



SCOTT RUSSELL SANDERS

b. 1945

Scott Russell Sanders had already established himself as a fine writer of fiction and of books for children when A Paradise of Bombs appeared in 1987. That was the collection of nonfiction that introduced a broad audience to the qualities of authenticity, elegance, personal modesty, and moral seriousness that have since made Sanders one of our most admired and valued essayists. Six other volumes of essays have followed between 1991 and 2001—Secrets of the Universe, Staying Put: Making a Home in a Restless World, Writing from the Center, Hunting for Hope, The Country of Language, and The Force of Spirit. There is remarkable continuity from one of these books to the next. Scott Russell Sanders celebrates the grounded pleasures of home and family, as well as the potential alliance between reading and our experiences of nature. He remains alert for the unanticipated, luminous moments that are our day's truest content, even as he ponders the grave challenges to ecological and social sustainability in our time. His readers revel in the crispness of his perceptions and feel grateful for the maturity and faithfulness of his example.

BUCKEYE

Years after my father's heart quit, I keep in a wooden box on my desk the two buckeyes that were in his pocket when he died. Once the size of plums, the brown seeds are shriveled now, hollow, hard as pebbles, yet they still gleam from the polish of his hands. He used to reach for them in his overalls or suit pants and click them together, or he would draw them out, cupped in his palm, and twirl them with his blunt carpenter's fingers, all the while humming snatches of old tunes.

"Do you really believe buckeyes keep off arthritis?" I asked him more than once.

Writing from the Center (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

He would flex his hands and say, "I do so far."

My father never paid much heed to pain. Near the end, when his worn knee often slipped out of joint, he would pound it back in place with a rubber mallet. If a splinter worked into his flesh beyond the reach of tweezers, he would heat the blade of his knife over a cigarette lighter and slice through the skin. He sought to ward off arthritis not because he feared pain but because he lived through his hands, and he dreaded the swelling of knuckles, the stiffening of fingers. What use would he be if he could no longer hold a hammer or guide a plow? When he was a boy he had known farmers not yet forty years old whose hands had curled into claws, men so crippled up they could not tie their own shoes, could not sign their names.

"I mean to tickle my grandchildren when they come along," he told me, "and I mean to build doll houses and turn spindles for tiny chairs on my lathe."

So he fondled those buckeyes as if they were charms, carrying them with him when our family moved from Ohio at the end of my childhood, bearing them to new homes in Louisiana, then Oklahoma, Ontario, and Mississippi, carrying them still on his final day when pain a thousand times fiercer than arthritis gripped his heart.

The box where I keep the buckeyes also comes from Ohio, made by my father from a walnut plank he bought at a farm auction. I remember the auction, remember the sagging face of the widow whose home was being sold, remember my father telling her he would prize that walnut as if he had watched the tree grow from a sapling on his own land. He did not care for pewter or silver or gold, but he cherished wood. On the rare occasions when my mother coaxed him into a museum, he ignored the paintings or porcelain and studied the exhibit cases, the banisters, the moldings, the parquet floors.

I remember him planing that walnut board, sawing it, sanding it, joining piece to piece to make foot stools, picture frames, jewelry boxes. My own box, a bit larger than a soap dish, lined with red corduroy, was meant to hold earrings and pins, not buckeyes. The top is inlaid with pieces fitted so as to bring out the grain, four diagonal joints converging from the corners toward the center. If I stare long enough at those converging lines, they float free of the box and point to a center deeper than wood.

I learned to recognize buckeyes and beeches, sugar maples and shagbark hickories, wild cherries, walnuts, and dozens of other trees while tramping through the Ohio woods with my father. To his eyes, their shapes, their leaves, their bark, their winter buds were as distinctive as

the set of a friend's shoulders. As with friends, he was partial to some, craving their company, so he would go out of his way to visit particular trees, walking in a circle around the splayed roots of a sycamore, laying his hand against the trunk of a white oak, ruffling the feathery green boughs of a cedar.

"Trees breathe," he told me. "Listen."

I listened, and heard the stir of breath.

He was no botanist; the names and uses he taught me were those he had learned from country folks, not from books. Latin never crossed his lips. Only much later would I discover that the tree he called ironwood, its branches like muscular arms, good for axe handles, is known in the books as hophornbeam; what he called tuliptree or canoeewood, ideal for log cabins, is officially the yellow poplar; what he called hoop ash, good for barrels and fence posts, appears in books as hackberry.

