



My name is John and I'm retired (except for some freelance translation) and like to travel alone. I take lots of photos, look for second-hand books which become part of the journey, keep a log and collect fridge magnets. I try to give my trips form and meaning with missions and quests. This is Part 6 of the **Pilgrim Chronicles**.

New Orleans

It's April 16, 2014, and a full moon hangs above the end of my street on the eve of my road trip to New Orleans. I've got a rental car and I'm leaving in the morning with no special mission aside from the usual: photos, old books and a break from routine. The plan is to drive south along the Eastern Seaboard, then west to New Orleans, then back through states such as Tennessee and Virginia. I've printed a small map on 5 x 7 photo paper that I will keep next to me in the car and use to chart my progress. It will be cool tomorrow with a high of only five Celsius but of course it will only get warmer as I move south.

On Day 1 I'm on the road at 9 a.m., driving due east when an hour later in the Eastern Townships I get nailed for my first speeding ticket ever. Guilty as charged of driving only slightly over the speed limit, I don't even try to argue with the young officer. Then, at a tiny, deserted border crossing into New Hampshire, I'm ordered out of my car and made to sit for ten minutes with my back to an unfriendly U.S. Customs official while he questions me with a disembodied voice to make sure I'm not a terrorist.

First stop is Portland, Maine, which is nice enough, but I can't find much to photograph and when I get to my motel the street is full of trucks because a water main has broken, which means there is no water in my room and no guarantee as to when it might come back. But it isn't all bad - I pick up my first book at Longfellow's: Jonathan Kozol's *Amazing Grace*, about the lives of poverty-stricken children in the Bronx, and spend some time in a very comfortable non-profit (maybe Christian-oriented) café downtown.

I'm exhausted after my first day of driving and struggle to stay awake past nine. I take the speeding ticket as a message to drive slowly. There's no rush. The water returns to the motel at 10:15 and all is well with the world.

Day 2 doesn't begin well: I get lost driving north trying to find spots recommended by the motel owner and when I finally make it back to Cape Elizabeth the sun is gone. I'm finding New England a bit depressing, hoping the whole Eastern Seaboard is not so drab. The trip so far is disappointing, with the trees still naked and the air full of the dust left behind by melting snow, and still a bit too cold for comfort. But it's early days, there are always adventures to be had on the road, and it takes time for the routines and habits of home to loosen their grip.

I return to Old Orchard, the site of a wonderful week with my three boys nineteen years ago. It's chilly and grey and deserted at this time of year of course with everything from the pier to the amusement park in lock-down, waiting for the summer-people to return. But I like deserted beach towns and I get a couple of nice shots as I slowly drive down the coast to Kennebunkport and Ogunquit. By mid-afternoon I'm feeling better and I have my first fridge magnet, a replica of the U.S. Highway 1 sign, which is where I'm headed to continue my crawl down the Seaboard. I make it to Newport, Rhode Island, and spend a bit extra on a nice hotel room.

I'm feeling a bit edgy on Day 3, but the weather is spectacular in Newport and the Ocean Drive around the bay and the Mansion District is very nice, with lots of access to the water which is a beautiful emerald green-blue with enough surf to fill the air with the scent of the sea.

After the drive I find Kelly's Bookstore and leave with two books: a collection of Ansel Adams prints in color and Anne Lamott's *Travelling Mercies*. It's a fine bookstore and I hear a lady remark on the wonderful scent of old books. Old books and the sea: a very nice day indeed. Later, I will learn that "travelling mercies" is something to be wished to a traveler: *Love the journey, God is with you, come home safe and sound.*



Old Orchard, Maine



Kennebunkport, Maine



Maine



Maine



Newport, Rhode Island



Newport, Rhode Island

I decide to get some driving done and set the GPS for Princeton, which takes me through the Bronx and thank god it's Saturday or I'm sure I would have got stuck in heavy rush hour traffic in this forsaken place. Beyond New York, the highway crosses the New Jersey Meadowlands, vast stretches of perfectly flat wetlands surrounded by cities that seem to rise out of the swamps like alien monuments. It's a surreal vision with a vivid orange and purple-streaked sunset sky making it even more dramatic. I would love to take some photos but there is nowhere to pull over. I'm exhausted by the time I find a motel close to Princeton

I wake up early and refreshed on Day 4 and I'm off to St. Paul's in Princeton for Easter Sunday mass, but the church is overflowing with overdressed families and I can't get through the door. On the ten-minute drive from my hotel to the church something remarkable had happened: spring! Entering Princeton, suddenly there were buds and blossoms everywhere as if I had crossed a line from one season to the next. Dramatic, beautiful and much appreciated.

I visit a couple of state parks but there's nothing to see so I hit the road again, setting the GPS for the Eastern Penitentiary in Philadelphia, a 200-year-old prison in the center of the city that was abandoned for twenty years in the early seventies and then re-opened years later as a "preserved ruin". It's the first time I've ever been in a prison and you can feel pain and tension still clinging to the walls. But even more interesting is how quickly nature began to overtake the site once it was abandoned. Trees are actually growing in some cells with only a small broken skylight to first let in the seeds, then nurture them; I finally understand how ancient cities become buried.

The parts of downtown Philadelphia that I see are very nice: the view from the steps of the art museum, the strollers and painters on the banks of the Schuylkill River. But leaving downtown Philadelphia takes me through a black neighborhood where I get my first glimpse of racial segregation. I get lost for a few minutes and I'm a bit nervous sitting at a red light, feeling conspicuously white, something that will happen more frequently as I move further south.

I decide to get some driving done before looking for a hotel but don't get very far before I settle in for the night somewhere in Delaware. Was the penitentiary haunted, as some say? It certainly felt that way and I found myself craving a cigarette (an inmate obsession no doubt) badly as I walked down the narrow corridor of one of the cell blocks, the first craving since I stopped smoking nine years ago.



Eastern Penitentiary, Philadelphia



Eastern Penitentiary, Philadelphia



Rocky Statue, Philadelphia



Philadelphia

Day 5 begins with another beautiful morning. I'm looking forward to using public transportation in Washington. I check into my hotel in Alexandria and I'm in the city before noon with a public transportation day pass. On the Metro into the city I eavesdropped on a conversation between two black women in their thirties talking about their military careers. They spoke of health benefits, college educations entirely paid for, and assignments to great places like Hawaii (not to mention Afghanistan), all suggesting that this really is a militarized society. Healthcare and higher education are ultra-expensive here but if you volunteer to become a professional soldier it's all free.

