



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 15 of my **Pilgrim Chronicles**.

## DENVER

The plan is an 18-day road trip from Los Angeles to Denver and back, visiting National and State Parks along the way. Two weekends with family in Orange County, California, will bookend the road trip, extending the journey to 24 days.

When I leave on September 29, 2017, I've already read Edward Abbey's classic *Desert Solitaire*, about his time spent as a ranger in Utah's Arches National Park, one of my destinations. The first line of the book was: "This is the most beautiful place on earth." I knew immediately this was all I might take from this book and wondered if the absolute beauty of Utah could ruin landscape photography for me.

Then my thoughts take an unexpected turn and I envision not only the photos but the pilgrimages I began nine years ago coming to an end next year after a tenth anniversary round-the-world-in-42-days-mother-of-all-trips. Maybe I'll buy a car for my sixty-fifth birthday shortly after I return from this last adventure and live a different kind of mobility, closer to home and family, with occasional trips to California to see my granddaughter and Vancouver, my hometown.

I arrive at L.A.X. and endure the usual stress of picking up a car and the inevitable dreary freeway intro to Southern California till I get to Orange County where I will be a houseguest for the next three days before heading into the desert.

The next morning, Grandpa escapes for an hour to pick up some American cash and books at Bookman in Orange City, two of which will prove pivotal to the trip: Will Durant's *Fallen Leaves* and *On Living Simply: The Golden Voice of John Chrysostom*, a book of excerpts from sermons delivered by the 4<sup>th</sup>-century priest. I'll start with John C., the smaller of two small books.

The rest of the weekend is uninterrupted company and conversation, the opposite of my quiet regular life. From this, I will go directly into desert solitude first thing Monday morning.

Day 1 of the road trip begins with news of the biggest mass shooting in modern U.S. history in Las Vegas, precisely where I'm headed. 58 dead, more than 500 injured at an outdoor music festival by a loser with machine guns in a room on the 32<sup>nd</sup> floor of the Mandalay Hotel on The Strip. I feel like I'm driving into a war zone.

The four-hour drive is routine by now, probably the tenth time I've done it. I stop for breakfast as I did last January at the MacDonal'd's at Cajon Summit, the entrance to the High Desert. I listen to the radio for updates on the shootings along the way. First reports are that the shooter was a rich, retired accountant who did not seem to be mentally ill. He didn't seem to have any political motives or grudges either, and announcers keep repeating the fact that he liked to gamble, as if this craving for riches is a wholesome trait that just doesn't jive with a crazy-evil murder spree.

There's not much traffic heading into the city with electronic signs on the highway saying The Strip (the scene of the massacre) is closed this morning. After checking into my room at the Fiesta Henderson Hotel-Casino, just east of Vegas, I'm exhausted by the time I get to Hoover Dam where I take lots of breaks and feel like a bad tourist, ignoring information plaques and not seriously considering visiting the museum or even getting close to the dam. I've been here before, so I simply take a few photos of the iconic structure from the elegant Mike O'Callaghan – Pat Tillman Bridge spanning the gorge just downstream.

Dinner back at the casino-hotel is not good, and the smell of stale cigarette-smoke is nastier than I thought it would be. But my room on the tenth floor is nice and, with only a freeway below and Las Vegas in the distance (I can even make out the Mandalay Hotel from here), I'll be able to sleep with the curtains open to the night sky.

Breakfast in the morning of Day 2 is much better and I finish John Chrysostom before getting back on the road to drive north into Utah. My home for the next two nights will be the Super 8 in Hurricane, close to Zion National Park.

John C. says God gives some people more than they need to make them stewards. He rails against the greed of some church leaders: "If their eyes are set on mansions in heaven, why are they building mansions on earth?" He warns against seeking security from a big house: "Build walls of divine grace and have



Vegas in the distance

heaven as your roof.” He’s relentless in his condemnation of materialism: “The person who wishes to move toward God must free himself from all sense of ownership.” And he provides an interesting argument for a fair distribution of wealth, saying “The most precious fruit of material justice is prayer,” because the rich are too busy maintaining and enhancing their wealth to pray, while the poor are too preoccupied with survival.

He says the person “who desires to own nothing and regards nothing as a personal possession – in spirit owns everything.” This evocation of the true core of Christianity will be a recurring theme of the trip.

There are more people than expected in Zion when I arrive and I’m tired from driving, but it sure is beautiful (looks like paradise to me) and I get some nice shots before heading back to Hurricane.

In the morning of Day 3, a full moon hangs in a pitch-black sky at 5:30 when I leave my room to pick up coffee and a tostito at the 7/11 down the street. An app on my phone tells me that the two bright lights almost touching the Moon in the eastern sky are Mars and Venus. The Web says that tomorrow (October 5) will be the actual climax of the event.

The news is still all about Vegas mayhem. Today the Idiot Trump will visit the site of the massacre and pundits are speculating about how stupid, insensitive, crude and inappropriate his remarks will be if he ventures off-script.

I leave the hotel at 7:15, trusting the sun will be up by the time I arrive at Zion thirty minutes later to begin a full day of walking. It’s still very cold: the day began at 2 degrees Celsius and will rise to 26 by mid-day.

I park the car in the lot near the Visitors Center. It will be back and forth, up and down the canyons on the park’s shuttle bus all day, taking some of the same shots in different kinds of light, ranging from the soft warm and heavy mountain shadows of early morning to the sharp brightness of late afternoon. I will need to pace myself: this is only my second day of national-parking. I’ll take breaks and read Will Durant throughout.

As the sun rises higher and higher above the dramatic walls of the canyons it gets warmer and warmer and I can feel the light, as well as see it, slowly filling spots on the floors of the valleys. Spectacular! And the names of the sites are wonderful: Angels Landing, Temple of Sinawava, Court of the Patriarchs...







After stopping at each of the nine stops along the route to the top, I take the creeping shuttle all the way back down to the museum, the second stop, where I will walk the last section down to the Visitors Center. By eleven, it's hot and the sun is beginning to burn. Off comes the hoodie and on goes the cap. The temperature has risen almost 20 degrees since this morning.

The Durant book is good company and beautifully written: short chapters in a short book with no frills. The subtitle, *Last Words on Life, Love, War and God*, explains everything. In his preface, the famous author of so many books on philosophy and history proposes "to tell, in a very informal way, without the grandeur of obscurity, how I feel, now that I have one foot in the grave, about those ultimate riddles..." I take a long break at noon at a picnic table in a parking lot island near my car to eat something, re-charge, and let the top-of-the-day light calm down a little.

Durant says, "Only one thing is certain in history, and that is decadence; only one thing is certain in life, and that is death." Everything falls apart, then dies. He considers himself a Christian because he admires Christ and makes "a persistent effort to behave like a Christian." Even without literal faith, he says, it's good to believe in something. "Let me then keep the term God for the inventive vitality and abounding fertility of Nature, the eon-long struggle of 'matter' to rise from atomic energy to intelligence, consciousness, and informed and deliberate will... Let me have something to worship!"

Back in the park after lunch, there's a touch of red in the light, a special light not just falling from the sky but bouncing off the walls of the canyons as well. It's the opposite of the Grand Canyon which you normally see from above; here, you're on the floor looking up. Even the asphalt on the roads has a red tinge. Everything is photogenic here.

The winding, ultra-scenic road through the park to Mt. Carmel in the morning of Day 4 is magnificent and thrilling. Maybe the best light I've ever seen. And the air is wonderful. When there are no cars on the road, the quiet and stillness are like the scenery on this windless day: awesome.

Then it's a long, slow drive to Bryce Canyon which is a bit of let-down after Zion. The light is bright but slightly bluish and the weird rock formations are not so interesting visually. After three days of natural awesomeness, I'm ready for a weekend in Salt Lake City. I didn't plan it this way, but a weekend is the best time to visit a city.



Bryce Canyon



The Color Country Motel on Main Street in Panguitch is old-school and dinner at Kenny Ray's Diner is not bad. I make good use of the desk in Room 14, editing photos and excerpting the golden-voiced John C. I got some good shots today. John C. says, "the love which Jesus expressed through his words and actions reveals the depths of love of which all people are capable." There's nothing magical about his perception of the man.

