1 December 2020

The West and Me

Introduction

Six years ago I started searching for a philosophy to guide my life. I was moving away from home for the first time and started encountering situations that made me question the way I had approached life and morality. However, I soon found that the more I thought about it, the more complicated it became. There didn't seem to be any situation that could be influenced by a single philosophy—let alone a single philosophy that could influence every situation. It was also during this time that I turned from writing as a hobby to writing as a way of life. This came with its own set of personal questions as I struggled to find where my work fit into the world. It would be folly for me to say that I have what William Wordsworth termed "a more comprehensive soul," and though I am confident in my creative power, when "meaningful" is the objective adjective I lack conviction in my own originality.

Then, I walked into the West.

As I have studied western literature and culture, I have finally begun to draw conclusions about some (not all) of my questions. This collection contains a few of my musings on these points. The frame for each section is the West; I am the theme. These essays are the intersection between the West as a philosophy for life and my craft as a writer.

God Saved Some Lucky Men To Be Cowboys

The room is small, almost claustrophobic despite the limited number of our plague-thinned group gathered in terraced seats. I count two hats, six boots, and one guitar. The strings on the guitar—Brenn Hill's guitar—walk, trot, cantor, even gallop in a rhythm reminiscent of their theme: The American Cowboy. It's a lifestyle that I've learned a lot about over the last few weeks. If you were to find a help wanted ad in the papers, then the job description could very well run as follows:

"Wanted, cowboy:

Must be willing to work long days, sometimes nights, in harsh environments with the stubbornest damned creatures that the Good Lord ever put on this piece of rock and maybe some cattle and horses too. Though we're not much for variety, food will be provided. Must be smart as a coyote and stronger'n a bull with the ability to work well on a team of two even when your partner doesn't say much…since horses rarely do. Must have bones left to break or fingers left to lose.

Benefits: none

Healthcare: anything you know how to bandage yourself

Pay: Lousy

*Work hard and don't complain and you won't be fired until the end of the season.

Happy trails!

Ranch Management"

That's the life—the cowboy life—as I understand it. Now, the music which engulfs me confronts me with a fuller realty. Yes, the cowboy life is hard. Yes, the pay is lousy. But there is also deep beauty pulsing throughout, a simplicity of care, and a connection with the land and with a community. The men of the West seem to have made their peace with the past so that when Brenn Hill tells the story of the bear river massacre, singing that "the river ran red," men on every side of the color wheel weep with the same sorrow that McCarthy's character John Grady feels as he watches the ghosts of the Comanches ride away from the fences spreading like a fungal network, clogging the land. Why do the men of the West keep coming back? Pursuing the thankless life on the windy range? Despite the hard work and lousy pay, the belief held by every cowbaby who has stuck around long enough to be weaned into a cowboy is summed up in the first line of the song which, as I sit in this tiny white room in the basement of a humanities building somewhere out where the rain don't fall, comes rolling over me and the rest

of the greenhorned college students who listen: “God saved some lucky men to be cowboys,” it says…he says: the music and the man are nearly indistinguishable. It’s a hard line to resist.

Edward Abbey, in his book *Desert Solitaire* describes a night when he got stranded in a canyon and caught in the rain. He says: “I stretched out in the coyote den, pillowed my head on my arm and suffered through the long long night, wet, cold, aching, hungry, wretched, dreaming claustrophobic nightmares. It was one of the happiest nights of my life.” This sentiment seems echoed by the boot wearin’, hat tippin’, guitar picker who not only sings the song to which I listen, titled “Call You Cowboy”, but who—one inky night as he drove his truck down a winding canyon road—wrote it down on a napkin: the only stationary convenient. And yet, it’s more than just a laugh and a good time that keeps these lucky men coming back for more long hours and hard falls. It’s a deep, almost spiritual connection that they have with the land. It’s a code—a bond—of brotherhood that they have with each other. It’s the simple joy of a gritty life riding a horse, letting the sun come up in the morning to scorch the sumac and the spruce and your skin. As off kilter as it may seem, it is true that “God saved some lucky men to be cowboys”.

