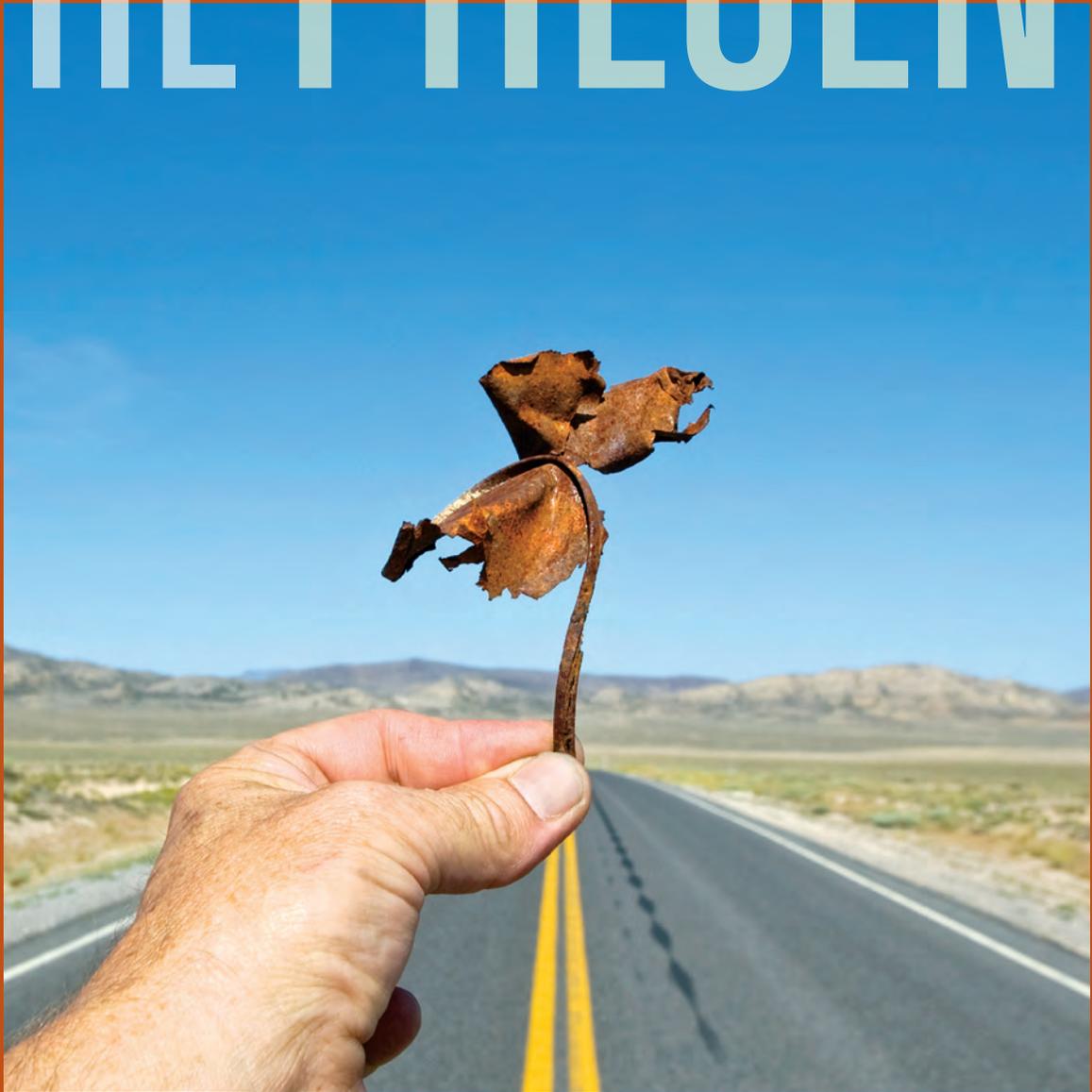


THE PRESENT



Finding Myself in the Middle of NowHere.

JERRY DOWNS

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Address all inquiries to: jerry@thepresentis.it

This book was mindfully assembled by Michael at: signorella.com

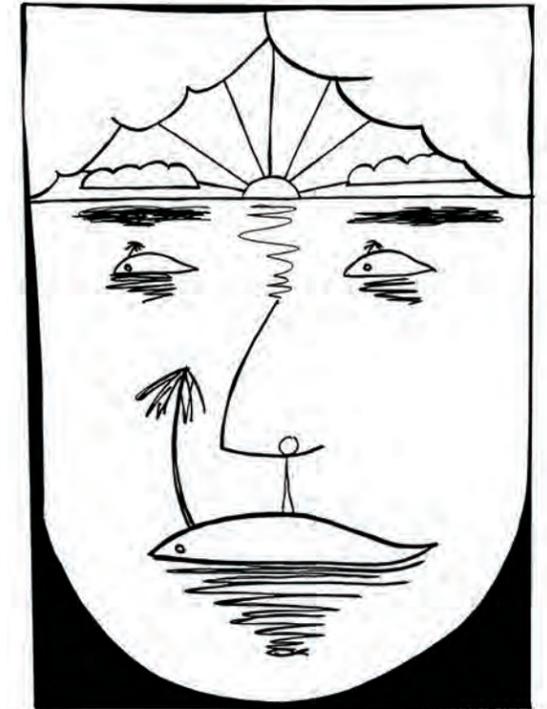
An artist is not a different kind of person. Every person is a different kind of artist.