It feels good to be a pedestrian again but hard on the feet with distances between landmarks on the Mall much greater than expected. I manage to visit most of the main attractions in one exhausting day (except for the White House which is overrun by thousands of families attending the annual Easter Egg Roll), ending with the long walk across the Potomac into Arlington Cemetery all the way to the top to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, then John F. Kennedy's grave on the way down. I didn't expect it all to be so beautiful and impressive.

I finally get to the White House in the morning of Day 6 where I hang around the front gate for more than an hour, watching gawkers like myself and all sorts of protesters, the most interesting being Conception Picciotto who has been camped out in the same spot directly in front of the White House for 33 years. Her anti-nuclear, anti-war tent has been manned by volunteers continuously (to prevent it from being removed) 24 hours a day since 1981. She's an odd duck who wears an aluminum helmet under a large wig as protection against airwaves.

A middle-aged Muslim man is screaming hell and damnation against all Christians, taking the occasional break to prostrate in prayer on the pavement or take a sip from a "Big Gulp" soft drink. There's the usual Falun Gong group, this one demonstrating against Communist Chinese organ harvesting of their members, a Hispanic group protesting the threat of mass deportations, and a group of very colorful traditionally dressed Koreans taking photos of each other standing in front of the gates. All seem to be completely ignored by bored security personnel, a testament to freedom of expression.

By one o'clock I've seen enough monuments to last a lifetime and it's starting to rain so I have something to eat, then make my way slowly back to the hotel to take a nap and get some work done.





Concepcion Picciotto





Arlington Cemetery



After a day off from the car, Day 7 will be a driving day. I'll try to get to Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, seven hours away. The sun is bright but it's very windy and cooler than it has been the last couple of days. I stop in Richmond, Virginia, and ask for tips on what to see at the Visitors Centre but the ancient lady behind the counter doesn't really give me much to go on. I drive around a bit but the city seems lifeless, slightly depressing and almost deserted. I feel like I've arrived in the South.

After ten hours I finally make it to Myrtle Beach and it's perfect. I choose a random seaside motel called The Vancouver of all things and it's just what I'm looking for: simple, cheap, ocean breezes and very relaxed. The owner is extremely nice and seems very happy in his work. I have a big Chinese buffet dinner and get some translation work done back at the hotel. Maybe I'll work at a poolside table tomorrow since I've decided to stay a second day before heading to Savannah.

Day 8 is beautiful but crisp and too windy in the morning to linger in Myrtle Beach State Park. There's not much else to do here so today I'll finish the translation, get a haircut and do some clothes shopping. I'm starting to feel more at ease and less edgy, which is probably always the case on the road after the first week. I find some running shoes and clothes, but the day is slightly melancholy. This is a family vacation spot, with fantastical mini-golf structures and rides and all sorts of other stuff for kids. It doesn't feel right being here alone and I find myself wishing I had the grandkids with me.

Day 9 begins with a bit of fog, like the fog in my head from drinking too much wine last night. I'm back on the road, driving into ever warmer weather. I take a small detour to visit Hampton Plantation in the middle of nowhere, South Carolina, but it's closed. With not a soul in sight, I wander around the grounds for a while trying to imagine what it must have been like for the slaves who lived and died here. Creepy and a bit depressing.

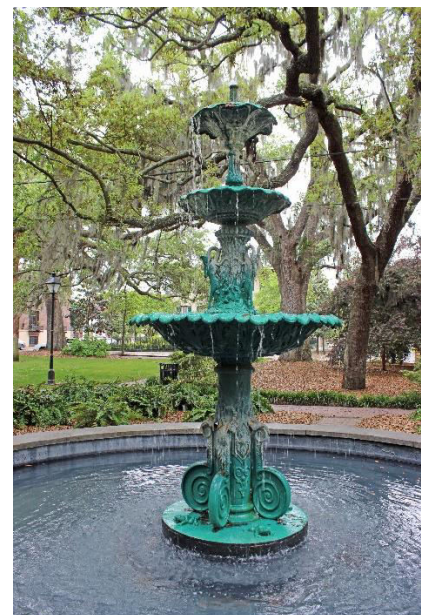
By the time I reach Savannah I feel like I've arrived in the tropics, with heavy air and sweet, familiar fragrances. The city is full of live oaks, which I learn are oaks that never lose their leaves; new leaves just push out the old ones. I stop at the Visitors Center on the way in and buy a ticket for the hop-on-hop-off trolley to give me a glimpse of the attractions and some interesting local history. It's a beautiful city but after a whole afternoon I've seen enough and decide to hit the road again tomorrow for my last sprint south to St. Augustine before turning west.



Myrtle Beach, South Carolina



Hampton Plantation, South Carolina



Savannah, Georgia

In the morning of Day 10 I walk across the highway to a Waffle House for breakfast. I slept surprisingly well last night in spite of this being the sketchiest hotel yet, situated at the intersection of two highways somewhere in northern Florida with the constant noise of cars and trucks whizzing by and several other hotels nearby advertising the sort of weekly rates aimed at people in precarious life circumstances (of which there seem to many in this part of the world).

Jonathan Kozol's book is grim and I wonder how it fits into this trip. I saw a kind-hearted billionaire on TV last night who was asked why other billionaires don't ever seem satisfied with what they have – why they never stop trying to acquire more and more. He said the only thing he could imagine was sheer competitiveness. In other words, they're pricks. If they weren't pricks, they wouldn't be billionaires.

I'm feeling very far from home this morning. As always at a certain point on the road, life at home begins to fade and soon I will wonder if it even exists, and then when I return I'll be happy to rediscover everything I left behind is not a dream. Today I drive the A1A east down the coast of Florida, which turns out to be very nice, but not as nice as Highway 1 on the West Coast.

I take the ferry over the St Johns River at Mayport Village, have a catfish sandwich at Singleton's Fish Shack, and continue south after visiting Little and Big Talbot State Parks where I take my shirt and shoes off and read for a while on a beautiful beach. It's weird to read, in this Edenic setting, about babies being mauled by rats in their cribs and dying from fires and gunshot wounds in the Bronx.

