

William Least Heat Moon BLUE HIGHWAYS

ON the old highway maps of America, the main routes were red and the back roads blue. Now even the colors are changing. But in those brevities just before dawn and a little after dusk — times neither day nor night— the old roads return to the sky some of its color. Then, in truth, they carry a mysterious cast of blue, and it's that time when the pull of the blue highway is strongest, when the open road is a beckoning, a strangeness, a place where a man can lose himself.

BEWARE thoughts that come in the night. They aren't turned properly; they come in askew, free of sense and restriction, deriving from the most remote of sources. Take the idea of February 17, a day of canceled expectations, the day I learned my job leaching English was finished because of declining enrollment at the college, the day I called my wife from whom I'd been separated for nine months to give her the news, the day she let slip about her "friend" — Rick or Dick or Chick. Something like that.

That morning, before all the news started hitting the fan, Eddie Short Leaf, who worked a bottomland section of the Missouri River and plowed snow off campus sidewalks, told me if the deep cold didn't break soon the trees would freeze straight through and explode. Indeed.

That night, as I lay wondering whether I would get sleep or explosion, I got the idea instead. A man who couldn't make things go right could at least go. He could quit trying to get out of the way of life. Chuck routine. Live the real jeopardy of circumstance. It was a question of dignity.

The result: on March 19, the last night of winter, I again lay awake in the tangled bed, this time doubting the madness of just walking out on things, doubting the whole plan that would begin at daybreak—to set out on a long (equivalent to half the circumference of the earth), circular trip over the back roads of the United States. Following a circle would give a purpose— to come around again — where taking a straight line would not. And I was going to do it by living out of the back end of a truck. But how to begin a beginning?

A strange sound interrupted my tossing. I went to the window, the cold air against my eyes. At first I saw only starlight. Then they were there. Up in the March blackness, two entwined skeins of snow and blue geese honking north, an undulating W-shaped configuration across the deep sky, white bellies glowing eerily with the reflected light from town, necks stretched northward. Then another flock pulled by who knows what out of the south to breed and remake itself. A new season. Answer: begin by following spring as they did — darkly, with neck stuck out.

THE vernal equinox came on gray and quiet, a curiously still morning not winter and not spring, as if the cycle paused. Because things go their own way, my daybreak departure turned to a morning departure, then to an afternoon departure. Finally, I climbed into the van, rolled down the window, looked a last time at the rented apartment. From a dead elm sparrow hawks used each year came a high *whee* as the nestlings squealed for more grub. I started the engine. When I returned a season from now — if I did return — those squabs would be gone from the nest.

Accompanied only by a small, gray spider crawling the dashboard (kill a spider and it will rain), I drove into the street, around the corner, through the intersection, over the bridge, onto the highway. I was heading toward those little towns that get on the map — if they get on at all — only because some cartographer has a blank space to fill: Remote, Oregon; Simplicity, Virginia; New Freedom, Pennsylvania; New Hope, Tennessee; Why, Arizona; Whynot, Mississippi. Igo, California (just down the road from Ono), here I come.

A PLEDGE: I give this chapter to myself. When done with it, I will shut up about *that* topic.

Call me Least Heat Moon. My father calls himself Heat Moon, my elder brother Little Heat Moon. I, coming last, am therefore Least. It has been a long lesson of a name to learn.

To the Siouan peoples, the Moon of Heat is the seventh month, a time also known as the Blood Moon — I think because of its dusky midsummer color.

I have other names: Buck, once a slur — never mind the predominant Anglo features. Also Bill Trogdon. The Christian names come from a grandfather eight generations back, one William Trogdon, an immigrant Lancashireman living in North Carolina, who was killed by the Tories for providing food to rebel patriots and thereby got his name in volume four of *Makers of America*. Yet to the red way of thinking, a man who makes peace with the new by destroying the old is not to be honored. So I hear.

One summer when Heat Moon and I were walking the ancestral grounds of the Osage near the river of that name in western Missouri, we talked about bloodlines. He said, "Each of the people from anywhere, when you see in them far enough, you find red blood and a red heart. There's a hope."

