

WILLIAM
LEAST
HEAT-MOON

ROADS TO
QUOZ
An American Mosey

by the author of *Blue Highways* and *River-Horse*

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Blue Highways: A Journey into America

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By Way of Explanation

“Upon my honour,” cried Lynmere, piqued, “the quoz of the present season are beyond what a man could have hoped to see!”

“Quoz! What’s quoz, nephew?”

“Why, it’s a thing there’s no explaining to you sort of gentlemen.”

—Frances Burney,
Camilla,
1796

Down an Ancient Valley

The Ouachita River Country



- | | |
|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1 Columbia, Missouri | 5 Monroe, Louisiana |
| 2 Rich Mountain, Arkansas | 6 Jonesville, Louisiana |
| 3 Hot Springs, Arkansas | 7 Natchez, Mississippi |
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Down an Ancient Valley

Before It Shall All Be Disenchanted

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Before It Shall All Be Disenchanted

Alexandria, Louisiana, April 21, 1835

Dear Sir —

You remember the promise you exacted from me last summer in Philadelphia to visit the Maison Rouge Grant on the Ouachita. You see I adopt the good old French orthography of that river. I know not whether your motive was to give me pleasure or to inflict a salutary discipline. If the latter, should you take the trouble to read this, I shall have my revenge. In any view, I cannot doubt that it originated in a benevolent wish in some way to confer a benefit. I am now seated to give you a sketch of my mode of performing that promise. I spin this long yarn with the more confidence, being aware that you cannot but take an interest in reading surveys, however inadequate, of a region so extensive, so fertile, so identified with your name as its possessor, into the alluvial swamps of which, in your bygone days, you too have plunged.

The Ouachita is a beautiful river, of interesting character and capabilities; and, although

unknown to song, classical in forest narrative and tradition, as having been the locale of the pastoral experiments of the Marquess Maison Rouge and Baron de Bastrop, as well as many other adventurers, Spanish, French, and American, not to mention its relation to American history as the point where Aaron Burr masked his ultimate plans of ambition and conquest. I wish to seize some of its present fresh and forest features, before it shall all be disenchanting by being transformed into a counting-room flower-garden or cotton plantation. I will even hope that this sketch will awaken pleasant reminiscences of your own extensive journeys and stirring incidents in these remote central forests. You may, therefore, christen this prelude to my Ouachita trip a preface or an apology, at your choice.

—*Journal of the Rev. Timothy Flint,
From the Red River to the Ouachita,
or Washita, in Louisiana in 1835*

The Letter Q Embodied

AS TRAVELERS AGE, we carry along ever more journeys, especially when we cross through a remembered terrain where we become wayfarers in time as well as space, where physical landscapes get infused with temporal ones. We roll along a road, into a town, past a café, a hotel, and we may hear stories and rising memories. Then our past is got with feet, and it comes forth: *There, I met her there*. Or, *That's the place, that's where he told me about the accident*. Since each day lived gets subtracted from our allotted total, recollections may be our highest recompense: to live one moment score of times.

For me, having now become an elder of the road, these risings of memory from a specific topography can almost lead me to believe all previous miles have gone to create some single moment and then I can see how meaning begins in and proceeds from memory. Backseated children able to find only boredom beyond car windows — *if they're looking out* — are nevertheless laying a foundation for meaning to arise one day when they'll need significance far more than experience.

My occasional stories to Q, which some particular landscape happens to evoke, serve to pass a stretch of slow miles as the tales also fortify my memory. I think she doesn't mind my rambles now and then, perhaps because in a "previous Administration" (an earlier marriage) she once crossed the length of Kansas in silence — unless you deem as conversation that quondam husband's "We gotta stop for gas."

Q is my wife, Jo Ann, a moniker for which she's never felt much kinship. In fact, with nomenclature she's not been lucky, even in her church. When it came time for confirmation, her elder sister convinced six-year-old Jo Ann every female saint's name was taken except one: Dorothy. That name, linked to the pluck of the *Wizard of Oz* heroine she admired, contributed to her deciding she possessed the power to fly *if* her belief was firm enough: she straddled a kitchen broom, her toy cat strapped to the bristles, and from the top of the basement stairs, leaped. She broke no bones, and if you consider falling in a slightly horizontal pattern to be flight, she flew. But she no longer trusted in half-reasoned faith.

But as Jo Ann grew up to become Jan (her tomboyishness would have made Joe not inaccurate), she learned to speak Spanish and visited Mexico, and found herself intrigued by a Yucatán place-name taken from a Mexican revolutionary hero, all the better that he was male: Quintana Roo. Quintana Roo — the state, not the man — is the territory of the quetzal, the plumed serpent sacred to the indigenous Maya, especially to the Quiché, and perhaps the most stunning bird in the Western Hemisphere north of the equator; to her, it's a creature of fascination.

