Mary and Maggie arranged eleven cranes. To make sure they had the right amount of birds, I heard them count, not with numbers, but with the names of all the kids: Eileen, Johnny, Joey, Jimmy, Jerry, Mary, Shawn, Maggie, Nancy, Dermod and Vincent. I recalled how Mommy and Daddy would say "COUNT OFF" and how we would say our names out loud, in order, each time the family would get in the station wagon, to see if everyone was present. This day we were all very present and most appreciative of their gift.



In the evening we all got together again. We took turns cranking the ice cream bucket that was old fashioned even when we used it as kids. We celebrated birthdays, marveled at Alida's culinary Panda cake creation, shared a meal, looked at old pictures, had rhubarb and blueberry pies just like Daddy used to make, saw how we have all grown and how we have all stayed the same.



We also poured over pictures in our family album. Maggie pointed to the picture where there were only five Downs kids and said, "Oh look, Jerry was afraid of the photographer."



Maggie is the baby in this picture. Nancy, Dermot and Vincent were not yet in the picture. They were, as my mother used to say, "Still in the Mind of God." That is me with my elbows on the bed saying the rosary. Joey jokingly said, "You were such a holy little kid." To which Vincent added, in a humor and voice that perfectly mimicked my father, "Yeah, you're right. Jerry always acted like he had a hole in his head."



Photo: Pinque Clark

*A friend is someone who can see through you
and still enjoy the view.*

Farmers Almanac



After saying good bye to my brothers and sisters I drove to see some friends in Boulder, the place I called home for thirty years. The roads that I've taken back and forth from Boulder to San Francisco brought to mind a different memory with each passing mile marker. Highway 93, the 20-mile stretch between Golden and Boulder awakens events from thousands of past selves lived over a 30 year period.

One spot on this road holds an energy that is especially charged with meaning. Since I was 18, I have been focusing on a particular tree that lives just after Rocky Flats and before the hill that leads down to Eldorado Canyon and Boulder.

The symbolic nature of "The Tree", for me, has had as many different incarnations as I have had personal transformations. I have projected a feeling of abject loneliness on this lone tree, as well as an admiration for the courageous individuality it shows by its ability to stand so proudly on its own.

Before I even knew of "The Tree," this spot on the road was the location of an event that scared me to life. I was 17 years old and driving back home from Boulder in an old Buick my brother Joey had sold me for fifty bucks. There were no bucket seats or seatbelts. The front seat was more like a couch. My high school sweetheart, Renee, with her head on my lap, lay across the seat sound asleep. Just as I reached the area next to the tree I fell asleep at

the wheel. I don't know how long I was out of this world, but what happened next was as real as any waking moment I've had in my life.

I saw myself standing in the road about fifty yards in front of the car. Even though he was an older me, I immediately recognized myself. It felt like I was reading his mind when, in my own calm voice, I heard these words, "Do you want to stay here?" In just as calm a voice I said, "Yes." The figure in the road nodded in acknowledgment, lifted off the ground, pointed his head in my direction, shot through the air, through the windshield and slammed into my chest.

The impact was so great that it lifted Renee into a seated position and deposited her all the way across the seat next to the passenger door. That woke me up.

The otherworldly image on the previous page is a picture of "The Tree" during a twenty-minute exposure that I captured on film in the first couple of hours of New Year's Day 2002.



Having lived in Boulder for over thirty years, I could write a book about what happened on every block and behind every rock.



It was here that I was married to Jennifer for eight years and where we, together and separately, raised our son Christopher. I married her to be a little more stable. She married me to loosen up a little. After six years all that stability was making me unstable and Jennifer was losing it over her own loss of stability. We had both moved to a middle ground that no longer served either one of us.

Fortunately, we still loved each other and do to this day. We caught ourselves in that peculiar place when you love someone and you know that what is best for that person is for you to leave. Since it is not reasonable to leave someone we love, we start looking for all the things that we don't love about them until we end up hating them. This then gives us a reasonable excuse to leave.

We loved each other enough to find a format that allowed us to love. It seemed reasonable to us. We were both surprised by the reactions of our friends when we announced that we were getting a divorce. It was as if they heard the word "divorce" and went to some file in their brain and it didn't contain a single positive entry. They offered sympathy. They started to take sides.

Jennifer and I came up with an idea to reframe the event and give all the other people we loved something new to put in the file. We had a divorce party. We sent out invitations. I cleared out my studio and we danced together with Christopher and with all of our friends. Some things have to be experienced to be believed.

On the next page is my favorite picture of Christopher as a child. It's not a picture of what he looks like, but it exhibits who he is: a creative being who loves playing with the light and sees the value of a good shadow.



If there is a single event that would describe my feelings for my creative community of friends in Boulder, it would have to be the wedding of Cha Cha and Leslie. I don't normally shoot weddings, but given who was involved, I knew that this was going to be an event!

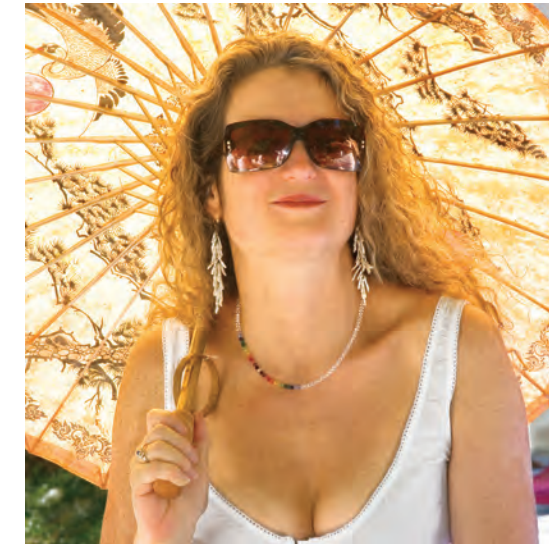


After Leslie and Cha Cha placed themselves in front of us all, they explained the rainbow theme and the request that all the guest should wear white.

Leslie: Cha first thought of having a rainbow theme, and she had the vision of a gathering all in white. Cha: Part of it was that we'd all make for such great pictures! Leslie: But we thought about it and realized there was something more instinctive about the idea. Our experiences, our friends, and the ways we are with each other seem to come in all the colors of the rainbow, and you probably know that when you combine all the colors of light in the rainbow, you get white. Cha: So bringing all of you together is like gathering together all the white light.

We were all honored to be there for them. And, yes, it did make for great pictures.

They thanked us, their parents and each other. In response to each other's vows they replied with the phrase they both have always used to express their answer to life, a resounding, "Yes, please."



The reception was a wonderful time to capture more beauty of this very visual event, talk more with my friends and even compare our festive fashions. I had to spray 12 coats of white shoe dye and a half a bottle of liquid shoe polish to get my shoes to match my outfit. As Rebecca said, “You know how hard it is to find white after Labor Day!”

When I was talking with my friend Ken, he asked me how it felt for me to be back in Boulder. I looked at how I felt and answered, “You know, it’s kind of funny. I’ve been on the road so much lately that it all feels like being home to me. It’s just a matter of time. I know it sounds like something Jerry would say, but it’s like being here with you right now. We are both alive. For the last six hours we have been at Cha and Leslie’s wedding. This is where we have lived for the last six hours of our lives.” He laughed and added, “Yes, that is exactly something Jerry would say.”



After a spectacular rainbow colored meal (this was the first time I had ever seen purple potatoes) Dawn was called upon to get everyone’s attention for the cutting of the cake.

The Cake was created by culinary artist Sarah Amorese. This labor of love was a gift, a thank you, to Cha Cha who had made such a difference in her life. As is true for so many of us, Cha Cha’s love, support and encouragement were her inspiration. The rainbow arched over a chocolate Flatirons (the mountain rock formation above Boulder). The rainbow flowed into a teapot (Cha is very famous for her tea parties) that was shaped like an earth to represent the couple’s world travels. It then spilled into a cake the shape of a giant teacup. I loved the look on Sarah’s face as the cake was cut. On the gold leafed rim of the teacup were the words, “Yes, please!”



Much later, when only a core group of friends remained, each of us having known one another for years, took a dip in the pool. At one point Leslie turned to the group and said, “We had the perfect day. A perfect night. A sitar playing in the background. Absolutely wonderful friends. I feel very loved and blessed. Could life get any better than this?” We all responded with a resounding, “Yes, please!”

Part II
START FROM ZERO



Security is mostly a superstition. It does not exist in nature, nor do the children of men as a whole experience it. Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. Life is either a daring adventure, or nothing.

Helen Keller



Once, when I was young and foolish, I drove 2,500 miles from Colorado to Kentucky and back, just to see a world I had never witnessed. On my way back home to Boulder, I stopped to take a picture on the side of a Kansas gravel road. It was a picture of a large grain elevator that broke the flat plain half a mile away. It reminded me of Oz. A sudden gust of wind knocked me off my feet. Wide-eyed, I turned to see the source of the invisible force. I instantly discovered that the same back draft of the 18-wheeler that had lifted me off the ground had also lifted a cloud of dust so dense that the semi seemed to disappear into the once-clear-as-day summer air. I'm sure the driver couldn't see me in his rear view mirror as I dropped to my knees from the pain of feeling my eyelids grind the bits of crushed gravel across my eyes. I was afraid to open them knowing that the scrubbing action would only be repeated if I raised my lids.

The car was close. The rear hatch on my hatch-back VW was unlocked. There was water from melted ice in the Styrofoam cooler, cool but not too cold. With the frightened fingers of one hand, I pulled each lid away from the eye and lifted it open to flush it with fistfuls of water from the other. After repeating the procedure three times under both eyelids top and bottom, I hand picked the few remaining chunks that had embedded themselves in the soft tissue on the surface of my eyes. I blinked. I squinted. I opened my eyes to see if I was blind.

The semi was long gone. The cloud of dust had drifted off the road and was settling like fog in a field of alfalfa. It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. Captured by the thought that it might be one of the last things I would ever see, it took a moment to

return to my other senses, to the pain, to wondering if I could drive to a town large enough to have a doctor. I took this self portrait shot thinking it might be my last exposure as a photographer. I remember seeing my reflection on the surface of the wide-angle lens, my hand holding my camera, the camera strap flapping in the wind. I saw everything and how important and precious it was to see every single thing. I was completely transported to another world. I was not in Kansas anymore.

I remember feeling foolish. Not for what I had done, but because I found myself so completely pleased to be alive and witnessing such splendor. By the time I made my way to Wichita, the pain was gone. The wheat fields were waving as they do in a Van Gogh. I kept going.

The next time I pulled the car over, it wasn't to take a picture or read the map. I had to stop because I was laughing so hard. As was my custom in those days, I drew a Tarot card to get a read on where I was and where I was coming from. The Fool card fell face up onto the floor. It only took a second to get hit with the punch line. I saw that I had gotten just what I had asked for: to see a world I had never witnessed. I let the tears flow for a final cleansing purge and told myself to be more precise when I was making a request in the future.

As you have already seen, this foolish behavior of driving into the void is not something that I have outgrown. I sing the praises of this most important and essential part of our being. I think April Fool's Day should be a national holiday!



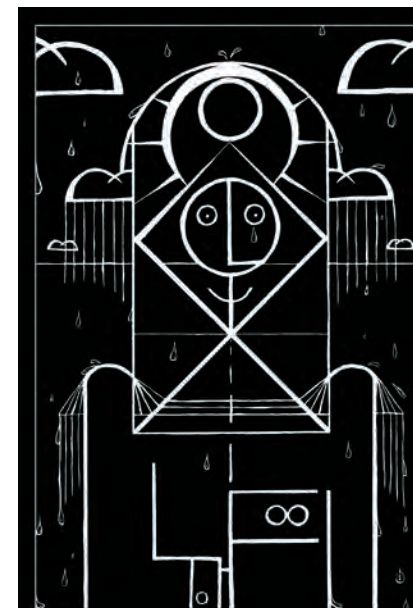
The necessity of foolishness is hardwired into our genes. We are not designed to arrive at some sort of perfect static state. Without the ability to make mistakes we would never make new connections. Evolution would end. Having arrived at the punch line there would be no jokes, no transcendent experience. There would be no need to be. The great goof, the fool, not only makes life bearable; it makes it possible. Whenever I make this connection, I take it as a sign from God.