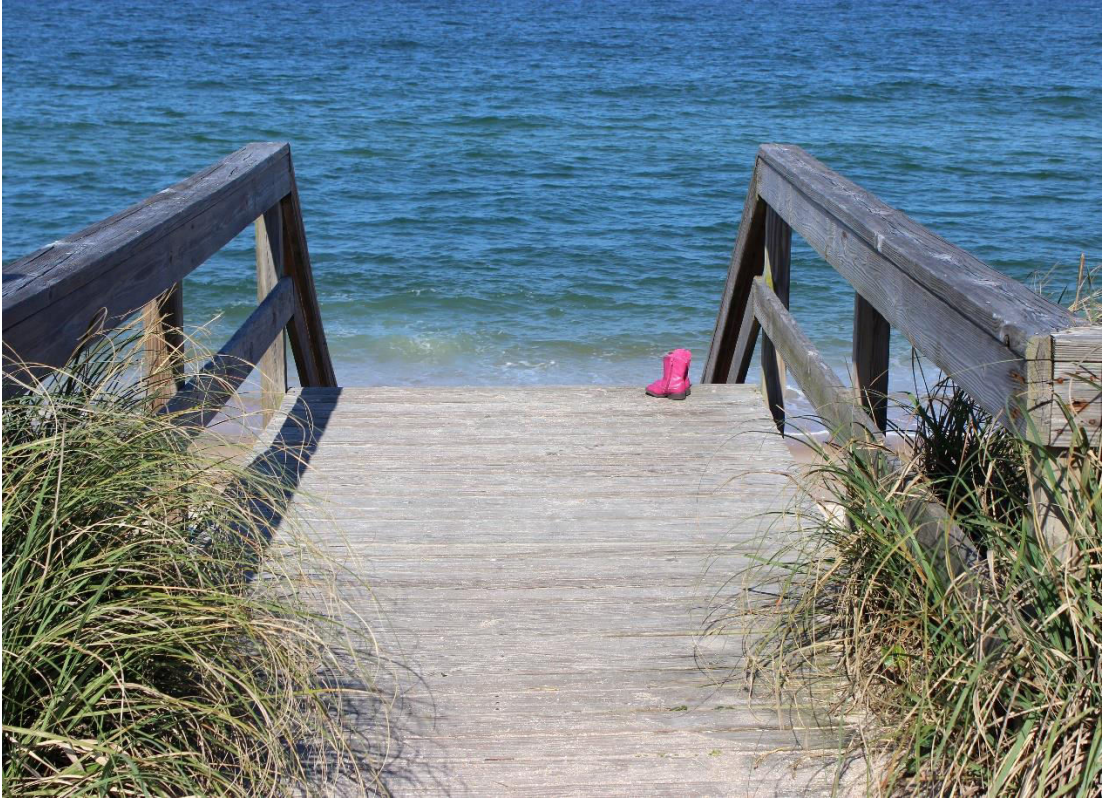
Further down the coast the sky is blue and it's not too hot and on rare occasions when the coast is accessible there is often a staircase sandwiched between private homes leading down to a small stretch of public beach. At one of these nameless stretches a pair of tiny vibrant pink books on the landing at the top of the stairs looks like a nice shot with the deep blue sea in the background.

Before I can click the shutter, a little girl appears to adjust the boots slightly before disappearing back down the stairs to the beach. She quickly reappears and does the same thing before I hear her mother call her back. I finally get my shot and then another of the little girl herself on the beach. Maybe her boots are her most prized possession, and maybe she just doesn't want sand to get in them.





Baptism



I arrive in St. Augustine on Day 11 on a busy Saturday afternoon and search for a hotel room in the Old Town center so I can explore the sights on foot. While it's still light, I visit the old Spanish fort and Shrine of Our Lady of Laleche which includes the world's tallest cross raised to commemorate the first cross planted in what is now the United States in 1565.

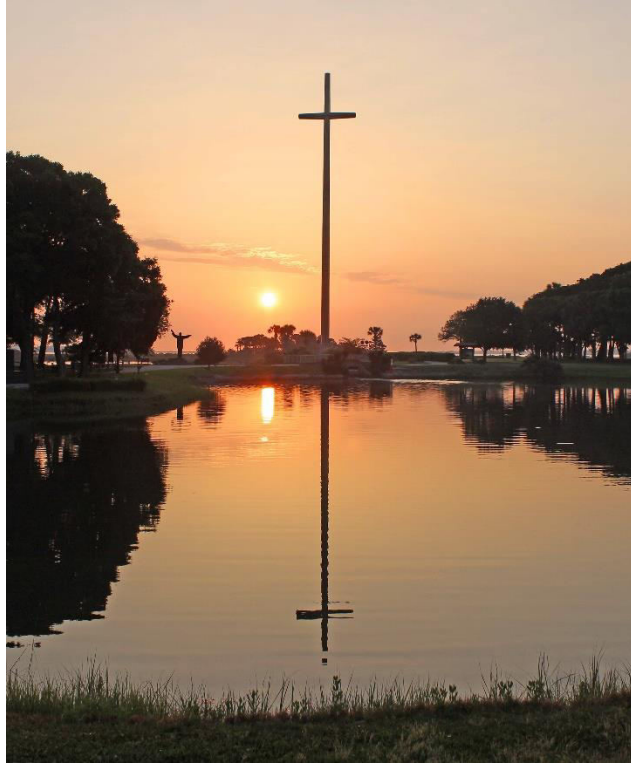
As night falls the restaurants and bars, with live music spilling out into the streets, fill up with revelers. I wander through the Old Town long enough to find a fridge magnet and end up with take-out pizza back in my room where I get to sleep early enough to wake up to get a shot of the sun rising behind the huge cross across the street.

Mass at San Sebastian on Sunday morning is cheesy and I really feel like leaving but stick it out long enough to take communion. The sermon is the familiar one about forgiveness but as my home priest says, stories that speak of fundamental truths need to be told again and again because we forget them, or fail to live by them. I miss my church. What bothers me about churches like San Sebastian is the display of wealth. It's very modern, very bright and very beautiful. I understand the good intentions behind church opulence, but it seems un-Christian. One of the things I like about my own church is its grungy simplicity. I think Jesus would like it too.