Not long after our meeting, she told me about her delight in things beginning with the letter Q, a revelation at a restaurant-supper one night that struck a note within me — someone who has always loved the seventeenth letter for its rarity: a mere seven pages in my desk dictionary, while neighbor *L* gets 120. I like to think sinuous Q (only *O* has a more purely geometric form) makes up for its paucity in entries by its peculiarities of meanings, by its pictographic capital-shape (a serpent curling out of

its den, a tethered balloon floating away, a hatchling with one foot out of the egg), and by its unbreakable bond with its beloved *U*. Of greater import are those quirky words we'd not have without *Q*: quark, quack, quadrillion, quantum, quidnunc, quoits, quench, quisling, quilt, quipster, quince, quincunx, and that most universal *nonword* on the planet, QWERTY. And, should I not mention that recondite Christian holy day, Quinquagesima, Shrove Sunday?

Is there another letter with such a high percentage of words both jolly and curious, so many having to do with quests and questions and quintessences? Is it not a letter of signal seriousness? How could a fellow of the quill not love the letter *Q*? How could a defender of the underdog not love a letter that's the least used on a keyboard, the one that never takes on finger-shine?

Nonetheless *Q*, alphabetically superfluous, has tricks: For the tongue there's *quick* and *quiche*; for meaning there's *queer* and *queen*; and there's *quell* (put down) and *quell* (well up). And to enhance its mystery, *Q* has a dark side, words to give you qualms: queasy, quagmire, quarantine, quarrel, quibble, quinsy, quash, quackery, quietus, quake, quicksand, quadratic equation.

It's a letter that has suffered loss, thinning our language as we went about minding our *p*'s while forgetting our *q*'s; if Shakespeare possessed those lost words, why can't we? Here's a quorum of such quatches ripe for revival, ready for your quaintance: quaddle (grumble), quizzity (oddity), querken (stifle), quiddle (dawdle), querimony (complaint), queme (pleasant), quetch (go), queeve (twist in a road). And there's the handy *quisquiliou*s: in one sense it refers to something composed — like a life or a book — of odds and ends, and in another import it means rubbish.

I can see now the letter one of you will write me:

Dear Mister Fancy Author,

I'd like to querken your quiddles on the quizzities of the letter Q because they aren't queme and leave me quaddling and full of querimony. Stick to the queeves and get quetching on your way to your quisquiliou Quoz.

*Querulously yours,
Ace Reeder*

So that brings us to *quoz*: a noun, both singular and plural, referring to anything strange, incongruous, or peculiar; at its heart is the unknown, the mysterious. It rhymes with *Oz*. To a traveler it's often the highest quaesitum. For me, everything — whether object, person, or event — when seen clearly in the depths of its existence, in its quiddity, is quoz, and every road, every alley, the hall to your parlor, the course of a creek, the track of a comet, all are a route to quoz for any traveler, any querist willing to question, to go in quest, to ask the cosmic question of medieval church drama: *Quae quaeritis?* Whom do you seek, O pilgrim?

Forgive me, quick-witted reader, if this quodlibet to *Q* has made you querimonious; I'll leave the letter and return to *Q*, the woman, after I tax you with one more notion. The vocabulary of our language is an abundant — and often untapped — storehouse of concepts neatly embodied in a few squiggles of ink or in a column of air vibrated by vocal cords. To fail to embrace and thereby honor a rich vocabulary is a sacrilege advocated by those who would reduce the expanse of our lexicon to fit their own limited expression; these are often novices and drudges and certain book reviewers who ought to be confined to the exposition of instructions for installing a water heater. A genuine road-book should open unknown realms in its words as it does in its miles. If you leave a journey exactly

who you were before you departed, the trip has been much wasted, even if it's just to the Quickee-Mart.

During that restaurant-supper, I admitted to Q — call it a quid pro quo — that since my boyhood when my favorite number was five (I could handle it mathematically easier than, say, seven or nine), I've longed to be not William but five-lettered Quint. Its Roman version, Quintus, helped lead me in high school to enroll in Miss Nell Adams's Latin I and II. How different my life might have turned out with Spanish or French, I don't know, other than to say that somewhere among the ancient declension of Rome and the Etruscan *qu-* words, I was becharmed by a girl seated in front of me, and for the next five years I discovered all that goes with infatuation. So you see, the letter Q has shaped me in ways beyond my comprehending, even now as I write these words.