Eric Gill

This book is dedicated to all of my fellow artists.



Preface



We are all standing on a whale
fishing for minnows.

Polynesian Proverb

In my early 20's I had a dream.

When I went to bed, I didn't have to turn off the lights or turn down the heat. The power company had already done that for me earlier in the week.

That same week someone had stopped by to look at and possibly buy some of my art. He said that I was a genius, ahead of my time and that I would be famous one day and then he left, paying me only a pile of compliments. I remember wanting to hit him. Not him so much, but everyone who had ever offered me encouragement. Everyone who made me think that I should keep going. I was pretty gone. I felt like some idiot savant who could make great art but had a hard time making change.

I fell asleep thankful that I didn't have to

live my life for the next eight hours. I asked for a dream that could help me understand why I would want to get up in the morning. I got it.

In the dream I was waiting in falling snow for a museum to open. Over the door was a banner that read Opening Night. I didn't read any further. I came for the inspiration of art, but even more, in hopes of free food at the reception. I stood outside until, driven by the biting cold, I tried the door. It opened easily. I was inside and instantly warm and dry. Great halls led off to the left and right. Straight ahead of me was a tall marble staircase.

At the top of the stairs there was a man waving me up to the next story. He seemed genuinely happy to see me. He seemed fa-

miliar. He called me by name and descended the staircase to greet me as if he hadn't seen me in years. It wasn't until we were face to face that I recognized his eyes as my own. His full head of white hair reminded me of my father. His smile set me at ease. He said, "Come on in. The gallery is open and the food is already set. We've got shrimp, smoked salmon and, even though I had to argue with the caterer, we've even got those little weenies in barbecue sauce that we like."

Over the gallery doors was the same 'Opening Night' sign. This time I read my own name in Bold Helvetica along with the words 'A Retrospective.' I stopped in my tracks and pulled away from his hand that was holding my arm. With the first words that I could speak since opening the door downstairs, I stuttered, "What is this? What is going on?"

He, me, that future self said, "I guess you didn't see the sign when you came in."

"No. No I didn't. Please...." I couldn't finish the sentence.

"It's a gift. The one you asked for before you went to sleep. I forgot how hard it was. It's okay." Then he laughed and added, "You can trust me."

Remembering that this was all a dream helped calm me down. He backed off and I entered the gallery by myself. It was huge. Hundreds of pieces lined the walls. I saw a photograph of a little black girl on stairs with a poster that said "Black is Beautiful" behind her head. I had taken it years before when I was in art school in San Francisco.

There were photographs that I had never seen. There were large collage works made from thousands of images. There were drawings. There were drawings!

I hadn't drawn since second grade when I was forbidden to do so until I learned to read. I began to cry. I was so happy. Happy for that little kid who had overcome so much sadness and was able to make these primitive, beautiful images.

I turned to face my future self who was holding back tears of his own and said, "Thank you. Thank you."

"You're welcome. Thank you. I wouldn't be here without you. Without all of you." he said with words. The rest was told by his eyes and that self-conscious smile that made me laugh when I felt it on my own face.

"Now for the really good part." He began to speak and stopped, several times, before he said, "I know what you are going through. I know it the same way you know I know what we went through in second grade. I have the power to make you an offer. Okay, here's the deal: in about a half an hour hundreds of people are going to come through that door to look at your life's work. I am completely comfortable with my art and book sales. If you choose, and this is completely up to you, we can change places and you will not have to suffer another worry about money or a pang of hunger. You will be respected and appreciated. I will take your place in bed in your past due rental house without electricity and heat. You will stay here and receive the fruits of our labor."

To be polite, I let him finish. My mind was made up before he finished speaking. The comfort and accolades were not even part of the decision. I simply could not be denied the experience of seeing every photograph, collage and drawing come into being. I didn't even have to answer. He knew himself well enough to know what I would say.

To this day I remember how it felt as we laughed together looking at the art, comparing notes and munching on those tooth-picked barbecue sauce-drenched weenies we both like so much.

I remember being happy to wake up as myself and looking forward to all the years that would pass, all the experiences that I would have, all the artwork that would come into being, and the book you now hold in your hands.

Introduction

Hi!



Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads.
Henry David Thoreau

Thank you for being here. It is no small matter, given that it required the creation of an entire Universe. It is a miracle that we made it. Every atom of this book, our bodies, the Earth, the stars and all of the hundred trillion galaxies all once fit into a mass of energy that could fit into the period at the end of this sentence. We are all different vibrations of the same energy that burst forth at the first instant of creation. The consciousness that accompanied the creation is the same consciousness that now per-

ceives this page.

This, of course, is true of every other instance of our lives. The miracle is so precise, so perfect and so pervasive that, for all practical purposes, it has become invisible.