When he introduced me to the buckeye, he broke off a chunk of the gray bark and held it to my nose. I gagged.

"That's why the old-timers called it stinking buckeye," he told me. "They used it for cradles and feed troughs and peg legs."

"Why for peg legs?" I asked.

"Because it's light and hard to split, so it won't shatter when you're clumping around."

He showed me this tree in late summer, when the fruits had fallen and the ground was littered with prickly brown pods. He picked up one, as fat as a lemon, and peeled away the husk to reveal the shiny seed. He laid it in my palm and closed my fist around it so the seed peeped out from the circle formed by my index finger and thumb. "You see where it got the name?" he asked.

I saw: what gleamed in my hand was the eye of a deer, bright with life. "It's beautiful," I said.

"It's beautiful," my father agreed, "but also poisonous. Nobody eats buckeyes, except maybe a fool squirrel."

I knew the gaze of deer from living in the Ravenna Arsenal, in Portage County, up in the northeastern corner of Ohio. After supper we often drove the Arsenal's gravel roads, past the munitions bunkers, past acres of rusting tanks and wrecked bombers, into the far fields where we counted deer. One June evening, while mist rose from the ponds, we counted three hundred and eleven, our family record. We found the deer in herds, in bunches, in amorous pairs. We came upon lone bucks, their antlers lifted against the sky like the bare branches of dogwood. If you were quiet, if your hands were empty, if you moved slowly, you could leave the car and steal to within a few paces of a graz-

ing deer, close enough to see the delicate lips, the twitching nostrils, the glossy, fathomless eyes.

The wooden box on my desk holds these grazing deer, as it holds the buckeyes and the walnut plank and the farm auction and the munitions bunkers and the breathing forests and my father's hands. I could lose the box, I could lose the polished seeds, but if I were to lose the memories I would become a bush without roots, and every new breeze would toss me about. All those memories lead back to the northeastern corner of Ohio, the place where I came to consciousness, where I learned to connect feelings with words, where I fell in love with the earth.

It was a troubled love, for much of the land I knew as a child had been ravaged. The ponds in the Arsenal teemed with bluegill and beaver, but they were also laced with TNT from the making of bombs. Because the wolves and coyotes had long since been killed, some of the deer, so plump in the June grass, collapsed on the January snow, whittled by hunger to racks of bones. Outside the Arsenal's high barbed fences, many of the farms had failed, their barns caving in, their topsoil gone. Ravines were choked with swollen couches and junked washing machines and cars. Crossing fields, you had to be careful not to slice your feet on tin cans or shards of glass. Most of the rivers had been dammed, turning fertile valleys into scummy playgrounds for boats.

One free-flowing river, the Mahoning, ran past the small farm near the Arsenal where our family lived during my later years in Ohio. We owned just enough land to pasture three ponies and to grow vegetables for our table, but those few acres opened onto miles of woods and creeks and secret meadows. I walked that land in every season, every weather, following animal trails. But then the Mahoning, too, was doomed by a government decision; we were forced to sell our land, and a dam began to rise across the river.

If enough people had spoken for the river, we might have saved it. If enough people had believed that our scarred country was worth defending, we might have dug in our heels and fought. Our attachments to the land were all private. We had no shared lore, no literature, no art to root us there, to give us courage, to help us stand our ground. The only maps we had were those issued by the state, showing a maze of numbered lines stretched over emptiness. The Ohio landscape never showed up on postcards or posters, never unfurled like tapestry in films, rarely filled even a paragraph in books. There were no mountains in that place, no waterfalls, no rocky gorges, no vistas. It was a country of low hills, cut over woods, scoured fields, villages that had lost their purpose, roads that had lost their way.

"Let us love the country of here below," Simone Weil urged. "It is real; it offers resistance to love. It is this country that God has given us to love. He has willed that it should be difficult yet possible to love it." Which is the deeper truth about buckeyes, their poison or their beauty? I hold with the beauty; or rather, I am held by the beauty, without forgetting the poison. In my corner of Ohio the gullies were choked with trash, yet cedars flickered up like green flames from cracks in stone; in the evening bombs exploded at the ammunition dump, yet from the darkness came the mating cries of owls. I was saved from despair by knowing a few men and women who cared enough about the land to clean up trash, who planted walnuts and oaks that would long outlive them, who imagined a world that would have no call for bombs.