While this recital of our pasts came forth, I think Q and I began to recognize a fellow traveler sitting across the table. There we were, our imagined names revealing more about us than could ever those strapped onto us by others. For me she was Quintana, only later becoming simply Q.

But I've become neither Quint nor Quintus. Because we met through a forgotten manuscript of William Clark — the William of the great 1804 to 1806 western expedition, he who is buried not far from where Q grew up along the Missouri River, he whom she was then writing a book about (the very undertaking that introduced us), he whom I am named after — Q has not been willing to yield up my William, and so to her, Will I am and remain.

She is a historian who left the practice of law not long after she discovered Clark's logbook of his 1798 trip down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers to New Orleans, a voyage — virtually unknown and totally unexamined until her research — he made six years before his ascent with Meriwether Lewis up the Missouri River and on to the Pacific. It was a journey I had made and written a book about just before I met Q. Over the course of the travels we were about to undertake, she would tell me from time to time of her surprising discoveries about William Clark descending the Mississippi into Spanish territory. So, along with my stories triggered by our passing a place I'd visited before, we began traveling miles overlaid with several dimensions of time. During these travels, Q was a quinquagenarian, and it was sheer chance we began them in the old lands of the Quapaw, and not far from the ancient Tunica "town" Quizquiz [Kees-Kees].

Because she's important to these roads to quoz, I'll try to set her before you now and then, but not by physical description except to say she is slender, with straw-colored corkscrew hair that can draw from men long glances that amuse me. No husband should undertake to describe his wife in detail, especially a wife who practices law and knows something of libel, invasion of privacy, and, when pressed, can even explain the Rule Against Perpetuities. It's unwise to monkey — in print, at least — with such professional counsel. I think she will emerge from her own words and doings which I hope will catch her quintessence and maybe even a touch of her mystery emanating from her quietness.

For now, let one incident reveal something of Q, an event in her eleventh year. Walking home from her parochial school with her friend Deborah, the pretty girls in their perky uniforms — white blouse, navy-blue pleated skirt, matching kneesocks — Q saw two lads from the public school approaching. As the children passed, one of the impious Protestant boys said, "You girls are sluts." Never breaking stride, Q gave him a raspberry. Deborah whispered, "What's a slut?" Young Q had no idea, but it sounded intriguing, so the girls went to the town library only a block away and opened the fat dictionary on a pedestal under the tapestry of George Washington. There, in the greatest single volume of American lexicography — *Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language*, 2nd edition — they found the word. Narrowing the definitions meant looking up several

other terms, but it was the illustrative citations from esteemed sources that shed light:

- “Sluts are good enough to make a sloven’s porridge” (old proverb).
- “Such wicked sluts cannot be too severely punished” (Fielding).
- “Our little girl Susan is a most admirable slut” (Pepys).

Q said to her friend, “I have a feeling those twerps didn’t mean this last definition.”

Her capability to listen so intently to one of my stories may cause her to ask, well after the story finished, “Did you say somebody tried to shoot you down like a dirty dog?” This happens because, while I’m getting a tale down its road, she takes a turn bending off in a promising way but not on the route of my narrative. I’ve learned to watch her face for indications her mind is heading for Texas when the story is on its way to Tennessee.

I’ll mention now, in all of our miles over neglected and strange routes, she never once has complained of even the most twisted of intimidating roads. If she gets uneasy at one of my route decisions, she expresses it only with silence and a certain slant to her lower lip. But her nether lip can also betoken an odd idea or a different track coming on, sometimes resulting in a new route, including her idea of going to Arkansas to follow the Ouachita River.

In 1849, J. Quinn Thornton published a guide to westward emigration called *Oregon and California in 1848*. He said of the people setting out for the Far West that “some were activated by a mere love of change; more by a spirit of enterprise and adventure; and a few, I believe, knew not exactly why they were thus upon the road.” If you will grant the writing of books as an enterprise, then of the other reasons J. Quinn enumerates, I could be convicted on all counts. But for me it is that last reason which underlies all the others, for to go out not quite knowing why is the very reason for going out at all, and to discover the *why* is the most promising and potentially fulfilling of outcomes. I’m speaking about a quest for quoz, of which I’ll say more as we go along, but until then, you might want to see Quoz as a realm filled with itself as a cosmos is with all that’s there, not just suns and planets and comets but dust and gas, darkness and light, and all we don’t know, and only a fraction of what we can imagine.