It's cold (-2) again in the morning of Day 5 and there's hardly anyone else on the roads. I pull over at one point into Piute State Park in the middle of nowhere to get a long shot with a line of yellow aspens through the center, and then again at an empty rest stop where three donkeys behind a fence pose for the camera. The Metropolitan Inn in downtown Salt Lake City, with almost everything I want to see within thirty minutes walking distance, will be my home for the next three days. I check in, then set off on foot immediately, happy to be city-walking again.

There are two used books stores on the way to Temple Square. Utah Books and Mags is more of an eccentric vintage shop than a bookstore and the three-floored Eborn Books is just too big. Both are well-stocked with LDS (Church of Latter Day Saints) books and Eborn even smells churchy (the whole town seems to smell churchy). I find *The Untouched Key* by Alice Miller and the first good cup of coffee in four days at Eborn.

Everything downtown looks clean, scrubbed, polished and brand new, even the old buildings and especially Temple Square, the 35-acre Mormon complex that dominates the center of the city. There are guides lying in wait everywhere in the compound, one of whom gives me a map and fills me in on all the things to see and do, including a free performance of the famous Mormon Tabernacle Choir on Sunday morning. There seem to be men in black suits and white shirts with pregnant wives everywhere.

Everybody in the Family History Library, the genealogical research facility run by the Mormons, is super (slightly suspiciously) friendly and I'm greeted and assigned a young guide as soon as I walk in. The young men all look like they just got up from a barber's chair with smooth shiny faces and the women seem to be doing their best to make themselves invisible. It's weird the way they seem to look right through you, like they don't want to get their eyes dirty. I sit with the young man assigned to me at a computer for about an hour-and-a-half and we find my mother's baptismal certificate from January 1918, but not much else before I've had enough of the persistent *Handmaids-Tale-meets-Invasion-of-the-Body Snatchers* undercurrent of eeriness.



I have trouble finding anything to eat in the evening. Nobody seems to live downtown so there's not much nearby and I don't feel like driving very far. I end up with a hamburger and the Durant book in a Wendy's that has an armed security guard.

Durant says mankind is without a conscience, so conscience needs to be internationally enforced. He shines a light on our dark side and says war has a certain appeal to both men and women: "A soldier's uniform transfigures a civilian, intoxicates a maiden, and almost reconciles a mother to the killing of her son." The value of studying history, he says, is that it tells us how we actually *have* behaved for six thousand years, as opposed to how we *might* behave or *should* behave. "One who knows that record is in large measure protected in advance against the delusions and disillusionments of his times."

In the morning of Day 6, I drive to the Great Salt Lake where the Pavilion on Saltine Beach is closed for the season with a group of about twenty homeless people camped out in front of the entrance. There's nobody in sight as I walk out onto the flats where I take a photo of an empty shotgun ammunition box lying in the sand with an image of a typical angry white 'Murican on it. He's angry at everything and everybody, even Mother Nature, it seems – why else would he leave this shit-ugly refuse out here. I look closer and notice that the box is actually riddled with shotgun pellet holes. It's hard to feel anything good about such people.

Meanwhile, politicians and the NRA are busy with their usual lies about how easily accessible machines specifically designed to kill as many humans as possible in the shortest amount of time possible have nothing to do with the Vegas Massacre. And someone on the radio says the White House is in chaos – no one wants to work for the Idiot Trump, only opportunists who stay for a few minutes to get something cashable on their resumes. So many levels of corruption at work that cast a deal-breaking shadow over this paradise. I wouldn't even consider living here.

Durant says history shows us that human nature has never changed. Good and evil is evenly distributed among all people and classes and revolutions are usually delusional. "If anything is clear in the experience of mankind it is that successful revolutionists soon behave like the men they have overthrown." He says civilizations can be destroyed not only by invading barbarians but by barbarians within. "Civilization is a fragile bungalow precariously poised on a live volcano of barbarism."



Back in the city, I take a guided tour of the twenty-one-thousand-seat Mormon Conference Center which is impressive and beautifully appointed, almost Shaker in its simplicity. Jan, our guide, is delightful, and a nice, slightly severe, man who is part of the tour fills me in on some of the details of his strange religion (which religion isn't strange?) and insists I pick up my free copy of the Book of Mormon at the Visitors Center. He says that, after he rose from the dead, Jesus chose to come to America because people here were more receptive and nicer to him – not like the Jews who wanted to torture and kill him back home.

There's an impressive collection of large paintings in the Center depicting episodes in the Book of Mormon by the artist Arnold Friberg who was recruited by Cecil B. DeMille to design the costumes and the look of *The Ten Commandments*, an aesthetic that still dominates Biblical representations. Everyone in Friberg's lurid paintings is white, even though many are supposed to be Native Americans who Mormons believe to be the lost tribe of Israel. I shouldn't mock someone else's mythologies, and I have to admit that everyone here is very nice and everything is free, which speaks to a certain integrity. They want our souls, not our money.

I walk up Temple South Street to the Catholic Cathedral of the Madeleine for something completely different. The doors are open and someone is playing the organ as I bask in the familiar imagery and scent, a mixture of wood, incense and candlewax. The interior is wondrously ornate in an Art Deco style and the mythologies expressed are much older, but no less strange and fantastic, than the Mormon, the quintessential American religion.

The organ playing stops and I quickly fall asleep for a nice 15-minute pew- nap before returning to Mormonland. Back at the Visitors Center, I visit the 11-foot marble Jesus and get my free Book of Mormon from an earnest, glassy-eyed teenager who has a twitchy way of speaking, like her program is malfunctioning. Then I choose one of the very comfortable armchairs to take another short nap. I'm exhausted and could really use a down-day. I find myself wishing for bad weather. Every day so far has been relentlessly sunny. I wear a cap most of the time, but my ears are burnt to a crisp.



Cathedral of the Madeleine



A pamphlet explains the basics of the religion. In 1817, Joseph Smith, the founder and original Prophet, found himself with too many religions to choose from and asked God for help. Jesus pops up and tells him all the established religions are wrong, so he makes Smith a prophet with a mandate to create a new one. Then John the Baptist, Peter, James and John all pop up themselves to bestow priesthood upon him. Jesus then appoints twelve apostles to help out and since then the reigning president of the church at any given moment is considered to be the living prophet with his own twelve apostles. All old men, of course. Smith then translates the Book of Mormon (“a record of God’s dealings with the ancient inhabitants of the Americas...”) from tablets written in an ancient script he found buried in the ground. No one else sees these tablets and they disappear once translated.

I get my wish and it’s cloudy and cool in the morning of Sunday, Day 7, which begins with a free performance of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. The 360 faces in the choir appear to be all white at first glance, but then I detect one black face on the girls’ side and one Asian on the boys’ side. The old Tabernacle auditorium, like everything else in Mormonland, is well-designed and tasteful, with lighting behind the magnificent organ that shifts from deep purple to sunset orange to celestial blue. The music is nice, and I try hard to look beyond the general Sunday-school cheesiness.

Then it’s eleven o’clock mass and another choir at the Cathedral of the Madeleine. The mass is conducted by a bishop whose bright green robes and chess-piece hat couldn’t be more different than the sober black-suited Mormon patriarchs. The church is packed and there is even security at the door which proves useful when a skirmish develops between a black priest and a deranged, toothless 30-something man screaming racial epithets at the priest who is definitely not backing down and being held back by several people. The man, no doubt one of the homeless or addicts who receive assistance from the church, is whisked away by the security guard and another priest.

The mass is long and boring except for the Gospel which is surprisingly radical, even more than John of the Golden Voice. In Matthew 21:33-42, Jesus tells a story to an audience of priests in which a landowner plants a vineyard and builds a winepress and a watchtower. He goes away on a trip and leaves the vineyard in the care of his farmer-tenants. At harvest time he sends servants to collect his profits. The tenants beat, stone and kill the servants. The landowner sends more servants and the same thing happens. Finally, he sends his own son and the tenants kill him as well and take his inheritance.