It's hot, 29 and humid, and I'm getting sunburned on my ears and forearms. I begin the drive west and discover that the Florida interior is pretty dull and I have trouble even finding a place to eat once I check into my hotel in the middle of nowhere, about twenty miles outside of Tallahassee. I book a room for three days in New Orleans.

It's foggy outside when I wake up on Day 12 and bad weather is forecast for tomorrow, so I'll try to get as close to New Orleans as possible. It's only six hours away on the Interstate, but my intention is to drive very slowly along the coast, so we'll see how long it takes. There are almost no cars on the two-lane roads through forest south towards the coast, and for the first time on this trip I begin to fully appreciate the beauty of nature as seen from the car.

I'm also appreciating the fact that it's mostly cloudy for a change (after so much sun) and each time I drive through a patch of sunlight it's like God's camera flashing on the fifty-foot trees hugging both sides of the road. I stop in a state park to ask a ranger for directions and also why there are so many dead armadillos on the road, many lying on their backs with hooves pointing straight up. He says he doesn't know but warns me not to get out of the car to approach one who is only injured because they can be very mean and nasty.



St. Augustine



The sky clears just enough for me to get some nice shots, with miles of almost deserted coastline, the choppy water the color of chocolate popsicles. But the sky gets darker as I move further west and then turns a soupy, hazy grey – poison to my camera – so I move inland to cover as much ground as I can.

I end up in Mobile, Alabama, two hours outside New Orleans, but the weather forecasts of storms and potential tornados are so grim that even being so close, I'm not sure I'll make it tomorrow. It's another sketchy motel but this one has a laundry and, waiting for my clothes to dry, I have a good conversation with a thirty-something Mexican travelling construction worker.

Back in my room the wind is howling outside and I'm getting anxious watching live storm and tornado coverage on TV. There is a small chance that a tornado could pass through here in the middle of the night. What do I do if I hear the sirens? The Weather Channel is making me nervous, so I turn it off and go to bed where more than once during the night I'm awakened by the storm.

Day 13 begins early after a fitful few hours of semi-sleep. I have never experienced such a loud storm in my life, especially the rolling thunder that would go on and on.

Kozol's last words before his epilogue are: "I don't know what can change this", referring to the seemingly hopeless situation of the poor in the Bronx. He says too many people have made lists of solutions but nothing ever seems to work. He says we avoid the truth by manipulating the way we talk and write – by mitigating, rationalizing and minimizing. One of his sources in the ghetto says that, when describing these conditions to more privileged readers, "A quarter of the truth, stated with lots of indirection, is regarded as more seemly." This is how we are able to live peaceful lives mostly oblivious to suffering and injustice. Later, in a book I will find about Thomas Merton and the Shakers, Merton will write about Shaker trends he saw in his father's paintings, which were simple and clean, "without decoration or superfluous comment, since a religious man respects the power of God's creation to bear witness for itself."

I didn't get the name of the Mexican I had such a great conversation with in the laundry last night. He was on his cell phone when I shook his hand to say goodbye. I was on alert when he first came into the room; he seemed angry and a bit threatening. I was prejudiced in my apprehension; it's a mindset that's hard to resist in this part of the world.



Florida Panhandle

The drive along the coast in the morning is interesting with many places to stop for photos. I get some nice shots at Biloxi Beach in Mississippi before I get on the interstate to take me into New Orleans. The “Guesthouse” is sketchy from the get-go but I leave my things in the room and take the trolley to the French Quarter. First impressions are not good. It’s painfully humid and Bourbon Street is strictly for tourists, full of souvenir shops, strip clubs, panhandlers and sightseers like me.

The buildings are attractive but I don’t really know how to photograph buildings and the small part of the river I see is ugly, like my room in the Guesthouse which is the worst room I’ve had yet, with the Internet connection so bad it’s useless. There are no surfaces to place things or work on and, aside from the cleaning lady who managed to register me after much confusion, when I checked in there was no owner, manager or guest in sight. Creepy.

I find a book at Beckham’s Bookshop in the French Quarter and I’m happy to have arrived at my final outbound destination. After this, I will start the long homeward ascent. I find a nice fridge magnet and have another great catfish sandwich, but when I get back to my room, the owner is still nowhere to be seen and I’m greeted by a giant cockroach sitting in the middle of the kitchen floor.

There is still no sign of habitation in either the main house or the side building where my room is located, but when I enter the bathroom there is a single turd floating in the bowl. Is this a message of some kind? Daphne, the owner, finally answers her phone and I tell her I absolutely need the Internet, to which she responds the Internet works fine, and I when I tell her about the cockroach, she says, “Well, if it was a big one, there’s nothing to worry about. We just about call them our state bird around here. If you saw little ones, that would be another matter.” But I had also seen little brown spots on the top plate of a stack of Styrofoam plates in a kitchen cupboard.

The cockroach is the final straw; for the first time ever, I pack my belongings and abandon a room. I find a motel room on the Web and it’s fine, but I have to check in through a bullet-proof window and the parking lot is gated. Obviously not a safe part of town. I decide to abandon the city, like the Guesthouse, and head up the road to Baton Rouge tomorrow. I know I didn’t give it much of a chance, but I go with my feelings which are telling me not to be in New Orleans at this time.



Biloxi Beach, Mississippi





Biloxi Beach, Mississippi



New Orleans



New Orleans

I start Day 14 driving in circles thanks to the GPS and no signs leading to the Great River Road that is supposed to be the scenic route to Baton Rouge. But the weather is perfect and I have all the time in the world and when I eventually stumble upon the road it's a very nice drive through small Cajun towns with names like Thibodaux and Assumption Parrish.

I visit St. Joseph Church in Thibodaux where a group of women asks me where I'm from and one of them, a local woman of Acadian descent, tells me that she visited Montreal and when she entered Notre Dame de Bon Secours in the Old Port, she started to cry. Her husband says it's because her family has a connection with the church that goes way back. It's weird to find pockets of French Canadian culture so far from home. Baton Rouge is small and quiet. I get a nice shot of an oil refinery and good night's sleep.

Day 15 is bright and shiny and actually a little cool. The plan is to drive to Natchez, Mississippi to pick up the Trace Parkway and take it all the way to Jackson where I have a room booked. I'm feeling good with much of the rest of the trip planned and settling into a vagabond life in week three. I treat myself to breakfast at the Waffle House where the waitresses seem so happy, dancing to the jukebox and bantering with regulars.