Nevertheless, a mixed-blood — let his heart be where it may— is a contaminated man who will be trusted by neither red_ nor white. The attitude goes back to a long history of "perfidious" half-breeds, men who, by their nature, had to choose against one of their bloodlines. As for me, I will choose for heart, for spirit, but never will I choose for blood.

One last word about bloodlines. My wife, a woman of striking mixed-blood features, came from the Cherokee. Our battles, my Cherokee and I, we called the "Indian wars."

For these reasons I named my truck Ghost Dancing, a heavy-handed symbol alluding to ceremonies of the 1890s in which the Plains Indians, wearing cloth shirts they believed rendered them indestructible, danced for the return of warriors, bison, and the fervor of the old life that would sweep away the new. Ghost dances, desperate resurrection rituals, were the dying rattles of a people whose last defense was delusion — about all that remained to them in their futility.

A final detail: on the morning of my departure, I had seen thirty-eight Blood Moons, an age that carries its own madness and futility. With a nearly desperate sense of isolation and a growing suspicion that I lived in an alien land, I took to the open road in search of places where change did not mean ruin and where time and men and deeds connected.

THE first highway: Interstate 70 eastbound out of Columbia, Missouri. The road here follows, more or less, the Booneslick Trail, the initial leg of the Oregon Trail; it also parallels both the southern latitude of the last great glacier in central Missouri as well as the northern boundary of the Osage Nation. The Cherokee and I had skirmished its length in Missouri and Illinois for ten years, and memory made for hard driving that first day of spring. But it was the fastest route east out of the homeland. When memory is too much, turn to the eye. So I watched particularities.

Item: a green and grainy and corrupted ice over the ponds.

Item: blackbirds, passing like storm-borne leaves, sweeping just above the treetops, moving as if invisibly tethered to one will.

Item: barn roofs painted VISIT ROCK CITY — SEE SEVEN STATES. Seven at one fell swoop. People loved it.

Item: uprooted fencerows of Osage orange (so-called hedge apples although they are in the mulberry family). The Osage made bows and war clubs from the limbs; the trunks, with a natural fungicide, carried the first telegraph

lines; and roots furnished dye to make doughboy uniforms olive drab. Now the Osage orange were going so bigger tractors could work longer rows.

At High Hill, two boys were flying gaudy butterfly kites that pulled hard against their leashes. No strings, no flight. A town of surprising flatness on a single main street of turn-of-the-century buildings paralleling the interstate, High Hill sat golden in a piece of sunlight that broke through. No one moved along the street, and things held so still and old, the town looked like a museum diorama.

Eighty miles out, rain started popping the windshield, and the road became blobby headlights and green interstate signs for this exit, that exit. LAST EXIT TO ELSEWHERE. I crossed the Missouri River not far upstream from where Lewis and Clark on another wet spring afternoon set out for Mr. Jefferson's *"terra incognita"*. Then, to the southeast under a glowing skullcap of fouled sky, lay St. Louis. I crossed the Mississippi as it carried its forty hourly tons of topsoil to the Louisiana delta.

The tumult of St. Louis behind, the Illinois superwide quiet but for the rain. I turned south onto state 4, a shortcut to I-64. After that, the 42,500 miles of straight and wide could lead to hell for all I cared; I was going to slay on the three million miles of bent and narrow rural American two-lane, the roads to Podunk and Toonerville. Into the sticks, the boondocks, the burghs, backwaters, jerkwaters, the wide-spots-in-the-road, the don't-blink-or-you'll-miss-it towns. Into those places where you say, "My god! What if you lived here!" The Middle of Nowhere.

The early darkness came on. My headlamps cut only a forty-foot trail through the rain, and the dashboard lights cast a spectral glowing. Sheet lightning behind the horizon of trees made the sky look like a great faded orange cloth being blown about; then darkness soaked up the light, and, for a moment. I was blinder than before.

In the approaching car beams, raindrops spattering the road became little beacons. I bent over the wheel to steer along the divider stripes. A frog, long-legged and green, belly-flopped across the road to the side where the puddles would be better. The land, still cold and wintry, was alive with creatures that trusted in the coming of spring.