The song “Call You Cowboy” in many ways marked the start of Brenn’s career. I can’t say what his daddy called him at the time that he wrote it. He was just coming off of his first job cowboying and hadn’t yet bronced into the music industry. If there was ever a time to call him “drifter” then that was it, though now, as an established cowboy song artist, his weeks sound more than ever like a leaf blown by a fickle wind across the midwest, going from performance hall to festival stage and then to private event—practically the definition of drifting. However, as with most of the beautiful gifts in the world, the song wasn’t written for himself but for one of his cowboy partners who was drifting on a different set of sails—to a different ranch with a better opportunity. “Your daddy calls you a drifter / I call you cowboy”.

To my recollection, my daddy has never called me something that I didn’t want. I could tell him that I was finally going to fulfill my longtime plans of opening “Hey Diddle Diddle, Over the Moon Dairy and Beef”—a clandestine dairy farm and cattle ranch on the moon—and he

would smile with pride as he would tell his coworkers, “My son’s a space-cowboy and an entrepreneur.” Upon further questioning he might finally admit that “it hasn’t happened yet, he’s still getting set up,” but then he would quickly follow up with, “but it’ll only be a few years before everyone knows his name. Afterall, you’ll never find milk as creamy as what is grown on the moon, nor ice cream as smooth as what’s churned in space. And let me tell you about low gravity beef...”

Well now, this is certainly an exaggeration; I call on my cowboy rights. My father has always been supportive of my crazy ideas and loftily irresponsible goals, but he is a smart man, and he knows the limits of the current economy (not that I think a ranch on the moon is unfeasable...just that it’s a touch above my pay grade right now). However, as I’ve never suggested anything quite so insane, he has always shown me all the support for what I *have* pursued. He did so when I announced that I was dropping out of college, he did so when I started my publishing business in an already saturated market, and still does so as I type my little stories on my little laptop. He has never called me drifter when I want to be called cowboy. This has not always been my experience with my mother. It’s not a lack of support from her so much as it is a surplus of care. She worries about me and wants to see me settled, happy, and secure. But even if I’m settled and secure, I can’t be happy unless I’m free. Edward Abbey would say the rivers and mountains, canyons and hoodoos will set you free, if you’ll check your civilization at the door. Brenn would say “saddlin' up now to chase your dreams” will set you free, but then remind you that freedom doesn’t come easy or painlessly. After all, “whoever said that cowboys don't cry?” My dream is to be a writer. Even as I sit, listening to the riffs and rills of Brenn’s guitar, all I can think is how I could achieve the same effect in writing. My mom calls me drifter. My dad calls me cowboy. They’re both right. There are too many writers and not enough money. But how can I explain the connection I have with words and creation? Is it the same connection that a cowboy has with the land? Writer’s and cowboys cry, but neither one can really live if they don’t saddle up to chase their dreams.

“And that restless spirit no one will ever tame

…

That voice of freedom is callin' you down the line

And you don't know where you're goin' but you know what you leave behind

So you're saddlin' up now to chase your dreams

To show yourself and the world what freedom really means

…

Your daddy calls you a drifter

I call you cowboy”

Red Bandannas

Storyteller, storyteller, tell me a story.

In Lesie Marmon Silko’s book titled “Storyteller,” in the story also titled “Storyteller,” there is a woman who is the storyteller with a single story to tell. It is a story of guilt and revenge, guilt and revenge. It is a self incriminating story; one that could send her to prison. Yet she persists—*insists*—that she must tell her story, never changing the details. Her lawyer tells her a different story, one that could set her free, but she does not listen. Her story is too important to not tell.

In James Welch’s book “Fools Crow” there is a man, Fools Crow, who also has a story. His, too, is a story of guilt and revenge. His, too, ends poorly for himself. He can perhaps save himself by telling his story (though it is doubtful he will help his people), yet he tells his story only twice. Even as he watches his people die as his story comes to pass, he is silent. His story is too important to tell.

I wonder sometimes if my story is important. My life seems like a charmed existence, too good to warrant discussion. I have never known grief to make me cry. I have never known pain

to make me scream. I have only tasted hunger with the comfort of present food. I have only lost friends that I pushed away. And my family is so disturbingly functional that “family media” seems like fiction for its dysfunction. My story does not contain Welch’s destruction of my people nor Silko’s intentional death of a deplorable man and incarceration of a guiltless woman. It is not without trouble, but my troubles seem meaningless next to the monolithic troubles that make up these stories. What, then, is left for me to tell? After all, it does not seem coincidental that the Bible contains chapters of hardship but only verses of ease.