I’ve spent so many years rambling alone and not knowing exactly the reason, I now believe the answer to why we “were thus upon the road” lies in both the *why* and the *how* I became a writer in the first place: to break those long silent miles, I must stop and hunt stories and only later set down my gatherings in order to release them one day to wander on their own. A few years ago, a friend traveling in Nepal was lying on a pallet in a dormitory; atop a small shelf he saw a book dust-jacket and my face watching him. He said to me later, “You’ve traveled where you’ve never been.” To write is to have a reason for hoboing through one’s life and sometimes through those of others, whether or not you’ve met them. It’s for this reason you will find me now and again addressing you, the good reader. What the deuce, I might see you someday at that bookshop in Oshkosh or maybe we’ve already met at that lunch counter in Yazoo City.

These days, when Q and I take off down some two-lane where I begin to wander into a tale about that very road in another time, my recital is not just to pass uneventful miles; even more it’s my try at recollecting and reclaiming what once occurred. After all, for each of us, at our finale — if we’re lucky — we end up with only memory. As long as it lasts, memory — upon which love is utterly dependent — is the lone, truly portable outcome of our days. It’s a snare for the transitory happening that have been our life. Everything you will remember in your last days probably will come from

encounters on your own roads to quoz. When one's past can no longer be summoned forth (even if elided and distorted as it must be through our frailties in perfect recall), that's the day we become a former person, a cypher with the rim rubbed out.

My first book ends with this fragment from a Navajo wind chant: "Remember what you have seen because everything forgotten returns to the circling winds." Through those ancient words, and the others preceding them, Q first knew me and thereby set in motion our path to that supper conversation about the seventeenth letter of the alphabet.

As best I can figure it, my job is to go out and get stories and to pass them along as far as they can carry themselves. You can see what I'm saying: A search for quoz gives me a reason to get out of bed and step into the shower and wake up and once again take up a quest. That some particular quoz I find might one day later find you is not a requisite to my travels, but it surely is nice.

So then, quizzical reader, you who are yourself an infinity of quoz bound temporarily as one, it is now *you whom I seek* in hopes you're ready for the quest and ready with a second question: *Quo vadis?*

Mrs. Weatherford's Story

ON THE SECOND DAY of spring 2004, Q and I headed for the Ouachita Mountains, she at the wheel. I told her this story soon after we crossed the border of northern Arkansas not far from a road that triggered my recollection. I spoke of Mrs. Weatherford — as I'll call her here — and a tale she passed on to me some years earlier.

Traveling alone, I met her aboard the steamboat *Delta Queen* on a voyage down the Mississippi from St. Louis to New Orleans. By chance I got seated next to her at the supper table the first evening. Despite her age — barely shy of eighty — she was attractive, slender, and quick, and she was a widow. Although she had little formal education, Mrs. Weatherford was a reader and articulate and happy to let her two companions — rich ladies, as was she now — do most of the talking, yakking really. In their fifties, her friends were overweight, mirthful women from Houston whose husbands gladly set them up in expensive sun-deck cabins for long boat-trips. The two companions talked often about money but not in dollars. Rather, their terms were the chattel of a well-heeled suburban life: “Why, the ring he gave that girl!” or “That man has never known a mortgage!” or “The First Lady said my gown was to die for!” And so on. The pair fell silent only when Mrs. Weatherford told a story from a time none of us had seen; although she never spoke of money or the life attached to it, despite being wealthier than her shipmates.

After each supper, I would follow Mrs. Weatherford and her friends to a quiet deck near their cabins where they would pour a nightcap. Then was the time she would pull up a story. My dedicated attention must have been encouragement because she kept telling things the other two had never heard. Mrs. Weatherford's clear recollections made me wish her a relative or a neighbor, someone I could drop in on just to listen to what were really prose georgics from an era seemingly more distant than her years would allow. When she had finished a story, told in her soft Ozark cadence, I'd ask questions — the first night just to keep the others silent for a while longer but afterward to learn more details. She was pleased when I wrote some of them into my shirt-pocket memo book.

One evening we were sitting topside with our various nightcaps — mine was two fingers of a Kentucky straight Bourbon distilled not far to the east of where the boat was just then. We were watching a kind of alpenglow on the horizon behind a dark mass of big cottonwoods having the silhouette of low mountains. I said the sunset must be radiating all across Arkansas, and Mrs. Weatherford straightened in her chair as she did when something stirred her memory.

The version I set down now is from my notes:

“None of you know I grew up in north Arkansas,” she said. “The western side, in the hills. It was mostly rocks, soil no thicker than worn-out muslin. Everything, except our chickens, we had to get out of a creek-bottom field so small Poppa could plow it with a mule in a day. The hills were good for firewood and some walnuts and a squirrel or two. We didn't eat coon. Usually, dessert was a half-dozen verses from the Bible. King James Version.”