On through Lebanon, a brick-street village where Charles Dickens spent a night in the Mermaid Inn; on down the Illinois roads — roads that leave you ill and annoyed, the joke went — all the way dodging chuckholes that *Time* magazine said Americans would spend 626 million dollars in extra fuel swerving around. Then onto I-64, a new interstate that cuts across southern

Illinois and Indiana without going through a single town. If a world lay out there, it was far from me. On and on. Behind, only a red wash of taillights.

At Grayville, Illinois, on the Wabash River, I pulled up for the night on North Street and parked in front of the old picture show. The marquee said TRAVELOGUE TODAY, or it would have if the *O's* had been there. I should have gone to a cafe and struck up a conversation; instead I stumbled to the bunk in the back of my rig, undressed, zipped into the sleeping bag, and watched things go dark, I fought desolation and wrestled memories of the Indian wars.

First night on the road. I've read that fawns have no scent so that predators cannot track them down. For me, I heard the past snuffling about somewhere close.

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THE rain came again in the night and moved on east to leave a morning of cool overcast. In Well's Restaurant I said to a man whose cap told me what fertilizer he used, "You've got a clean little town here."

"Grayville's bigger than a whale, but the oil riggers get us a mite dirty around the ears," he said. "I've got no oil myself, not that I haven't drilled up a sieve." He jerked his thumb heavenward. "Gave me beans, but if i'da got my rightful druthers, I'da took oil." He adjusted his cap. "So what's your line?"

"Don't have one."

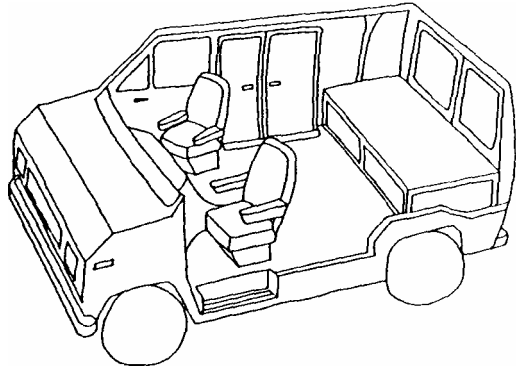
"How's that work?"

"It doesn't and isn't."

He grunted and went back to his coffee. The man took me for a bindlestiff. Next time I'd say I sold ventilated aluminum awnings or repaired long-rinse cycles on Whirlpools. Now my presence disturbed him. After the third tilt of his empty cup, he tried to make sense of me by asking where I was from and why I was so far from home. I hadn't traveled even three hundred miles yet. I told him I planned to drive around the country on the smallest roads I could find.

"Goddamn," he said, "if screwball things don't happen every day even in this town. The country's all alike now." On that second day of the new season, I guess I was his screwball thing.

Along the road: old snow hidden from the sun lay in sooty heaps, but the interstate ran clear of cinders and salt deposits, the culverts gushed with splash and slosh, and the streams, covering the low cornfields, filled the old soil with richness gathered in their meanderings.



Ghost Dancing

Driving through the washed land in my small self-propelled box — a "wheel estate," a mechanic had called it — I felt clean and almost disentangled. I had what I needed for now, much of it stowed under the wooden bunk:

- 1 sleeping bag and blanket;
- 1 Coleman cooler (empty but for a can of chopped liver a friend had given *me* so there would *always* be something to eat);
- 1 Rubbennaid basin and a plastic gallon jug (the sink);
- 1 Sears, Roebuck portable toilet;
- 1 Optimus 8R white gas cook stove (hardly bigger than a can of beans);
- 1 knapsack of utensils, a pot, a skillet;
- 1 U.S. Navy seabag of clothes;
- 1 tool kit;
- 1 satchel of notebooks, pens, road atlas, and a microcassette recorder;
- 2 Nikon F2 35mm cameras and five lenses;
- 2 vade mecums: Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and Neihardl's *Black Elk Speaks*.

In my billfold were four gasoline credit cards and twenty-six dollars. Hidden under the dash were the remnants of my savings account: \$428.