How could our hearts be large enough for heaven if they are not large enough for earth? The only country I am certain of is the one here below. The only paradise I know is the one lit by our everyday sun, this land of difficult love, shot through with shadow. The place where we learn this love, if we learn it at all, shimmers behind every new place we inhabit.

A family move carried me away from Ohio thirty years ago; my schooling and marriage and job have kept me away ever since, except for visits in memory and in flesh. I returned to the site of our farm one cold November day, when the trees were skeletons and the ground shone with the yellow of fallen leaves. From a previous trip I knew that our house had been bulldozed, our yard and pasture had grown up in thickets, and the reservoir had flooded the woods. On my earlier visit I had merely gazed from the car, too numb with loss to climb out. But on this November day, I parked the car, drew on my hat and gloves, opened the door, and walked.

I was looking for some sign that we had lived there, some token of our affection for the place. All that I recognized, aside from the contours of the land, were two weeping willows that my father and I had planted near the road. They had been slips the length of my forearm when we set them out, and now their crowns rose higher than the telephone poles. When I touched them last, their trunks had been smooth and supple, as thin as my wrist, and now they were furrowed and stout. I took off my gloves and laid my hands against the rough bark. Immediately I felt the wince of tears. Without knowing why, I said hello to my father, quietly at first, then louder and louder, as if only shouts could reach him through the bark and miles and years.

Surprised by sobs, I turned from the willows and stumbled away toward the drowned woods, calling to my father. I sensed that he was

nearby. Even as I called, I was wary of grief's deceptions. I had never seen his body after he died. By the time I reached the place of his death, a furnace had reduced him to ashes. The need to see him, to let go of him, to let go of this land and time, was powerful enough to summon mirages; I knew that. But I also knew, stumbling toward the woods, that my father was here.

At the bottom of a slope where the creek used to run, I came to an expanse of gray stumps and withered grass. It was a bay of the reservoir from which the water had retreated, the level drawn down by engineers or drought. I stood at the edge of this desolate ground, willing it back to life, trying to recall the woods where my father had taught me the names of trees. No green shoots rose. I walked out among the stumps. The grass crackled under my boots, breath rasped in my throat, but otherwise the world was silent.

Then a cry broke overhead and I looked up to see a red-tailed hawk launching out from the top of an oak. I recognized the bird from its band of dark feathers across the creamy breast and the tail splayed like rosy fingers against the sun. It was a red-tailed hawk for sure; and it was also my father. Not a symbol of my father, not a reminder, not a ghost, but the man himself, right there, circling in the air above me. I knew this as clearly as I knew the sun burned in the sky. A calm poured through me. My chest quit heaving. My eyes dried.

Hawk and father wheeled above me, circle upon circle, wings barely moving, head still. My own head was still, looking up, knowing and being known. Time scattered like fog. At length, father and hawk stroked the air with those powerful wings, three beats, then vanished over a ridge.

The voice of my education told me then and tells me now that I did not meet my father, that I merely projected my longing onto a bird. My education may well be right; yet nothing I heard in school, nothing I've read, no lesson reached by logic has ever convinced me as utterly or stirred me as deeply as did that red-tailed hawk. Nothing in my education prepared me to love a piece of the earth, least of all a humble, battered country like northeastern Ohio; I learned from the land itself.

Before leaving the drowned woods, I looked around at the ash stumps, the wilted grass, and for the first time since moving from this place I was able to let it go. This ground was lost; the flood would reclaim it. But other ground could be saved, must be saved, in every watershed, every neighborhood. For each home ground we need new maps, living maps, stories and poems, photographs and paintings, essays and songs. We need to know where we are, so that we may dwell in our place with a full heart.

haphazard marvels the planet bestows every year. We find the sizzling colors thrilling, and in a sense they dupe us. Colored like living things, they signal death and disintegration. In time, they will become fragile and, like the body, return to dust. They are as we hope our own fate will be when we die. Not to vanish, just to sublime from one beautiful state into another. Though leaves lose their green life, they bloom with urgent colors, as the woods grow mummified day by day, and Nature becomes more carnal, mute, and radiant.