She paused and picked up my tumbler of whiskey and held it up against the dusky western sky to

make the liquor gleam in a deepened hue. She put the glass down again and said, "My mother would call that 'the color of sin.' To her it was 'the distillation of damnation.'" (Mrs. Weatherford, for her part, took an occasional vodka, neat.) She said, "Poppa made a clear, corn whiskey that would burn the gallstones out of your uncle's brother."

"You're talking moonshine?" one of her friends asked.

"White lightning, bottled-in-the-barn booze. Ozark nose paint. Field whiskey. By whatever name you want, Momma knew it as sin, and she knew it was only a question of time before the Lord was going to settle up with Poppa. Now, at her insistence, he would read the evening Bible verses to us, but he could just as well have been reading the labels on a feed sack, and when it came to his still, there wasn't anyone — man or woman or wife — going to argue him out of that. And the Sunday-school teacher didn't help because he was known to accept on the q.t. a quart every holiday, including his birthday. He drank in his cellar and never showed himself until he'd finished it all and slept it off. The congregation said his wife was usually down there with him. And sometimes, so we heard, they'd get 'plumb nekkid.' Otherwise, he was vociferous against alcohol, and Momma accepted him because she thought his words might work on somebody. He liked to say, 'I have known the jeopardous sin of liquor,' as if those days were past.

"And of course Momma knew that without the money from Poppa's still, she'd be hard-pressed to set the table three times a day for four of us. I'm talking now of the early thirties. Even our church dresses had mendings over the mendings. Poppa wasn't above nipping into some of his finishings but never in front of us children. Even on a cold night, if he had a couple of nips, he'd stay down in the shed where the works were, curled up near the fire. He called it 'the works.' I think he drank mostly because of our poverty. He was ashamed of not providing more for us."

Mrs. Weatherford, once she had our attention, would take long pauses, holding them like a concealed master just to the right moment, then she'd follow on with her memory as if it were a score she knew well but hadn't conducted in years.

Nodding toward the sunset, she said, "Over there, it's almost like the northern lights. They call them the northern lights because they don't shine in the South, or at least not very often down this way. In northwest Arkansas they hadn't shone ever as far as anyone back then could recall. Nobody had any idea what they were.

"Well" — and here she took her first long pause — "they did shine one night, and they did it with a glory as if they were making up for all those years of dark skies. One evening Momma came out of the kitchen onto the porch to sit a spell before bed. My older sister, Maylene, and I were there waiting for her. It was late in the year, and she had her shawl on. She sat there humming a hymn, collecting herself, always wanting to be ready for salvation. She stopped in the middle of her hymn and said, 'Why, girls, look over in that corner of the sky!' and she pointed to the north toward a long ridge that sort of shut us in. 'The Atgoods' barn must be on fire!' It was well past sundown, but the sky was rose like dusk, except that bright sky was in the north. We went round the house to the front to see better, and there it was — the whole north was a pale curve of light rising from the tree line. We stood and watched it until we were certain it was truly getting brighter. Momma went to the window to holler up Poppa to come outside. He stepped out on the front stoop in his union suit he slept in when the weather cooled.

"By now there were rays like searchlights shooting up. Then the bottom part started turning orange and flickering just like fire. Poppa said, 'That ain't the Atgoods,' and Momma said, 'Oh dear Jesus!' I thought this was all good fun until I saw her face. She was alarmed. Alarmed bad. And I looked at Poppa. It was the same expression when he saw Maylene fall off the mule.

“I’m vowing to you the sky was like the old picture-show curtain in Fort Smith. I mean the sky was moving the way folds in the curtain swung when it got pulled open or closed. We just stood there watching until lower down the sky started getting even brighter, and rays seemed to kind of clump up and form into a big, flickering crown just like a king would wear.

“At the sight of that, Momma stepped back so sharply she banged her head against the house and didn’t even know it. She said, ‘It’s here! It’s here! It’s happening tonight! *This is the night!*’ And she grabbed me and Maylene and started pulling us toward the house. ‘What’s here?’ Maylene said. ‘What’s happening tonight, Momma?’ ‘The Lord, child! The Lord! The Lord’s a-coming!’

“Now, she was a practical woman, more clearheaded under pressure than Poppa who was still standing there in his droopy union suit and his mouth hanging open. I was starting to cry. Maylene said, ‘Should we get under the bed?’ ‘No, child! You don’t hide from the Lord! You girls go inside and put on your church dresses and lay out straight on the bed! And I mean straight.’ She shoved us toward the house, then called out like an afterthought, ‘And wash your feet!’

“We did it fast, but we didn’t get in bed. We went to the window. Now the sky had flashes coming up from below like gigantic flames. Momma had hold of Poppa’s arm and was shaking it and talking fast. All I heard was ‘And, Cloyd, I mean now!’