1990

Twenty some years ago I wrote another book called *The Present*. What you just read was how it began. I don't mind that it was never published. I might have gotten stuck making the same wordy argument about the nature

of reality for the rest of my life. The truth behind all those words was completely invisible to me at the time I wrote them. The first book was about what I thought. There wasn't a lot about how I felt. I feel differently now. Life is just as complex now, actually even more so, but my approach is simpler, as is this book. It is not just about looking at the miracle. It's about being in it.

Thank you for joining me. It is going to be a trip. You, of course, will do most of the driving. Go at your own speed and stop for a picture whenever you like. I'll play navigator. There will be no need for me to pull out the map. I've made the 3,000 mile journey we'll be taking dozens of times. I've seen every mile of road at every time of day and night. It is always different. Each time I see it in a new light.

We'll start from my home just north of the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco and weave our way across the American West to Colorado. The thread that will hold our conversation together is a trip that I took to my childhood home for a family reunion. Being the fifth of eleven kids has

definitely shaped the way I hold the world. While we're there we'll make a quick visit to some of my best friends in beautiful Boulder, Colorado, the place that was my home for 30 years. I'm sure everyone will make you feel right at home.

We will make lots of stops along the way to take new pictures and, occasionally, do a little time tripping when I include pictures that I shot at different times on the same road. It's not important to keep track of the time. Just sit back and enjoy the ride.

When we leave Boulder it's California here we come, right back where we started from. We'll take a different route and follow a different thread. I've made the 1,400 mile trip in as little as 19 hours when I was going to see my girlfriend and as long as four days when I wanted to find myself in the middle of nowhere. We'll take all the time we need. That's enough talking about it. I don't know about you, but I feel like getting things on the road. I don't mind if some things are left in the dark. If we start now we will be somewhere we've never been when the sun comes up.



It could have been yesterday, or years ago, that I was a thousand miles and a time zone away in Colorado. I was there to celebrate the lives of my parents, my brother, Shawn, and granddaughter, Gabrielle. It would have been cheaper to fly, but I wanted some time alone to contemplate life and my connection to the world. I needed what only a road trip, alone, could provide. I left in the dark, just as I had done most of the 50 plus times that I had crossed the vast open space of the American West between San Francisco and Boulder, Colorado. Some of Shawn's ashes, along with Gabrielle's blanket, were tucked safely into the back seat. In my reflective mood, all the pictures and personal revelations that I had experienced over the last 30 years on this familiar road began to reappear with the passing of each mile marker. I took notes. I took a lot of pictures. My mother would have been proud.

My friend, Joe, had given me some tapes to play in my CD-challenged car. I considered listening to a book-on-tape of Eckhart Tolle reading his book *The Power of Now*. It was, however, way too early for Tolle's tone talking about Nothing. I'd save that for the middle of NowHere. Instead, I popped in a Talking Heads' tape and David Byrne'd my way down Interstate 80. By the time the Earth's rotation began to bring on the dawn, I was rolling past Davis, California.

As I passed the "Milk Farm" sign, I remembered the first time I had seen it when I was hitchhiking to California thirty years ago, and the dozens of times I had seen it since. Each time I thought it would be great to shoot a full moon behind the sign at dawn, when it was still dark enough to make out detail on a full moon and yet light enough to see the sign. I always imaged that at some point in the future I would find myself in the right place at the right time to take that picture. This time, I passed the sign, looked in the rear view mirror, saw the moon telling me that the time was NOW. I moved out of the fast lane, took the next exit, turned around, got back on the highway, and raced to a spot I had pictured a

hundred times. I set up the tripod and took the first shot as a stainless steel milk tank truck sped down the empty highway.

It felt like a gift. I felt enormously grateful. I found myself saying, "Thank you. Thank you." As I got back on the road I turned on the Talking Heads tape. It started up in the middle of the same song that was playing when I turned it off to go take the picture. Mr. Byrne was singing, "Thank you. Thank you," as a chorus of voices behind him repeated the phrase, "When you get to where you want to be."



A dozen miles down the road a magpie was making a meal of fresh road kill. I remembered trying for years to capture the graphic beauty of these splendid birds. When I was staying in my family home after my father died I took this picture of a magpie flying above the snow. In his beak is a morsel of food left over from my father's wake. I remembered how my father snickered when I told him that the magpie was my "totem animal" and how he laughed out loud when I told him why. "The magpie," I explained, "can make the most of many different environments. They can make a living from scraps and refuse, and they do it all in a tuxedo!"



By the time Sacramento came into sight, the thermos was empty and the caffeine was kicking my central nervous system into high gear. I passed on getting off at the Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area where I had once, unsuccessfully, tried to get a picture of a couple of egrets in a small pond. I was in the mood to keep moving. It was only with passing interest that I turned my eyes off the road to see whether the two solitary specks of white were still stationed there. They were and they were not alone. It turned out that this was the time of year when hundreds of their feathered relations flew in from across the country for their annual family reunion. I still had five days--plenty of time--until my own family reunion. I turned around at the next exit three miles away and made my way back to the rookery. The jubilant celebration of life and rebirth got me excited about seeing my remaining eight brothers and sisters who were still very much alive.