We call the season "fall," from the Old English *feallan*, to fall, which leads back through time to the Indo-European *phol*, which also means to fall. So the word and the idea are both extremely ancient, and haven't really changed since the first of our kind needed a name for fall's leafy abundance. As we say the word, we're reminded of that other Fall, in the garden of Eden, when fig leaves never withered and scales fell from our eyes. Fall is the time when leaves fall from the trees, just as spring is when flowers spring up, summer is when we simmer, and winter is when we whine from the cold.

Children love to play in piles of leaves, hurling them into the air like confetti, leaping into soft unruly mattresses of them. For children, leaf fall is just one of the odder figments of Nature, like hailstones or snowflakes. Walk down a lane overhung with trees in the never-never land of autumn, and you will forget about time and death, lost in the sheer delicious spill of color. Adam and Eve concealed their nakedness with leaves, remember? Leaves have always hidden our awkward secrets.

But how do the colored leaves fall? As a leaf ages, the growth hormone, auxin, fades, and cells at the base of the petiole divide. Two or three rows of small cells, lying at right angles to the axis of the petiole, react with water, then come apart, leaving the petioles hanging on by only a few threads of xylem. A light breeze, and the leaves are airborne. They glide and swoop, rocking in invisible cradles. They are all wing and may flutter from yard to yard on small whirlwinds or updrafts, swiveling as they go. Firmly tethered to earth, we love to see things rise up and fly—soap bubbles, balloons, birds, fall leaves. They remind us that the end of a season is capricious, as is the end of life. We especially like the way leaves rock, careen, and swoop as they fall. Everyone knows the motion. Pilots sometimes do a maneuver called a "falling leaf," in which the plane loses altitude quickly and on purpose, by slipping first to the right, then to the left. The machine weighs a ton or more, but in one pilot's mind it is a weightless thing, a falling leaf. She has seen the motion before, in the Vermont woods where she played as a child. Below her the trees radiate gold, copper, and red. Leaves are falling, although she can't see them fall, as she falls, swooping down for a closer view.

At last the leaves leave. But first they turn color and thrill us for weeks on end. Then they crunch and crackle underfoot. They *shush*, as children drag their small feet through leaves heaped along the curb. Dark, slimy mats of leaves cling to one's heels after a rain. A damp, stuccolike mortar of semidecayed leaves protects the tender shoots with a roof until spring, and makes a rich humus. An occasional bulge or ripple in the leafy mounds signals a shrew or a field mouse tunneling out of sight. Sometimes one finds in fossil stones the imprint of a leaf, long since disintegrated, whose outlines remind us how detailed, vibrant, and alive are the things of this earth that perish.



JOHN DANIEL

b. 1948

Born in South Carolina and raised outside Washington, D. C., John Daniel is one of a number of transplanted easterners who have found an adopted home in the West, in Daniel's case, Oregon. Daniel was greatly influenced by Wallace Stegner, who was his neighbor for a time in California and who also had an itinerant childhood before rooting himself in a chosen locale. The question of finding and committing oneself to place and family figures largely in both men's work. Daniel's first essay collection, *The Trail Home* (1992), examines nature and imagination in the American West. *Looking After* (1996) is a memoir of caring for his Alzheimer's-stricken mother. But one of his merits as a writer is his inclination to examine his own most deeply held convictions. In the following essay, he questions the absolute value of rootedness and suggests the salutary aspects of the outsider and the perpetual wanderer to society as a whole.

A WORD IN FAVOR OF ROOTLESSNESS

I am one of the converted when it comes to the cultural and economic necessity of finding place. Our rootlessness—our refusal to accept the discipline of living as responsive and responsible members of neighborhoods, communities, landscapes, and ecosystems—is perhaps our most serious and widespread disease. The history of our country, and especially of the American West, is in great part a record of damage done by generations of boomers, both individual and corporate, who have wrested from the land all that a place could give and continually moved on to take from another place. Boomers such as Wallace Stegner's father, who, as we see him in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, "wanted to make a killing and end up on Easy Street." Like many Americans, he was obsessed by the fruit of Tantalus: "Why remain in one dull plot of Earth when Heaven was reachable, was touchable, was just over there?"