They're nice to me too: I could get used to being called Sugar, Darling and Sweetheart. Natchez is an interesting town where I finally get to visit a plantation mansion. Melrose House, with slave quarters on the side, is said to be one the best-preserved homes of its kind. Oddly enough, the original owners would leave for Newport, Rhode Island every spring to avoid the child-killing Yellow Fever, interesting because I declined to tour any of the mansions in Newport just two weeks ago. Who would have guessed that Natchez, Mississippi was home to the cotton industry and more millionaires than anywhere else in the U.S. 150 years ago? It was also Union-controlled; I didn't know the dividing line during the Civil War was not actually a solid line.

I have another catfish sandwich at a crawfish shack just in front of the entrance to the Natchez Trace Parkway in the late afternoon. The trek starts well on a nice smooth two-lane road with good signs and markers, cozily surrounded by nothing but nature. But the first few stops are not very interesting and I start to get bored. Dangerously bored because the ride is so serene, it's putting me to sleep.



Assumption, Louisiana



Baton Rouge, Louisiana



Baton Rouge, Louisiana



Melrose Plantation, Natchez, Mississippi



St. Mary Basilica, Natchez, Mississippi



Trees, trees, nothing but trees with green almost the only color, and my camera seems to hate green, and even when there is a bit of yellow in an open field or something else like a couple of random cows, there are no shoulders on the road so it's impossible to stop except at designated stations. On top of this, trying to maintain the fifty-mile-an-hour speed limit is agonizing and almost as stupor-inducing as the relentless green. I'm extremely relieved when I reach an exit.

I find my motel in Jackson and head to a local sports bar to see if I can catch a playoff hockey game but after being frisked at the door and told by the security guy that he will ask the manager if it's possible to find the game on TV (not much interest in hockey down here), I change my mind. It would be too strange to be not only the only white guy in the place but the only person watching hockey as well. He nods and smiles like I've made the right decision.

I'm going to Graceland! In the morning of Day 16 I buy my ticket online and book a room at a Motel 6 for two nights in Memphis. I decide to take the long way to Memphis, going east first to Vicksburg to visit the National Military Park, a sixteen-mile drive through Civil War history at one of the most strategic points of conflict in a war that still resonates 150 years later in this part of the world. The Park is beautiful and very serene and I get a couple of nice shots. I arrive at my hotel east of Memphis at six and decide to have a quiet evening and get up early to spend the entire day in the city tomorrow.

I have an excellent dinner of meatloaf, fried broccoli and cabbage at Abbey's Restaurant whose motto is "How the South does fast food". I decline the drink which would have cost an extra dollar, then change my mind but the polite young man behind the counter refuses to charge me for it. Not for the first time, I experience Southern hospitality and realize I'm beginning to like it very much. It's warm, like the weather.

In the morning of Day 17, I'm standing on the corner of Beale and Main in front of the Orpheum Theater in downtown Memphis, waiting for a streetcar to come by for a photo I want to take. I find some shade and open my book to pass the time with Anne Lamott who is explaining why she drags her seven-year-old son to church most Sundays.



National Military Park, Vicksburg, Mississippi



Memphis



Tennessee Rest Stop



Vicksburg



National Military Park, Vicksburg, Mississippi

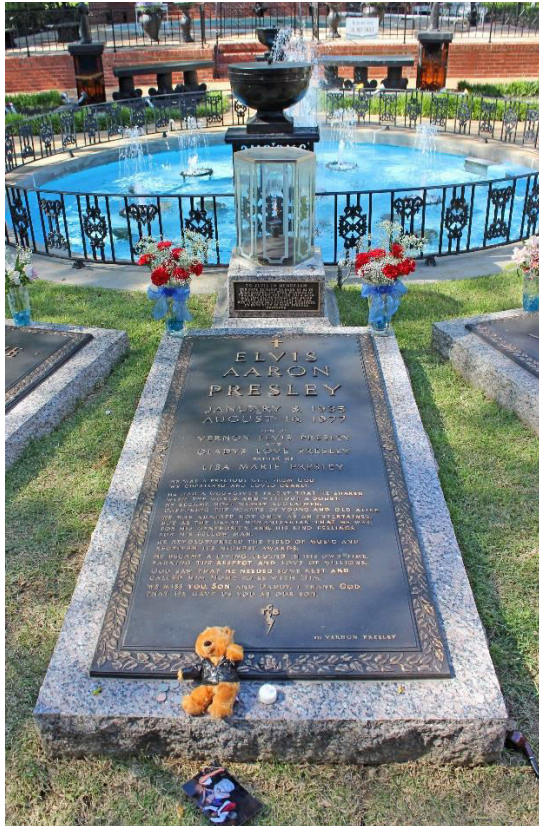
She describes the church people she knows as part of a community of people helping each other and the world in general. They seem to live transcendent lives. "They follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle; they are part of something beautiful." She's a good writer. I admire her understanding and acceptance of her own brokenness, a very Christian perspective. She quotes Eugene O'Neill who says that life is about fixing our brokenness, something which can only be done with the glue of God's grace

The streets are deserted, just about everything is closed and it takes a while to find coffee. Once again, race consciousness is unavoidable. I'm walking down a sidewalk when a large young black man steps out of a car in front of me and shrugs his shoulders with a slight forward movement of his upper body in my direction. I smile, assuming that he's just having fun, and ask him if he knows the way to the waterfront, but I should have asked what his gesture meant. I didn't sense any unfriendliness or aggression, but who knows, maybe it was meant to startle me.

I buy my ticket for Sun Studio and read the plaque outside on the sidewalk while I wait for my tour to begin. The plaque says the world shifted on its axis with the birth of rock and roll on this very spot sixty years ago. The tour is great and very authentic. I have goose bumps the whole hour and the guide is excellent, with real knowledge and obvious affection for her subject. The experience is so simple and unassuming compared to the over-the-top Graceland explosion of commercialized idol-worship later in the afternoon, which is fun but not inspiring.

The house (not a mansion) itself is not so interesting. It reveals Elvis to be a devoted family man and devout Christian. After he made it big he bought a house, moved his parents in and, in a sense, never left home. What you don't see on the tour is a toilet. Even the two toilets in his private airplane have been turned into cushioned benches. Gods don't poop.