The fool is the zero card. The zero is the symbol of continuity and connection as well as chaos and contradiction. There is nowhere it begins and nowhere it ends. It represents everything and nothing. Every time we want to create something new we have to let go of the past. We have start from scratch, from zero.

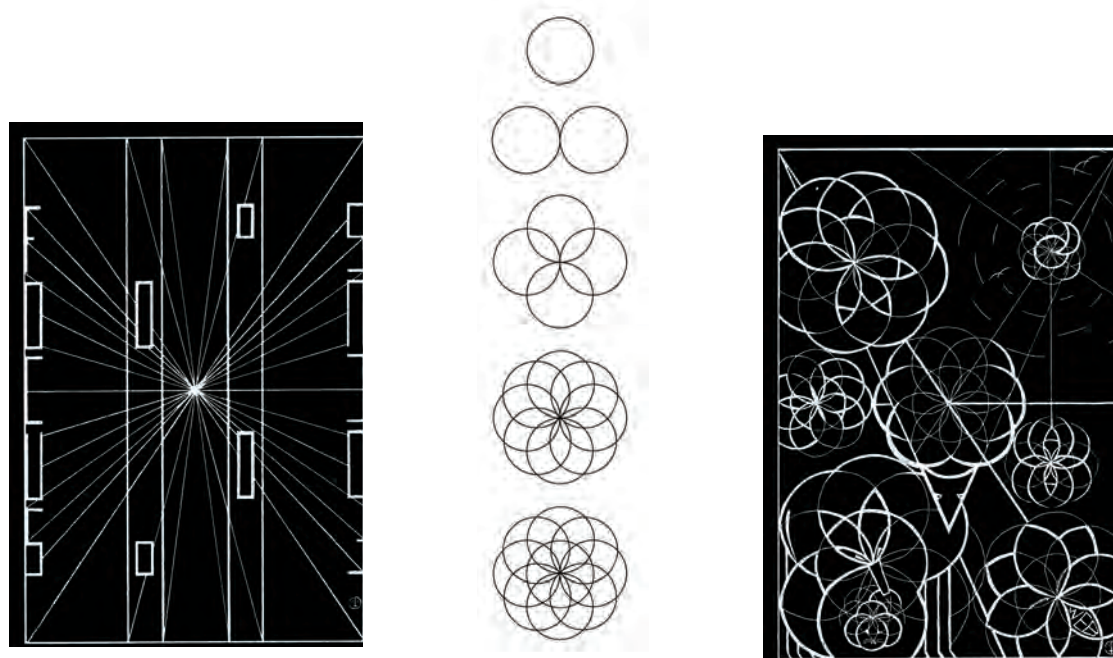
When I was in second grade, I could draw anything and couldn't learn to read. I read so slowly because I had to ask each individual Word permission to release its power before I could negotiate with the next Word Being to do the same. Every word was a proper noun. I thought all of my classmates were doing the same and that they were able to rattle off the words simply because they were on better terms with these magical beings.

Sister Mary Rose called my parents in for a conference. They talked among themselves and then called me forward and said, "Why don't you try harder? You can't make it in this world if you only know how to draw. You have to learn how to read." I was asked, "What do you have to say for yourself?" Feeling like a big zero, I said, "Nothing." My father spoke for the group. This father of eight children with three more still to come said to me, the fifth born, "We hate to do this, but you brought it on yourself. And believe us, it hurts us as much as it hurts you, but we don't know what else to do. You have to learn how to read. So, from now on, until you learn to read, we forbid you to draw. If we catch you drawing, you will be punished. We are doing this for your own good. Someday, when you are older, you will thank us." Thank you Daddy. Thank you Mommy. Thank you Sister Mary Rose. It is because of you that I am sitting here today and these pictures and words are on this page.

I gave up drawing but I always remained an artist of some sort. In high school I wrote poetry and was the president of the drama club. In my early twenties I became a photographer.



To create something new, I have to be willing to look foolish. It's like the magpie in Native American tradition. This trickster in a tuxedo is both the fool god and the creator god. It is a fool god because it doesn't do things the same way everyone else does and it is the creator god for exactly the same reason. The trickster is the fool card in the tarot, the Joker in the poker deck. The fool is free to hold any position it wants. It is the wild card, the one that is free to be a king or a deuce. A fool is free to take advantage of being either. With a joker and two deuces you can beat a pair of kings and queens.



I didn't start drawing again until I was forty years old. I began with a ruler, a template of circles, a sheet of scratch-board and a scratch pen. The scratch-board is solid black. The light lines are revealed by scraping away the darkness. These drawings are from my first set of scratches, a tarot deck of personal impressions that have made a difference in my life. The one on the left is "Focus." The four vertical lines are perfectly straight. I noticed when I focus on only one thing, by definition, I have to unfocus everything else. I've discovered, on more than one occasion, that my single-mindedness has distorted my perception and left me susceptible to becoming blind-sided from something outside my field of view.

When you first looked at the image on the right what did you see? A bunch of circles? A bunch of nothing? From a certain perspective you are perfectly correct. Now squint and see if the thin lines go away. Now look. Do you see an elk, a fox with a mouse in its mouth, a flower, a bee, a spider, a sun, a moon, or a toucan in the canopy of a tree? To see all these creatures, I had to fool myself into believing that I could find them within the same simple pattern in the center. I had to fool myself into believing I could draw.

All of my card drawings contain some sort of optical illusion. I appreciate being fooled, which is to say, I love being surprised. Physicists and spiritual teachers describe this reality as an illusion. For a long time I was confused and even resented that some force was purposely fooling me. Playing with these illusions I came to see that I was only fooling myself. This illusion is not not-real, it is, in fact, the mechanism that makes it real. How else could you make something from nothing? How miraculous!



Jesus said, "The Kingdom of the Father is spread upon the earth and men do not see it." Mohammed said, "What fools to cry for signs, when creation harbors nothing else." I completely agree. The odds of any particular thing coming into being is infinitely small. But, with an infinite number of possibilities parading in front of us every instant, the odd miracle is imminent. How else could I explain finding this appealing, peeling poster that uses sex appeal to promote a product to prevent peeling or a shredded sign of a shredding snowboard selling shredded cheese? It Is ALL IT. Or, as those Zen guys would say, "This Very Body the Buddha. This Very Place the Lotus Paradise." When I am present, I am living in the miracle. When I think I have found the final answer, I am immediately living in the past. When I'm living in the future, any sign of paradise is a million miles away.



Of course, I don't live in a constant state of presence. What would be the point? If I didn't forget who I was, I could never find myself again. Each time I come back I see how my time away has made me a different person. Each time complete. Each time completely different. This book is as much about getting lost in the illusion as it is about finding myself.

“All those statistics that you are gathering about your own experiences and about others are only about how somebody has flowed Energy. It isn’t about any hard fast reality. Never face reality unless your reality is just the way you want it to be.”

Abraham/Hicks

On my trip from Colorado back to California after burying my brother and parents’ ashes I didn’t stop for a single picture. I just reflected on my life and watched time and space unfold as I rolled across my beloved landscape through the [American West](#). In my mind I kept returning to the drive I took when I moved away from Boulder to San Francisco.

On that trip I did something that I had always wanted to do the previous thirty-plus times I had made the journey. I stopped every time I saw a picture and recorded the time, place and feeling of each impression. The journal book for this trip had been my mother’s. She always wanted to be a writer and I had given it to her when she showed the first signs of Alzheimer’s. When I came across it in her belongings it was blank. The pleased look on her face when I gave her the gift spoke volumes.

I made the first entry in the journal as I headed out of Boulder. I had already said my good byes. I hit the mileage counter to register zero and I was officially on the road. Driving out of town, not knowing if or when I would be back, I found myself paying attention to every detail. Four blocks from my start I stopped to take a picture of a mural on the side of a garage that had been painted by my friend Michael Wojczuk. When I got out of the car, I performed one of my playful personal rituals. If everything is IT, I reason, then whatever I find at my feet should provide some insight about where I am and where I’m going.



Between my shoes was a broken bicycle lock. “What did it mean?” I wondered. Was I breaking free from my past? Was it an infinity sign that was freeing itself to even wider possibilities? Were my infinite possibilities being reduced to zero?

When I do this little dance I am not looking for answers from some Higher Source, I’m just getting a take on what is going through my mind about what I am feeling at that moment in time.



With my heightened symbolic mind in full gear I took a couple of pictures of the mural. I wondered what dairy cows in a field could possibly have to do with what awaited me over the horizon.



While I was clicking the shutter I heard a voice that said, “Hey mister, would you mind moving your car. I’m taking in this load of manure.” Across the alley from the mural the City of Boulder was putting in a community garden. I moved the car and followed the cue.



The community garden would be called “Fortune Park.” At first glance I thought that this was some premonition of future fame and fortune. On closer examination I saw that the word itself was an illusion. Looking at the “e” in the shadow, it was easy to see that all the letters were recessed into the wood. Moving my eye to the left, my mind perceived raised letters. It was good to remind myself that any read of what I would call “fortune” would completely depend on my own personal perception and interpretation of the word.



On the side of the manure truck I saw the black silhouette of an elk and decided to make it my totem animal for the trip. I sometimes pick things, animals or numbers to see how often they appear down the road. This is a good exercise to entertain my brain on long trips. I entered all this information in my journal. I included the numbers 0 and 111 which, at one time or another always show up in my journeys. I reset my mind to zero and headed down the road.

Dung is no saint, yet where it falls it works miracles.

Spanish Proverb



Innocence of eye has a quality of its own. It means to see as a child sees, with freshness and acknowledgement of the wonder. It also means to see as an adult sees who has gone full circle and once again sees as a child, with freshness and an even deeper sense of wonder.

Minor White



I drove Highway 93 out of Boulder and stopped to say hi and goodbye to “The Tree” on my way to Golden and west on Interstate 70. At the Genesee/Buffalo Overlook exit I stopped for more good-byes. This was the same exit to my parents’ house on Lookout Mountain and the place I lived for the last six months of my father’s life.



Standing in the middle of the overpass, I recalled that this was the place where a local TV crew interviewed me years before during a snowstorm in the dark. They were there reporting on the storm for the 10:00 news. The reporter thought this lone photographer would make an interesting “color piece” to go with the severe storm story. After getting me “miked up” he asked, “What in the world are you doing out here?” I looked in the camera and said, “The only real trick to get a good picture is to take a picture in a way that hasn’t been seen before. Sometimes that means just getting a different point of view. You get above or below the subject to get a different angle. Sometimes it means just taking a picture when nobody else would bother to stop to get the shot.” The reporter said, “That’s great. That’s all we need.” Then he stepped in front of the camera and said, “This certainly qualifies as one of those times.”

Now I stood on the overpass and took a good long last look at the front-range of the Rocky Mountains that I had been looking at since I was a child. I got back on the highway, excited about making my own new news.



I got off at Idaho Springs to get gas. I stopped and shot a silhouette of an elk sculpture in front of an Elk’s Club. When I shot it from the reverse side I saw that the hands of the clock on the side of the building didn’t move. They were stuck to the surface, frozen on 11 o’clock. I checked my cell phone and saw that it was 11:00 right on the dot. I walked down the street and saw a round thermometer that registered 111 degrees.

I later asked my sister Eileen’s husband, Jake, a member of The Benevolent & Protective Order of Elks, the meaning of 11 o’clock. He told me that all meetings and gatherings with his fellow Elks, all activity would stop at 11:00 PM and a toast would be given to honor all deceased members of the order. The tradition precedes the Elk Order. It dates back to 11th Century England.

I gave my friend Joe, who I would be staying with until I found my own place in San Francisco, a call. I asked him to find out from our friend Katherine, who knows about such things, the totem meaning of the elk.

After I made it to Rifle, Colorado and had got a picture of another elk sculpture in front of a Kum & Go Quick Mart and stopped to get a milk shake at the Sonic Drive-in on Wapiti (The Native American name for elk) Road. I heard back from Joe. He provided me with the following information: “An Elk totem teaches you how to pace yourself. You might not be the first to arrive, but you will arrive without burning out. Don’t try for the quick and easy way. Being steady, while taking your time, is the key to reaching your goals.”