We don't stand much chance of perpetuating ourselves as a culture, or of restoring and sustaining the health of our land, unless we can outgrow our boomer adolescence and mature into sticklers, or nesters—human beings willing to take on the obligations of living in communities rooted in place, conserving nature as we conserve ourselves. And maybe, slowly, we are headed in that direction. The powers and virtues of place are celebrated in a growing body of literature and discussed in conferences across the country. Bioregionalism, small-scale organic farming, urban food co-ops, and other manifestations of the spirit of place seem to be burgeoning, or at least coming along.

That is all to the good. But as we settle into our home places and local communities and bioregional niches, as we become the responsible economic and ecologic citizens we ought to be, I worry a little. I worry, for one thing, that we will settle in place so pervasively that no unsettled places will remain. But I worry about us settlers, too. I feel at least a tinge of concern that we might allow our shared beliefs and practices to harden into orthodoxy, and that the bath water of irresponsibility we are ready to toss out the home door might contain a lively baby or two. These fears may turn out to be groundless, like most of my insomniac broodings. But they are on my mind, so indulge me, if you will, as I address some of the less salutary aspects of living in place and some of the joys and perhaps necessary virtues of rootlessness.

No power of place is more elemental or influential than climate, and I

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feel compelled at the outset to report that we who live in the wet regions of the Northwest suffer immensely from our climate. Melville's Ishmael experienced a damp, drizzly November in his soul, but only now and again. For us it is eternally so, or it feels like eternity. From October well into June we slouch in our mossy-roofed houses listening to the incessant patter of rain, dark thoughts slowly forming in the dull cloud chambers of our minds. It's been days, weeks, years, we believe, since a neighbor knocked or a letter arrived from friend or agent or editor. Those who live where sun and breezes play, engaged in their smiling businesses, have long forgotten us, if they ever cared for us at all. Rain drips from the eaves like poison into our souls. We sit. We sleep. We check the mail.

What but climate could it be that so rots the fiber of the Northwestern psyche? Or if not climate itself, then an epiphenomenon of climate—perhaps the spores of an undiscovered fungus floating out of those decadent forests we environmentalists are so bent on saving. Oh, we try to improve ourselves. We join support groups and twelve-step programs, we drink gallons of cappuccino and café latte, we bathe our pallid bodies in the radiance of full-spectrum light machines. These measures keep us from dissolving outright into the sodden air, and when spring arrives we bestir ourselves outdoors, blinking against the occasional cruel sun and the lurid displays of rhododendrons. By summer we have cured sufficiently to sally forth to the mountains and the coast, where we linger in sunglasses and try to pass for normal.

But it is place we're talking about, the powers of place. As I write this, my thoughts are perhaps unduly influenced by the fact that my right ear has swollen to the size and complexion of a rutabaga. I was working behind the cabin this afternoon, cutting up madrone and Douglas fir slash with the chain saw, when I evidently stepped too close to a yellow jacket nest. I injured none of their tribe, to my knowledge, but one of them sorely injured me. Those good and industrious citizens take place pretty seriously. I started to get out the .22 and shoot every one of them, but thought better of it and drank a tumbler of bourbon instead.

And now, a bit later, a spectacle outside my window only confirms my bitter state of mind. The place in question is the hummingbird feeder, and the chief influence of that place is to inspire in hummingbirds a fiercely intense desire to impale one another on their needlelike beaks. Surely they expend more energy blustering in their buzzy way than they can possibly derive from the feeder. This behavior is not simply a consequence of feeding Kool-Aid to already over-amped birds—they try to kill each other over natural flower patches too. Nor can it be explained as the typically mindless and violent behavior of the

male sex in general. Both sexes are represented in the fray, and females predominate. It is merely a demonstration of over-identification with place. Humans do it too. Look at Yosemite Valley on the Fourth of July. Look at any empty parking space in San Francisco. Look at Jerusalem.