Ghost Dancing, a 1975 half-ton Econoline (the smallest van Ford then made), rode self-contained but not self-containing. So I hoped. It had two worn rear tires and an ominous knocking in the waterpump. I had converted the van

from a clanky tin box into a place at once a six-by-ten bedroom, kitchen, bathroom, parlor. Everything simple and lightweight — no crushed velvet upholstery, no wine racks, no built-in television. It came equipped with power nothing and drove like what it was: a truck. Your basic plumber's model.

The Wabash divides southern Illinois from Indiana. East of the fluvial flood plain, a sense of the unknown, the addiction of the traveler, began seeping in. Abruptly, Pokeberry Creek came and went before I could see it. The interstate afforded easy passage over the Hoosierland. so easy it gave no sense Of the up and down of the country; worse, it hid away the people. Life doesn't happen along inlerstales. It's against the law.

At the Huntingburg exit, I turned off and headed for the Ohio River. Indiana 66, a road so crooked it could run for the legislature, took me into the hilly fields of CHEW MAIL POUCH barns, past Christ-of-the-Ohio Catholic Church, through the Swiss town of Tell City with its statue of William and his crossbow and nervous son. On past the old stone riverfront houses in Cannelton, on up along the Ohio, the muddy banks sometimes not ten feet from the road. The brown water rolled and roiled. Under wooded bluffs I stopped to stretch among the periwinkle. At the edge of a field, Sulphur Spring bubbled up beneath a cover of dead leaves. Shawnees once believed in the curative power of the water, and settlers even bottled it. I cleared the small spring for a taste. Bad enough to cure something.

I crossed into the Eastern Time Zone and then over the Blue River, which was a brown creek. Blue, Green, Red: yes — yet who ever heard of a Brown River? For some reason, the farther west the river and the scarcer the water, the more honest the names become: Stinking Water Branch, Dead Horse Fork, Cutthroat Gulch, Damnation Creek. Perhaps the old trailmen and prospectors figured settlers would be slower to build along a river named Calamity.

On through what was left of White Cloud, through the old statehouse town of Corydon, I drove to get the miles between me and home. Daniel Boone moved on at the sight of smoke from a new neighbor's chimney; I was moving from the sight of my own. Although the past may not repeat / itself, it does rhyme, Mark Twain said. As soon as my worries became only the old immediate worries of the road — When's the rain going to stop? Who can you trust to fix a waterpump around here? Where's the best pie in town? — then I would slow down.

I took the nearest Ohio River bridge at Louisville and whipped around the city and went into Pewee Valley and on to La Grange, where seven daily

Louisville & Nashville freight trains ran right down Main Street. Then southeast.

Curling, dropping, trying to follow a stream, Kentucky 5 3. looked as if it needed someone to take the slack out of it. On that gray late afternoon, the creek ran full and clear under the rock ledges that dripped out the last meltwater. In spite of snow packs here and about, a woman bent to the planting of a switch of a tree. one man tilled mulch into his garden, another cleaned a birdhouse.

At Shelbyville I stopped for supper and the night. Just outside of town and surrounded by cattle and pastures was Claudia Sanders Dinner House, a low building attached to an old brick farmhouse with red roof. I didn't make the connection in names until I was inside and saw a mantel full of coffee mugs of a smiling Colonel Harlan Sanders. Claudia was his wife, and the Colonel once worked out of the farmhouse before the great buck-ets-in-the-sky poured down their golden bounty of extra crispy. The Dinner House specialized in Kentucky ham and country-style vegetables.

I waited for a table. A man, in a suit of sharp creases, and his wife, her jacket lying as straight as an accountant's left margin, suggested I join them. "You can't be as dismal as you look," she said. "Just hunger, we decided."

"Hunger's the word," I said.

We talked and I sat waiting for the question. It got there before the olives and celery. "What do you do?" the husband asked. I told my lie, turned it to a joke, and then gave an answer too long. As I talked, the man put a pair of forks, a spoon, and knife into a lever system that changed directions twice before lifting his salad plate.

He said. "I notice that you use *work* and *job* interchangeably. Oughten to do that. A job's what you force yourself to pay attention to for money. With work, you don't have to force yourself. There are a lot of jobs in this country, and that's good because they keep people occupied. That's why they're called 'occupations.'"

The woman said, "Cal works at General Electric in Louisville. He's a metallurgical engineer."