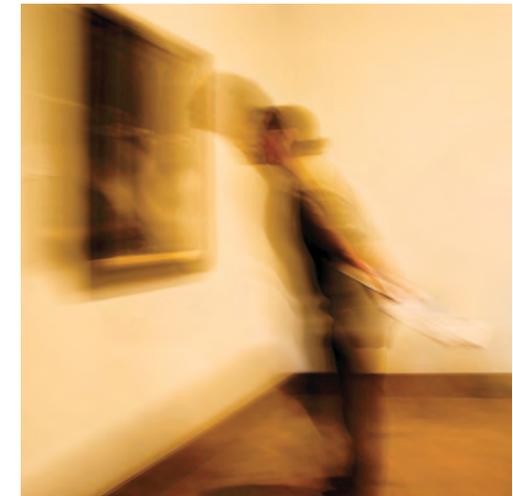
With the Sierra Mountains in my rear-view mirror I rolled into Reno, gambling that the Nevada Art Museum would have a good show. The odds were definitely in my favor. It's an excellent museum. I had some extra time on my hands while waiting for it to open so I decided to spend it driving around town, betting that the next turn of the wheel would take me to the next picture.



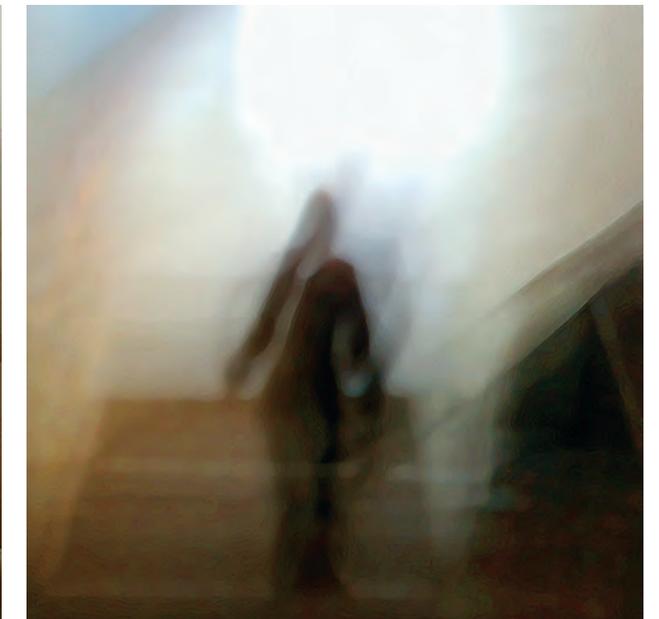
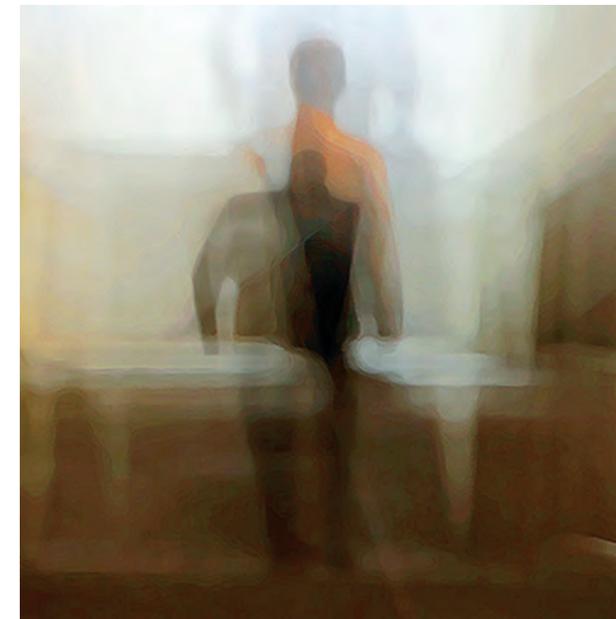
When I saw the classic auto motel sign against the puffy cloud filled sky, I knew I had a winner. I pulled off the road, set up the tripod, poured some coffee and just watched the clouds roll by until the perfect puff parked itself behind the car above the Sandman Motel. It was exhausting.



Though I had been to the Nevada Museum of Art before, I had never taken a good look at the face of the building. Art, of any sort, inspires me and I visit museums whenever I have the chance. When I walk out of a museum I think differently. The world is a different place. Colors are more vibrant, design is more dynamic and I am more connected to the world around me.



In a museum I always consider the patrons to be a major part of any exhibit. I enjoy the reactions, the contemplation and how each person positions their self in relation to the artwork. I created a [whole series](#) of images from my visits to museums around the country to illustrate my experience of how people looking at art become the art.



While looking at the shows at the Nevada Museum of Art I shot a few images from the hip. It wasn't until I got home and began to play with the images that I noticed that in two of the pictures, a man and a woman were entering the light.



I was in high spirits as I rolled out of Reno. I was leaving with much more than I had when I arrived. Even the potholes in the pavement gave me a happy return.



About forty miles from Reno a flying semi-trailer truck hovers above the highway in Fernley, Nevada.