When human beings settle in a place for the long run, it may be that good things occur overall. There are dangers, though. Stickers run the substantial risk of becoming sticks-in-the-mud. Consider my own state of Oregon, which was settled by farmers from the Midwest and upper South who had one epic move in them, across the Oregon Trail, and having found paradise resolved not to stir again until the millennium. The more scintillating sorts—writers, murderers, prostitutes, lawyers, other riffraff—tended toward Seattle or San Francisco. And so it happens that we Oregonians harbor behind our bland and agreeable demeanor a serious streak of moralism and conformism. We have some pretty strict notions about the way people should live. It was we who started the nationwide spate of legal attacks on gay and lesbian rights, and it is we who annually rank among the top five states in citizen challenges to morally subversive library books, books such as *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, and *The Color Purple*.

This pernicious characteristic is strongest, along with some of our best characteristics, where communities are strongest and people live closest to the land—in the small towns. When my girlfriend and I lived in Klamath Falls in the early 1970s, we were frequently accosted by Mrs. Grandquist, our elderly neighbor across the road. She was pointedly eager to lend us a lawn mower, and when she offered it she had the unnerving habit of staring at my hair. Our phone was just inside the front door, and sometimes as we arrived home it rang before we were entirely through the door. "You left your lights on," Mrs. Grandquist would say. Or, "You ought to shut your windows when you go out. We've got burglars, you know." Not in that block of Denver Avenue, we didn't. Mrs. Grandquist and other watchful citizens with time on their hands may have kept insurance rates down, but the presence of all those eyes and inquiring minds was at times intensely uncomfortable. Small towns are hard places in which to be different. Those yellow jackets are wary, and they can sting.

Customs of land use can become as ossified and difficult to budge as social customs. The Amish, among other long-established rural peoples, practice a good and responsible farming economy. But long-term association with a place no more guarantees good stewardship than a long-term marriage guarantees a loving and responsible relationship. As Aldo Leopold noted with pain, there are farmers who habitually abuse their land and cannot easily be induced to do otherwise.

Thoreau saw the same thing in Concord—landpeople who, though they must have known their places intimately, mistreated them continually. They whipped the dog every day because the dog was no good, and because that's the way dogs had always been dealt with.

As for us of the green persuasions, settled or on the loose, we too are prone—perhaps more prone than most—to orthodoxy and intolerance. We tend to be overstocked in piety and self-righteousness, deficient in a sense of humor about our values and our causes. Here in the Northwest, where debate in the last decade has focused on logging issues, it's instructive to compare bumper stickers. Ours say, sanctimoniously, "Stumps Don't Lie" or "Love Your Mother." Those who disagree with us, on the other hand, sport sayings such as "Hug a Logger—You'll Never Go Back to Trees," or "Earth First! (We'll Log the Other Planets Later)."

I don't mean to minimize the clear truth that ecological blindness and misconduct are epidemic in our land. I only mean to suggest that rigid ecological correctness may not be the most helpful treatment. All of us, in any place or community or movement, tend to become insiders; we all need the stranger, the outsider, to shake our perspective and keep us honest. Prominent among Edward Abbey's many virtues was his way of puncturing environmentalist pieties (along with every other brand of piety he encountered). What's more, the outsider can sometimes see landscape with a certain clarity unavailable to the longtime resident. It was as a relative newcomer to the Southwest that Abbey took the notes that would become his best book, in which he imagined the canyon country of the Colorado Plateau more deeply than anyone had imagined it before or has imagined it since. His spirit was stirred and his vision sharpened by his outsider's passion. I don't know that he could have written *Desert Solitaire* if he had been raised in Moab or Mexican Hat.

Unlike Thoreau, who was born to his place, or Wendell Berry, who returned to the place he was born to, Edward Abbey came to his place from afar and took hold. More of a lifelong wanderer was John Muir, who we chiefly identify with the Sierra Nevada but who explored and sojourned in and wrote of a multitude of places, from the Gulf of Mexico to the Gulf of Alaska. I think Muir needed continually to see new landscapes and life forms in order to keep his ardent mind ignited. Motion for him was not a pathology but a devotion, an essential joy, a continuous discovery of place and self. Marriage to place is something we need to realize in our culture, but not all of us are the marrying kind. The least happy period of Muir's life was his tenure as a settled fruit farmer in Martinez, California. He was more given to the exhilarated attention and fervent exploration of wooing, more given to rap-

ture than to extended fidelity. "Rapture" is related etymologically to "rape," but unlike the boomer, who rapes a place, the authentic wooer allows the place to enrapture him.