The roof of the Conference Center



Jesus asks the priests what they think the landowner should do. He should destroy the tenants, of course, they say, and replace them with tenants who'll give him his share.

No way, says Jesus, the Kingdom of God will be taken away from the rich landowner and given to the people who actually produce its fruit. The priests and Pharisees want to arrest Jesus on the spot but are afraid of the crowd. The next day Jesus would cause his infamous ruckus in the temple, overturning the tables of the money-changers.

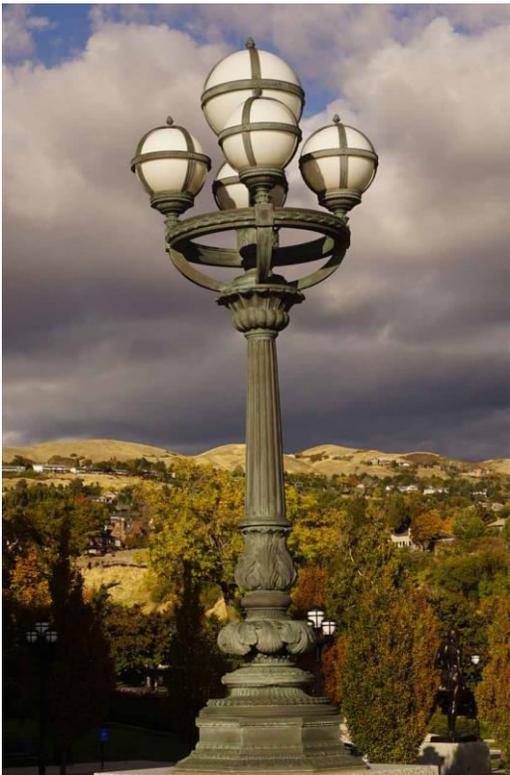
After mass, I find lunch and a book at Weller Book Works in Trolley Square. I can't shake the churchy feel of the day, so I decide to visit the laundromat this afternoon instead of this evening. The sun comes out when the clothes are dry with heavy dark clouds still lingering in other parts of the sky – my favorite kind of light – so I drive up to the capitol building, a smaller replica of the U.S. Congress in Washington, for views of the city below.

As has been the case all day, there's hardly a soul in sight, just a few Japanese tourists. I take some photos then have dinner at Whole Foods back in Trolley Square, and by the end of the day I know the linear city well enough to find my way home without the GPS, but that's it for Salt Lake City. Tomorrow it's back to spectacular nature for three or four days before I take another urban break in Denver.

In the evening I finish excerpting John Chrysostom. I end up taking too much from this small book because it basically consists of well-chosen excerpts, to begin with. He says the invisible idols within (fame, power, even our own virtues...) are more dangerous than any of the material idols The Bible rails against. We need to avoid the temptation to take pride in our virtuous actions. Concern for what others think of us – our reputation - is the hardest vanity to give up.

In the morning of Day 8, I take a break halfway to Dead Horse Point at the *Happiness Within Coffee Shop* in the tiny town of Helper. Main street is deserted and I'm the only customer in the café, feeling a bit tired and canyon-weary. I read some Durant who says that scientists are the new priesthood. "I think that biology has been misled by applying too widely the notion of mechanism and hesitating to credit living things with inherent, guiding will."

Dead Horse Point is a little boring but nearby Canyonlands National Park is better and there's not too much walking involved in what I want to do, which is simply drive through the Island in the Sky section of the park towards iconic Mesa Arch, stopping at each of the overlooks along the way.



When I finally reach Mesa Arch and park the car, catastrophe strikes. Before I leave the car, I push the electronic start button to turn it back on to make sure the windows are closed tight and the car tells me it cannot detect the key. I try and try again to start the car and search for the key in vain with a rising sense of panic, but it seems hopeless because the key should be detectable if it's anywhere nearby. I must have dropped it at the last overlook, getting into the car – I can't think of any other possibility. What if the key is lost in such a remote location?

A nice family with young children gives me a lift back to the previous overlook but we can't find the key, so I ask them to take me back to the Visitors Center at the entrance to the park where I speak to the rangers about what can be done. I make the first of several calls to the car rental company, the situation worsening with each call

It could cost as much as \$400 plus labor and travel time to replace the electronic key, *if* they can find a locksmith nearby who is able to do it. The only possibility is a guy in Moab, 45 minutes away, who won't be reachable till 5 o'clock. The rangers go home at five so if that doesn't work, I could be stranded. The alternative is to tow the car back to Salt Lake City which is four hours away. This would have me waiting in the car in the cold and dark in the middle of nowhere for at least four hours. And then what? And how much would the towing cost?

The fiasco will probably cost at least \$1000 but I'm more concerned about my safety at this point. At 4:45, a young ranger drives me back to look for the key one last time before I request the towing. I get off the phone with even more bad news from the rental car company and tell the ranger I really need something good to happen. The situation just keeps getting worse as she tells me I might not even have cell phone reception at Mesa Arch.

I'm starting to picture myself shivering in the car in the dark surrounded by wild animals, getting eaten by a mountain lion when I step out to pee in the dark. Torn apart and carried away, ravens will eat my eyes and years later someone will find my sun-bleached skull in some remote part of the canyon.

We can't find the key at the overlook where I first thought I might have dropped it and when we get to Mesa Arch we pull open all the doors of the car and prepare to search one last time. I sit in the driver's seat and automatically reach for the start button. The car starts! I can't believe it - the key is somewhere in the car!



Canyonlands, Islands in the Sky

Moments later, the ranger finds it in the compartment built into the driver-side door, which is where I always kept it. It turns out the back side of the compartment, into which the key had slid, is covered, which must explain why it couldn't be detected unless the door was wide open.

After two hours of steadily increasing tension, the relief is incredible. Literally, hard to believe. We take so much for granted, especially things like driving through rugged, uninhabited places in perfect comfort and safety. I was actually bored earlier today. I will have a smile on my face for the rest of the day.

I thank the ranger profusely, telling her how much I love American National Parks and the people who work in them. I walk slowly up to Mesa Arch, which is truly a work of art in late afternoon light, almost making the ordeal worth it. I linger for at least thirty minutes, watching the light change on the Arch as the sun begins to set behind me.

It's pitch black and cold by the time I get to my room at the Motel 6 in Moab, the tourist town next to Arches National Park, which feels luxuriously warm and safe.

I wake up on Day 9 still smiling and grateful to have a car with a key and no crisis to deal with, and a sunny day in Arches National Park ahead of me. I treat myself to an excellent breakfast and discover the entrance to the park is just a couple of miles down the road.

The arches themselves are quirky and impressive and swarming with tourists this morning. But the monumental red rocks rising like cathedrals in fields of soft purple-green sage against a backdrop of the purest blue sky I've ever seen are magnificent. And more often than not, there's no one in sight (everyone's visiting the arches) and not even the slightest breeze, the silence thick and solemn. I get some nice shots, including one of two fat, fearless ravens sitting on a fence, before I decide to skip the mid-day light and return to Moab at noon for coffee.

At 2:15 I head back to the park to slowly revisit the sites. I stop at the Visitors Center on the way in to identify some of the plants that are adding unexpected color to my photos. Sagebrush, snakeweed, rabbitbrush, goldenrod... I wish I knew more about such things. The young ranger behind the counter couldn't be nicer or more helpful. What a lovely job it must be to be a steward of natural beauty. No wonder they look so happy.



Mesa Arch



Arches National Park



Stewardship (of our church and our own attributes) is one of John C.'s main themes. We should avoid all sense of ownership of the material wealth and the talents God has bestowed. Everything is on loan to us – entrusted actually. “We are merely visitors, here for a short span to learn virtue... before we continue our journey toward the Kingdom that lasts forever.”

The plan was to ride slowly through the park like an old man with a line-up of cars behind me, drivers getting more and more furious waiting for an opportunity to pass the old geezer. I'll take pleasure from their murderous thoughts. But I seem to be the only one entering the park at this hour and when a car appears going even slower in front of me I realize I'm not ready to be such an annoying old man, not quite bitter or oblivious enough yet.