I've taken pictures of the raised Truck Inn sign in every season and time of day and night. I don't always stop. The last time I drove by, it was the middle of the day and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. There was no real reason to just take another picture. Just as I had put that reasoning together I saw a white semi coming up the on ramp. I pulled the car to a stop, hopped out, ran in front of the car, and started to take pictures. The Truck Inn truck rolled right along the top of the semi-trailer. As the semi passed the Truck Inn truck stayed in the air like a character in a cartoon. Sometimes I think the world is playing with me.



Fernley is also the place I stopped on a previous trip to get a meal at the Truck Inn restaurant. I gave the waitress, Nikki, one of my rose prints as a thank you for humoring me and translating the formal Latin-looking script prominently displayed in the diner. With practiced pronunciation, Nikki first delivered the line in its original dialect and then translated the words into a more modern, educated English: "See Willie, there they go, thousand busses in a row. No, Joe, them trucks, some with cows and some with ducks."

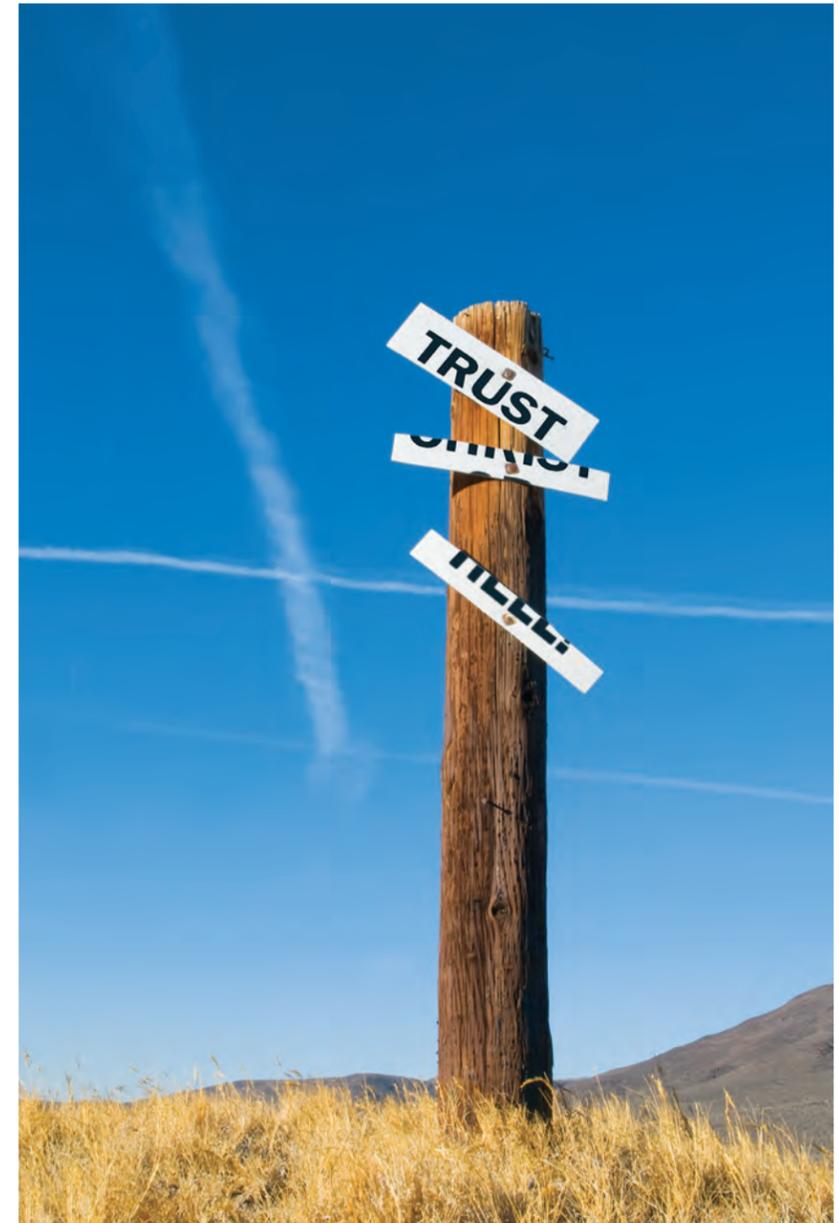




Having a companion fixes you in time and that the present, but when the quality of aloneness settles down, past, present, and future all flow together. A memory, a present event, and a forecast all equally present.

John Steinbeck,
Travels with Charley

Whether we're on a road trip or reading a book it's good to have a place to stop. Every once in a while I will have a page with a picture and a quote that made me stop and think. Like my raised hand in the picture, you can read these singular pages as a sign to stop or as a "Hi!" sign welcoming you to the next chapter.



Further down the road from Fernley, across the highway, I saw a sign that I photographed once when I was going in the opposite direction. In the sky there was an inverted cross created by contrails. On a wood post someone had nailed a message. All that remained was the word "TRUST," a small piece of "CHRIST" and half of "HELL." Having deteriorated so far from the original message, its meaning was open to a wide range of interpretations. That, I thought, was true of any spiritual teaching.

Personally, I listen to everything and take a little of this and a little of that and trust everything that can be applied to my own personal experience. Having listened and looked at a lot of things, it pretty much boils down to this: if I walk around damning the world it looks like hell. When I bless this place it looks like paradise. It's personal.