"I don't *work* there, I'm employed there," he said to her. Then to me, "I'm supposed to spend my time 'imagineering,' but the job isn't so much a matter of getting something new made. It's a matter of making it *look like* we're getting something made. You know what my work is? You know what I pay attention to? Covering my tracks. Pretending, covering my tracks, and getting through another day. That's my work. Imagineering's my job."

"It isn't that bad, darling."

"It isn't that bad on a stick. What I do doesn't matter. There's no damn future whatsoever in what I do, and I don't mean built-in obsolescence. What I do begins and stops each day. There's no convergence between what I know and what I do. And even less with what I *want* to know."

Now he was hoisting his wife's salad plate, rolling her cherry tomato around. "You've learned lots," she said. "Just lots."

"I've learned this, Twinkie: when America outgrows engineering, we'll begin to have something."

6

IN the morning, an incident of blackbirds happened. Swarm following swarm wheeled above Ghost Dancing and dropped into the tall oaks to watch the dawn. They seemed to be conducting some son of ancient bird worship of the spring sun. New arrivals fluttered helter-skelter into the branches but immediately turned toward the warm light with the others. Like sunflowers, every head faced east. The birds chattered among the fat buds, their throaty squeakings like thousands of unoiled wheels. Heat Moon says it's the planting season when the blackbirds return; yet not long after sunrise, the warm and golden light disappeared as if the blackness in the trees had absorbed it, and it was days before I saw sun again.

To walk Main Street in Shelbyville, Kentucky, is to go down three centuries of American architecture: rough-hewn timber, postbellum brick, Victorian fretwork, 1950s plate glass. Founded in 1792, it's an old town for this pan of the country.

At the west end of Main, a man stripping siding from a small, two-story house had exposed a log cabin. I stopped to watch him straighten the doorway. To get a better perspective, he came to the sidewalk, eyed the lintel, then looked at me. "It's tilting, isn't it?" he said.

"There's a little list to it, but you could live with that."

"I want it right." He went to the door, set up a jack, measured, then leaned into it. The timbers creaked and squared up. He shoved a couple of two-by-fours behind the lintel to hold it true then cranked down the jack. "Come in for a look," he said. "After a hundred and fifty years, she's not likely to fall down today."



1. Bob Andriot, Tony Hardin, Kirk Littlefield in Shelbyville, Kentucky

"That's before people started jacking around with it." The interior, bare of plaster and lath, leaked a deep smell of old timbers. Bigger than railway ties,

the logs lay locked in dovetails, all careful work done only with ax, adz, froe, and wedge. The man, Bob Andriot, asked what I thought. "It's a beauty. How long have you been at it?"

"Ten days. We want to move in the first of April."

"You're going to live here?"

"My wife and I have a picture-framing and interior design shop. We're moving it out of our house. We just bought this place."

"Did you know the log cabin was underneath the siding?"

"We thought it possible. Shape of the house and the low windows looked right. We knew some were along Main." He went to the door. "That little house across the street. Could be one under the siding. A lot of cabins still buried under asphalt shingles, and nobody knows it. I've heard Kentucky's got more log houses than any other state."

A squarely solid man stepped through a back window. Andriot said, "Tony here got himself one last year in Spencer County."

"But I knew what I was gettin'," Tony said. "It wasn't sided over. Some fellas clearin' a field were discussin' whether to burn the cabin or push it in the holler. We were lookin' for a house, so we bought it and moved it. Only three inches off square, and I know factually it'd been there since eighteen oh seven. Good for another couple hundred years now."

"Tony's logs are chestnut and a lot more termite-resistant than these poplar logs here," Andriot said. "Somebody let a gutter leak for a long time on the back corner, and termites came up in the wet wood. Now that end's like a rotted tooth, except we can't pull it. So we'll reinforce."

He took me around to the east wall. "Look at this." He pointed to a worn Roman numeral I cut between adz marks into the bottom log. The eighth tier had a VIII scratched in it. "They're numbered, and we don't know why. I don't think it was ever moved. Maybe pre-cut to a plan."

"A prefab nineteenth-century log house?"