But with no pressure to take any more photos (I got more than enough this morning), the going is slow and relaxed with lots of stops. At one stop, I leave the camera in the car and simply lean on a fence to eat a banana and enjoy the scenery at Balanced Rock, trying to feel fully conscious and aware of my body alive in this inspirational setting. Here I am, eating a banana in Arches National Park. But I quickly cheat and retrieve my camera to take a photo of the unlikely rock with the sun now on the parking lot side.

In the evening, I finish the Durant book and start Alice Miller. Durant says our history is characterized by greed, competition and aggression. He cites Plato's cycle of government: chaos to dictatorship and monarchy, monarchy to aristocracy, aristocracy to democracy, democracy to chaos, chaos to dictatorship... History makes it appear inevitable.

Halfway through the trip, I'm eating breakfast at a McDonald's in Moab well before sunrise on Day 10. Green River, my next stop, is only an hour away and there are only two things to see today, one of them being Goblin Valley State Park, which I'm thinking might be disappointing after Arches. In fact, there may not be anything comparable till I get to Monument Valley on the way back to L.A.

Green River is post-apocalyptically depressing. There's almost nothing here, most businesses in the town center abandoned a long time ago. Ironically, the Comfort Inn will probably be the nicest hotel I stay in, even though there's no reason for me to be here. I should be on my way to Denver.

The Green River Coffee Company on Main Street is a pleasant surprise. Good coffee, wonderful scents of breakfast cooking, full of books, vinyl records and other eccentricities. I especially like the business hours posted on the front door, a long list of approximate, contingent hours ending with “lately I have been here just about all the time, except when I am someplace else!”





Green River, Utah



Swasey's Beach

After taking some photos of the almost-deserted town, I'm not sure what to do next. It's clouded over but it's an hour drive to Goblin Valley and the forecast is mostly sunny, so I get back in the car and take a chance.

After a while on the road, driving through empty desert, I sense there's absolutely nobody here. A sign on the highway is disconcerting: *No services for next 100 miles*. I feel a bit spooked, like I'm entering a twilight zone. But the goblins in the valley await, so I soldier on.

The host of a call-in show on the satellite radio Catholic Channel is talking about why non-Catholics should never be allowed to take communion. Because, he says, "we" believe in transubstantiation – that the bread and the wine actually become the body and blood of Jesus. According to this guy, "we" believe in magic. Do Catholics literally "believe" this? Does this mean I'm not a Catholic if I don't believe this dogma to be literally true?

He says Satanists have been known to stand or kneel for communion, then surreptitiously stash the host in their mouths (to take back to their lairs and use in blasphemous ceremonies) instead of eating it, like Jack Nicolson hiding pills under his tongue in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Who knew this was a thing?

The most shocking thing that John C. said in his sermons (in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, at the very beginning of organized Christianity!) was that the concept of Jesus as "God's son" is a figure of speech, a metaphor to describe a personal will in perfect unity with God, a man who could be said to be a perfect embodiment of God. This, he says, is a state accessible to all of us: "As our wills increasingly conform themselves to God's will, we can think of ourselves as the adopted children of God." The whole point of the religion is to imitate the real Jesus, not consume Magic Jesus.

When I arrive, Goblin Valley is obviously a small state park, with just the one small valley to visit. I know there are other people here – I saw a few cars in the lot, but I don't see anyone once I climb down among the goblins. Eventually, I will see a couple of other non-goblins wandering about in the relentless sunlight on the floor of the valley, which is actually an ancient seabed, and I take a break in the shade of one of the larger goblins to take some notes.

This place looks and feels like another planet, but I remind myself that it isn't the things I see and experience when I travel that are so different. It's the quality of my attention that changes, a quality I need to observe and try to take home with me.







I thought the Valley would be boring and without color but it's the opposite. I don't think I've ever had so much fun taking pictures. So many angles and perspectives, shapes and rock formations that look like works of art. I have a feeling I could keep coming back and never see everything. The clouds are interesting too, one shaped like a huge starship hovering over the rocky rim of the valley behind the goblins.

I climb through an opening into what looks like the courtyard of what I imagine to be the King of the Goblins, a statuesque formation that stands on the outer edge of the valley wall. I feel like a space traveller, the first human to visit this kingdom of weirdly shaped, motionless entities. Suddenly I realize it's become very hot down here and I'm extremely parched. A slight panic rises, like I really am a human stranded on a bone-dry planet.

I eventually make it back to the car in the lot above the valley and take refuge with a bottle of water and a banana in a large, covered picnic area overlooking the goblins who just stand there watching about a dozen humans eating, laughing and talking above. It's definitely cooler up here on Planet Earth, chilly even in the shade. I can see the Goblin King on the other side of the valley from where I sit.

There's not much else to see in the park so I head back to Green River where the twenty-minute, thirty-mile-an-hour drive out to Swasey's Beach is a creepy end to a creepy afternoon. The only other person I encounter on the road is an 8-to-10-year-old boy driving a gigantic tractor in the oncoming lane. I get a nice shot at the deserted beach before returning to my room. It's been a quiet but interesting day.

On Day 11, I've decided to shorten my route home from Denver and cancel plans to visit certain parks. I don't want to do hours of driving every day on the way back to L.A. and I think I've seen the best already (except maybe for Monument Valley).

On the highway driving east, the sun is rising slowly above the horizon directly in front of me, blinding me at moments, forcing me to pull over and wait for it to climb a bit higher in the sky. It's a long drive to Denver, up into the Rocky Mountains, reaching as high as 12,000 feet before the dramatic descent down the other side of the Continental Divide.



King of the Goblins



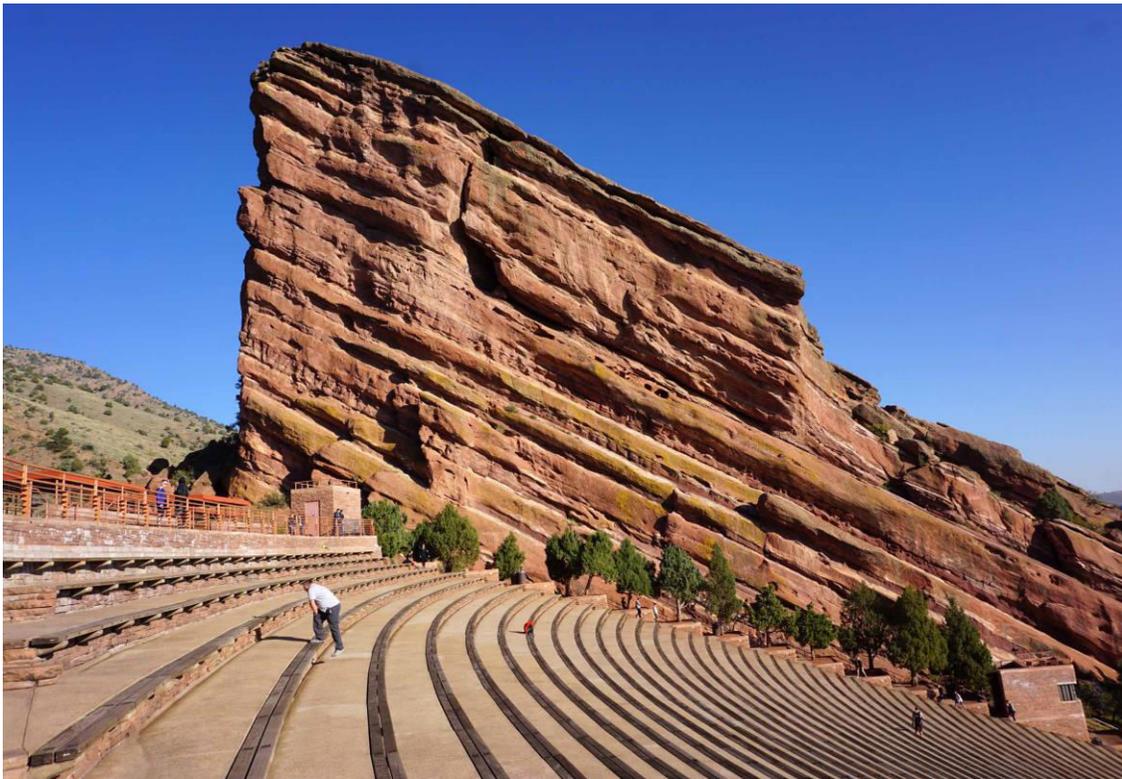
I stop at a rest area/information center on the way down and feel weirdly light-headed when I step out of the car. A woman behind the counter says it's normal at this altitude; I just descended 4,000 feet in ten minutes. She says it will get better as I keep descending to Denver which is only 5900 feet above sea level. She says I should drink lots of water and sit down till I feel better. I'm nervous about continuing to drive in this condition – it's terrifying to think I could just pass out, lose consciousness while driving, but I get back on the road, paying close attention to my ability to pay close attention.