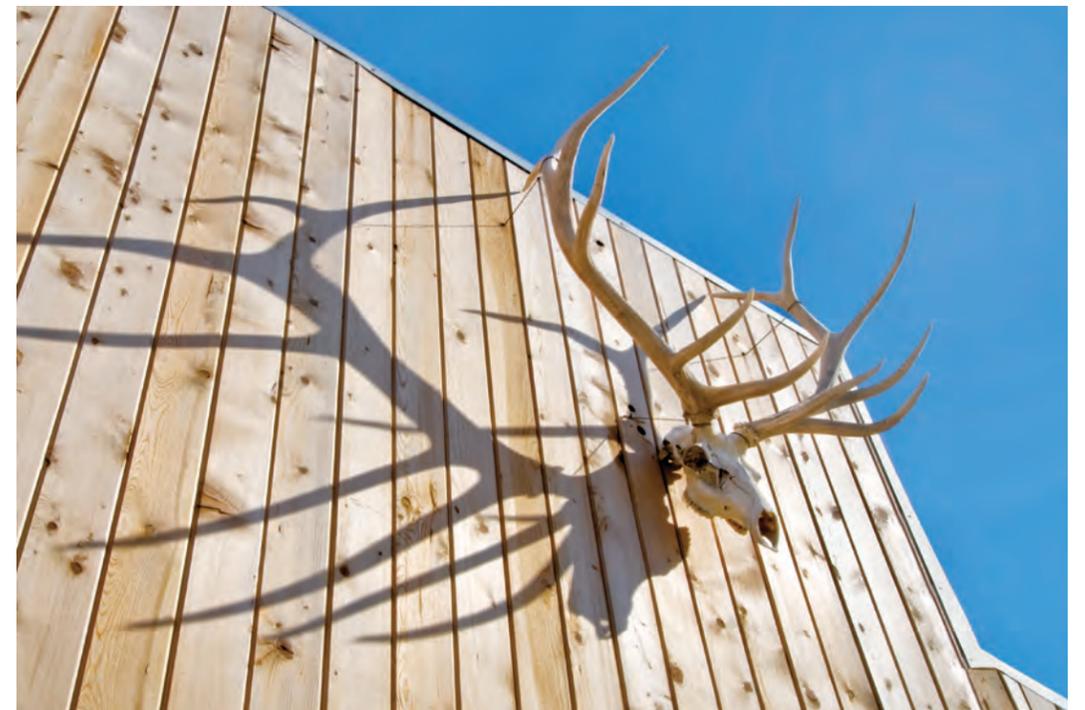
I no longer look for photographs. I just enjoy the looking and the pictures arise from that space. The resulting images are also more personal. Most of my time on the road is not spent taking pictures. Most of the time I'm just looking at the lines of the highway, the landscape and my own lines of thought. Every once in a while they all converge into single point of focus and I push the button. I don't even stop for every "good" picture. Sometimes I shoot right out the windshield.



Because I stop more often and drive faster than most, I often pass the same slower moving vehicle a number of different times on our shared expedition of the open road.



"The City by the 'C'" was my next stop. I drove through Carlin, NV to see if the elk skulls on the fresh façade of a building were casting a shadow on this sunny summer day. The last time I drove through town was in the dead of winter. I saw the skulls, without shadows, on the new building with no sign and no sign of life under a cloudy sky that threatened snow. I told myself to come back someday to take a picture and see what kind of establishment would sport such an interesting storefront.





I found and introduced myself to Bobbie and Terry, the husband and wife co-owners. When I told them about the previous time I stopped by they swore that they must have been open. “Hell,” Terry said “Every damn bar in Nevada is open 24 hours a day, every day of the year.” And added, “We never put up the sign. We’ll do it one of these days. Everybody in town knows where it is. We’re just in no hurry.” I told him that one of the best restaurants in San Francisco, Nopa, has no signage except for a small sign on the door, and that it’s always packed.

After talking with Terry and Bobbie, I accepted their offer of a drink. While I drank my Pepsi, I laid out a dozen of my business cards, each with a different picture, across the bar, and asked people to take their pick. One thing led to another and pretty soon everybody in the bar was outside posing for a picture. It was clear, by the way they behaved with one another, that this was a family portrait. After we all wished one another well, I took the rest of the still chilled soda and headed back down the road. I used the soda to wash down a handful of organic nuts and granola that I had bought at Whole Foods the day before.

Maybe the reason I chose to be born the fifth child in a family of eleven kids was because I so enjoy getting to visit so many different worlds. No matter how different one is from another there is always something about everyone that unites us all. I remember my mother telling all of us that we were “all special” and that “each of you has your own special gift.” I remember her personally saying the same phrase to me, and adding, “Your gift is being an artist. I can’t tell you what that means. But I’m sure you will figure it out.”



After leaving the bar in Carlin the sky was full of beautiful perfectly placed clouds. I began to “work” on getting a picture. I started making a whole series of motions to find a picture in the flat and deserted desert. As far as I could see, there wasn’t a tree, a farmhouse or even a windmill to put in the foreground of those fabulous clouds.