The “quick and easy” comment struck a cord. The Elk Club at 11:00 with the stuck 11:00 o’clock clock in 111 degrees really got me going. I was so impressed with myself that the openness that had created these events in the first place had become secondary. My excitement had reduced me to gathering evidence of my special gift for attracting magic. In truth, shooting elk references in The American West is as easy as shooting fish in a barrel. I knew somehow that the true significance of the elk reference would make itself known somewhere down the road. There was no need to chase it down. If I remained open to it, it would find me. I pulled into the Rifle rest area to cool my heels and toes in the Colorado River. I let it all go. I started from zero.....again.



The Colorado River parallels I-70 almost all the way to the Colorado/Utah border. I often take a break at the James M. Robb Colorado River State Park near Grand Junction. On the trip that I moved to California, I shot these cottonwood trees that border the bank of the river. I converted the image to black and white and played with different filters in Photoshop to get it to look more like an etching. On another trip, after leaving Boulder in the middle of the night, I stopped to say “Hi!” to this same special spot on the river. The image was completely created in the camera. It’s hard to say which one is more “real.” More often than not I use Photoshop to get a closer rendition of what the scene looked like rather

than for special effects. Going digital has given me that choice and also freed me from having to “shoot to the film.” Kodachrome was always warm, Ectachrome was blue and Velvia was super-saturated. Each made beautiful pictures...in their own way.

A photograph is only “real” as a photograph. It starts out as a manipulated representation of reality. Every choice of a different lens is a distortion. A telephoto lens represents the way our eye focuses on a single element or on a distant scene. A wide-angle lens takes in more of the scene in the same way our eyes do when we scan a scene or use our peripheral vision. Both only mimic the ways we look at the world. Photoshop, film, lenses and the camera are just tools I use to create an image that better represents the experience of what it felt like to be standing in the place where the picture was taken.



At Fruita, I stopped outside the Dinosaur Journey Museum and imagined myself in the same place a couple of million years ago when I would have been surrounded by giant lizards. On my trip, I zipped down this same exit a couple of miles to the Colorado National Monument. There I saw something that surprised even me. It was not a goose or a moose. It was some dear creature with a look straight from a book by that cat called Dr. Seuss.



Every time I cross the Colorado/Utah border I always look for one of the unique signs of The American West. I imagine the band, The Eagles, putting themselves on the highway, having been shown the sign to take it to the limit one more time.

All alone at the end of the evening, the bright lights had faded to blue when I shot this picture. I set the camera on a tripod and closed down the aperture to $f/22$ for the maximum depth of field. This also meant that the exposure time would be over a second. I waited for a semi-truck to enter the frame to paint the light across the image.



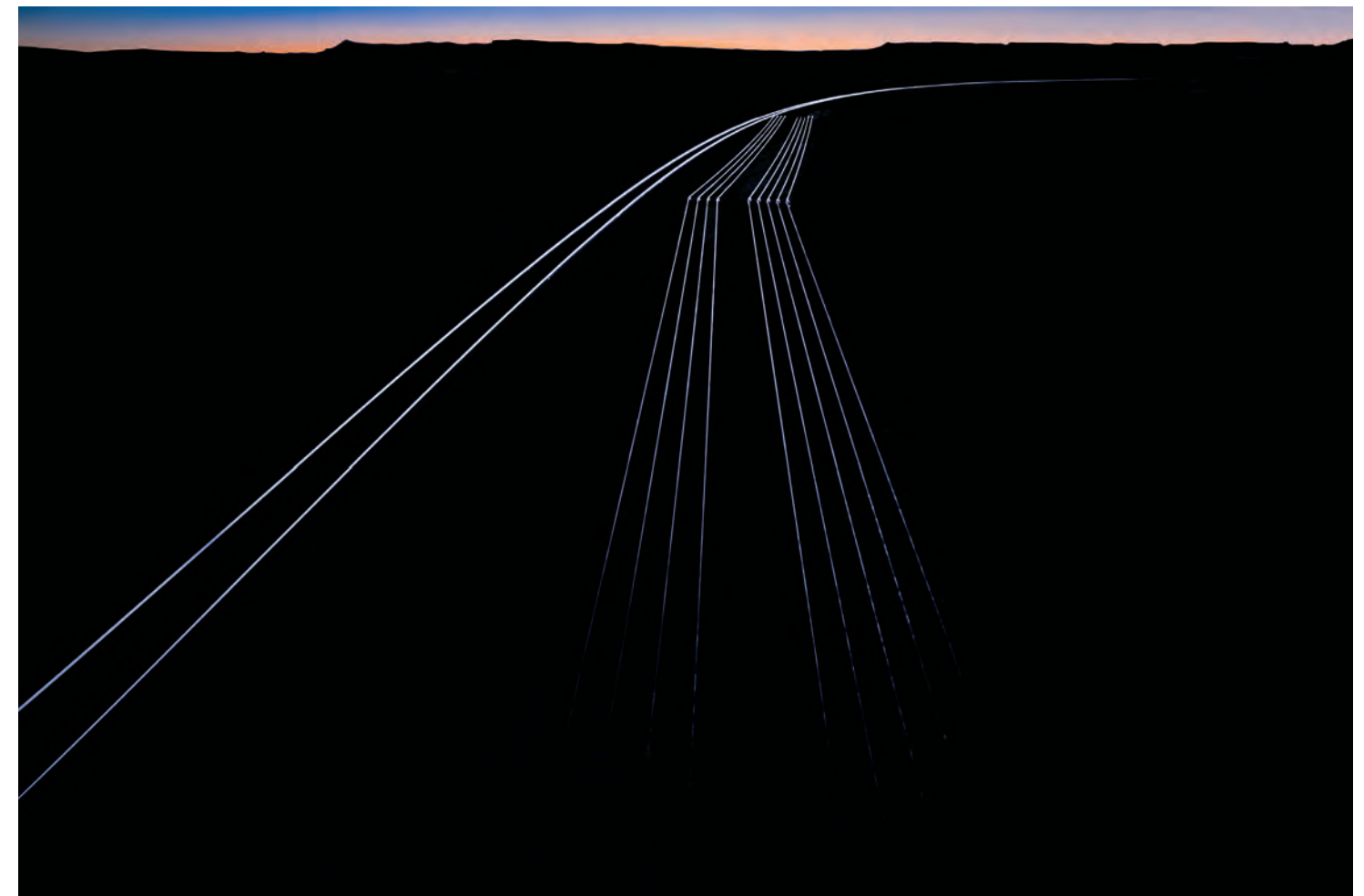
This section of the landscape begins to become seriously surreal. Using the geology of this space I imagined how this world looked when each layer of the sediment was laid down and how it was worn away over the next hundreds of millions of years. Halfway down the ridge resides the remains of a time when this was the domain of dinosaurs. Where the

antelope are standing, sharks once swam. The antelope themselves have been in this neighborhood for over a million years. They are second only to the African Cheetah in being the fastest land animal in the world, having been clocked at a speed of just over 60 mph. It is believed that Pronghorn Antelope evolved their sprinting style to cheat the American Cheetah out of a meal. The American Cheetah died off here only about 20,000 years ago, less than a foot down in the dirt.

Whenever I'm on the road, my day begins before dawn and ends well after dark. Though I am going somewhere, my truest destination is the next picture. I rarely know where I will end up at the end of each day or if my bed will be in a motel or the backseat of my car.

When I am traveling west to California and it is getting dark as I approach Green River, Utah, I always stop for the night. I want to take advantage of the morning light as I drive the next 100 miles on I-70, one of the most, if not the most, spectacular stretches of the interstate highway system in America.

Sometimes a subtle glint of light in a dark landscape can be as powerful as a dramatic butte in the "magic hour" at dawn. While coming into Green River a half an hour after sunset, the glow off the railroad and power lines caught my eye and stopped me in my tracks.



After sleeping for four hours I opened the blinds, turned around and was surprised by my own shadow created by the green wavelengths flowing from a light across the parking lot.



I was up, dressed and out the door before the sun or the truckers had risen for their respective journeys across the landscape.



Under an abandoned gas station sign I had an epiphany about the nature of light: Yes, it is the darkness that shows us the light of the stars. And, a star is nothing but a massive amount of dark matter gathered together so closely that it explodes into light. It is only a view found in time that distinguishes one form of energy from another.



I always visit the pool girl at the Robber's Roost Motel when I come through town. She always looked especially good bathed in the soft warm morning light. About a year ago I went by her place and found her gone. I asked the owner of the motel where she went and he told me that because they no longer had a pool he sent her off to get made up in a Western outfit. I looked forward to seeing her in a new getup. I know I am personalizing an object and I know it sounds funny, but when I stopped to see her the last time I was in town I was shocked.



It wasn't her. The face that I had known, loved, photographed, and fantasized about for years, was replaced by someone who I had never met. It felt awkward. This new person just didn't speak to me. I recalled the last words of The Buddha, "All compound things decay. Strive on with diligence." I headed back down the highway.



We are not human beings having a spiritual experience.

We are spiritual beings having a human experience.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin



Almost immediately after leaving Green River I pulled onto the soft shoulder to shoot the sign that always surprises me. It delights me that there is still a stretch of the Interstate Highway System that has no services for 100 miles.



Twelve miles from Green River, just before reaching the San Rafael Swell, there is a swell side trip south down Highway 24 about 35 miles. There is little doubt why this place is called Goblin Valley. The fanciful formations fill me with awe and I also find them awfully funny.



Just after the visiting the valley, on my way back to I-70, I spotted a small stretch of sand on the side of the road. Perhaps it was because I had just spent the previous hour being dwarfed by Goblins that I found myself an inch off the ground wondering through the foot tall grass with a wide-angle lens.

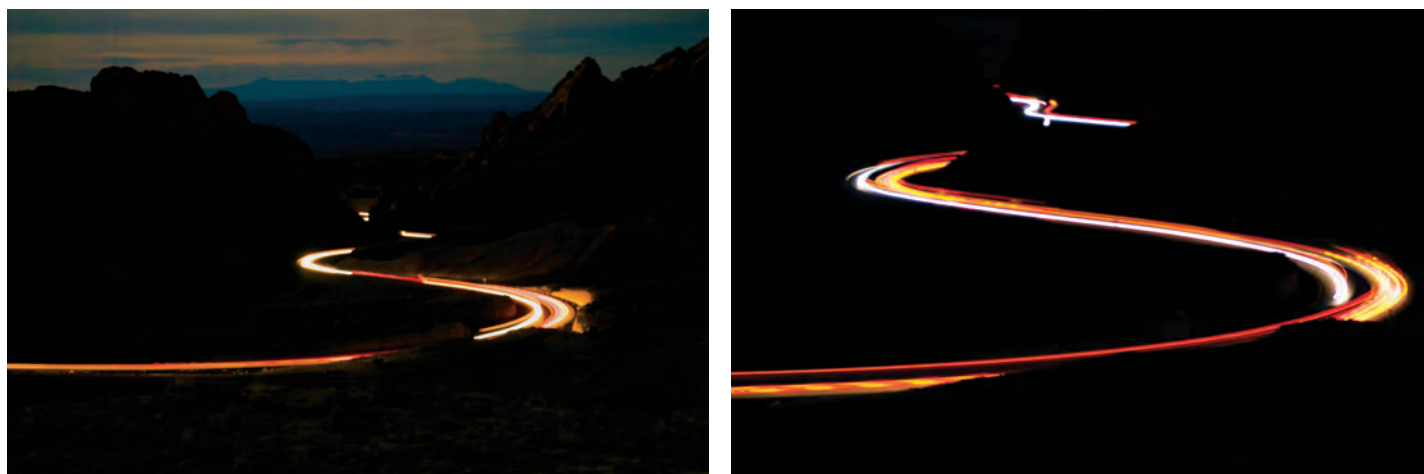


Picking up speed, I headed back down the open road and passed something that looked like a stick lying across the road. I thought it odd given that there were no trees as far as I could see. On that particular trip, my totem animal was the snake so I turned around to see if it was, indeed, that transformational beast. It was so still that it actually took a while to find out if it was still alive. After I determined that it had no rattles, I got closer and closer until I saw its tongue tasting the air to determine if I was dangerous. With my camera held out in front of me, I inched it off the flat, long, black surface where it had been sunning itself. Once the snake was safely in the grass we took a final look at each other and said goodbye. Once I got back to I-70 and stopped at the top of The San Rafael Swell I saw a terrific tar snake painted perfectly on the pavement.