I listen to five people share one story. Like Storyteller, it is a story too important to be suppressed. Like Fools Crow, it is the story of their people. Not the future of their people nor the past. Theirs is the story of the present, an ongoing struggle for the Native American population. I have heard parts of this story before. I know that it can be difficult to feel like a part of a community which sometimes has a different culture than you. I know that there are still those who take advantage of the unique legal status on the reservations. I know racism and detrimental stereotypes persist and perhaps always will. I have read parts of this story in books by Silko, Welch, Zitkala-ša, and elsewhere. I have heard it from their peers and from my parents. Yet, much of the story is new to me. I was unaware of the pandemic of missing and murdered indigenous women—an ignorance which surprises me considering that I grew up discussing human trafficking issues in Sunday School. There are other things that I am unaware of, but that one sticks in my mind.

This story is important in ways that mine is not. But these five people cause me to pause. Though I have listened to their story for an hour, I know very little about the individuals. The story that they tell is informed by a community and an heritage. It is not about themselves. I don’t even know whether they have personally experienced the complexities that seem required to create an important story; it is enough that their people have. The hope that this engenders for my own story is fleeting at best. My people cannot inform my story with their suffering. They

have been the perpetrators of hardships, rarely the recipients and never in a prolonged way and not at all in a persistence into the present. My story still seems unimportant.

There is a part of the story that I have not missed. Kyle, one of the five Native Americans who share their story with me, points to his red bandana tied around his head like an olive wreath of victor's laurels...or like a bloody crown of thorns. “I’m wearing red today,” he says, “to raise awareness of the missing and murdered native and indigenous women.” I pause to contemplate. The importance of the thousands of missing women is obvious. But what about the importance of a foot of red cloth? Can a scarf solve thousands of unsolved murders? kidnappings? rapes? Perhaps not. Can ten thousand such cloth squares accomplish this feat? Perhaps. As I type these words I think about my story: not the story I tell, but the story I possess. I do not have significant struggles to make my story important, but I have red bandanas of my own.

Buck

There is a stillness of chaos looking through a life. In a moment of silence, you can see years of action. A smile now, often means tears years ago.

Buck Brannaman has become iconic for the gentle magic that he works with horses. In many ways, his moniker is misleading since *Buck* is exactly what neither he nor his horses do. His story, like his name, seems paradoxical. He came from an abusive father and became a gentle man. His life is a uniquely painful and soulfully strong story. But whose story is it? Does it belong to him? Does it belong to those he inspires? The documentary *Buck*, it is his story, but it is not Brannaman who tells it. It is the people around him: his friends and family. Does this story belong to those people? Or does it perhaps belong to the international audience who hears, reads, and watches his story every year?

Terresa Jordan in her book *Riding the White Horse Home* writes about losing her mother to a brain aneurysm the size of a grapefruit. The loss was sudden and the pain was lingering—not just for Terresa, but for her mom as well. For her mom the pain stretched before her death like a dark six foot river eel hiding in the streambed. It was crippling migraines forcing days spent in silence. For Terresa the pain was a tumor in her soul for years after the event. She struggled to reclaim her identity in a world without her mother. Both mother and daughter could lay claim to that story of suffering. For the mother it was a story of faith and perseverance: her own story. For the daughter it was a story of healing. Whose story did that turn out to be? Perhaps Jordan's, perhaps her mother's. Perhaps now owning the book, it is mine.

Twenty-seven years, nine months, and seven days ago, my grandfather walked into a cold and windy Wyoming morning. The day before he had found a sick heifer with a calf who needed help. He was help. He was a rancher. He was a simple, good man who cared about God, his family, and the land that he worked. It must have been cold that day. February in Wyoming is always cold. It must have also been windy. Cattle shoots, after all, don't fall over by themselves. Despite the unpleasant weather, it was to be a big day for my grandparents. It would be the day my oldest brother was born. He would be only their second grandchild. Of their eight children, two were serving missions, one was studying at Harvard, three were still at home, and only two were married. I can only assume, then, the anticipation the birth of a second grandchild would bring. But work on a ranch never stops. For now there was a different new arrival who needed his help, a calf that he had found the night before in bad need of nourishment. The day was long and cold. If it had been one year earlier, in 1992, then the weather would have hovered right around freezing—cold, but comfortable if you're dressed right. This year was colder. The night had remained in the low single digits and the day wasn't much better. That's the kind of weather

that takes more than a warm coat to brave. It takes a hard-working man with a hearty disposition dedicated to his task. As the hours stretched on, my grandpa fed the stock and moved some fence panels and cattle chutes to make a makeshift pen for his newfound ward so that it could be close to the old school building which now functioned as a grand, sprawling ranch-house where he could keep a close eye on it.