"Don't think this was a house originally. Records show it was a coach stop on the old road to Louisville in eighteen twenty-nine, but it's probably older. Main Street's always been the highway."

"What about the gaps between the logs?"

Andriot stuck a crowbar between two timbers and pried out a rock caked with mud as hard as the stone. "They chinked with rocks and mud, but we aren't going to be that authentic. We'll leave the rocks but chink with concrete." He locked the crowbar onto a wooden peg, its color much lighter than the logs, and pulled it free. "Hand-whittled oak. Sniff it." The peg smelled of freshly cut

wood. "You're sniffing a tree from seventeen seventy-six." Andriot touched his nose. "Gives you a real sense of history. Take it with you."

He asked where I was from. Tony listened and asked whether I had ever read *Walking Through Missouri on a Mule*.

"Never heard of it, but I like that title."

"It's about an old boy that tramped across the state a hundred years ago. Boy that walked it wrote the book. Now, that's good reading."

A head popped in the window. "Hey, Kirk," Andriot said. "Coke time."

"I went yesterday."

"And today," Andriot said.

Kirk crossed the street to the Exxon station and came back with three Cokes and a Kickapoo Joy Juice. "Ran flat out of Coke," he said.

There was a discussion over who had to drink the "Injun piss." "I've never had it," I said. "Let me try it."

"Man won't never come back to Kentucky now," Kirk said.

We sat on the plank floor and talked. "You know," Andriot said, "this old place makes a difference here. To us, of course, but to the town too before long. I feel it more than I can explain it. I don't know, I guess rescuing this building makes me feel I've done something to last. And people here need to see this old lady. To be reminded."

"Old lady? That's not what you were calling her yesterday."

"That was yesterday. She gets better as she gets older."

The men got up to work again, and we shook hands around. When I got to the sidewalk. Kirk called to me, "What about the Injun piss?"

I thought before I spoke. "The red man's revenge."

I drove on east. I thought how Bob Andriot was rebuilding a past he could see and smell, one he could shape with his hands. He was using it to build something new. I envied him that.

7

U.S. 60, running from Norfolk, Virginia, to Los Angeles, used to be a major east-west route. But Interstate 64 now has taken up the heavy traffic and left 60 to farm pickups and kids on horses. For the blue highway traveler, freeing roads like this one is the purpose of the interstates. Comprising only one percent of American highways, the interstate system has opened a lot of roadway to the dawdler. And a lot of space: the billboards have followed the traffic. The Department of Transportation expects the interstates to carry a quarter of all

traffic by the early eighties; that statistic, more than any billboard legislation, has cleared the back roads of the United States.

I came to a ramshackle place called Smitty's Trading Post. Smitty was a merchant of relics. He could sell you a Frankfort, Kentucky, city bus that made its last run down Shively Street, or an ice cream wagon made from a golf can, or a used bulldozer, or a bent horseshoe. I stopped to look. Lying flat as the ground, a piebald mongrel too tired to lift its head gave a one-eyed stare. I pulled on the locked door, peered through windows grimed like coalminers' goggles, but I couldn't find Smitty. A pickup rattled in. A man with a wen above his eye said, "Smitty ain't here."

"Where is he?" I was just making talk.

"You the feller wantin' the harness?"

"Already got one."

"What'd you come for then?"

"I don't know. Have to talk to Smitty to find out."

"That's one I ain't heard," he said.

8

FRANKFORT is a tale of two cities. Once the citizens called it Frank's Ford after Stephen Frank, a pioneer killed by Indians in 1780 near a shallow crossing in the Kentucky River. As the town grew, people found the name too rustic. Not wanting to chuck their history entirely, they changed it to Frankfort, although there were probably more Bolivians in town than Germans. If it made cosmetic sense, it didn't make historical sense, and the people cut something between them and their beginnings.

A traveler coming from the west sees no hint of the town because the highway abruptly angles down a bluff into a deep, encircled river valley that conceals even the high dome of the capitol. If you're ever looking for the most hidden statehouse in America, look no farther than Frankfort.