Finally, I make it to Denver where the first impression is too many cars. The whole city will sound like a highway, and feel a lot like L.A. The Motel 6 on Federal Boulevard is depressing and sketchy – there's actually an armed guard behind the check-in counter and there are suspicious looking men hanging around the parking lot and leaning over the balconies of the three-storey structure. The room is definitely bare bones, with cinderblock walls and no small luxuries provided, not even tissue or shampoo. The overall effect is a bit prison-cell but it's clean and functional.

Except for the toilet which seems to be broken, making alarming noises with water swirling around impressively but not really going down very much. When I call the desk, the armed security guard knocks on my door a minute later holding up a plunger. *This is for you*, he says, and I want to say *Wait a minute... the problem is not a blockage*, but I figure it's really not his job so after a few minutes I go down to the desk and get myself moved to a new room.

Slight dizziness persists and my mind feels somehow different, a bit darker. I drive into the city and check out a neighborhood with a couple of bookstores. I find *Salvation on Sand Mountain*, a book about snake-handling Christians, at Fahrenheit Bookstore, and dinner at a Safeway supermarket, which I eat in the car in the parking lot. I'm not liking the city so far, much like I took an immediate, inexplicable dislike to the final destination of a previous road trip to New Orleans, but this time I'll try to stick it out.

When I return to my motel, there are more sketchy men leaning on the balcony railings outside the rooms - who knows what goes on here. After visiting the reception desk repeatedly for problems with the toilet, key-cards, passwords... one more glitch, I tell myself, and I'll take it as a sign to get out of Denver.



Red Rocks Amphitheater, Denver

But then I sleep well, better than ever on this trip. There's no gunfire during the night and I wake up alive and in one piece on Day 12. I feel like myself again (no dizziness) but the unfamiliar darkness still lurks in my thoughts. There's a Burger King right in front of the hotel, so breakfast is easy.

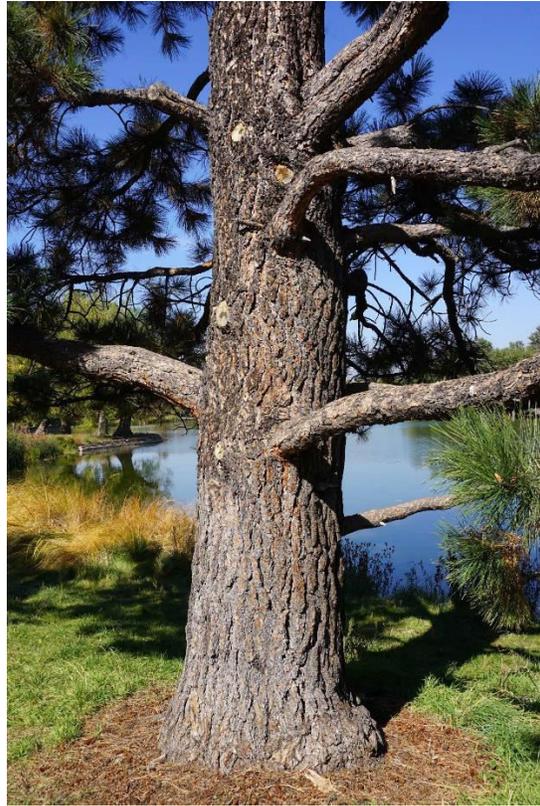
The mission for the day is to wander around the city after an early morning visit to Red Rocks Park to see the iconic natural auditorium that overlooks the city. Then it's back into the city to Washington Park which I thought I might use as a home-base to leave the car and explore downtown, but it's nowhere near downtown, so I decide to linger in the park instead, to walk slowly around Grasmere Lake, sitting on each bench I encounter to absorb my surroundings and take some notes on this beautiful day.

At the first bench, I decide to give up on Alice Miller's book, which I really wanted to enjoy because she seems like such an interesting and caring person. But her central idea – that tracing childhood trauma is a key to solving life's problems (“The amazing knowledge that comes to light from behind those previously locked doors contributes substantially toward helping people rescue themselves from their dangerous sleep and all its grave consequences”) doesn't resonate with me. I don't know if it would do me any good – knowing why I am bent a certain way.

At the next bench I'm still thinking about Miller, about how even after reviewing our stories and discovering the roots of our complexes, we still need to take action and move past them. We make decisions to act one way or another all the time, why not just decide to move on, especially since we know how inaccurate our memories are anyway.

At the third bench, I look up from my notebook and there's a nice little tree striking a perfect pose in front of me, bent and hanging over the edge of the lake. I take a photo without getting up from the bench before a gust of wind causes dying leaves to rain down on me from another tree behind me. I'm feeling a little better about Denver.

I like the pattern on the dying leaves of the tree that bench number four sits under, the way the decay moves from the outside in, and I'm glad I did this – decided to hang around a park and do something normal (for me). Regardless of what I think of Denver, I'll remember this lake, this mini-pilgrimage inside a bigger one.



At the next bench, I enjoy the view and start to connect with the lake, which reminds me of the artificial lake in my own beloved Jarry Park. I take some photos and realize that, even if I give up on the book, it could still prove vital to the trip's narrative if I finish this train of thought with a decision about what to do next. I'll put aside introspection of past events and ask myself a question of the present, make it a mission on this as yet missionless pilgrimage.

I decide I need to decide if I am a Christian. If only to know what to tell people who ask, or even those who don't. Many people have reacted poorly (pity, contempt, bewilderment, mockery) to my church-going but no one has ever asked me what I actually believe, not even myself.

At the last bench there are people nearby: a teenaged couple fishing and a little boy on a bicycle yelling *My head's on fire* over and over again, which must be some kind of inside joke or game with his mother. There doesn't seem to be anything left to write or think here, except to decide which book to read next. I'll read the book I found yesterday on crazy faith.

I leave the park and return to the neighborhood where I hung out yesterday to visit another bookstore and café and then walk a few blocks to the International Church of Cannabis which is open to the public each day from one to three. The interior of the former Lutheran church is beautifully painted and the mission of the legally incorporated religion is "to offer a home to adults everywhere who are looking to create the best version of themselves by way of the sacred plant." They call themselves *elevationists* who believe that "an individual's spiritual journey, and search for meaning... can be accelerated with ritual cannabis use." Nice people.

Next, I park the car downtown and start to walk, but it's all very sterile and there's really not much to see so I find a Denver fridge magnet and head back to the hotel where, once again, my WIFI passwords don't work. There doesn't seem to be much else for me to do in this city - even the movies and art exhibits don't interest me - so I decide to check out one day early and start heading home tomorrow morning.



International Church of Cannabis

As I'm making arrangements to check out early at the reception desk, a very young family, a father and mother and child in a stroller, come in looking for a room. The father looks subdued and distressed, a little desperate perhaps. I linger outside the office for a moment and again on the balcony in front of my room (like the drug dealers), wondering if this is an example of the kind of family trauma, occurring right here, right now, that Alice Miller said can stay with a child for the rest of her life. I wish there was something I could do to help these strangers.

In the morning of Day 13, I drive into the city to see what it looks like on a quiet Saturday morning without crazy weekday traffic. There's still not much to see so I set my GPS for Manitou Springs to begin the long trip back to L.A., glad to be leaving Denver. Too many desperate and homeless people and too many cars.

It's a short drive, this first step home, only an hour and twenty minutes, and the light is still morning-hazy-blue when I get to the Garden of the Gods which is not actually a state park – it used to be private property that was eventually donated to the state by a very wealthy family.