No matter what time of day or night, I make a stop. It's just too grand a place to think of overlooking this overlook.



At night it is especially cool to watch the traffic snake its way up and down the narrow canyon.



Just west of the Swell is the Black Dragon Scenic Overlook. I don't know where it got its name. I know that the motel back in Green River got its name, "Robber's Roost," because the complex maze of canyons visible from the overlook was the hiding place for the likes of Butch Cassidy, The Sundance Kid and the rest of outlaw gang known as The Wild Bunch. I wondered if the scenic overlook sign planners overlooked the irony of these two signs appearing together.



As I rounded one of the uphill curves I spotted these semi-sexual semis parked in a configuration I had seen before but never was in the right position to take the picture. Driving too fast to stop, I drove down the highway to use the turnaround for emergency only vehicles, passed the semis and turned around again at another emergency turnaround about four miles down the road and positioned myself across from the mounted motor vehicles. As soon as I took the picture, the driver opened his window, waved, and was on his way.



Down the road I stopped to say, “Hola!” to the area that has the areola tipped peak. No matter how many times I travel through those red hills and sensuous round curves it feels like the first time.



My spirits are always raised whenever I reach Ghost Rock, who is always generous with her gifts. Once she gave up the ghost of a cloud for me to enjoy.



Another time the full moon had already risen high above the rock when it first came into view. I drove closer until the rock hid the moon. I set up the tripod, waited for the moon to rise again then took the shot. Then I drove to the bottom of the next valley, ran across the highway, reset my tripod in the bottom of a gully and watched the moon rise again. The first time it occurred to me to play hide and seek with my fellow celestial bodies, I was shooting the sunset through the smoke of a forest fire in Northern California. After the sun cleared the horizon I drove back up the mountain and shot it again.

Ghost Rock was also where I met François, a trucker from Montréal, Canada, who showed me some of the pictures he had just taken. As we stood on the overlook looking in the backs of each other’s cameras, we talked about photography and about life on the road. I’ve met hundreds of individuals who share my appreciation for this most interesting and beautiful world. Most of them asked to receive the email-photo-essays that have become the basis of this book. Playing with my fellow human beings helps me to see how I see.



Salina, Utah is the place mentioned earlier on the sign outside Green River that had the next services in 100 miles. I've been through here a number of times, and every time, the light has always been on the other side of the army surplus store with the murals and Ten Commandments written on the building. This day my timing was perfect.



Sometimes more than just the light has changed in this familiar world. Since I moved to California the statue of Prometheus in Salina has morphed into the Ute chief Black Hawk. Not Google, nor any local has ever been able to tell me why a Greek god, who was bound to Earth by Zeus for giving fire to mortals, was in the middle of Utah.

Chief Black Hawk was a central figure in Utah history. The "Black Hawk War" (1865-1872) was fought between the Ute tribes and the Mormons who claimed that the land the Mormons called "Zion" was ordained "theirs" by the true god. The settlers lost thousands of livestock in raids and nearly 100 settlers lost their lives. Fighting, measles, smallpox, tuberculosis and the loss of their sacred buffalo from hunting and European practices of farming, reduced the Ute population from 20,000 to 2,400 by 1900. Before his death Black Hawk tried to make peace with the "pale-faces." On horseback he visited every village within 100 miles to plead with the whites to forgive him for the suffering that he and his people had caused them. He had a vision and in that vision all people lived in peace.

"Utah," is named after the Ute tribes. Utah was also the ancestral home of the Apatosaurus, formerly known as Brontosaurus, one of the largest land animals that ever existed, with an average length of 23 meters (75 ft) and a mass of at least 23 metric tons. It also appears on the sign for Sinclair Oil, a company that sells the solar energy captured by the same plants that powered the Brontosaurus during the Jurassic Period.



In Western thought...space is empty and had to be occupied with matter; time is empty and to be filled with activity. In both primitive and civilized nonWestern cultures, on the other hand, free space and time have being and integrity. It was this conception of nothingness as somethingness that enabled the philosophers of India to perceive the integrity of nonbeing, to name the free space and give us the zero.

Dorothy Lee



When got on Hwy 50 in Salina, Utah, there was a sign saying that the next place to get gas was 86 miles. Once this two-lane road reaches Nevada there are three stretches where the “next services” are over a 80 miles each. In July 1986, LIFE magazine published an article that named the Nevada stretch of US 50 “The Loneliest Road in America.” This road is not for everyone. I met a person in Nevada who, once he heard that Highway 50 was my chosen path said, “I don’t know if I’d recommend it. I wouldn’t go out there without a gun.”

Though there are 17 mountain passes on this stretch of Hwy 50, none of them are more than 3,000 feet above the high desert plane. Most of the road is flat, straight and deserted. I love it. Perhaps it is one of my favorite places on Earth because it contains so little information. I experience the world the same way now as I did as a kid, with one very important difference. As a child I took in the same vast amounts of visual input but it felt like it was hitting me. I just couldn’t take it all in. It took a long time to learn that the only way to hold it all was to become a part of It All. It took a long time to realize, to admit, that I was part of It. As a child I felt like I was drowning. Now I can swim. On [Hwy 50](#) I can have my eyes wide open and float down the wide-open road.



Yesterday, when I stopped at the Elk's Lodge at 11:00 AM, back in the Colorado Rockies, it was 111 degrees in the sun. Out here on the high desert I'm sure it was at least that in the shade, but there was no shade. I wasn't the only one feeling the heat. On a raised farm irrigation system I saw a single hawk and a murder of crows at rest in the rising mist. This was a first for me. I'd seen a hawk attacking a crow and crows attacking a hawk, but this was the first time I'd seen them being calm in such close proximity. Keeping cool was clearly more of a priority than getting hot and bothered over their differences.

When I got back in the car I made a note about the birds and marked down the mile marker number and the time. It was 1:11. I couldn't believe how much had happened in the last 26 hours. I felt like I had already been gone a week. Since I left "home" this was the first time that the road ahead looked long. I wasn't even half way to my new home. The thought of it all made me tired.

I took a queue from the birds and sprayed my face with a water spritzer and stuck my head out the moving car window to cool off and wake up. That worked...for about 30 seconds. This was the first car I ever owned that had an air-conditioner and this was the first time that I ever used it. If I turned it up enough to cool my legs and feet it would make the rest of me shiver. I turned on the radio to distract me from the noise in my head, but it was no help. After pushing the scan button, it just went round and round. That kept me entertained...for about a minute. I knew I was just too far gone to pick up a signal.

I was bored...for a good ten minutes. Once I got bored with being bored I asked myself, 'What did I really want?' I answered, 'I want to be comforted.' That kind of surprised me. I continued, 'Okay, given where we are right now. What would comfort you?' The answer was immediate, 'Graham crackers and milk.' 'Good answer!' I said. Graham crackers and milk always did the trick for me when I was a kid.

Delta, Utah was only another 20 miles down the road. I knew they would have just what I needed. I pictured opening the box, biting the plastic wrapper around the single pack, and pulling out the first long cracker. I saw myself carefully breaking it apart, one at a time, down the four perforated lines. I did the same with a second cracker. I took the first four and added two from the second batch and stacked them together. I held the stack of six crackers from the top end between my thumb and forefinger and then, in a ritual that I had done a thousand times, dipped them half way down in the milk.

I continued my visualization, taking care to cover every step: The next part is where it gets tricky. All the graham crackers have to be completely saturated in milk, so, with the slightest pressure, I pinched the top to separate the bottom of the stack, but just for a second or two. I knew that if you leave them in too long the integrity of the structure becomes compromised and the bottom half of the stack falls off into the milk. I proceeded with complete confidence. I've had this alchemy down since I was six.

I could smell the concoction as I lifted the stack, straight up, out of the milk. I could feel the added weight of the milk. I could feel the muscles in my arm coordinate the arch to my mouth. I tilted my head as my mouth opened. The stack lands half way in, my tongue lifts, the saturated portion falls free. Normally, I would close my eyes at this point, but I'm still driving. I can almost taste it. I felt better already.



I had to stop on my way to get graham crackers and milk when I saw this Milky Way road sign. The Latin version of Milky Way is Via Lactea, "Via" meaning "Way" or "Road" and "Lactea" meaning "Milk". The word galaxy comes from the Greek word for milk, galactos. I knew I was on the right road.

After leaving the Milky Way behind me I started thinking about thinking. I didn't think thinking itself created reality. It was more that the thoughts helped stimulate a feeling that in turn created a frequency that tuned into a receptor for like minded manifestations. I thought about what happened to me after I met that person in Nevada who, once he heard that Highway 50 was my chosen path said, "I wouldn't go out there without a gun."

Just before that stranger showed up in my world I had experienced a whole series of synchronicities and was thinking these same kind of highfalutin' notions about my understanding of the way the world worked. I was feeling pretty full of myself just before he put the gun and the fear of god in my head. I knew that if I was going to own the magical manifestations that I had created, I also had to own that I brought him and his strange comment into my world. I just didn't know what to make of it. In a single instant I went from feeling clear and present to feeling a clear and present danger.

It took me a good fifty miles to find my way back to the present. I was too busy projecting myself into the future to notice the world going by the open window. In this future I fantasized a dozen different phantoms of various sizes. I was shot, stranded and crawling across the sand under the sun at high noon. It was very dramatic. Some of the plots even had a Western theme starring Slim Pickens and a larger than life, John Wayne. I couldn't believe how long I stayed in the dark about what I was doing. I guess I just got lost in the movie. I guess I forgot that I was telling myself a story. I remembered that I could write the script any way I wanted. I could even make it a comedy.

I let it all go after telling myself that I was safe and sound as long I remembered who was doing the driving. After all the thinking and emotion I had put into shooting this movie, I knew that the gun would show up one way or another. I looked forward to the exciting conclusion.

Another 100 miles down Hwy 50, nine bullet holes stopped me in my tracks. I laughed as I shot the sign in the back and thanked that lone stranger for giving me such a present. I was back home, home on the range where everything that I hold dear and the antelope play.



Coming into Delta, I shot another elk in the hardware store and zeroed in on a pair of zeros down the road, both mere minnows in the synchronicity game. I wasn't counting, but if I'd been traveling with my son Christopher, using a 1 to 10 scale, we would have scored the first sighting of the 12 point buck as a 2 and counted each zero as a one. As good as I am at this game, Christopher is hard to beat.



Next I stopped at the Delta Drug and Gift Store hoping to crack the mystery of where to find my graham crackers and milk. They had both. I bought a single serving of milk and a single pack box of graham crackers. Feeling like the king, I left the building, got back in the car and readied myself for a royal feast prepared by Keebler Elves.



I opened the single pack box, pulled out the pack and raised it to my mouth to bite free the plastic wrap. As I bit down I looked out the windshield and there, on the street in front of the car was what appeared to be another single packet of graham crackers. I couldn't believe my eyes. I could barely even hold a thought.

I asked myself, 'Where in the world or Wherever did they come from? Why didn't I see them on the way in or on the way out? Did they fall from the sky or did they just appear out of thin air?'





I was beside myself in wonder. To tell you the truth, at first I was afraid to touch them. After taking a picture, I did pick them up and brought them back to the car. To this day I have yet to open the pack. I took a number of pictures. It was like covering a news event. I wanted something to retell the story. I wanted something that might provide a clue. On closer examination, I discovered the address of the drug and gift store was 111 Main Street. That threw me over the edge. I broke apart a full sheet of graham crackers, jammed it in my mouth, and took a shot of milk. That seemed to help. I repeated the prescription until the bottle was empty.

'Okay, okay,' I told myself in a calming voice, 'It's alright. You can do this. Don't get too carried away. Get back in your body. You still need to drive another seven hundred miles.' Searching for some perspective, I added, 'Look, it's not the winning lottery ticket. It's a pack of graham crackers.' That all seemed to help. I just started to laugh at myself. That really helped.