At about four thirty in the afternoon my parents called my Grandma with news: My brother had been born! slipping some shoes on and hastily throwing the first coat that came to hand over her shoulders, she ran out to tell my Grandpa. Ten minutes later, there was panic and pain. My grandpa was dead, crushed by one of the cattle chutes that he had been trying to move—killed trying to help a calf.

I never got to know my grandfather. My brother got his name that day. Cecil. The only piece of him that I ever got was this story. And that was fragmentary at best. I have never been told this story in its completion. I have had to piece it together from passing mentions of the day over the last twenty three years. I know the weather that day because the internet has made weather reports from past decades in small towns available. The facts are fuzzy, the feelings are inferred, and the timeline is uncertain. Does this story belong to me? I hesitate to give it up because I have so little of the man that I am so desperate to know. This is perhaps the closest thing to a memory of him that I will ever have. And yet, I am uncertain whether I am even right in including it here. If my grandma, the person who suffered most through this event, has been unwilling to tell me, her own grandson, the particulars for all these years, then how can I write conjectures for people that I may never meet?

Does Buck’s story belong to him? Does Jordan’s story belong to her? Nobody can adequately determine what it is to be shaped by a hurt that they don’t feel, not me, not Buck’s

foster mother or best friend, not Jordan's audience. It could be pain which gives ownership. When Terressa Jordan wrote of the pain of losing her mother, that was her pain to tell. But how much pain is required? James Galving shows a whole community facing the death of a friend. His remark on that occasion was, "They say it's a terrible thing to see grown men cry, but when you see a whole room full of tough-as-jerky dried up old cowpokes who never talk except to say hello, goodbye, and excuse me, all broken down with weeping, it's kind of a relief."

So perhaps it is this pain that draws us together. Perhaps it is this pain that purifies us. Buck Brannaman is severe but gentle, just like my Grandma, just like Terresa Jordan, and just like the tough-as-jerky cowpokes that Galvin speaks of. The pain, in many ways, seems to purify its recipient, but leaves something left over for others, too.

Horses

According to parents across America, there are three distinct horse riding styles: the way the lady rides (trit trot, trit trot), the way the gentleman rides (gallopy trot, gallopy trot), and the way the farmer rides (hobbledy hoy, hobbledy hoy). However, despite the verbosity and experiential argument of dandlers the world over, there is a fourth riding hero who straddles the saddle with an alacrity that would make even Teddy—famous for his "rough riders"—tremble in his iconically manicured moustache. There are not many creatures crazy enough to get on a horse when they know they'll be thrown off. The cowboy is. What's more, sometimes he stays on.

Makey Hedges tells a story—fictional, but from a source so experienced that you can bet it's more fact than fable—of a young cowboy, Dean, and his over rambunctious horse "Road Map," so named because his bad temper got him sold and subsequently new-branded so many times that his rump looked like his namesake. Ten or fifteen times a day Dean would get on and ten or fifteen times a day he would fall off (fall is too tame: bucked, thrown, or launched would all

be more accurate) and ten or fifteen times a day he would get back on. And that is the spirit of the cowboy.

Horses can be tamed and humans can be killed. Which result is more likely depends on three things: the horse, the human, and the tack—that thin padding which provides the bulk of the connection between boy and bronc. However, by the time a pair becomes cow-boy and cow-bronc, they'd best have good tack, reconciled their differences, and made up their minds to be partners. It's not easy riding.

As a young bean-pole, barely tall enough to reach a horse's rump, I took riding lessons. Good student that I was, I came away having learned only two things: first, riding bareback was uncomfortable as a spine in your rump sounds. And second, when the horse misbehaves we both have to walk in endless circles around the outside of the pen, and neither of us like that.