I tire myself out on the Garden Walk through more magnificent stone structures before returning to the car to drive through the rest of the park to the Silver Saddle Motel in Manitou Springs. I'll come back in the late afternoon when the light will probably be better.

Before returning to the park, I drive through nearby downtown Colorado Springs after visiting the eccentric Starr Kempf house with huge fantastical sculptures in the front yard. Then it's back to the Garden of the Gods where I'll spend the afternoon driving back and forth trying to find parking at each of the stops.

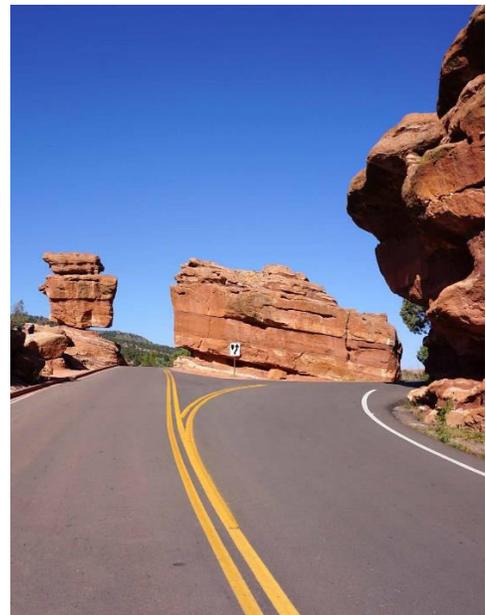
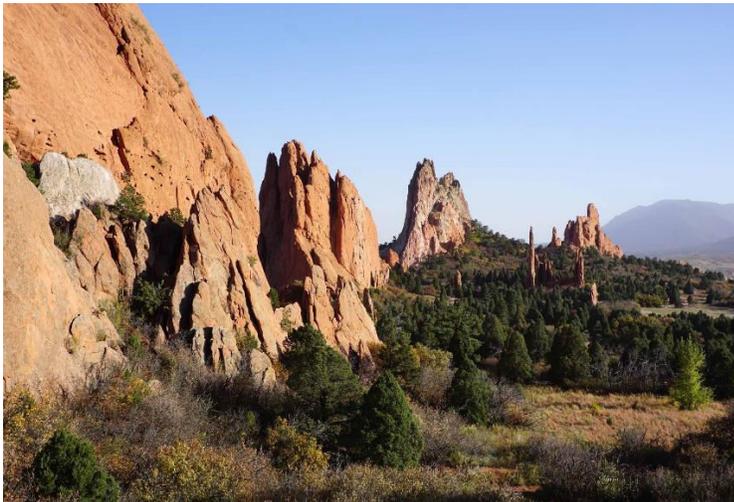
I return to downtown Colorado Springs in the evening to Poor Richard's, a used bookstore connected to a restaurant connected to a toy store. The whole complex has that wonderful hippie-food aroma and dinner is predictably delicious. I find a book easily: *Writers Revealed* consists of interviews with eight British novelists talking about faith, religion and other such things.

For the first time on this trip, night is falling and I don't have a destination or room booked for tomorrow. I wouldn't mind a day off; I feel like I deserve one, with so much already done – so many photos I really like already taken and the traveller's pressure to do as much as possible waning.

The plan on Day 14 is to eat a good breakfast, go to nine o'clock mass in Colorado Springs, drive to Great Sand Dunes National Park, then on to a motel I just booked in Alamosa. Finally, if possible, I'll do some laundry.



Garden of the Gods



Mass at St. Mary's Catholic Cathedral in Colorado Springs is nice. The music is good and there are several people hand-signing (instead of singing) hymns, which is surprisingly beautiful. At one point, the sun shines through a stained-glass window directly onto me, sitting in a pew off to the side of the altar, making me feel warm and holy for just a few moments before it moves on.

A straight road through flat fields leads up to the entrance of Great Sand Dunes National Park. In the distance, I can see the tallest dunes in North America lying between mountains and treetops. They're awesome in a slightly creepy way. I pull over often and it takes a long time to reach the entrance and Visitors Center, but I can't help but stop for another shot as I get closer and closer.

I'm not technically in the park yet but I might as well be because this road goes only there on the map and people are already driving in the slow, respectful way they do in these sacred places. Visiting these parks is, in a way, like going to church (or what going to church should be like). Here, we pay homage to Nature, that thing we are part of but looms above us with absolute laws, awesome force and indescribable beauty.

People are even more respectful outside of their cars: friendly, in a good mood, and trustful, because everyone is here for the same reasons, much like the connection of trust people can feel towards each other in a congregation, a trust based on the assumption that we are sharing something deep and reverential. This was something Edward Abbey missed in his ode to Arches National Park. I really didn't appreciate his eco-snobbery that led him to look down on tourists arriving in cars. The overwhelming majority of us respect the leave-it-as-you-found-it rule when passing through these special preserves. Good enough.

I'm not sure why I came here - I don't even like gigantic sand dunes. They're too stark and relentlessly beige. There is not even a scenic drive in the park, just the prospect of walking through a creek and climbing the dunes. Walking in shifting sand is annoying enough but walking uphill is really too much. I hate the feeling of constantly trying to resist slipping backward with each step forward and sand pouring into my shoes like water.

Taking off my shoes and walking through the shallow creek is special, something I've never done before, but after ten minutes of trudging barefoot on the flat approach to the dunes, I feel my whole body starting to dry up (I forgot to bring water) and decide against going any further. Not this time.

Back in the car, I notice the title of the book on the seat beside me – *Salvation on Sand Mountain* – and wonder if I just passed up an opportunity. Damn the dunes, I just don't trust them. There's something sinister about them.



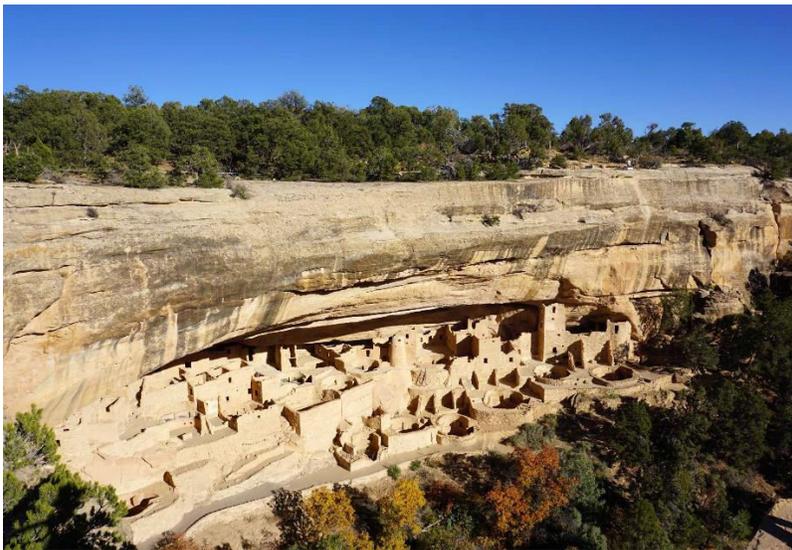
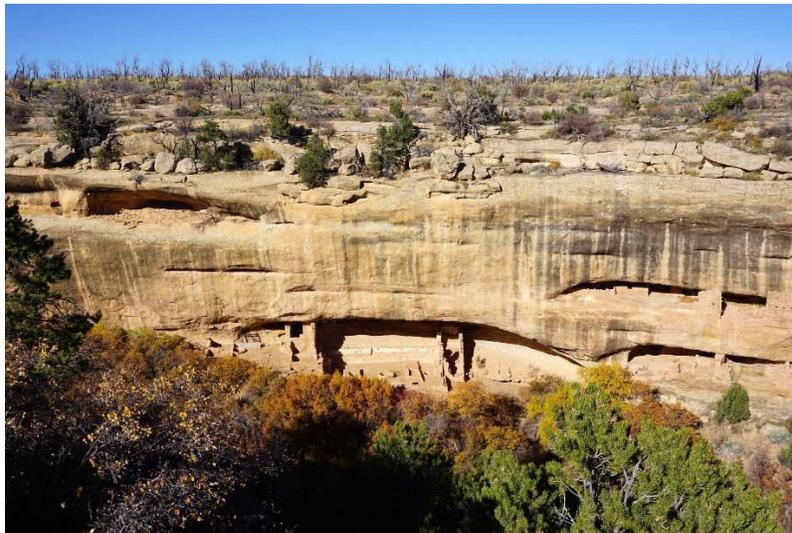
For the second day in a row I have an excellent hotel room, this one at the Riverside Inn of Alamosa. I do my laundry and enjoy a relaxing evening reading about the highly charged religious practices of snake-handlers. The author Dennis Covington has family history in the Appalachian region and with the religion he writes about. Eventually, as he delves further into the motives and emotions of the handlers, he will come to try it himself. He wants to feel the power that handling lethal creatures can evoke.