I shook my head, turned on the car, turned on the radio, pushed the scan button and pulled away wondering what could possibly happen next. I was looking forward to the peace and quiet of the middle of nowhere. Before I made it a block down Main Street the radio began to blast Aretha Franklin singing about a pink Cadillac in the song "Freeway of Love." I heard her sing, "Knew you'd be a vision in white" just as I saw my own vision of white in one of the windows of the fairly nondescript two-story buildings of this small town's downtown. I hesitated to stop. The song was also sending another message: "City traffic movin' way too slow. Drop the pedal and go...go...go." If I didn't stop, I knew, it would be the first time on this trip that I didn't take the cue that was given me. I made a U-turn and parked right in front of the window. I planned to be back in the car before the Queen of Soul finished the song.

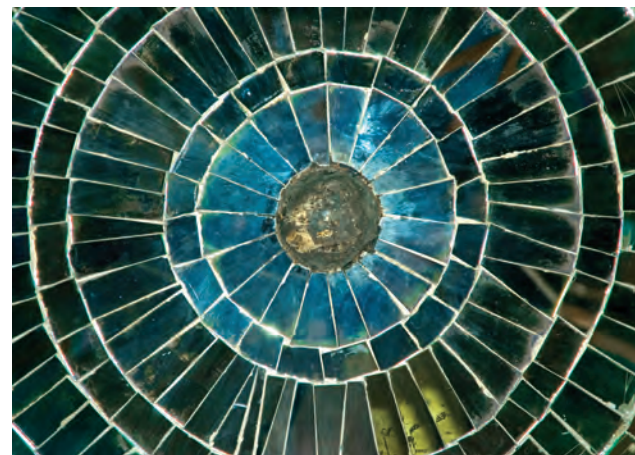


While I was taking the picture of the Saints and Saviors through the window, I heard a voice. It was the owner of the shop, Roger. He told me to come inside for better look. With a great deal of pride he told me that the Deldan Clay used for his statues was the whitest in the world and that he had hand dug it all from a hillside outside town. He showed me around his world and we talked about art and then he said, "Art. You want to see art? Wait until you see what is right above us. Got another minute? You've got to see this."



Again I hesitated, thinking that I needed to get going. Again, I let go of my thinking and went with the feeling. I knew even if it did slow me down, it would be setting me up for another perfect time in the perfect place somewhere down the road. "Sure," I said, in response to his invitation, "Let's go take a look."

Though the colorful stairway offered some clue, the vision at top of the stairs startled me. Instantly I knew that my slowing down to take the vision in white picture had set me up to be in this exact place at the perfect time.



It was great to have a local giving me the grand tour of this grand ballroom. Roger told me all about this massive artwork that was created by the eccentric inventor and artist William Edward Van deVanter, who was known simply as Billy Van. During the 'Uranium Boom' in Delta during the 1930s and 40s, up to 800 people crowded into this majestic dance hall. Long before the days of Disco, a giant mirrored ball danced light on couples working up a Saturday night fever.

To create the mirrored ball, Billy fastened together two wagon wheels and rounded out the form with gauze and packing. The ball moved as a model airplane propelled around the sphere. On the platform attached to the ball a model train moved in the opposite direction. Roger pointed out a massive piece of equipment resting heavily on the floor and said, "That was the motor for the strobe light Billy invented." On the floor beneath the mirrored ball was a sheet of polished aluminum to reflect the backward words and the glittering lights bouncing off the ball. As I lay on the floor shooting up at the ball I wondered if Billy had a learning disability, didn't speak English very well or if it was just his own private joke when he put the word "at" where there should have been a "to."



I thanked Roger and gave him a print of my “World of Worlds” collage. I signed it and inscribed a note about how we are all connected. When I started the car I remembered the lines in the “Freeway of Love” song as I made the decision to stop for my vision in white, “Don’t know what you’re doin.’ But you must be livin’ right.”

As I rolled out of Delta, storm clouds filled the sky. Though there were still four hours of daylight left, the landscape was dark. I turned off the radio. For the next hour I just sat back and enjoyed reentering the space that is, as Tom Robbins once wrote, “that sacred place where nothing begins to happen.” After everything that happened in the last hour, nothing was good enough for me.

I drove through several scattered thundershowers. With such a vast view of the landscape, it was easy to see one of them coming. Off in the distance the pavement would be dark because it was wet. Because the fast moving front was traveling towards me, I moved through each shower in less than five minutes. During one particularly heavy downpour the road changed directions. One minute my wipers were set on high and during that same minute the rain stopped and the pavement was dry. Given how fast we were both moving in opposite directions I thought I just might reach the back of the front before the day turned into night. These brief showers were all that broke the silence of that glorious quiet hour.



Between the hour spent in Delta and the quiet hour that followed, I couldn’t say which I enjoyed more. In retrospect, it felt like both hours were a kind of spiritual training designed to prepare me for what happened next.

I found myself in the center of a universe of heavenly delights. Splashes of blue began to appear between clouds that were claiming their own personal space. Rays of sunlight, what my mother had called “God fingers,” reached through the clouds and touched the Earth. I pulled the car to a stop. Across the vast open wilderness, a rain shower was watering the plants on a mountain peak.

I took a few pictures. I was back in the car with my hands on the key ready to start back down the road. I stopped. I stopped being a driving machine. I stopped simply being a photographer. There was nowhere down the road that could be any more magical than where I was at that very moment. I went back to where I had taken the telephoto shot of the storm

moving across the mountains, set up the tripod and pushed the button whenever it moved me. In between times I just watched the clouds, felt the Earth beneath my feet, and smelled the scent that fills the air after a rain.

Standing in a sea of a thousand sages I saw how easy it would be for any shaman to believe that the peak before me was The Sacred Mountain. This quiet revelation threw me into fits of laughter. In my mind I was back in Boulder where I started from zero. I could see myself choosing my totem animal for the trip when I saw the black elk on the side of the manure truck. I remembered being in Rifle next to the Colorado River letting my hunt for the elk go, trusting that if I remained open to it, it would find me. I had found myself alive in Black Elk's personal revelation of "the hoops."





One of the first people to offer sage advice that I could believe in was Joseph Campbell. In his book *THE POWER OF MYTH*, he relates the whole story to Bill Moyers. "In the vision, Black Elk saw that the hoop of his nation was one of many hoops ... He saw the cooperation of all the hoops, all nations in grand procession. But more than that, the vision was an experience of himself as going through the realms of spiritual imagery that were of his culture and assimilating their import. It comes to one great statement, which for me is a key statement to the understanding myths and symbols. He says, "I saw myself on the central mountain of the world, the highest place, and I had a vision because I was seeing in the sacred manner of the world." And the sacred mountain was Harney Peak in South Dakota" And then he adds, "But the central mountain is everywhere."

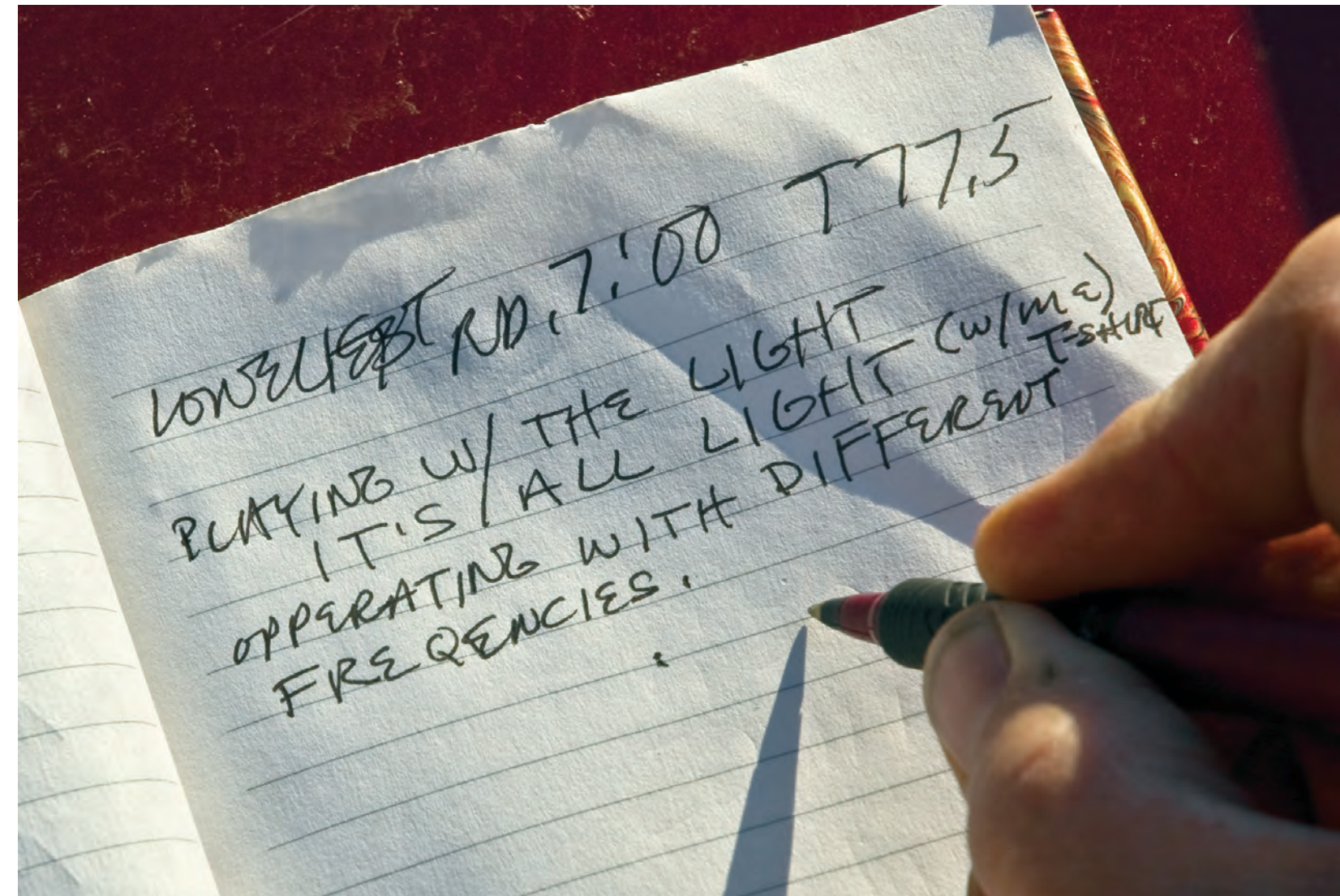
And then in words that could just as easily be written in a physics book, Campbell continued, "The center is the axis mundi, the central point, the pole around which all revolves. The central point of the world is where stillness and movement are together. Movement is time, but stillness is eternity. Realizing how this moment of your life is actually a moment of eternity, and experiencing the eternal aspect of what you're doing in the temporal experience-this is the mythological experience."

"There is a definition of God which has been repeated by many philosophers. God is an intelligible sphere-a sphere known to the mind, but not the senses-whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. And the center, Bill, is right where you are sitting. And the center is right where I'm sitting. And each of us is a manifestation of that mystery. That's a nice mythological realization that sort of gives you a sense of who and what you are."

I stayed until dark, started the car, started from zero and moved the center of the universe down the road.

Crossing the border into Nevada, I stopped to take a picture of the sign that told me to watch for more 'black elk moments' as I moved into a new state and a new time zone.

I drove until I found a vacancy sign, checked into a motel, downloaded pictures, charged batteries, set the alarm for half an hour before sunrise, fell into bed and entered yet another dream state.



*Sometimes the lights all shining on me
Other times I can barely see.*

The Grateful Dead

The next morning when I was leaving the motel parking lot, the first thing I eyed was a giant 8-ball above a bar. I didn't quite know how to interpret this sign from the universe. Was I behind the 8-ball? Was my number up? Then I remembered what the 0 said to the 8. It said, "Nice belt." The 8-ball was just a little joke to keep me from taking myself too seriously.



Ely, Nevada has some truly wonderful murals. A couple of blocks down the street from the motel, the long shadows coming from the lights pulled me over for a longer look. It wasn't until I began to set up the shot that I realized how the sky, the clouds and the hill matched up the scene in the mural of the Pony Express rider. I picked up some pastries, filled the thermos and hit the road.



Just past Ely I stopped at the deserted copper mine in Ruth. I sat on top of my moving-through-space vehicle and ate an almond croissant with my Colombian coffee. Looking at the exhausted remains of this mother load, I wondered if it had given birth to the pennies in my pockets when I was a kid or the motherboard in my computer.