The river loops from the east bluffs to the west bluffs and back again, a serpentine among old buildings that almost makes the town a little Venice. Had it not been for the last thirty years, Frankfort would be an architecturally distinguished capital city with streets of forcefully simple, aesthetically honest houses and shops. But the impulse to "modernize" nineteenth-century commercial buildings, an impulse that has blasted the business districts of almost every town in the country, defaced Frankfort. The harmonious, proportioned, historic lines of the buildings now wore veneers of ceramic tile, cedar siding, imitation marble, extruded aluminum, textured stucco, precast

concrete; and the street level had become a jumble of meretricious, tawdry fronts. But at the second- and third-story levels, graceful designs in brick and stone remained; disregarding the plywood over the upper-story windows, you had unrenovated history. Frankfort or Frank's Ford, take your pick.

Old Frankfort did nothing to prepare me for the new Frankfort that spread over the eastern bluffs, where the highway ran the length of one of those carnival midway strips of plastic-roof franchises. It was past noon, and I could have had lunch from any of two dozen frylines without knowing I was seven hundred miles from home. Maybe America should make the national bird a Kentucky Fried Leghorn and put Ronald McDonald on the dollar bill. After all, the year before, franchisers did nearly three hundred billion dollars of business. And there's nothing wrong with that except the franchise system has almost obliterated the local cafes and grills and catfish parlors serving distinctly regional food, much of it made from truly secret recipes. In another time, to eat in Frankfort was to know you were eating in Kentucky. You couldn't find the same thing in Lompoc or Weehawken. A professor at the University of Kentucky, Thomas D. dark, tells of an old geologist who could distinguish local cooking by the area it came from and whether it was cooked on the east or west side of the Kentucky River.

But franchisers don't sell many of their thirty-three billion hamburgers per year in blue highway towns where chophouses must draw customers through continuing quality rather than national advertising. I had nothing to lose but the chains, and I hoped to find down the county roads Ma in her beanery and Pap over his barbecue pit, both still serving slow food from the same place they did thirty years ago. Where-you-from-buddy restaurants.

9

NOT out of any plan, but just because it lay in front of me, I headed for the Bluegrass region. I took an old road, a "pike," the Kentuckians say, since their first highways were toll roads with entrances barred by revolving poles called "turn pikes." I followed the old pike, today route 421, not out of any plan either, but because it looked pleasant — a road of white fences around Thoroughbred farms. Many of the fence planks now, however, were creosoted and likely to remain the color of charred stumps until someone invents a machine to paint them.

Along the Leestown Road, near an old whitewashed springhouse made useless by a water-district pipeline, I stopped to eat lunch. Downstream from the spring where butter once got cooled, under peeling sycamores, the clear rill

washed around clumps of new watercress. I pulled makings for a sandwich from my haversack: Muenster cheese, a collop of hard salami, sourdough bread, horseradish. I cut a sprig of watercress and laid it on, then ate slowly, letting the gurgle in the water and the guttural trilling of red-winged blackbirds do the talking. A noisy, whizzing gnat that couldn't decide whether to eat on my sandwich or ear joined me.

Had I gone looking for some particular place rather than any place, I'd never have found this spring under the sycamores. Since leaving home, I felt for the first time at rest. Sitting full in the moment. I practiced on the god-awful difficulty of just paying attention. It's a contention of Heat Moon's —believing as he does any traveler who misses the journey misses about all he's going to get— that a man becomes his attentions. His observations and curiosity, they make and remake him.

Etymology: *curious*, related to *cure*, once meant "carefully observant." Maybe a tonic of curiosity would counter my numbing sense, that life inevitably creeps toward the absurd. *Absurd*, by the way, derives from a Latin word meaning "deaf, dulled." Maybe the road could provide a therapy through observation of the ordinary and obvious, a means whereby the outer eye opens an inner one. STOP, LOOK, LISTEN, the old railroad crossing signs warned. Whitman calls it "the profound lesson of reception."

New ways of seeing can disclose new things: the radio telescope revealed quasars and pulsars, and the scanning electron microscope showed the whiskers of the dust mite. But turn the question around: Do new *things* make for new ways of seeing?