Wooing often leads to marriage, of course, but not always. Is a life of wooing place after place less responsible than a life of settled wedlock? It may be less sustainable, but the degree of its responsibility depends on the quality of the wooing. John Muir subjected himself utterly to the places he sought out. He walked from Wisconsin to the Gulf Coast, climbed a tree in a Sierra windstorm, survived a subzero night on the summit of Mount Shasta by scalding himself in a sulfurous volcanic vent. There was nothing macho about it—he loved where he happened to be and refused to miss one lick of it. In his wandering, day to day and minute to minute, he was more placed than most of us ever will be, in a lifetime at home or a life on the move. Rootedness was not his genius and not his need. As the followers of the Grateful Dead like to remind us, quoting J. R. R. Tolkien, "Not all who wander are lost."

Muir's devoted adventuring, of course, was something very different from the random restlessness of many in our culture today. Recently I sat through a dinner party during which the guests, most of them thirty-something, compared notes all evening about their travels through Asia. They were experts on border crossings, train transport, currency exchange, and even local art objects, but nothing I heard that evening indicated an influence of land or native peoples on the traveler's soul. They were travel technicians. Many backpackers are the same, passing through wilderness places encapsulated in maps and objectives and high-tech gear. There is a pathology there, a serious one. It infects all of us to one degree or another. We have not yet arrived where we believe—and our color slides show—we have already been.

But if shifting around disconnected from land and community is our national disease, I would argue, perversely perhaps, or perhaps just homeopathically, that it is also an element of our national health. Hank Williams and others in our folk and country traditions stir something in many of us when they sing the delights of the open road, of rambling on the loose by foot or thumb or boxcar through the American countryside. Williams's "Ramblin' Man" believes that God intended him for a life of discovery beyond the horizons. Is this mere immaturity? Irresponsibility? An inability to relate to people or place? Maybe. But maybe also renewal, vitality, a growing of the soul. It makes me very happy to drive the highways and back roads of the West, exchanging talk with people who live where I don't, pulling off somewhere, anywhere, to sleep in the truck and wake to a place I've never seen. I can't defend the cost of that travel in fossil fuel consumption and air befoulment—Williams's rambler at least took the fuel-efficient

~ Love of the Open Road ~

train—but I do know that it satisfies me as a man and a writer.

Such pleasure in movement—the joy of hitting the trail on a brisk morning, of watching from a train the towns and fields pass by, of riding a skateboard or hang glider or even a 747—must come from a deep and ancient source. All of us are descended from peoples whose way was to roam with the seasons, following game herds and the succession of edible plants, responding to weather and natural calamities and the shifting field of relations with their own kind. And those peoples came, far deeper in the past, from creatures not yet human who crawled and leapt and swung through the crowns of trees for millions of years, evolving prehensile hands and color binocular vision as a consequence, then took to the ground and learned to walk upright and wandered out of Africa (or so it now seems) across the continents of Earth. Along the way we have lost much of the sensory acuity our saga evoked in us, our ability to smell danger or read a landscape or notice nuances of weather, but the old knowing still stirs an alertness, an air of anticipation, when we set out on our various journeys.

Native cultural traditions reflect the value of the traveler's knowing. In Native American stories of the Northwest, I notice that Coyote doesn't seem to have a home. Or if he does, he's never there. "Coyote was traveling upriver," the stories begin. "Coyote came over Neahkanie Mountain," "Coyote was going there. . . ." The stories take place in the early time when the order of the world was still in flux. Coyote, the placeless one, helps people and animals find their proper places. You wouldn't want to base a code of ethics on his character, which is unreliable and frequently ignoble, but he is the agent who introduces human beings to their roles and responsibilities in life. Coyote is the necessary inseminator. (Sometimes literally.) He is the shifty and shiftless traveler who fertilizes the locally rooted bloomings of the world.

Maybe Coyote moves among us as the stranger, often odd or disagreeable, sometimes dangerous, who brings reports from far places. Maybe that stranger is one of the carriers of our wildness, one of the mutant genes that keep our evolution fresh and thriving. It is for that stranger, says Elie Weisel, that an extra place is set at the Seder table. The voyager might arrive, the one who finds his home in the homes of others. He might tell a story, a story no one in the family or local community is capable of telling, and children might hear that story and imagine their lives in a new way.