It would be fifteen years before I have another chance to set foot in stirrup. That opportunity comes on a Thursday when Cowboy Phil offers to let me ride his horse, Sam. It's nothing so drastic as a ride on Roadmap nor a gallop across the plains nor even a slow ride through a grand landscape. Sam is a gentle horse, nearly as eager to please as I am. He is obedient so long as he understands what is wanted. It isn't till now, fifteen years after graduating from riding lessons, that I finally understand what I was supposed to have learned so long ago: the beauty of riding. The rider's job is to help the horse understand what is expected. It is a relationship of communication—a partnership, a dance. Sam and I slow waltz through the small riding arena. I imagine how a fast tango across a grassy plain would feel. Flying low over my partner's neck—dancing, as it were, cheek to cheek. As in a dance, my part is to lead. And as when I dance, my intentions are not always clear. There are momentary pauses, beats of uncertainty, steps in the wrong direction. The principles are consistent; good communication requires tone, trust, and a strong understanding of weight and center of gravity.

The slow rhythm of Sam walking through sand is soothing. For weeks I have felt overwhelmed by stress, an indefinable weight mixing with a crippling fear and a sad splash of

depression—it's an unwelcome cocktail, but one that has been especially potent this semester. However, as I sit on Sam, moving in circles along the inside of the arena fence line, I notice how much more striking the fall colors washing across the mountain are. Reds, oranges, and browns fight for dominance, stand in soothing compliment, make the world right. Here on Sam's back there is no stress, no fear, no depression, no class, no deadline, no politics, no expectations, no confusion, and no disappointment. In an unfairly borrowed line from Pablo Neruda, there is only Sam, and I, and now.

For years I have fed horses for my neighbors. I have cleaned pens, hauled hay, mended fences, and built sheds. In the fifteen years since I last rode a horse, when I was too young to understand either the struggle that life would bring or the relief that was possible, I have done all the work associated with horses and wondered a thousand times why people put up with them considering the cost, the work, and the limited use. Now I understand. I wish that I could take a horse and ride through a canyon, over red rock, and up a fall hill. To ride away. The romanticized idea of riding into a sunset no longer seems ridiculous. I would do it, if given the chance.

There is a part in Hedges' story where a cowboy with his boot caught in the stirrup is being dragged and nearly killed behind his horse. In a desperate attempt to save him, one of the other pokes finally shoots the horse, killing it on the spot. Rather than being grateful that a man's life has been saved, the ranch owner, when he discovers what has happened, is furious that his horse is dead. When I first read the account, that seemed like an irresponsible reaction. After all, we are the alpha predators on this earth; it is our privilege to save our own species above all others. But now I understand. Another person has never given me what Sam is giving me now. People complicate the world. Horses simplify it. Perhaps my loyalty does lie with my kind, but perhaps my well being is predicated on Sam and the nameless horse from Hedge's story. Seen from this light, it is not illogical that Cormac McCarthy uses attachment to a horse in his book (aptly titled *All the Pretty Horses*) to drive the plot. In the book, every problem that the

main characters encounter comes because one of them loses his horse and has to get it back come hell or high water. He gets his horse, but both hell and high water follow. For the person who has never ridden a horse, such an action may not make sense. For the person who knows what a horse is capable of, the story is not only logical but probable.

As I drove away the stress returned, though weakened by its absence. I was still not a horseman. I was still not a cowboy. I still had my problems and my fears were beginning again to find me. However, I finally understood what Cormac McCarthy meant when he said, “...it was pointless to speak of there being no horses in the world for God would not permit such a thing.” and I was better for it.

Redrock

The red rock swirls around me. It is sedentary and yet it has what my artist friends refer to as movement, line of action, directional motion. The soft, water worn contours are hard as the stone they are and yet they cradle me, not unlike a mother cradles her child. The metaphor seems appropriate. After all, “from dust [I] came and to dust [I have] returned.” Terry Tempest Williams claimed that you cannot claim the desert as your own unless you can cut yourself open and bleed red sand. I cannot claim the desert as my own. Despite my gritty heritage and proclivity to play the great American banjo, I am an interloper here: an outcast begging acceptance. Even so, though I cannot claim it, the desert claims me. Perhaps it is not the desert that I love but the solitude. It is true that I am drawn to the warmth of the sand—sand so much softer than anything that can be found in the miles of coastal rock-drift—and that I crave the arid air and moistless surfaces which the desert provides. And yet, it is not the desert that I love. Rather, it is the chance to feel the wind, walk through the rock dust, and “be still and know that I AM God.” I am still. I am alone. I am the only person in existence. And yet there are people milling around me—a parking lot, resting at the base of a trail, filled with cars from which fresh hikers issue and to which the weary retire. “это где мы должны быть?” There is a Russian

family, just arrived, now speaking by their car. I itch to speak to them in my own broken Russian, to welcome them, somehow, to my home. Instead, I bless my solitude. The others, like me, are not chasing people or company. They come for the rock. They come for the nature. They come for the connection of solitude. Sometimes, in the right settings, you can manage to be alone despite the crowd.