After making a few light notes in my journal, I finished the croissant that was made from a wheat plant that had converted the energy from the sun into matter, that was then shipped to Nevada, baked, bought and eaten by my body that would release the stored solar energy into the energy that would power my eyes as I continued down the road that traveled the same path as The Pony Express riders more than a century before. I caught my mind running away with my Self.

It was 7:00 AM and I was 777.5 miles from where I set the mileage counter to zero back in Boulder. I felt lucky. I felt blessed. It was just the trip that I had asked for to prepare me for a new life in California. Yesterday's revelations had been amazing. I had opened myself up and felt myself expand. I had used muscles that I never even knew I had. I had it all, and yet I felt just a little off. I was exhausted. I wasn't sure I could live through another day like yesterday. I had had enough. I needed time to recover. Even joy takes a kind of endurance.

I was now half way to my new home and in unfamiliar emotional territory. Having broken free of the bonds that bound me, I realized that I no longer had those bars to hold on to. I was free. The only person I had to answer to was myself. Now that nothing was holding me back, I realized that I would have to come up with new ways to move forward. I wasn't completely lost. I remembered that I hadn't gotten this far without knowing something. I remembered that simply proceeding would help inform me what to do next. Seeking any form of advice, I drew a tarot card. I drew The Fool. Normally this would delight me. But today I felt anything but normal. I started from zero. I proceeded....simply.



I took solice in a single flower in the barren soil that had found a way to reach for the sky.



As I tried to reshape my world I found it interesting that the environment was itself so misshapen. At the top of Antelope Pass I stopped at the Illipah Reservoir to get some air.



The cloud that I had seen on the highway had morphed into a quotation mark and an exclamation point. The meaning was an open question.



An ashpit and log looked like a giant cigarette and ashtray. When I read the note in the outhouse I didn't know if I should take it as a joke or a piece of advice.

As I rounded out of the last turn of the pass and headed across the next straight flat stretch, I remembered being in this same spot, in the middle of the night, ten years before. I had driven straight through from Boulder in my VW van. It must have been two or three in the morning and I hadn't seen another car in either direction for hours. The large sketchbook that I was using for a journal was spread open on the steering wheel and I was getting ready to write down my latest brilliant thought. Rounding the turn I looked up and saw a herd of antelope, in close formation, crossing the road. It wasn't a question of whether or not I would hit one. It was just a question of which one.

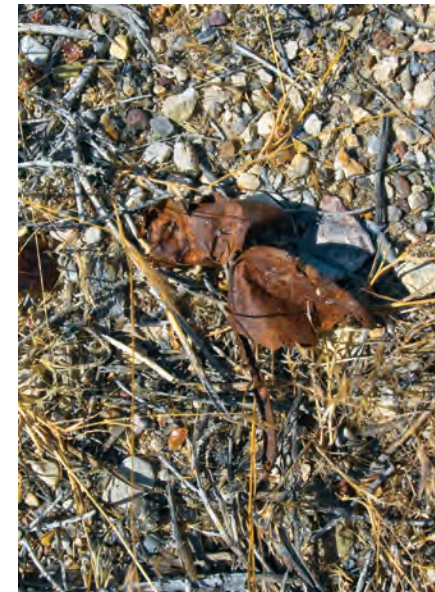
Scanning the herd looking for the weakest link in the unbroken chain of animals that extended off the road in both directions, I spotted a female about to leap onto the road following her herd instinct and following her was a calf. Instinctively I knew what to do. I stepped on the gas, flashed my brights on and off, and headed straight for her to catch her at the instant she was making up her mind whether to follow the herd or to jump back to protect her newborn. She made the right choice. I swerved though the break and the whole

thing was over in less than five seconds. It took way longer for the adrenalin to leave my system.

I didn't know why I remembered that story right then. I didn't recall recalling that exact spot on any of the dozen trips that I had taken since. I guess my vulnerable state reinstated the memory.



About five miles down the road, black skid marks were evidence of where a car had slammed on its breaks before and as it ran off the road. I stopped and took a series of pictures as if I was the one in the driver's seat. As I left the road I turned the camera to simulate the car flipping over before coming to rest. After this exercise, I was sweating even more than the 100+ degrees called for. I didn't know why I had stopped to recreate this frightening episode. Was all this craziness just an attempt to keep joy at bay? Why had I created all this drama? What was I so afraid of? Was I questioning my move? Was I making the right decision, moving away after 30 years of being with my family and family of friends back in Boulder? What made me think I could make it? What had possessed me? Was I fooling myself? I didn't have any answers. All I knew was that I had had enough. Clearly, I just didn't know what to think. I did, however, know what to do.



I had been here before - this lost place. I remembered the exercise that I had come up with to get myself grounded. I walked to the side of the road and looked down at my feet. If Everything is It, I





told myself, then what is right in front of me could inform me about what I was going through. It would tell me where I stood. In the dry, high desert grass I saw a piece of litter, a rusted tin can. I freed it from the tangled grass and sandy earth where it had laid waiting for decades, coloring and shaping itself for just this moment. What a gift. What a prize. What a surprise. What a present!

I held the tin can rose above the road in the direction of California and took a picture to memorialize the event. I knew that it was just a piece of litter. It really wasn't a rose. I knew that it was only my own foolishness that made it anything else. I understood that all of my fears and considerations about moving to California ---"It's so expensive there. What are you going to do to make a living?" --- all of it ---didn't really mean anything either. It was only what I made of it that gave it any meaning.

When I got back in the car I smiled when I saw The Fool card that I had placed in a slot on the dashboard after drawing it that morning. I picked it up and laughed out loud when I noticed that he was carrying a rose as he stepped off the cliff. I stepped on the gas and leapt into the future.



To me, photography is an art of observation. It's about finding something interesting in an ordinary place... I've found it has little to do with the things you see and everything to do with the way you see them.

Elliott Erwitt

I was back and it was only 9:00 AM. Those last two hours felt like an eternity. The radio found a country western station at 92.7 FM with Tracy Laurence singing her song, "It's All How You Look at It." I was back in the right frequency.

I really only listen to Country Western music when I come across it on the road. It adds a little local color and reminds me of the rodeos I shot in my early 20's. Like any music that is unfamiliar, from a distance, it all sounds the same. After a good listen, the subtleties are infinite. This listener, of course, likes the liberal use of word plays. "If I said you had a beautiful body, would you hold it against me?" by The Bellamy Brothers is a good visual example. Then there is the dynamic range of subject matter that reflects an openness to life's full range of experience. Randy Travis was singing, "I guess it's not what you take when you leave this world behind you; It's what you leave behind you when you go." in his spiritual and emotional ballad, "Three Wooden Crosses." The very next song on the playlist was Kacey Jones singing, "Show Up Naked, Bring Beer."



Eureka, Nevada was my next stop. Raine's Market was the perfect place to pick up some road food. Beneath the pressed tin ceiling, on every wall above the grocery shelves, elk heads and dozens of other trophy mounted animals ring the store.



With the food loaded in the cooler, I grabbed my camera and laptop and walked over to the Owl Club Casino and Diner to get a good sit down meal. At 10:30 AM, the breakfast crowd was gone and the lunch rush hadn't yet started. Cherri, the lone waitress, greeted me as I walked through the door and she helped me find a table near a wall socket to charge my batteries. In the nearly deserted diner, we had time to chat.

While she topped off ketchup bottles and I downed my bacon and over hard- broken eggs with sourdough toast in honor of moving to San Francisco, we shared a number of details of our individual story. I complimented her on the artful paint job on her long nails. She said, "Thank you. I did these for the Fourth of July holiday. It's just fun." After telling her what I was up to she said, "That sounds so romantic," and then asked me if I had read or seen the movie, *The Bridges Of Madison County*. I replied, "Yes, I had to. Women kept telling me that I would love it."

"Well did you?" she asked.

"It was okay. The part played by the photographer was a bit hokey. There were a number of technical things that were inaccurate. I mean who would get out of bed with this beautiful woman at dawn to go pick out his shot for the day. It might be understandable if he was going to shoot the bridge because the light was right, but to get out of bed with Meryl Streep to pick out a shot? That's just plain stupid."

Then sweet, gracious Cherrie, who I had already characterized as a longtime local in that small town on the Loneliest Road in America said, "I know just what you mean. I watch cop shows and think, 'A cop would never do that.'"

"A cop? You're a cop here too?"

"Oh no. Not here and I'm not a cop. I work with as a social worker with the Department of Corrections in Los Angeles."

"What?" was all I could say.

"I come here during the summer to get a break from all the craziness. It's calm here. It's..." she paused, took a deep breath and added, "It's heaven."

I told her that one of the things I liked most about being a photographer was meeting so many different people and being privileged to visit many so many different worlds. Knowing that she had experience in a world that I might never visit, I asked her if there was

one story, one snapshot, that would be telling about her life in LA.

Without hesitation, she began, "Once I was going to visit a parolee and his family. I had a uniformed cop with me. After we were let in, their four-year-old child dropped to the floor and put her hands behind her head. She did just what she had been trained to do if a cop ever came to the door." She paused, didn't breathe and added, "It just broke my heart."

"Don't get me wrong. I really love that job, especially when I feel like I am doing some good. It's just nice to get away to gain some perspective." Then she added, "Did you know that there are kids in LA who have never seen the ocean? You just have to get out of where you are every once in awhile or you begin to think that where you are is all there is." Then, as if being brought from somewhere far away, she laughed and said, "So, you want some desert?"

"No thanks. Not with breakfast. I would, of course, love to take your picture. I got her email address to send her some pictures, thanked her for the wonderful conversation and for the work she did on behalf of us all. I left the diner feeling full.



Though I had passed the sign that pointed to the Hickison Petroglyphs on every previous trip, this time the ancient rock drawings drew me in. The soft red sandstone was the perfect medium to create a good impression. After making a short walk to the face of the cliff, I was alone and face to face with the reason I had been attracted to this exact spot on this particular trip.



A thousand years before I came on the scene, some shaman had found a way to represent the birth of the Universe. It was the original, "Start from Zero." It was only natural that he/she used the zero, the circle, to represent the state that has no beginning and no end. It is the same figure that human beings, from different cultures around the world, have used to illustrate the creation myth since the dawn of civilization.

The beginning of time, the beginning of every thing, began when the Everything/Nothing state split to create something outside Itself ($0+1=\infty$). This split is represented by the slit that breaks the circle. The exclamation point represents birth.



This image represents how the sacred corn plant was created from All That Is.

The lightning looking part represents the energetic path of power that brought it into being. I directed the light that was bouncing off the ancient rock drawings to hit the sensor in my camera so I could recall the impressions. As I drove back down the road I felt amazed and reborn.



In Austin, Nevada I stopped at the International Cafe and Bar. I had a piece of pie at the café and talked to some of the local teenagers about this being the only place to hang out for a hundred miles. They informed me that there were plenty of places out in the hills that they could be by themselves. Then I went into the bar adjacent to the café. There I had the distinct pleasure of meeting this colorful bartender Curly, who, when I asked to take her picture said, “Sure.”

Then raising her middle finger, she smiled and said, “How’s this?”

“Works for me.” I replied.

Then I sat at the bar, ordered a beer and told her and a few of my fellow bar patrons my favorite bartender joke:

“This termite walks into a bar and says, “Where’s the bartender?”

After a few moments of silence and puzzled looks I continued,

‘Don’t you get it? Fine. I’ll tell it to you again. And this time I’ll say it real slow.

This termite walks into a bar and says, “Where is the bar...tender.”

They laughed and groaned. Curly took out a giant fly swatter from behind the bar and playfully began to hit me on the head and shoulders.

