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William Least Heat Moon

William Least Heat Moon (born in 1939) is Native American. His best-selling book Blue Highways: A Journey into America, published in 1982, chronicles his journeys around America. In the following selection from Blue Highways, Moon stops in the supposed "nowhereland" of southwest Texas and records everything he sees and hears before moving on to a small town up the road.

Straight as a chief's countenance, the road lay ahead, curves so long and gradual as to be imperceptible except on the map. For nearly a hundred miles due west of Eldorado, not a single town. It was the Texas some people see as barren waste when they cross it, the part they later describe at the motel bar as "nothing." They say, "There's nothing out there."

Driving through the miles of nothing, I decided to test the hypothesis and stopped somewhere in western Crockett County on the top of a broad mesa, just off Texas 29. At a distance, the land looked so rocky and dry, a religious man could believe that the First Hand never got around to the creation in here. Still, somebody had decided to string barbed wire around it.

No plant grew higher than my head. For a while, I heard only miles of wind against the Ghost; but after the ringing in my ears stopped, I heard myself breathing, then a bird note, an answering call, another kind of bird-song, and another: mockingbird, mourning dove, an enigma. I heard the high zizz of flies the color of gray flannel and the deep buzz of a blue bumblebee. I made a list of nothing in particular:

1. mockingbird
2. mourning dove
3. enigma bird (heard not saw)
4. gray flies
5. blue bumblebee
6. two circling buzzards (not yet, boys)
7. orange ants
8. black ants
9. orange-black ants (what's been going on?)

10. three species of spiders
11. opossum skull
12. jackrabbit (chewed on cactus)
13. deer (left scat)
14. coyote (left tracks)
15. small rodent (den full of seed hulls under rock)
16. snake (skin hooked on cactus spine)
17. prickly pear cactus (yellow blossoms)
18. hedgehog cactus (orange blossoms)
19. barrel cactus (red blossoms)
20. devil's pincushion (no blossoms)
21. catclaw (no better name)
22. two species of grass (neither green, both alive)
23. yellow flowers (blossoms smaller than peppercorns)
24. sage (indicates alkali-free soil)
25. mesquite (three-foot plants with eighty-foot roots to reach water that fell as rain two thousand years ago)
26. greasewood (oh, yes)
27. joint fir (steeped stems make Brigham Young tea)
28. earth
29. sky
30. wind (always)

That was all the nothing I could identify then, but had I waited until dark when the desert really comes to life, I could have done better. To say nothing is out here is incorrect; to say the desert is stingy with everything except space and light, stone and earth is closer to the truth.

I drove on. The low sun turned the mesa rimrock to silhouettes, angular and weird and unearthly; had someone said the far side of Saturn looked just like this, I would have believed him. The road dropped to the Pecos River, now dammed to such docility I couldn't imagine it formerly demarcating the western edge of a rudimentary white civilization. Even the old wagonmen felt the unease of isolation when they crossed the Pecos, a small but once serious river that has had many names: Rio de las Vacas (River of Cows—perhaps a reference to bison), Rio Salado (Salty River), Rio Puerco (Dirty River).

West of the Pecos, a strangely truncated cone rose from the valley. In the oblique evening light, its silhouette looked like a Mayan temple, so perfect was its symmetry. I stopped again, started climbing, stirring a panic of

lizards on the way up. From the top, the rubbled land below—veined with the highway and arroyos, topographical relief absorbed in the dusk—looked like a roadmap.

The desert, more than any other terrain, shows its age, shows time because so little vegetation covers the ancient erosions of wind and storm. What appears is tawny grit once stone and stone crumbling to grit. Everywhere rock, earth's oldest thing. Even desert creatures come from a time older than the woodland animals, and they, in answer to the arduousness, have retained prehistoric coverings of chitin and lapped scale and primitive defenses of spine and stinger, fang and poison, shell and claw.