When he finally picks one up, he describes a feeling of disappearing: “And suddenly there seemed to be nothing in the room but me and the snake. I knew then why the handlers took up serpents. There is power in the act of disappearing; there is victory in the loss of self.” The handlers are often bitten and many eventually are done in by the snakes. I don’t get it.

On Day 15, it’s a long drive on a two-lane highway through small towns, higher and higher into the mountains back over the Continental Divide and down the other side. Really tired of driving, I make it to Second Story Used Books in Durango by 12:30. I find *Love is the Wine: Talks of a Sufi Master in America* and have a good conversation with the owner who leaves me considering an alternate route home. I will eventually decide to go south to Flagstaff instead of east and down through Vegas the way I came. I’ll take the full three days with plenty of stops and as little planning as possible along the way.

I check into my room at the Quality Inn in Durango and drive to Mesa Verde National Park to see the cliff dwellings high up on top of the mesa. But I find the setting oppressive and wonder why anyone would want to live in such isolation so high up in settlements carved into the sides of cliffs. There’s also something depressing about long-abandoned settlements, the ghosts ancient and so far away. I linger in the park with a scattering of tourists for a while before heading back to my hotel.

Once again, on Day 16, the 20-mile entry into Monument Valley in Arizona, the stage-set for so many westerns from my childhood, is wonderful. The Tribal Park is actually on a reservation, land ceded to the Navajo probably because of its inhospitableness and apparent worthlessness. But it is breathtakingly beautiful and the gigantic rock formations sitting in the red-sand desert are entities unto themselves with names like *Totem Pole*, *Three Sisters* and *Elephant Butte*. This has been a sacred place for a long time.



The dirt road through the park is awful, almost impassable in parts, and I quickly decide against doing the 17-mile loop more than once, so I'll go very slow and open the windows at each stop when the dust settles to finish the Covington book. At one point, I park the car just beyond where everyone else is parked and walk into the cinematic landscape across the road. I move sideways to find the best angle to photograph *The Three Sisters* and notice a stretch of yellow flowers in front of the rock to my left. Perfect. There's even a stone slab that serves as a bench to sit and admire God's artwork.

The rest of the afternoon is very good with photo-ops at each stop. When I finally reach Artists' Point, there are no other tourists, just a young Navajo at a table selling jewellery. It's very quiet and I'm close to the end of the loop drive. This is it, I think to myself, the scenic part of the trip is over. I don't know if I will ever find anything more photogenic than this.

After three hours on a horrible road, it's good to be on solid ground again, with not-so-bad coffee on one of the balconies of the Visitors Center that overlook the park. I'll linger here, finish Covington, and watch the light change. I'm not sure what to make of the Covington book, except that I agree with his assertion that: "If you accept the idea of a universe set into motion by an intelligent hand, then it seems to me you need to consider the possibility that the hand may still be at work in its movement."

The Holy Ghost plays an important role in snake-handling church ceremonies. One handler told Covington that the Holy Ghost has a special scent, a "sweet savor" that Covington himself actually detects and describes as "a pleasant smell, like warm bread and apples." I don't understand the concept of a Holy Ghost.

Dinner is Chinese food in a depressing little place in a mall down the street from my room at the Wetherill Inn in Kayenta, Arizona, still on Navajo land. For some reason, the music in the restaurant sounds German, like a polka. Weird, but the food, as suggested on Yelp, is edible and the fortune cookie's message is not bad: *Commitment is the daily triumph of integrity over skepticism.*

On Day 16 I find myself nine hours from L.A. with three days to get there. First stop will be Flagstaff, Arizona, a town I liked when I stayed there a few years ago. On the way, Wupatki and Sunset Volcano National Monuments are disappointing after all I've seen. Maybe it's time to put the camera down. I find a Thomas Merton title to add to my collection at Starrlight Books in downtown Flagstaff before checking into Days Hotel.







There's not much of a plan for the next couple of days. I'll probably end up staying tomorrow night in Barstow (for the third time) and then drive to a beach the next day to pay my respects to the Pacific before returning to my son's house. It feels like the trip is over, with extra time to think and read and be present where I am in perfect pilgrim-solitude instead of looking, looking, looking. As if on cue, to officialize the end of the picture-taking, the sun is nowhere to be seen and it's overcast in Flagstaff.

*Writers Revealed* is good company, full of relevant insights. The novelist Iris Murdoch says she doesn't believe in God, the divinity of Christ or the afterlife, but still calls herself a Christian. She echoes Will Durant when she talks about the danger of the West becoming de-Christianized if we cannot "think of it in a wider and deeper way: trying to understand religion as to do with holiness and a reverence for what is holy and good..." She says prayer and meditation are important, that we need sometimes to withdraw from our ordinary personas and simply be quiet.

The Flagstaff Mall – it's come to this. Mediocre food in a sterile, deserted shopping center. I'm here to see a film. *Bladerunner 2049* is good but very grim and long, almost three hours. Even the previews were relentlessly apocalyptic with titles like *Geostorm*, a movie about when good weather goes bad and turns against us. I couldn't see any other people from where I sat in the middle of the theater, so I was able to totally immerse in this dystopian version of human, non-human and half-human Los Angeles, not my favorite city to begin with.

I stay up later than usual, reading. The writer A.N. Wilson finds the idea of a mechanical universe extremely boring. "It's only through the exercise of the imagination that one glimpses who we might be, what the universe might be, and what might lie behind it... It's the sheer trivialisation of existence in the modern world, which drives out not merely religion, but all perception of the good and the beautiful and casts a kind of grey fog over life."

I wake up on Day 17 thinking this will have been a trip with no magic and no significant dreams, but maybe the best photos ever. Today I drive into the High Desert, tomorrow I reach the sea. The five-hour drive to Barstow is tedious and almost ugly. It's very windy and the swirling dust of the Mojave Desert in the air fades out what little color might exist in this desolate landscape.

After I check into my room at the California Inn, I drive around the small town to maybe take some photos but when I drive by photos I took last January it feels weird – like I shouldn't be seeing them unfrozen in real life. I buy some dinner and cheap wine at Vans supermarket and return to my room to watch a documentary on Netflix. The motel smells funny. The whole town smells funny – maybe it's the wind. Not a single photo taken today.

It's back to family on Day 18. But first I need to make it through Cajon Pass in what could be perilously high winds. As expected the two-hour drive takes three hours, mostly due to fog at the Cajon Summit in San Bernardino, after which it rains for the first time in twenty days. The rain lasts only five minutes but long enough to wash most of the thick red Monument Valley dust off the car.

It's cloudy and cool when I get to Corona del Mar State Beach, but the waves are huge and, as always, the scent and sound of the ocean shift something inside of me just a little. It starts to sprinkle rain, so I sit in the car to plan the rest of the afternoon before meeting family for dinner. The GPS tells me everywhere I might want to go will take almost an hour and I'm just about done with driving – that part of the trip is over. I decide on a bookstore in nearby Fountain Valley, coffee, and a visit to Charles Bukowski's grave in Rancho Palos Verdes. There's just a handful of people on the beach and it's so quiet in the car I fall asleep and start to dream. I open my eyes a few minutes later and realize I have not had a single memorable dream on this trip.