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IT'S an old debate here: Is bluegrass indigenous to Kentucky or did it come accidentally to America as padding to protect pottery shipped from England? As for the rock under the bluegrass, there's no debate. Water percolating through the soft limestone leaches out the calcium and phosphorus that make for strong yet light-framed stake winners whose spine and leg bones have the close grain of ivory rather than the more porous grain of horses pastured in other areas.

And it's also limestone percolation that engenders good handmade bourbon; after all, hundred proof is half water. To make bourbon with purified water, as today the distilleries must to maintain consistent quality, is to take the Kentucky out of the whiskey. And that raises another old debate in the

Bluegrass about who made the first straight bourbon. One group holds — with evidence as good as anyone's — that it was a Baptist preacher.

In Lexington, I passed row after row of tobacco warehouses and auction barns on my way into the thousand square miles of bluegrass wold once called "God's footstool," a fertile land where pumpkin vines grow so fast they wear out the melons dragging them along. So they say.

Ghost Dancing leaned in and out of the easy curves — running east, west, south — and I steered a course over the swells of land. The captain before his binnacle. Past creosoted tobacco barns with silvery galvanized roofs, past white farmhouses, down along black lines of plank fences that met at right angles and linked the countryside into a crossword puzzle pattern.

It was late afternoon, and mares and foals were coming to drink at small quarry pits cut into limestone outcroppings. These old exposures of rock had furnished the material for the miles of mortarless fieldstone fences that slaves built in a distinctively regional style more than a century ago. Held together only by the cut of one stone conforming to another, the walls consisted of horizontal slabs laid on each other to a height of about three feet, then capped by smaller pieces set on edge to form a jagged top. New Englanders, proud of their piled dry walls, have nothing to match these of the Bluegrass for precision. But where runaway cars had knocked down the fences, the rocks had been heaped haphazardly back. Like the slaves, the skill and time necessary to build a good stone fence were gone.

Among catalpa and black cherry trees, a billboard pictured beams radiating from a carmine sun surmounted by a cross; below was THINK ABOUT IT. So I did and found the Gospel According to Acme Outdoor Advertising an abomination. But then, it's such mixtures that give the Kentucky flavor of born-again religion, bourbon whiskey, bluegrass farms, burley tobacco, and blooded horses.

The highway, without warning, rolled off the plateau of green pastures and entered a wooded and rocky gorge; down, down, precipitously down to the Kentucky River. Along the north slope, man-high columns of ice dung to the limestone. The road dropped deeper until it crossed the river at Brooklyn Bridge. The gorge, hidden in the tableland and wholly unexpected, was the Palisades. At the bottom lay only enough ground for the river and a narrow strip of willow-rimmed floodplain.

Houses on stilts and a few doublewides rose from the damp flats like toadstools. Next to one mobile home was a partly built steel boat longer than the trailer. I turned back and stopped at the Palisades Filling Station, a building with a chimney of round river stones, to ask the way to the boat. Inside you

could buy sorghum and honey in hand-labeled quarts, peacock feathers, or framed Renoir reproductions. On the walls, counters, doors, high and low, were signs: DONT LEAN ON GLASS, NO CREDIT, NO CHECKS, NO PETS INSIDE, KEEP OUT. By a row of windows opening to the water, a woman dipped river perch in cornmeal batter and dropped them, crackling, into a skillet. I forgot why I'd stopped and asked to buy a fish dinner.

"That's our supper you're wantin'. But I can heat you up one of them sandwiches in the microwave radio oven."

The dry sandwiches, wrapped in plastic, had started to warp like old lumber. "Actually," I said, "I just wanted to ask a couple of questions."

"Questions?" For some reason, she looked behind herself.

"How do I get to that steel boat being built up the river?"

"Past the pumps and down the din road. You said questions."

"What goes on in the cave across the highway — the one fenced off and posted with U.S. Government signs?"

"Some time ago they tested a gun in there soldiers used in Veet-Nam. I heard so. But years before it was a gas station and diner. Even had slot machines in the back. That cave's seen it all."

I followed the road to the boat. The big hull, a smooth skin of steel plates fused like a surgeon's sutures, sat on concrete blocks in drydock fashion. The door of the trailer opened and a man stepped out. He seemed made of cut and welded steel too. I said, "I'm looking for the shipwright." "You're looking at him."