Edward Abbey wrote his book *Desert Solitaire* in a similar setting, though in a time less crowded. He too experienced crowds, observed people, and worked with others on his days off. Yet he too found the solitude for reflection. Perhaps *reflection* is the wrong word. *Revel* would be a closer description of his experience of environmental solitude. Sometimes such experiences awaken a primal need to protect the setting of our solitude. Many of the resulting cult of environmentalists quickly realize that our species is the greatest threat to the environment they love. The logical step is not immediately to remove us from the environment, but to stop us from touching. Like a museum, they place it under glass, only to realize, too late, that as we stare through our glass at the cliffs, trees, streams, mammals, reptiles, and arachnids, it is not the environment but we, in our tiny boxes—display cases that we call houses and cars—who are under glass. Abbey takes a different approach. He does not believe in *saving* the environment, he believes in taking our place as part of the environment, and that the environment will then save itself. We are, after all, animals like the rest. The primary difference between us and our wiser natural counterparts is that we have some elitist idea that we have somehow graduated from the ranks and files of other mammals to a station above the world in which we live. But the clear commandment remains, “to dust thou shalt return.” Our hiatus must end, we must, with Abbey, return to the dust and revel in the solitude.

Earlier in the day, I walked up a river. The water was shallow and clear. Not wanting to wet my vestments, I took my shoes off, stuffed my socks down inside, tied the laces together, and hung them around my neck like a priest’s stole. I was reminded of Moses removing his shoes to approach the burning bush. I was the priest of the desert. Barefooted, I step into the

burning water. It was the burning of heat, not flowing into my naked foot-sole, but flowing out to mix with the river, to be eaten and disappear forever, leaving nothing but chilled feet on hard rocks in running water. The illusion leaves with the heat. I am not a priest. This is not holy ground. There is no meaning in this experience. But to dust I have returned, and I am contented.

I'm back in my redrock perch on the wall of the canyon. Still without meaning. Still devoid of purpose. I am hungry. I am in the desert. Tomorrow I will start my fast for "man shall not live on bread alone, but on every beauty that proceedeth forth out of the mouth of nature."

The next day comes and with it my fast. We start a new hike. This time it is not up a cold river to see a waterfall; it is over hard slickrock to see what has become the most iconic seven thousand tons of landscape in the state. I have seen Delicate Arch on license plates, desktop screensavers, postcards, and calendars my whole life. I've never been impressed. Having reached the top, I am even less impressed. The arch itself is small. It looks like no more than an anchor point on which God would connect his carabiner to carry the earth as a keychain. While I find the arch itself unworthy of the sycophantic crowds, the surrounding terrain is breathtaking. The arch is perched precariously on the top of a mesa with hard rock cliffs and sculpted bowels twisting and writhing around every step. I am surprised but not upset at the lack of safety features around this iconic landmark where the better part of 1.5 million pilgrims come each year to pay their respects to the gods of the bureau. Abbey too would be proud of this liability oversight. "Let them take risks," He says, "for Godsake, let them get lost, sunburnt, stranded, drowned, eaten by bears, buried alive under avalanches—that is the right and privilege of any free American."

The wilderness has worked in me. I have not been able to take my place in it as Abbey would urge, but I have experienced it in new ways. For Terry Tempest Williams, the desert is more than a place or a system or a single experience. It is a philosophy, a refuge, therapy, eroticism, release, meditation, peace, necessity, color, connection, healing, danger, family,

responsibility, and fantasy. I have not experienced most of these aspects of the desert. I still cannot cut myself and bleed red sand. Just as I found in the river, there is no meaning for me here. But I am content. I have searched for meaning, for philosophy, in my life through many years without finding it. Now I am beginning to understand that meaning is a specter of story. My life does not need meaning; it needs simple pleasures and quiet beauty. Here, in the desert, I have not found meaning, but I have found beauty...

On the very top of Delicate Arch there is a single plant stretching nine crooked branches trembling toward the dry blue sky.