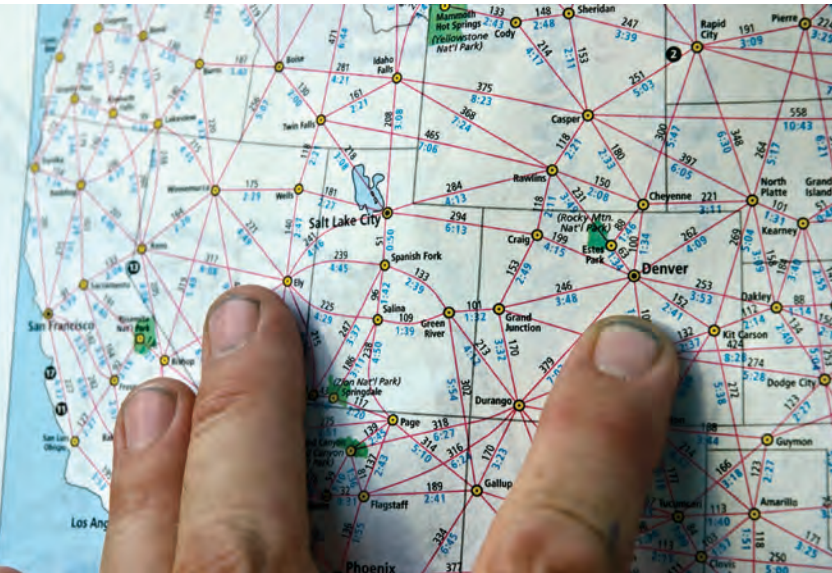
While we sat at the bar exchanging jokes and stories, I worked on my creative contribution to the existing ‘cash collage’ that covered nearly every wall and part of the ceiling. With great fanfare we added my final masterpiece to the hundreds of ‘ones’ that proceeded



my own. With one more toast, I thanked them all for letting me bug them and told them it was time for me to fly. The experience was, in a funny way, quite....tender.



Next door to the International is the Little Blue Bird Turquoise and Antique Shop. The shop carries relics from the days when Austin was silver mining town and raw turquoise from the surrounding hills. I loved the shadows on the wall and how the color of the wall matched the sky and the turquoise that the Native Americans call ‘sky stones.’



When I got back in the car, I pulled out my well worn road atlas to get a fix how far I'd come and how far I had yet to go. The total distance between Boulder and San Francisco is about 1,300 miles, which is about the same distance between New York and Jacksonville or Paris and Budapest or Tokyo and Seoul.

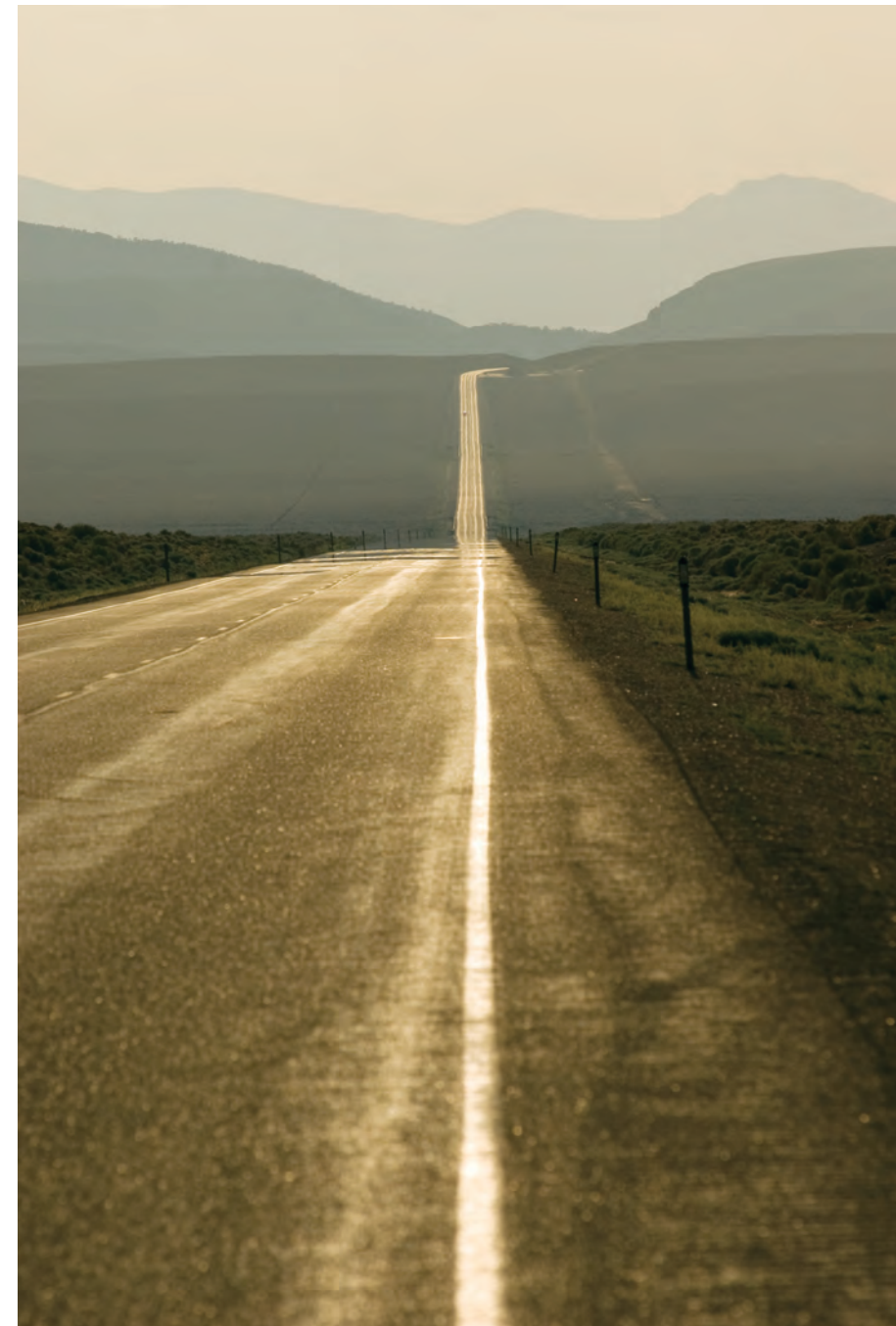
I was delighted with how far I had come emotionally since I found myself behind that giant 8-ball that same morning. I was a little concerned with the fact that in the preceding 12 hours I had only succeeded in moving down the road 137 miles.

There were only a few hours of daylight left and I still had 400 miles to go. It had been quite the day. I decided to just keep going at my own pace, stop when a picture revealed itself and when I got too tired, call it a night.

My pace slowed when I realized that this would be the last long stretch of road that I would see in the daylight on this pivotal trip to California. This picture was taken with a 200mm lens, a rather long telephoto. That is not the only thing that distorts the true scale of the scene. About a two-thirds a way up the picture, the road dramatically narrows. That is where it drops into a flat stretch of road that goes on for 6 or 7 miles before it starts going back up the hill again.

The end of the road after it makes the turn is a good 12 miles away. To better illustrate the scale, after I took the first picture, I took a series of images, with the same lens, all the way down the white line to where I was standing. These added shots in the foreground only represented about a quarter of a mile. To drive the full distance took me ten minutes. When I'm on a cross-country flight, the same ground is covered in less than a minute. When pioneers crossed the American West in a wagon train, it was the distance they would cover on a good day.

Standing on that white line I realized that time, space and experience were all relative to how I pictured them. I saw how no two people could possibly see them the same way. I understood how that is the point. Life is supposed to be personal. When I reached the turn on that the long road, the sun was already behind the hills that I had seen through the lens 10 minutes before.





I passed a sign that said I was entering Churchill County. Next to the sign was a mile-marker that reset the road to zero. I was half-a-mile down the road before I felt the calling to go back.

Stopping to take another picture of a “zero” meant little. It was the “Churchill” sign that elicited my feeling of hesitation. It wouldn’t make a good picture. The reason to take the picture was personal. My father grew up in Kentucky and where he met my mother from Boston. It is also where The Kentucky Derby is run at Churchill Downs. “The Downs” was a part of our family mythology. Every year, on the first Saturday in May, my parents held a Derby Party. I remembered all the adults laughing at the face I made after my father gave me my first taste of bourbon when I was a three-year-old.

There was no place for me to turn around, so I had to go all the way back around the big turn. Suddenly, I was looking back at the vast expanse that I had experienced at the other end of my very long road. The storm clouds had lifted, leaving a rainbow in their wake. I turned off my father’s car, broke down and cried. The instant was so clear, the connection so dear. I felt like I had died and gone to heaven.

It took me a couple of minutes to pull myself together. I set up the tripod and with the wide-angle I got an overall impression. With the telephoto I recorded a few significant details. That only took a few minutes but I stayed until the all the colors of the rainbow entered back into The Great White Light. It was as sweet and potent as sipping a mint julep.

I turned around the car, saluted the “Churchill” sign, thanked my parents for the call and was off and running for the roses.

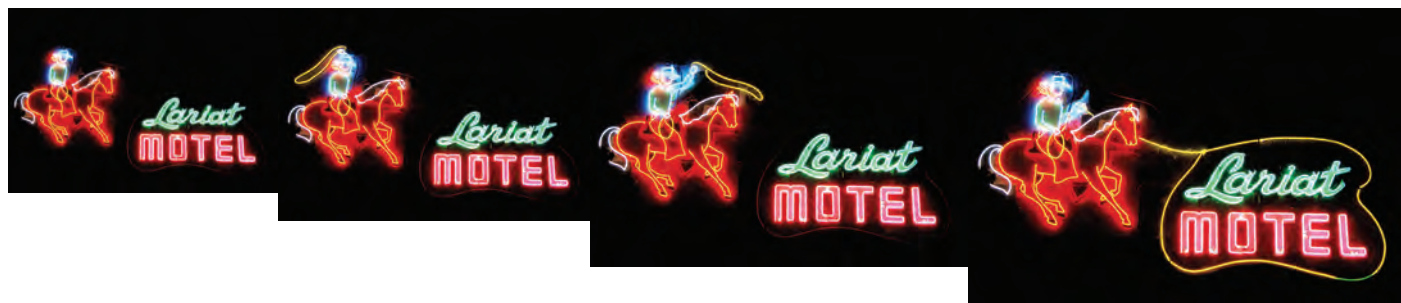


In the last light of day I stopped at Cold Springs and shot a picture at a motel that was once a Pony Express station. I laughed when I remembered the time, a couple of years before, when I had gotten lost on Hwy. 50. I know it’s hard to imagine, on a road so straight and empty, how anyone could possibly get lost. I had driven straight through from Boulder. After driving all night, I came to a roadside Point of Interest spot just as it was getting light. It was another location of an original Pony Express station. I spent a long time taking pictures and reading the information. I shot a panorama of the landscape with the map in the middle. The map showed the trail starting in St. Joseph, Missouri to the East and ending in Sacramento, California in the West. Dead center in the middle of the panorama was the point marked “You Are Here”. The sun was up by the time I got back on the road that, at anytime of the day, looks pretty much the same in both directions.

Pony Express stations were positioned about ten miles apart, the distance a horse could run at full gallop. I had traveled twice that distance before I recognized a deserted ranch house I had seen a half an hour before in the pre-dawn light. I was going in the wrong direction! The map I had so examined and believed in was only a reference. The East/West position on the map was correct, but the map itself had been facing the opposite direction. I was confused. I was mad. My mind was racing back and forth to the past and future: “They should have put the map on the other side of the display! This is such a waste. I am going to kill a whole hour before to get back to where I was before I can get going again. How could I be so stupid? You know... the usual crap. It took a while before I remembered that this, too, was my life. It took a while to remember that how I spent my time was the only thing that gave it any value. It was a priceless lesson. I’m glad it happened. By the time I got back to the “You Are Here” sign, I really was.



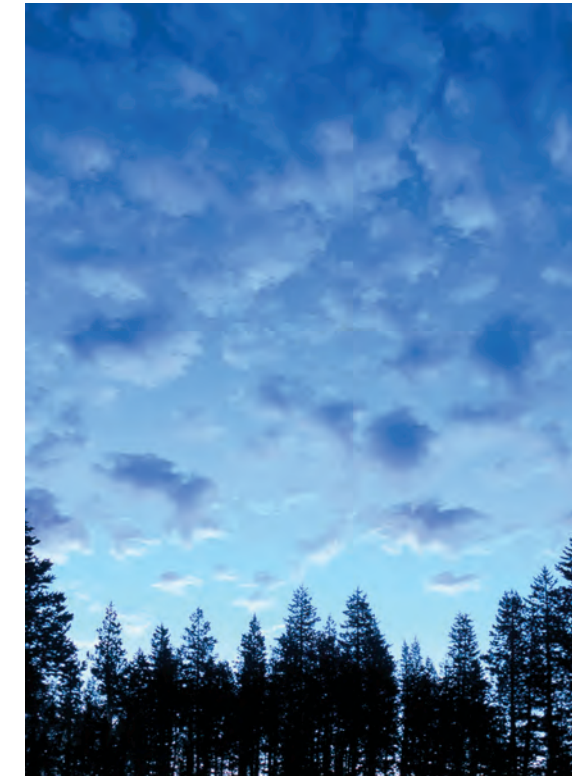
I drove on into the night. It was completely dark when I passed the Shoe Tree east of Fallon, NV. Hundreds, if not thousands of shoes, with their laces tied together, hang from every limb of an old cottonwood. Legends vary as to how this all began. One tale tells how the first pair was thrown during a wedding night argument by a young couple; later, their children's shoes were added to the branches. Several years after this trip, I decided that this was the perfect place to store my pair of shoes that I had painted white for Cha Cha and Leslie's "White Wedding." Now I will always know exactly where they are.