It could be Hank Williams who stops in, and he'll sing to you half the night (and maybe yours will be the family he needs, and he won't die of whiskey and barbiturates in the back seat of a car). Or Huck Finn might be your stranger, on the run from "civilization," dressed as a girl and telling stupendous lies. It could be Jack Kerouac and Neal Cassady, on

the road with their Beat buddies, hopped-up on speed, and they never will stop talking. It might be Gerry Nanapush, the Chippewa power man Louise Edrich has given us, escaped from jail still again to slip through the mists and snows with his ancient powers. Or it might be Billy Parham or John Grady Cole, Cormac McCarthy's boy drifters. They'll want water for their horses, they'll be ready to eat, and if you're wise you'll feed them. They won't talk much themselves, but you might find yourself telling them the crucial story of your life.

Or yours could be the house where Odysseus calls, a still youngish man returning from war, passionate for his family and the flocks and vineyards of home. Just as likely, though, he could be an old man when he stands in your door. No one's quite sure what became of Odysseus. Homer tells us that he made it to Ithaca and set things in order, but the story leaves off there. Some say he resumed his settled life, living out his days as a placed and prosperous landman. But others say that after all his adventures he couldn't live his old life again. Alfred, Lord Tennyson writes that he shipped out from Ithaca with his trusted crew. Maybe so. Or maybe the poet got it only half right. Maybe Penelope, island bound for all those years, was stir crazy herself. Maybe they left Telemachus the ranch and set out westward across the sea, two gray spirits "yearning in desire / To follow knowledge like a sinking star, / Beyond the utmost bound of human thought."

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DAVID QUAMMEN

b. 1948

"Biology," asserts David Quammen, "has great potential for vulgar entertainment." As a natural history columnist for *Outside* magazine for many years, he not only entertained his readers with his witty and provocative style, but also employed biological phenomena as a means of understanding human behavior—using, for instance, the structure of a chambered nautilus to discuss the nature of memory or the mating patterns of wild geese to examine marital fidelity. Born in Cincinnati, Quammen now lives in Montana, where he studied aquatic entomology

at the state university in Missoula. He is not, as he says, a scientist but "a follower of science"—often for the purpose of catching the scientists themselves in biased or untenable positions. Among his books are *Natural Acts* (1985), *Song of the Dodo* (1996), and *Wild Thoughts from Wild Places* (1998), from which the following selection comes.

STRAWBERRIES UNDER ICE

1. THE GRADIENT OF NET MASS BALANCE

Antarctica is a gently domed continent squashed flat, like a dent in the roof of a Chevy, by the weight of its ice. That burden of ice amounts to seven million cubic miles. Melt it away and the Antarctic interior would bounce upward; Earth itself would change shape. This grand cold fact has, to me, on the tiny and personal scale, a warm appeal. Take away ice and the topography of my own life changes drastically too.

Ice is lighter than water but still heavy. The stuff answers gravity. Ice is a solid but not an absolute solid. The stuff flows. Slowly but inexorably it runs downhill. We think of iciness as a synonym for cold, but cold is relative and ice happens to function well as insulation against heat loss: low thermal conductivity. Also it releases heat to immediate surroundings in the final stage of becoming frozen itself. Ice warms. On a certain night, roughly thirteen years ago, it warmed me.

When a tongue of ice flows down a mountain valley, we call it a glacier. When it flows out in all directions from a source point at high elevation, like pancake batter poured on a griddle, we call it a sheet. Out at the Antarctic circumference are glaciers and seaborne shelves, from which icebergs calve off under their own weight. Both sheets and glaciers are supplied with their substance, their impetus, their ice, by snow and other forms of precipitation back uphill at the source. While old ice is continually lost by calving and melting in the lowlands, new ice is deposited in the highlands, and any glacier or sheet receiving more new ice than it loses old, through the course of a year, is a glacier or sheet that is growing. The scientists would say that its net mass balance is positive.

The Antarctic sheet, for instance, has a positive balance. But this is not an essay about Antarctica.

Each point on a great ice body has its own numerical value for mass

Wild Thoughts from Wild Places (New York: Scribner, 1998).