The only things that I could see that stood out in my environment were the semis coming down the highway in the opposite direction. I was driving 80 miles an hour. I’m sure the trucks were doing the same. The road was straight and there was no one on my side of the divided highway for miles. I rolled down the window, picked out any truck that I thought would be interesting, panned the truck through the viewfinder and when we were side by side I clicked the shutter.

Coming down the highway, in the opposite direction, I saw a white “Swift” semi with blue letters. I thought that this could be just the thing to go with the blue and white sky.

For the next mile, inside my head, I heard myself try to make a case for whether or not I had gotten a good picture. My argument went something like, “The Roadway truck was good because of the roadway. The blue and white Swift truck worked well with the blue and white sky and the blurred weeds in the foreground helped show that we were moving swiftly.”

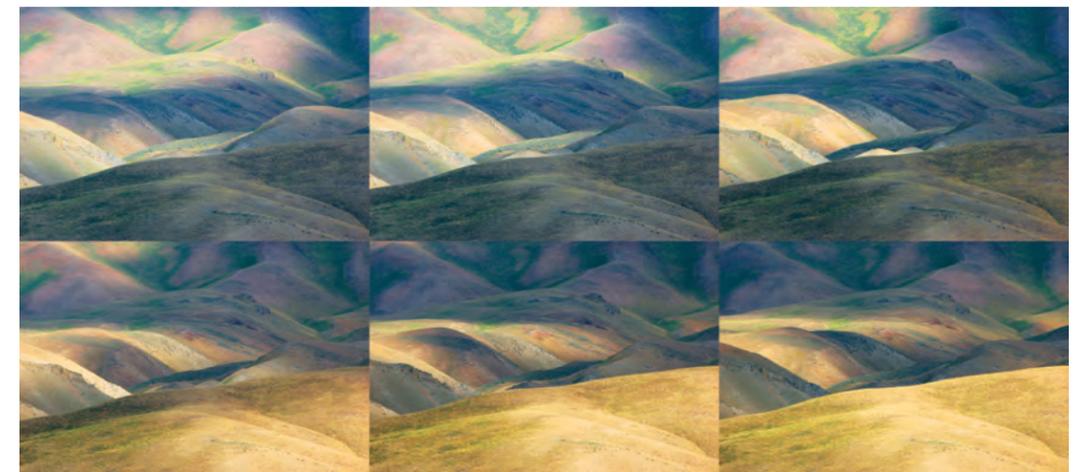
The bank of clouds was about to be spent. It was time to make a decision. I pulled the car to a stop. I instantly knew that none of the pictures that I had just taken was the one I was looking for. I knew because I was “thinking” about it. When I first saw the clouds I was responding to a feeling, not a thought. I dismissed the case I was making in my head and set myself free to just be there.



I stopped working and began playing with what was right in front of me. I let go of my judgements and just started taking pictures. The weeds that had been blurring by me for the last twenty miles were small wild sunflowers. I tried a number of different angles, moving closer and closer until a single sunflower filled the frame. The out of focus, perfectly-spaced clouds really make the picture pop. For me, the final picture feels exactly what it was like to be there. The photograph of the sunflower was a bright addition to my series of [floral images](#).



At Elko I got off the highway to fill the tank and get something in my stomach. Elko is the home of White King, the world's largest stuffed Polar Bear and the world largest fake one as well. They both reside at the Commercial Hotel and Casino. Upon seeing the remains of this magnificent creature I consoled myself knowing that the real animal, given his size, had lived a long and free existence.



After only a few miles of getting back on the highway I stopped to witness the living miracle of how the shadows of passing clouds changed the colors on the mountainside. As the scene unfolded I found myself reliving a similar event with my father after my mother died. We were sitting on the back deck of the family home on Lookout Mountain above Golden, Colorado. Different clouds were performing the same transformation across the foothills and flat plains beyond. We didn't speak for the longest time. We just listened to the birds and felt the dry, warm wind. When he finally spoke, in an even, calm voice, he said, "Life keeps moving." Then, after a pause, added, "Thank God."



I got back in the car, my home with a view, and kept moving.

When I count the hours, I have lived more than five months on this road over the last 40 years. It feels as much like home as any place I have called home in Colorado or California. Whenever I enter the valley over the mountains from Elko I find myself being grateful that I have such infinite space available in my living room.



There is a spot an hour east of Elko where I have stopped a half dozen times. I couldn't tell you exactly where it is. It is just the next dirt road exit that comes up after I've drained the second thermos of coffee. The only reason I recognize the spot on this deserted stretch of the road is because hundreds of purple swallows fill the sky with aerial acrobatics upon my arrival.

It is quite a sight seeing so many swallows slicing through the sky with their slender wings. Watching these graceful beings, I had the realization that "the infinite" is like the sky. We can point to it, but never put our finger on it. Then I had the added understanding that the sky is actually an accumulation of the entire atmosphere and that it actually starts at ground level. We are all living in the sky.

Before I took off into the wild blue yonder, I took a closer look at the creative constructions that these communal creatures create on the underside of the overpass. Each of the little blobs of mud you see on the nest was once scooped on top of a bird's beak and then sculpted into a place they call home.