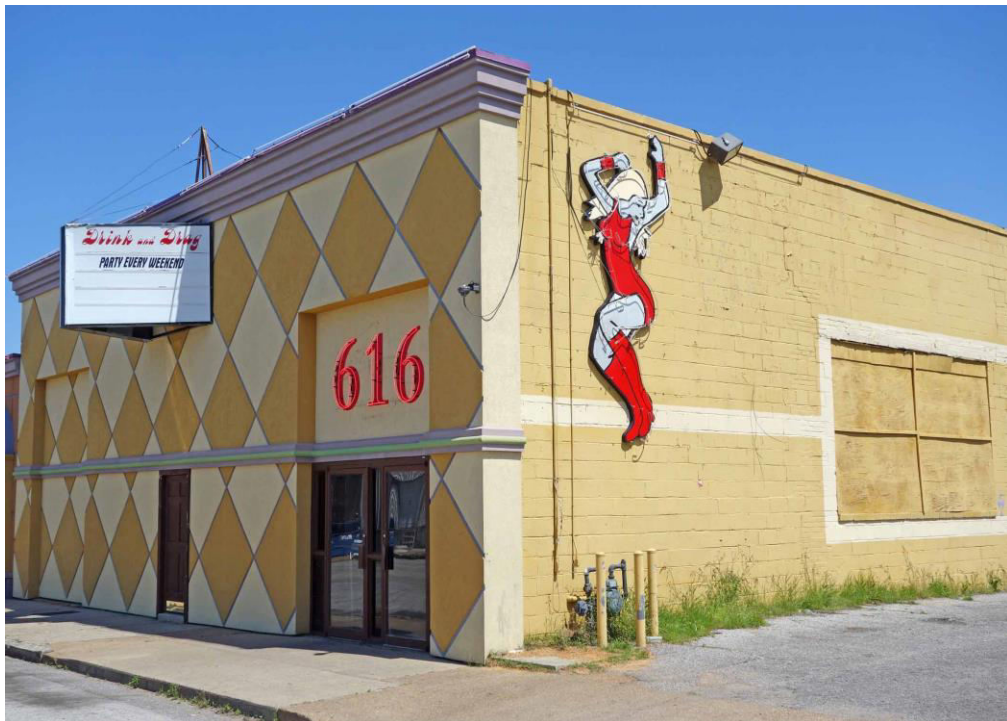
Burkes' Book Store in midtown Memphis is the best yet. I walk out with four books, one of which is *Seeking Paradise: The Spirit of the Shakers*, a book of photos and text by my favorite monk, Thomas Merton. The day ends early because the two other attractions that I want to see are closed, so I head back to Abbey's for dinner. I'll try to be on the road early tomorrow. This has been the best day yet.



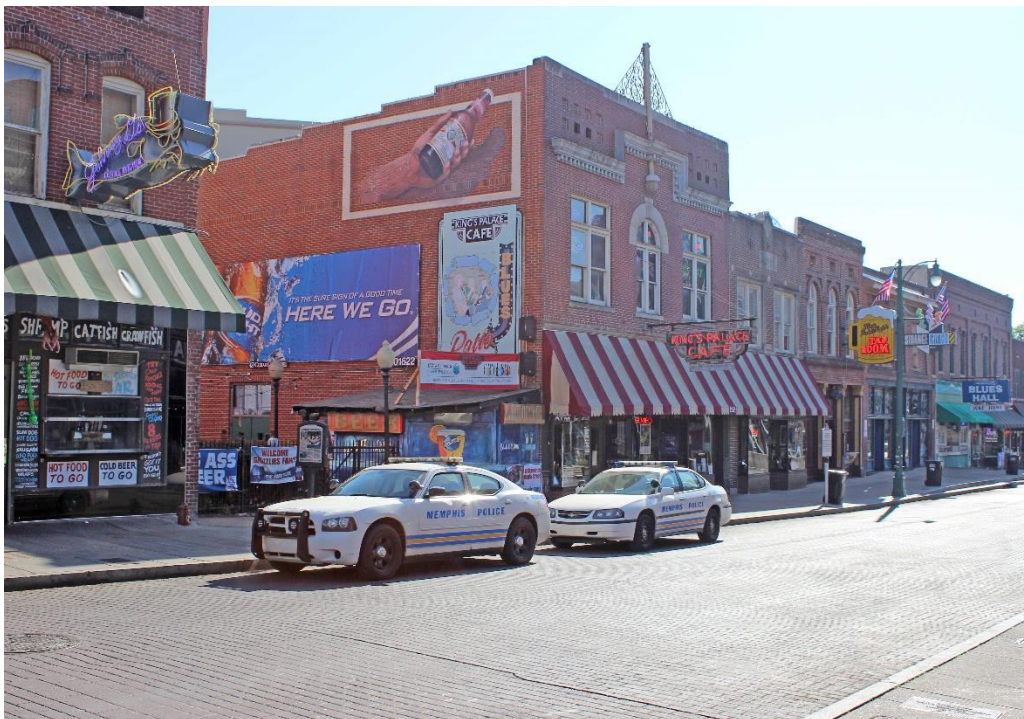
Graceland



Sun Studio, Memphis



Memphis, Tennessee



Memphis, Tennessee

Day 18 is boring. I struggle to stay awake on the three-hour drive to make eleven o'clock mass at St. Mary's Cathedral in Nashville. I arrive a couple of minutes late but leave after only fifteen minutes of cheesy singing and incomprehensible readings delivered by children. I can't stand empty ritual.

I visit the replica of the Parthenon in Centennial Park and it really is impressive but there are just too many people on this hot Sunday afternoon, with a major arts and crafts fair happening in the park. I walk through the fair and stop to eat a hot dog but don't hang around very long.

I check into my hotel in yet another slightly depressing stretch of suburban sprawl and ask if I can cancel the second day of my booking, but it's been prepaid. What am I going to do here for two days? What was I thinking? Everything looks so new and scrubbed downtown where I spend \$10 on parking on a deserted Sunday and \$14 for forty minutes in the highly touted Johnny Cash Museum, which is nice but not as amazing as advertised. I'm turned off by the emphasis on his Christianity and patriotism and the sanitized caricature presented of this severely flawed man. The old part of downtown seems zoned only for bars and very expensive cowboy paraphernalia shops.