The night, taking up the shadows and details, wiped the face of the desert into a simple, uncluttered blackness until there were only three things: land, wind, stars. I was there too, but my presence I felt more than saw. It was as if I had been reduced to mind, to an edge of consciousness. Men, ascetics, in all eras have gone into deserts to lose themselves—Jesus, Saint Anthony, Saint Basil, and numberless medicine men—maybe because such a losing happens almost as a matter of course here if you avail yourself. The Sioux once chanted, "All over the sky a sacred voice is calling."

Back to the highway, on with the headlamps, down Six Shooter Draw. In the darkness, deer, just shadows in the lights, began moving toward the desert willows in the wet bottoms. Stephen Vincent Benét:

When Daniel Boone goes by, at night,
The phantom deer arise
And all lost, wild America
Is burning in their eyes.

From the top of another high mesa: twelve miles west in the flat valley floor, the lights of Fort Stockton blinked white, blue, red, and yellow in the heat like a mirage. How is it that desert towns look so fine and big at night? It must be that little is hidden. The glistening ahead could have been a golden city of Cibola. But the reality of Fort Stockton was plywood and concrete block and the plastic signs of Holiday Inn and Mobil Oil.

The desert had given me an appetite that would have made carrion 10
crow stuffed with saltbush taste good. I found a Mexican cafe of adobe, with a whitewashed log ceiling, creekstone fireplace, and jukebox pumping out mariachi music. It was like a bunkhouse. I ate burritos, chile rellenos, and pinto beans, all ladled over with a fine, incendiary sauce the color of sludge from an old steel drum. At the next table sat three big, round men: an Indian wearing a silver headband, a Chicano in a droopy Pancho Villa mustache, and a Negro in faded overalls. I thought what a litany of grievances that table could recite. But the more I looked, the more I believed they were someone's vision of the West, maybe someone making ads for Levy's bread, the ads that used to begin "You don't have to be Jewish."

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Key Words

The author uses language with which you may not be familiar. Find the following words in the paragraphs indicated, and explain their meanings in the context of the sentences in which the words appear. Consult a dictionary, as needed.

- countenance (par. 1)
- enigma (par. 3)
- docility (par. 4)
- rudimentary (par. 4)
- truncated (par. 5)
- arduousness (par. 6)
- ascetics (par. 7)

Language and Style

The author makes extensive use of figurative or metaphorical language to make his description of West Texas vivid. Discuss with other readers what makes these passages effective:

"Straight as a Chief's countenance. . . ." (par. 1)

"I heard the zizz of flies. . . ." (par. 3)

"Even desert creatures come from a time older than the woodland animals . . . [and] have retained prehistoric coverings of chitin and lapped scale and primitive defenses of spine and stinger, fang and poison, shell and claw." (par. 6)

"The night . . . wiped the face of the desert into a simple, uncluttered blackness. . . ." (par. 7)

". . . 'All over the sky a sacred voice is calling.'" (par. 7)

"The desert had given me an appetite that would have made carrion crow stuffed with saltbush taste good." (par. 10)

Topics for Discussion and Writing

1. After establishing that he is "[d]riving through the miles of nothing," the author then makes a list "of nothing in particular." Look again at his list of things and actions. Which ones do you think most contribute to his change of mind so that later he can write: "To say nothing is out here is incorrect; to say the desert is stingy with everything except space and light, stone and earth is closer to the truth"?

2. Look up the area described on a topographical map of Texas and notice the close fit between the author's description of West Texas and the topography indicated on the map. In addition, the author mentions place names. How many of them are indicated on the map?
3. The author refers to historical people, places, and things such as Pancho Villa, Fort Stockton, the golden city of Cibola, and Levy's bread. Identify such references and discuss what they add to the effectiveness of the description in "West Texas."
4. What is the point of the author's comments about ads for Levy's bread? How do his comments reflect the place, the people, and the situation described in the last paragraph?
5. Write about a geographical area that has made a lasting impression on you. It may be a place close to home or one you visited on a trip. Use as many vivid details and words or phrases that appeal to the reader's senses as you can. The purpose of your description is to help your readers "see" and experience the place almost as vividly and deeply as you did.