Fifty miles from Elko is the town of Wells, Nevada, where the streets are almost always deserted. The casino, many of the local businesses and the theater are all closed. In the middle of town I witnessed a wall returning to nature. The white undercoat and the blue peeling paint mimicked the timeless blue sky and the ever-changing clouds.

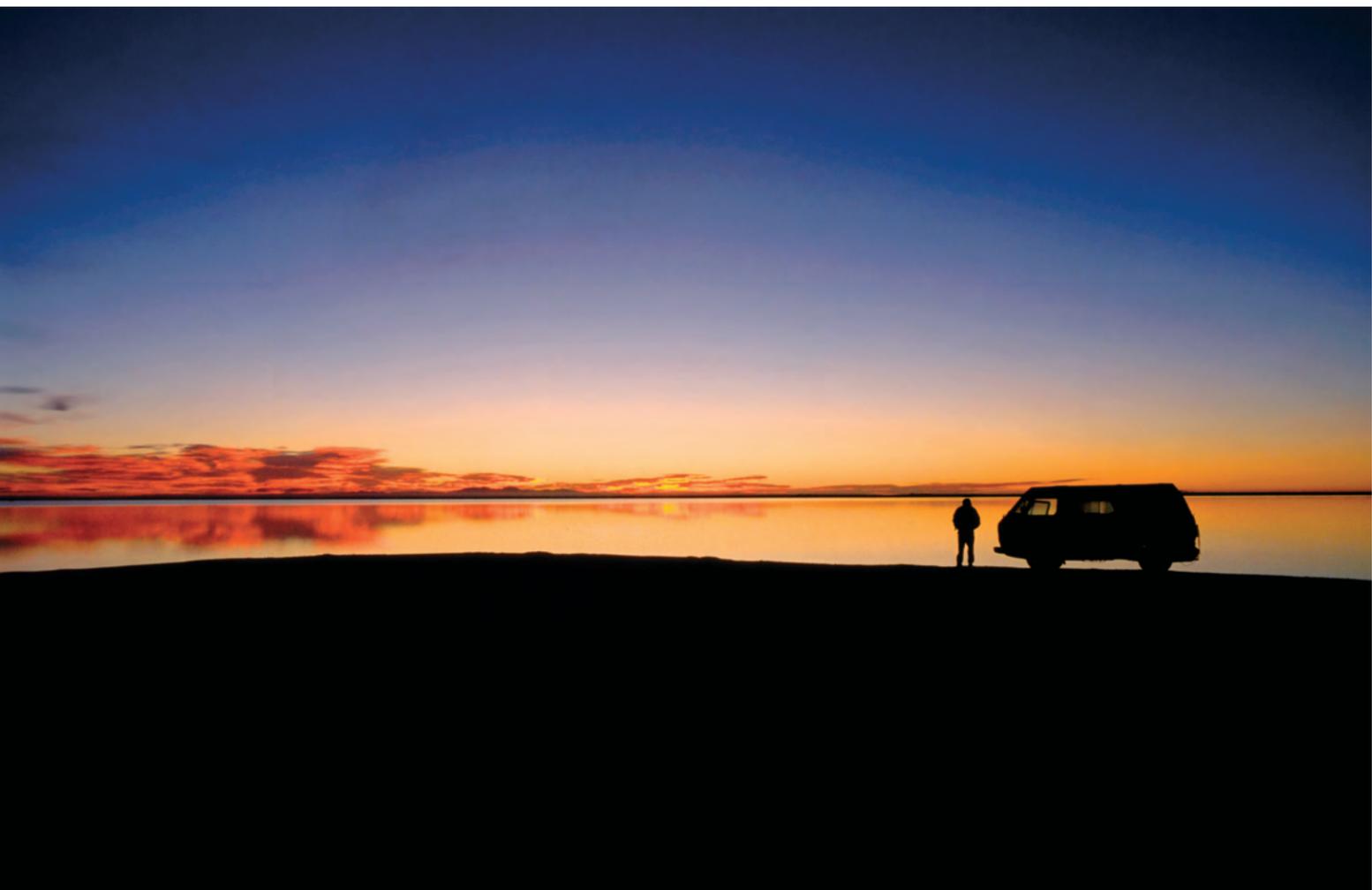


The Big Pillow Motel, under a pillow shaped cloud, was also closed.



Not all the businesses in Wells have dried up. There are two legal brothels, Bella's and Donna's, on the edge of town that are still doing a stiff business. The word belladonna means "beautiful woman" in Italian. The hallucinogenic drug, belladonna, was once used by painted ladies to dilate their pupils for a doe-eyed look to help attract the big bucks.





*I would rather wake up in the middle of nowhere
than in any city on earth.*

Steve McQueen



Once I wind my way to West Wendover, Nevada I am half way to Boulder. I wave to Wendover Will and prepare myself to enter another state, time zone and a geological space that defies logic and challenges the boundaries of perception.



I love it when I find myself at the Bonneville Salt Flats just at dawn or dusk so I can take a good long look at myself.

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