There's not much to photograph downtown or anywhere else. It's not an ugly city, just not visually interesting. The used bookstore in the trendy Hillsboro neighborhood is a disappointment but I linger in a nice café, then see a film at the Belcourt Theater, a documentary called *Finding Vivian Meier*.

The Belcourt Theater is a wonderfully-restored art house and the film is fascinating, about a woman who worked most her life as a nanny and ended up almost homeless, only to be discovered to be an incredible and prolific street photographer after she died. She once described herself as a spy. The film inspires me to just keep doing what I'm doing. Keep taking photos because it's what I do.

Day 19 is another hot day which starts with a second visit to the faux-Parthenon in Centennial Park, which is closed on Mondays, but I've decided that nothing is going to bother me today. I set off for Radnor Lake and pull over when I see a used bookstore, which won't open for another fifteen minutes, so I go next door to a just-opened coffee shop called *The Well* and have a very nice conversation with one of the founders of this non-profit, subtly Christian, café and organization (that actually builds wells in Africa).



Nashville Parthenon



Nashville, Tennessee

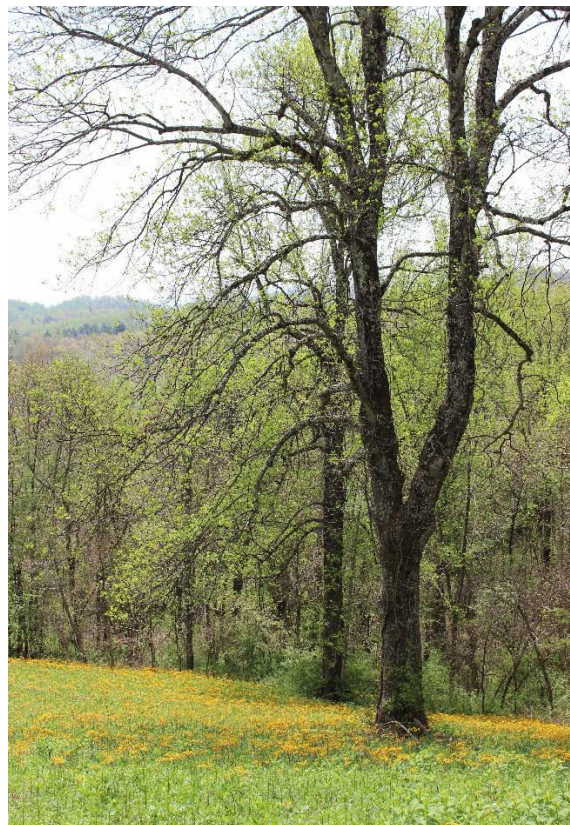
The coffee and the bacon and egg sandwich are great - the music, the people and the ambiance are perfect. There's a warm, comfortable and sensible Christian undertone to what's going on here, which is definitely turning into a theme on this trip. I spend more than an hour in the café and the Rhino Bookstore next door.

I complete the pleasant two-and-a-half -ile walk around Radnor Lake in about an hour and a half. Afterward, it's the Frist Museum housed in a beautiful Art Deco former post office. The featured exhibition on the Japanese influence on Western art is interesting. *Japonisme* was a craze in the West in the late 19th, early 20th century. I soak up the beautiful images, the high-contrast colors and simple, attractive compositions, keeping in mind Cartier-Bresson's photographic advice to look at lots of paintings. There is also an exhibition of a series of etchings by Francisco Goya called *The Disasters of War*. The prints represent the first European depiction of the horrors of war. It's been a good day, and I'm glad now I stayed the extra day in Nashville, leaving with a positive impression.

Day 20 is all about driving. Too much driving: 438 miles from Nashville to Roanoke, Virginia. But I find a nice, really cheap motel room with big windows overlooking a valley. On the way I had almost caused an accident on the highway, changing lanes with a car in my blind spot, and I resolve never to drive seven hours in one day again.

I leave the hotel and head east to the Blue Ridge Parkway where I drive forty-three miles south and back again while it's still light. When I step out of the car at the first stop on the Parkway, I'm enveloped by a strong chamomile scent and perfect silence, except for the birds. So many different kinds of birds, so many different songs and colors. Wonderful. Tomorrow I drive the Parkway north.

I decide to spend two days in Roanoke and end up liking the small city very much. I find Emmet Fox's *Sermon on the Mount* at Too Many Books, then see *The Lunchbox* at the Grandin Theater down the street. It's another wonderful art house theater, like the Belcourt in Nashville, much nicer than the Cinema du Parc, my home base for indie films in Montreal. Almost immediately after I write to a friend and note in my log that I'm not tired or homesick, I seem to hit a wall and lo and behold I'm tired and homesick. Twenty-three days seems to be my limit. I write to friends in Brooklyn, apologizing about my decision not to visit on my way back, and feel better immediately.



Blue Ridge Parkway, Virginia

On Day 22 I drive the rest of the beautiful and almost deserted Blue Ridge Parkway, followed by a bit of the Shenandoah Skyline, then ask the GPS to take me straight to Lancaster, Pennsylvania. I stop in a small town, Berryville, Virginia, for lunch in a nice, unassuming restaurant called Boyd's Nest. The fish and chips and coffee are perfect and the town looks like the sort of place I wouldn't mind living in. Even the parking meters on Main Street are friendly: 30 minutes for a nickel!

The Merton book about the Shakers is telling me something about the nature of work that I need to understand and introducing terms which are extremely familiar, even though I've never heard them before, such as *paradise consciousness*, *Edenic innocence* and (the poet Rilke's) *inseeing*.

I stop for coffee and lemon cake in Holy Joe's on the main square of a picturesque small town, New Oxford, Pennsylvania. Another perfectly lovely non-profit coffee shop, the third one I've enjoyed on this trip so far. I haven't seen anything like this in Montreal.

After too much driving I arrive in Lancaster and take a room at the Bird-In-Hand Inn in Amish country. The Amish are a bit of a let-down, not far removed from civilization and embedded in the tourist industry. I'm overwhelmed with technical problems in the evening, trying to straighten out the Guesthouse fiasco in New Orleans to get a refund, and letting myself be convinced by my anti-virus provider to spend \$180 to let them remotely clean up my computer which has slowed down to a crawl. I decide to drive to Albany tomorrow to visit a Shaker village.

