

On the Nature of the West

According to family legend, I was conceived on a couch in an old house not far from the northern bank of the Columbia River. I like to lay claim to that event as proof that I am a native Westerner, despite having spent the first part of my life in the Midwest. Like a steelhead thrashing upstream to its natal waters, once I caught the scent of the West again, I knew it was where I belonged.

I was twelve years old when I first crossed the hundredth meridian. My father and I chose to trade the desolation of winter in southwest Michigan for a Christmas with family in southwest Washington. Mesmerized, nose pressed to the airplane window, I watched the flat geometry of farmland gradually give way to dry, rumpled hills, then the jagged peaks of the spine of continent, arrayed in dazzling white snow and deep blue shadows. On the other side of the Rockies, there were no breaks in the clouds, and I read a book until the plane began its descent into Portland. In a maneuver with which I am now intimately familiar, the plane banked steeply, losing elevation at the same time. The clouds gave way to deep green forested hills. *Real* hills. In Michigan, where they have to build ski runs on top of closed landfills in order to make downhill skiing a possibility, folks would call them mountains. But I knew these were only hills, because the snowy base of Mount Hood was just barely visible beneath the clouds, hinting at greater heights. Another dip of the wing, and the Columbia hove into view, a vast, shimmering, silvery pool of light so alive it threatened to overtake the dark basalt cliffs holding it in check. Just as we leveled out for the landing, the skyscrapers of downtown appeared in the distance, bright rectangles against a backdrop of still more forest.

That first breath of damp, fir-scented air was electrifying. And the second, and third. My aunt and father, engaged in conversation in the front seat, didn't notice that I'd rolled the window down and was sniffing the cool breeze like a dog. Or that I was staring so hard at the hills and mountains and river and trees that I hardly had time to blink. I wanted to hoard every sensation, to possess the landscape as much as it already possessed me. I wanted to know the name of every tree, rock-hop along creeks tripping down the narrow valleys and

look beneath fallen logs to see what lived there. I wanted to, as Wren Farris says in her essay in this issue, "search for the interior heart of this one wild thing"—*any* wild thing, so long as it was in the West. I wanted the story of my life to twine with the story of this place, for one to be indistinguishable from the other.

And it has: the West has been home for half my life now, and like many others who feel its pull, I've wandered its forests and deserts, rivers and shorelines, seeking the source-- the nature of the West. What I've come to believe is that there is no one definitive thing that makes the West what it is—even beyond the dry line of the hundredth meridian, scratched in the thin topsoil of high plateaus, you still find rainforests and perennially green valleys. There are plenty of people here who are barely aware that the frontier ever existed, or that, as Bison Bob points out in his essay in this issue, it closed a hundred years ago. Tami Brunk's essay on a bioregional gathering in Peru reminds us there are people all over the globe who care as passionately for their landscapes and communities as we do, and John Elder, a Westerner turned Vermonter, points out that "conservation" is a complicated concept no matter which side of the continent you call home.

What makes the West what it is has more to do with what it inspires than the physical, tangible features of its terrain. It is that impassioned search for the story of the land, that desire to *belong* that is so powerful it seems brutal at times, which defines the West. More than any interlude on a couch, it's what makes me a Westerner. Here in these pages, you will find the stories of those who have taken their search for the story of the land out into the world and brought the lessons learned there to bear on how we live our life here. From Libby, Montana to the plains of Africa, each has some essential truth to offer, something that will take root in this rocky soil and grow.

-Katharine Hyzy



Nancy Q. Kirk