At Fallon, at 11:11PM, I stopped at the Lariat Motel to catch a picture of the flashing neon sign. Though I felt like I had been rode hard and put away wet, I didn't feel like stopping for the night. In only 75 miles I would reach the California border and from there it was only another 200 miles to San Francisco. I felt like a horse who picks up speed in sight of the barn. I was just too excited.

After 25 miles, Hwy. 50 met Interstate 80 in Fernley. I didn't take a picture of the raised semi at the Truck Inn and it just wasn't in the cards to stop in Reno. Though I was exhausted, I was just too jacked up to stop at the Sandman Motel for the night.

When I crossed the California border I was in a state that had always felt like home and now it was. I relaxed; my jitters just vanished. Pulling the off the highway, I found a grove of pines, turned off the engine, and fell fast asleep.



The predawn light woke and welcomed me to my new state and new state of being. I felt reborn. I started the day. I started a new life. I started from zero. I started the car.



At dawn I found myself next to a small mountain lake in the High Sierras.

It was all downhill from there. In the next 80 miles I-80 drops 6,000 feet. After being on a nearly deserted, flat, two-lane road for the last two days, it took some adjusting to be flying down the mountain curves with hundreds of other drivers going 80 to 90 miles an hour. By the time I reached Sacramento I was definitely up to speed and excited that I was less than 100 miles from the place I would call home.

Stopping for a picture didn't cross my mind. I didn't slow down until got off I-80 and made my way over to the California 101. Ten miles north of the Golden Gate Bridge I took the Paradise exit and found my way to Joe's house in Larkspur in heavenly Marin County.

Epilogue

Joe is the kind of friend that you can see again after years have gone by and you pick up right where you left off. When I rolled up to his house he was sitting on his front porch having coffee. He picked up his thermos and asked, "Can I offer you a cup from the "sacred chalice?" We both have a personal and shared mythology about being on the open road.



He had just gotten back from a trip to Alaska. We went on and on about respective trips. He already had made a few prints that he set on the porch table for me to have a look. The first one on the top of the pile was a picture of a rock. I couldn't believe my eyes. I then did a second double take when I saw, next to the prints, among other artifacts from his trip, two real rocks arranged to look like an exclamation point. I couldn't believe that only a day had passed since I saw the same symbols carved into soft sandstone by a shaman a thousand year ago. We had a good laugh!



People think that what we are seeking is a meaning for life. I don't think that's what we're really seeking. I think that what we're seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances within our own innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive.

Joseph Campbell



For weeks after my arrival I continued to see zeros. I found one glorified behind marble columns in downtown San Francisco and another in a bag of potato chips. After a time, my focus changed from believing in a theme to actually living it. Bringing the spirit of the road home meant leaving it behind me. Everything changes. It is the way of the world. It is the way change happens. If things did not disappear nothing could replace them. The story would end.



One day, a couple of months after my arrival, I was driving across the Golden Gate Bridge and I noticed a great set of clouds that might make a good background for a shot of the bridge. This was the next time, after the last time when lost in thought, I found myself, for the first time since I moved here, all the way across without noticing that I had traveled the span. It was just a commute, just a road. I was amazed that I could make something so large disappear.

At the first exit beyond the bridge, I got off the highway and headed for the bridge overlook. I had to drive pretty high up the hill to get the bridge and the clouds in the same shot. After lining up and taking the shot, I stopped for a moment to take it all in. I was happy that I had moved. From my perch on the Marin Headlands I had a bird's eye view of Alcatraz, Angel Island, the city and the spot on the bridge where I first pictured this snapshot of my new home.



While coming down the hill I stopped at the first overlook. On the trail I saw a heavenly vision. A group of Buddhist monks were approaching The Golden Gate, their saffron robes mimicking the colors of the bridge. We were all bathed in a golden light. The light from the nearest star was about to disappear from the face of the earth in the next half-hour. I ran ahead, excited to see these saints positioning themselves before the glowing bridge in the best possible light.

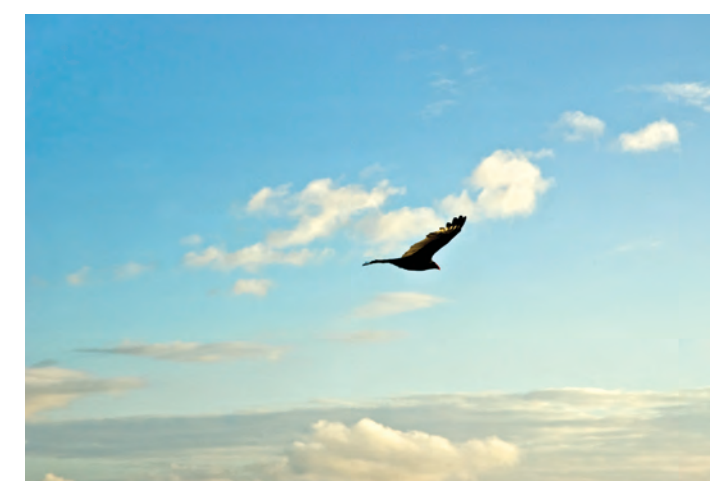


They, like so many tourists, gathered in a group while each individual with a camera broke rank to take a picture of the group. Like I have done a hundred times before, I asked if they would like me to take a picture with their cameras so they could all be included in their pictures. They smiled and piled the half dozen cameras at my feet. I framed and shot each one. Of course I asked to take their picture with my own camera. They all bowed politely. I did.

As they gathered their cameras I asked if any of them had an email so I could send them some of the pictures I had taken. Two of the monks answered yes to my question. One gave me his card. Returning the favor, I pulled out a couple dozen of my own cards and asked him to pick one. Each of the cards had a different image. The whole group gathered around. Some looked, made a pick and handed it back to me until I made it clear that they could keep it. I remember one of the monks choosing a lotus-looking a magnolia flower. Another accepted the rusted tin can that looks like a rose. The master kept several. When he picked the magpie I told him that in Native American mythology, this bird was the Trickster God that brings life to death. We were all laughing. Each treated the colored pieces of paper as a gift.



I asked the master if I could take a picture of him by himself. He smiled and sat down exactly where I asked. He needed no other instruction. I lay down on the ground and excitedly shot half a dozen images.



Out of the corner of my eye I saw a bird fly by. By some instinct I leaned back and shot the bird. It was a vulture. Tibetans call them “Angels” because they take the dead to heaven. When I turned back, the master was smiling.

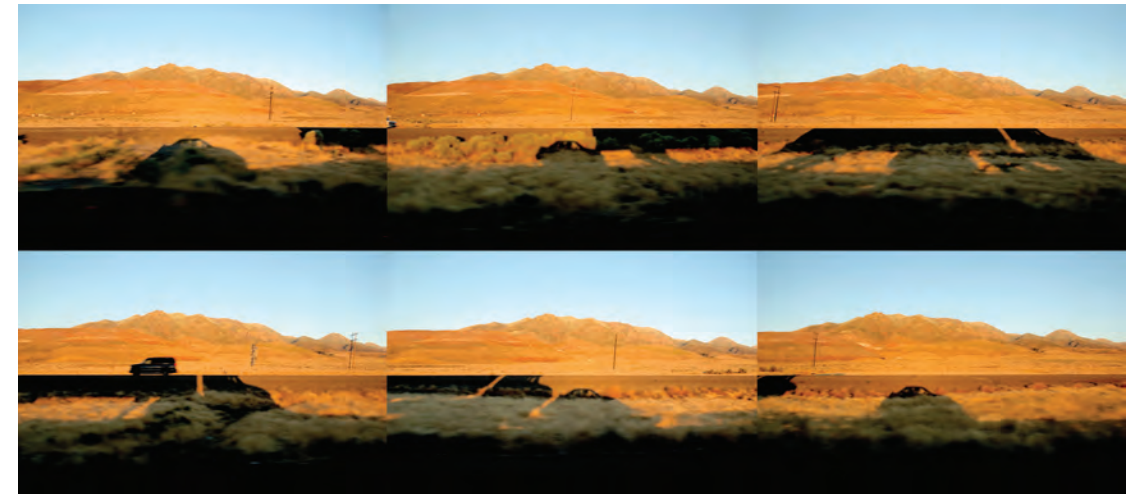


I thanked him and after we rose from the earth I reached out to shake his hand. He took my hand, turned it over and asked for the other. He laced my fingers together and arranged them in a fashion that he called “Feeding the Buddha”. Then he gestured for me to sit down. He took my camera and told me to close my eyes and relax. He instructed, “Forget everything, forget you are here. Calm yourself. There is no bridge in front of you. I am not here.”



I can't say how much time passed before I heard the shutter of my camera click. I opened my eyes and saw him looking at me through the lens. All the monks had already gone or disappeared. He handed back my camera. I held out my hand, this time to have him help raise me to my feet.

After leaving the monks at The Golden Gate Bridge, I went home and created my first email-photo-essay as a kind of postcard to send to my family members who were scattered around the country and my friends back in Boulder. It was a way to stay in touch. I've made more than a hundred email-photo-essays since then. The email now goes out to thousands of people all around the world. The response to these emails so touched me that I wrote this book that you now see before you.



As I said when we left Boulder, on the return trip to home after celebrating the lives of my parents, my brother Shawn and grand-daughter Gabrielle, I didn't stop for a single picture. Out the car window I did, however, shoot my shadow passing a semi-truck west of Winnemucca, Nevada.



Thank you, my fellow traveler, for joining me. Having you along has helped me see how I see. I gratefully accept your present and wish you well on your own journey through this most interesting, infinite and, oh so, beautiful universe.

Love,
Jerry



*Some trails are happy ones,
Others are blue.
It's the way you ride the trail that counts,
Here's a happy one for you.*

*Happy trails to you,
Until we meet again.
Happy trails to you,
Keep smiling until then.*

*Who cares about the clouds when we're together?
Just sing a song and bring the sunny weather.
Happy trails to you,
Until we meet again.*

Dale Evans

Afterword

This copy of *The Present* is yours. It's free. As long as you keep it free, feel free to copy, print, quote or share it any way you wish. In fact, please do! Give your friends a present. Send it to everyone in your address book. [Share it](#) with your friends on Facebook. [Tweet it](#). [Link](#) on LinkedIn. The more the merrier.

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The images in this book, as well as many of my own personal favorites from around the world can be seen full-screen on my [website](#).

The present, this now, goes on forever. I'd love to have you with me as our adventure continues. You can [sign up](#) for my personal photo-essay-emails that were the inspiration for this book. It's free. You can "Like" my Facebook Photo Fan Page and see a new image and a proliferation of my pithy comments. You can go to *The Present* [blog](#) and leave your comments, personal synchronicities and thoughts about our shared journey through this most interesting and beautiful world.

That's enough. Know that I know that the greatest gift you can give me is to find yourself in your own personal present. It was the place I found myself when I had the idea to give this book away. In that space I felt happy. I felt connected. I felt free.

Acknowledgements

Many people have played a part in creating this book. Fortunately, "played" is the operative word with these, my wonderful friends and family:

Christopher Downs, my son, whose sense of wonder helps inspire my own. Joe Burull for taking apart and reassembling the secrets of the universe with me for the last 40 years. Ned Wolf for his open and generous support. Michael Signorella whose design artistry helped bring this book to life.

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My family: Mommy, Daddy, Eileen, Johnny, Joey, Jimmy, Jerry, Mary, Shawn, Maggie, Nancy, Dermot and Vincent.