“The whole sky seemed to be on fire. Momma saw us in the window and yelled, ‘Get into bed and get R-E-A-D-Y! Ready! The Gates of Hades have been opened, girls!’ She and Poppa disappeared around the back and headed down into the hollow toward where the still was. But we didn’t get into bed — we went to the back porch and hid in the shadows. There were terrible sounds, Momma shouting, something smashing into wood and metal, glass breaking, and every so often a shower of sparks rose up. That went on for maybe twenty minutes, and then we smelled smoke, and then we saw a glow in the treetops down in the hollow. Maylene said, ‘Poppa’s burning the works.’

“It didn’t take long. We saw Momma coming toward the house. We ran back to the bed and got ourselves all laid out like we’d been told. She came to the door and looked in on us. I said, ‘I’m scared, Momma.’ She stepped into the room and stood over us. ‘This is Judgment Day, girls. If you’ve done right, you’ll be ascending. Graves all over the county are opening. The Arising has begun! The Glory has come!’ and she left the room. Then Maylene started crying. She was afraid Resurrection zombies were going to come forth and reach through the window and carry us off to damnation.

“Then Poppa came back. He wasn’t scared anymore. We heard him say to Momma — his voice was so weary, so defeated — ‘It’s gone. Every last quart of it. Gone.’ And Momma said, ‘Our need for money is gone too, Cloyd. This is all dross now. Wash yourself and come in and pray with us.’

“Momma called us into the front room and told us to get down on our knees. Maylene said, ‘Are we going to die now?’ And Momma said, ‘Girls, I can’t tell you. I’ve never been through one of these before.’

“Poppa came in with his church shirt on. I don’t know whether his face was red from the fire or from crying. Momma commenced praying, pointing out how we little ones were too young to have much sin attached to us. Then she took up Poppa’s cause, a more complicated one, given the liquor and his occasional cussing. I don’t remember much of it because I was watching the window. The sky had faded, but there was still enough light to see Jesus when he appeared to call us Home. After a while we went back to bed to wait, and the next thing I remember is the window was white with light and Maylene was asleep, her mouth open. I poked her to see if her soul had ascended yet. ‘Quit it!’ she said. Apparently it hadn’t.

“It was dawn. I got up. My Sunday dress was a muss of wrinkles. I went down to the hollow to where the works had been. It was just a heap of ashes and some twisted and scorched metal and broke

glass everywhere.

“Everybody was up when I got back. Poppa was at the kitchen table with his head in his hands. He wouldn’t talk. Momma said, ‘We’ll just go about our affairs until the Lord or one of his angels come for us. But first, get down on your knees.’ And she went to praying again, pointing out the innocence of children, making specific comment about her responsibility for the time in the schoolyard when the elastic in my underpants broke and let them fall to the ground. Then she called on Poppa to ask forgiveness, but he just kept his head on the table. So she tried to intercede for his ‘Sin in the Hollow’ emphasizing that the liquor he made was to provide for his family and, besides, he’d now renounced ‘Distilled Damnation’ by destroying the ‘Machinery of the Devil’ and pouring the ‘Liquid Hellfire’ into the ground. At that, Poppa raised his head as if to say something, but only a little moan came out and he just put his weary head back down.

“Momma went on, working her way into her sins — leaving a few out, like judgmentalism — but before she could finish, we heard the sound of some old flivver come sputtering up toward the house. Maylene ran to the front porch and said, ‘Is Jesus coming for us in a Ford car?’ I went to the window and peeked from behind the curtain. I told them I didn’t think it was Jesus unless Jesus wore baggy seersucker pants and a slouch hat.

“We were all frozen. Even Poppa had his head up. There was a rap at the door that might as well have been a rifle shot, we all jumped so. Nobody moved. I’d never seen Momma so fixed. There was another rapping, and a voice said, ‘Hey in there! Lampkin!’ Poppa, maybe figuring he had nothing more to lose, slowly went to the door. ‘Lampkin!’ the voice called again. Like a summons.

“Poppa opened the door, opened it real cautious. The voice spoke again, too low for us to understand, and Poppa turned to us inside and said, ‘Tain’t Jesus. It’s a feller from Ioway.’ Aware that it might be Jesus in disguise to test her charity, Momma ordered Poppa to let him in. The stranger stepped in, removed his hat, and turned it nervously in his hands. Nobody said a word. We were waiting for him to tell us how to proceed to Heaven, or perhaps Hades, in Poppa’s case. The man just twiddled his hat. Maylene whispered to me Jesus hadn’t shined his shoes. Finally, to break the silence he said, ‘That was some show in the sky last night.’