I took a total of one photo in Amish Country, from in front of the Bird-in-Hand Inn where lawn chairs are set up to watch the buggies go by. (So I took a photo of the chairs with a buggy going by.) The Amish don't like to be photographed and there was nowhere to stop the car on the side roads that intersect their farms which looked like regular farms anyway. At least there are no actual Shakers left in Albany and the museum that conducts tours of the buildings won't be open until next month. I won't be disturbing anyone.

I wake up from a horrible dream on Day 23, a dream in which I committed an atrocious act, leaving me feeling that the evil of the entire human race resides in each of us and we are not as innocent as we would like to think we are (or like others to think we are). But, not for the first time, I tell myself that it doesn't matter what we think or say or dream - what matters is what we actually do.



Blue Ridge Parkway



Lancaster, Pennsylvania



Blue Ridge Parkway, Virginia



Blue Ridge Parkway, Virginia

Albany was a good choice, despite the fact that both the bookstore and the cinema I had planned to visit are downtown and downtown is chaotic, with insane traffic and everybody on the streets on what is probably the first hot Saturday night of the spring. At one point, I actually get a little nervous when a group of about thirty black thirteen-year-olds starts running up and down the street, in and out of traffic, screaming at each other. The Shaker Village, coincidentally not far from my hotel, is the opposite. It's perfectly quiet, completely devoid of people or cars. It's very nice, but the light is problematic, so I'll come back in the morning to take more photos.

On Sunday, May 11, Day 24, the last full day of the trek, I wake up at 4:30 and can't get back to sleep. I finish the Shaker book over breakfast, take some more shots at the Shaker Village and I'm on the road by 7:30.

I picked up *Seeking Paradise* mainly for Merton's photographs but it's turned out to be the most important book of this trek. According to Merton, the paradise myth is key to understanding the United States. The myth is denied by racism, materialism and violence, but the three non-profit cafes I visited showed a genuine warmth and spiritual depth which contradict the image of the ugly American. There is something pure and optimistic in the American ethic.

It's still morning when I reach Montpelier, Vermont and, feeling like I can easily keep driving, try to cancel my hotel booking to return home immediately. But it's too late to cancel, so here I am for the rest of the day and night, trapped in a spooky, *Shining*-like motel on a hill in the woods. Are there ghosts here?

The mini-fridge is making a strange, moaning noise. I know fridge noises, and this is weird. Then the noise stops and the room is utterly silent. It's actually a very nice room, but definitely creepy. Maybe I fell asleep on the highway, died in a fiery crash, and this is purgatory. Maybe I'm the ghost. I freshen up and head back down the hill to downtown Montpelier.

Merton says we should work with God in mind. I'll try to write like a Shaker: use this day to give some form to my notes before I get home. Or maybe I'll just keep scribbling away all afternoon, then eat and see a movie at the local art house theater at 6:30.



Shaker Village, Albany, NY

There are four bookstores in the tiny downtown core and it's all very hippie with earnest young people in baggy t-shirts and mountain gear and older women with long gray hair and flowing dresses flaunting their inner goddesses. I stop for a pee and coffee and apple turnover in a hippie café where a trio is playing Bluegrass to an audience of five (not including me). I feel like a pervert when I pass over the brown and organic and reach for the white sugar dispenser for my coffee. Montpelier is very comfortable and unassuming, another very livable American town.

It's hard to believe I'm only two hours from home. It will be strange driving onto my own street tomorrow after 9,000 km. of constantly changing vistas. It's a beautiful day here and it'll be beautiful tomorrow in Montreal, spring having finally arrived in the North. I find two books to add to the pile I need to read when I get home. I won't have to visit a bookstore or library for a month.

The movie I see at the tiny Savoy Theater is *Le Weekend*, about an older couple spending a weekend in Paris. The theme of the movie doesn't resonate with me because it suggests that the problems of aging cannot be solved by leaving the person you are with. I'm alone and will probably remain alone, so I guess I might say the opposite about myself: that my aging problems could not be solved by finding someone to be with.

The drive home in the morning is pure fun. I'm up ridiculously early again and on the road at seven, home by ten. I open the door to the apartment and everything is just as I left it. I start to unpack and treasures emerge from the rubble: books, fridge magnets, hotel pens...

I go to my corner market and buy the essentials: bread, milk, bananas, tomatoes and a sandwich, my first local food bought from my own people. I also buy a small container of eggs, choosing the more expensive free-run chicken eggs which I pledge to do for the rest of my life, a small gesture to the hundreds of dead animals I passed on the roads just travelled. Let the chickens run free, the wind blowing through their feathers! The image is pleasing and worth the extra cost.

I also find the key to Room 144 of the Bird-in-Hand Inn, which I inadvertently took with me and decide to keep somewhere in sight forever as a reminder that even my own home is just another stop along the way. Long after I'm gone, other people will call this apartment home and hopefully I'll get to visit every now and then as a ghost.

In the days that follow, I'll have an opportunity to *not* reactivate routines I can live better without. I tell myself to be extra attentive this time, to make sure that good habits take precedence. But how many resolutions like these have come and gone? Merton says that "the peculiar grace of a Shaker chair is due to the fact that it was made by someone capable of believing that an angel might come and sit on it." Should I imagine that an angel might come down to read the things I write or look at my photos?

I remember as a child experiencing Merton's "paradise consciousness", first with an interest in religion sparked when I was five by a tiny prayer book I found on the sidewalk. I was enchanted by the colorful, wistful illustrations of Bible scenes, images that seemed to shimmer with goodness and love. I talked my father into letting me attend the Baptist church across the street until we moved a few blocks away to a house where I experienced the same euphoric consciousness when I was sick with pneumonia and dreamed or hallucinated a perfect world under the kitchen floor, reachable through a trap door. Later I would experience the same paradise consciousness inspired by Disney movies and TV shows depicting America as a wonderful place so different and so much better than the world I inhabited.

They may be illusions, but I like to think they could be glimpses of a reality beyond the illusion of the world perceived by my senses. Merton says that, for the Shakers, work itself is a prayer and that God can work through us to create things that never existed before. Makes sense to me.

The 5 x 7 map I was tracking my trip on with a red marker is complete and my trajectory has ended up looking like the Big Dipper. Later I will learn that in the 19th century, runaway slaves would "Follow the drinkn' gourd" (as they called the Dipper) to freedom in the North.