“Poppa said, ‘Tell my missus why you’re here.’ Can you imagine it? Momma was about to hear Jesus address her with his instructions for her salvation. If you could see her face! It was saying, ‘Ye Lord? Yes, Lord? Show me The Way, Lord Jesus! O, the glory!’

“The stranger, still fiddling with his hat, turned to Poppa to make sure he was to divulge his mission. ‘Tell her,’ Poppa said. ‘Go ahead on.’

“‘Well, ma’am, I’m passing through, you see, and I got directed out here to your place.’ Momma so excited, interrupted him, ‘And you’ve come for us!’ and he said, ‘Ma’am, I just come for a couple of quarts.’”

Here Mrs. Weatherford conducted a long pause. The longest yet, and she punctuated it with a sip of her vodka.

“Poor Momma!” she said. “Why, that stranger didn’t come to carry away her soul! He came to carry away a couple of quarts of Arkansas nose paint.”

And again Mrs. Weatherford performed a pause before her baton of words moved again.

“But then Momma recovered. Fast recovery was one of her strengths. It was a test! And she and Poppa had passed it! In triumph she said, ‘Gone! All of it gone! Cleansed with Righteous Fire! Gone! It was too much for Poppa. He went back to his chair and buried his head in his hands again. The stranger didn’t quite understand, but he knew something was wrong. He said, ‘Did you folks have a fire last night? I’m smelling smoke or something.’

“Momma said, ‘A Righteous Fire, right here on Earth, right here last night. One to match that glorious one of Yours in the sky.’ The man, who was stepping toward the door to leave, said, ‘It was glory for certain last night. It was as good as we used to see them up in north Iowa, but I never seen so much flickering orange before.’

“At that, Poppa raised his head. ‘What’s it you’re talkin about?’ and the stranger said, ‘Them lights last night. That oral borlis or whatever they call it. You know, them northern lights.’

“Poppa got up real slow and went up to the stranger and said, ‘That’s what northern lights is? All them movin colors?’

“‘That’s them,’ the man said, and excused himself. He could smell trouble. Poppa told us to go to our room and close the door. We heard him yelling, then there was a terrible thud, and we came rushing out. Jesus must be throwing Poppa like he did the moneylenders! But there Poppa was, standing over Momma who was sprawled on the floor with a bloody lip. He was saying, ‘I just hope you didn’t know all the time, because if you did —’ Then he hurried out to catch the stranger before he got away. Loud enough for Momma to hear, he said to the stranger, ‘Give me ten days. You’ll have to bring your own jugs.’”

Mrs. Weatherford stopped and drained her little glass. One of her friends said, “And your mother?” Mrs. Weatherford thought about it. “Momma took that as final proof that some men can’t ever, by any force, be healed. Her time with Poppa would be in this world and only in this world.”

Then, cradling the empty glass, Mrs. Weatherford closed her eyes and seemed to be gathering herself. There was something more. The last lines of her recollections were always something more.

“My mother,” she said quietly, “was so locked into her notion of an afterlife of one kind or other she just didn’t put much value on their final years together here on Earth.”

Rivers and Dominoes

THE ARKANSAS JUNKET was to be the first leg of a long trip that would become a continuing but not continuous journey. Q and I would set forth for several weeks, loop about, return home to pick up the mail and water the wilted begonia, then strike out again. A circuit more of directions than destinations. This pattern, I confess, had something to do with my becoming a high-mileage, back-route geezer who loves his travels but has come in his seniority to want them in smaller portions. Nothing sharpens a traveler for the road better than the grindstone of home, and never have I arrived home but with great relief nor have I ever set out except with eager expectation. The English writer William Hazlitt said in 1825, “I should like well enough to spend the whole of my life in traveling abroad, if I could anywhere borrow another life to spend afterward at home.” Circling in and out of our place would be a compromised solution to such a wish.

On the third day of spring, Q and I found ourselves in the Ouachita Mountains of Arkansas, a couple of hours west of Little Rock, traveling through the Ouachita National Forest that is largely contiguous with the ruffled belt of those untypically latitudinal mountains. We were there in search of the highest and most distant water of the Ouachita River so that we could follow it for its six-hundred miles from top to bottom, source to mouth. I’ve traveled rivers before — upstream, downstream — but usually atop them, *on* them. This time I wanted to follow *the valley* of a long river to see how it and its humanity fill the shape it has cut for itself. A river fits its vale as a seed its fruit, but to know the pit is not also to know the peach. Could an artist who has never seen a pomegranate paint the fruit from studying its seeds?

If the name Ouachita is one you’ve seen on a map but never heard pronounced, you might want to hear it correctly in your mind: WASH-uh-taw or, more locally, WASH-taw. The people along it take some merriment in a visitor who asks a question about the Ooo-uh-CHITT-uh. No need to divulge how I learned that.

Ouachita is also spelled in a more English fashion as Washita — especially in Oklahoma, where lies the western end of its mountains — but that version can lead people to confuse it with the smaller Wichita Mountains near the Texas Panhandle. The French set down the name in their orthography with reference to a group of indigenous folk and their territory. Although distantly related, the Ouachita people, like the mountains, should not be confused with the Wichita tribe farther west where it maintains a noteworthy presence in western Oklahoma; as for the current whereabouts of the Ouachita, that’s something of a mystery. My guess is that they live on in the blood of several extant tribes more broadly known as Caddo.

Q and I were in the Ouachita Mountains because she had begun talking some months earlier about a “Forgotten Expedition,” one that two centuries ago had the potential to be in significance second only to the Lewis and Clark exploration. Of the numerous words in the English language that will disrupt whatever else I’m thinking about, *forgotten* and *expedition* are two of them. Put them together and I’ll listen with an interest beyond reason.

Having purchased the unimaginably large tract of land called the Louisiana Territory, Thomas Jefferson knew the first requirement for it was to establish dominion, and to do so Americans had to understand the territory and fix a military and economic presence in it. Lewis and Clark were to perform those functions in the northwest portion of the great purchase and on westward (when they crossed the Rockies at Lemhi Pass on the present-day Montana-Idaho border, they left the United States). For the southwest section — and beyond — Jefferson called upon a Scottish immigrant, William Dunbar, who asked assistance from another Scot, George Hunter.

I've not done so, of course, but were I to stand on a downtown corner of Toledo or Boston or San Jose or any other city you might name and wait for *just one* passerby to tell me *just one* thing about the Dunbar-Hunter Expedition, I'd likely be standing there among the citizens weeks later. Such an unawareness, though, is not really their fault; rather it's the result of historians themselves generally overlooking early explorations into the near Southwest, a situation slowly changing. For myself, I can't profess to have known much about the two Scots until Q revealed my ignorance; in defense of a lot of us, I can only say, to find a copy of either explorer's account was, until not long ago, difficult. Still, a copy of Hunter's *Journal of an Excursion from Natchez on the Mississippi up the River Ouachita* has been sitting unread on my shelves for several years. The Dunbar-Hunter exploration — the "Forgotten Expedition" undertaken in 1804, exactly two centuries before our arrival in the mountains — seemed to me a useful hook to pull us toward the resident quoz of the Ouachita Valley.

So there we were in the mountains. That morning we followed on a topographic map a narrow blue line, one we assumed to represent the nascent river, a streamlet through a pinched, forested declivity where U.S. Highway 59 keeps close to what we took for the infant Ouachita. It was but six or seven feet wide and narrowing rapidly as we ascended what was no longer a valley but more a broad cleavage in the mountains. As the creek neared the crest of the two-lane, its continuance at last became so indeterminable, we stopped so I could climb a small signal-tower along the tracks of the Kansas City Southern Railway paralleling both creek and blacktop. Oklahoma lay six miles west. I called down to Q we were running out of water. What was now scarcely more than a runnel disappeared under a tangle of wiry brush, and beyond were only seeps and dribbles. She said the map gave no name to the blue squiggles delineating creeklets.

I climbed down and took a taste of the Ouachita without swallowing, and we crossed the road and headed toward a building, a general merchandise set among scraggly pines and still-leafless oaks. I said the name on the store, Rich Fountain, was probably a confirmation we were indeed at the headwaters. Q looked at me with something between compassion and amusement and said, "You might want to reread that sign." I did: **RICH MOUNTAIN SNACKS, CRAFTS, GROCERIES**. My frequent wishful thinking sometimes allows Q to outslouth me.

Inside, the wooden place was older than its new facade suggested, and its happy clutter exhaled the classic scent of an old grocery, making me forget the question I came in with, not just because of the smell of food but also because the place was not quaint — it was simply genuine, a quality ever more uncommon these days along the American road.

Q ordered up two cheese sandwiches, a MoonPie, and a couple of "sodas," despite my earlier advisement that we were now in the land of *pop*, where *soda* could refer to a carbonated ice-cream drink, seltzer, a baking substance, or a bicarbonate of. She, who has her moments of sauciness, said, "That particular usage will never pass my lips." This is what happens when one grows up near St. Louis where folks insist on pronouncing the state name Muh-zoo-ree, when those of us on the western side know it's Muh-zoo-rah — just as it's *soda pop*. We like onomatopoeia. My old friend Gus Kubitzki, of whom you will hear more later, used to insist the term should be spelled *sodaPOP!* and I

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