I find *Trinity*, a book that purports to explain the three-in-one mystery at the heart of Christian dogma, by Joseph F. Girzone, at Camelot Books in a mall in Fountain Valley. For once, the mall has no Starbucks (they're everywhere here) but it does have a Dunkin' Donuts where I spend forty minutes finishing *Writers Revealed* and starting *Love is the Wine: Talks of a Sufi Master in America*. The Sufi Master has a very long name (Sheikh Muzaffer Ozak Al Jerrahi Al Halveti) and begins with a description of Sufism as "the elimination of any intermediaries between the individual and God."

The Sheikh distinguishes between the essence of God and the attributes of God. The essence is impossible for us to understand, but we can begin to understand the attributes because trace amounts can actually be detected within ourselves. So, it follows that the only way to discover the attributes of God is to be conscious of yourself. "That is the beginning and the extent of it," he says, "outwardly, you will find nothing."

Next, I drive to Green Hills Memorial Park to find the grave I was unable to find last January. A nice, older man with a cane at the gatehouse tells me that so many people want to visit this grave (especially young Europeans), that they've placed an orange cone behind it to make it easier to find. Then, even though the directions are very simple, he decides he wants to escort me. "Follow me," he says, getting in his car. "Park right behind me."

I walk up a slope and there's the small stone, flat on the grass with the orange cone behind it. I move the cone aside to take a photo and notice it's covered in bird droppings, so I put it back, thinking the poet would probably like this detail. The epitaph on the stone is *Don't try*. The meaning is obscure but the Web says he's referring to the act of writing. You're either writing or not writing. *Trying* to write doesn't count or make sense. You need to wait for the grace to descend before you begin to write poetry.

Bukowski has a great view from where he lies on the slope, with his head I imagine slightly tilted up, so he can see ahead of him. A beautiful tree stands behind his grave; to the left, in the distance, is L.A. harbour; to the right, a winding road; ahead, another beautiful tree and rolling hills. The temperature and light are perfect, so I linger, take some photos, and consult the I Ching. I ask about faith.

I toss the three pennies onto my notebook, trying to keep them from rolling onto the grass. I'll decipher the hexagram at my son's house before I go to sleep tonight. (Later that night, Hexagrams 31 and 49 will seem to make no sense, but something the Sheikh says will resonate: "Real faith is not just a belief. It is faith which is expressed in action.")

I decide to leave the pennies at the grave, but I've already put them back in my pocket where there are now four of them, so I press one into the earth at each corner of the stone. Then, still on one knee, I press my palm down on the stone and say a short prayer in the middle of which I notice a very tiny, lime-green, almost-imperceptible spider, not at all menacing, approach the tip of my index finger, appear to touch it, then turn away and leave. Is some part of the poet in the ground underneath us in this creature's DNA?

The light is almost celestial now and I wonder if Charles is in heaven. Maybe there's a dive-bar for him to hang out there. I stand up to take a few more photos and admire his spot again. I feel like trying it out – what exactly does he see from where he lies? There's no one around except for the odd cemetery golf-cart that pops up occasionally on the winding road to my left. Why not – it's California, I'm allowed to be silly.



I put everything back in the car: the camera, my bag, my notebook – and just do it, quickly, before I change my mind. But I only last a moment flat on my back, long enough to immediately think I feel something trying to push up through my abdomen. I get right back up and leave soon after.

I've got a little more time to kill so I visit a Starbucks in this generic L.A. neighborhood. Everything looks fake in this city, even the palm trees. How do you make a tree look fake? I have doubts about what I just felt on the grave. How could anything real happen here? I feel like going home right now but there's a precious weekend with family ahead. I read some more of the Sheikh who says: "As long as you do not divorce the world and the worldly, you are not going to meet your God." He says every prophet has a role and that of Jesus was "to exhibit the lack of worldly possessions and concerns."

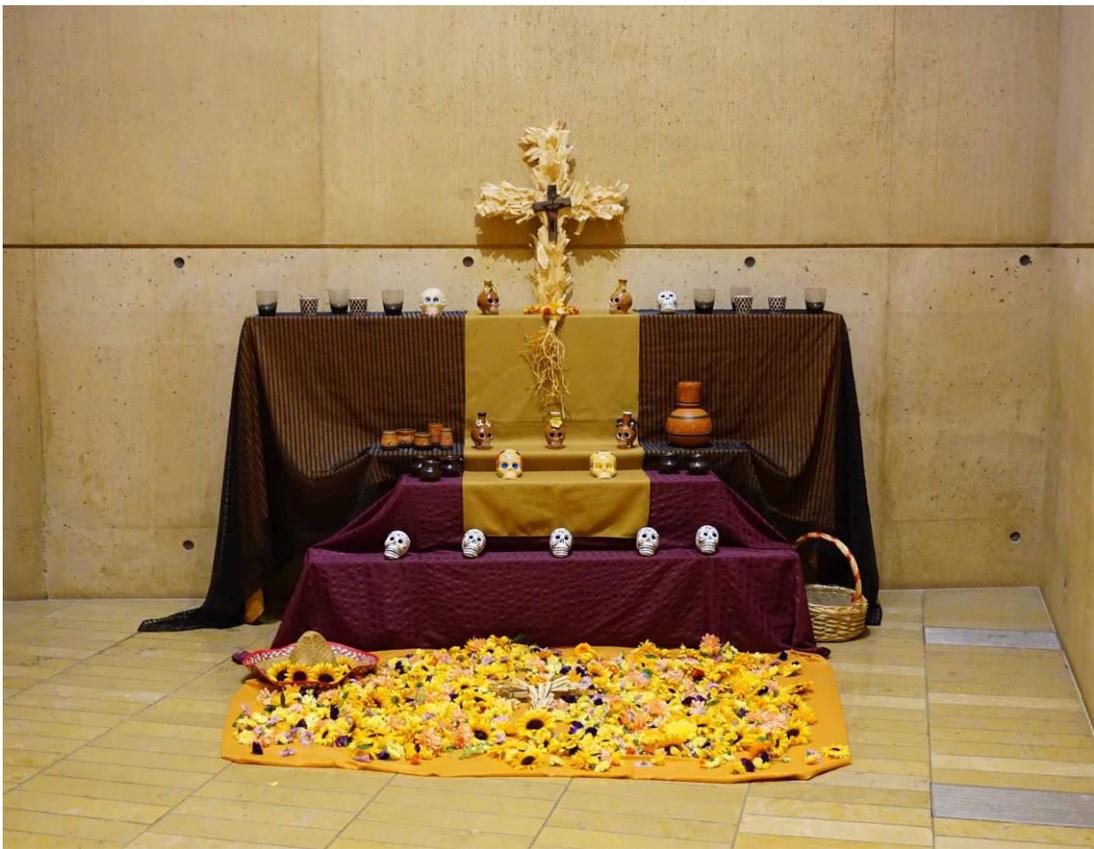
Two days later, on Sunday morning, I escape early for ten o'clock mass at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in the heart of downtown L.A. There are no jams or delays on the rivers of cars this morning and I get there in 45 minutes with three hours of free underground parking as a bonus.

What a beautiful place to linger on a Sunday morning in California sunshine with coffee in the Cathedral Plaza, a perfect respite from bland Orange County. The only negative is the swoosh of cars on the Hollywood Freeway next to and below the complex. But then what could be more L.A.: a mixture of flowers and car exhaust. The mass itself is boring and stiff with clouds of incense smoke and a choir but uninspiring readings and the gospel story of render unto Caesar what is Caesar's... which most people assume refers to a division of life into two spheres: secular and spiritual.

But Father Jack Mahoney on the Web offers a different meaning. Jesus is often challenged in the New Testament with questions from official clergy trying to trick him into saying something seditious to get him into trouble. In this case, the question was should Jews be allowed, by their own laws, to pay tribute to the Roman occupiers. If he answered yes, he was a traitor, if he said no, he was a rebel. When he points to the image on the coin and says render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's, he's not telling people to pay their taxes, he's using the situation to tell people to respect what belongs to God as well. Which happens to be, literally, everything. Remember, we are just stewards.



Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels



After mass, I walk to The Last Bookstore on Spring Street, which might be the perfect bookstore if only it had a café and you weren't required to leave your bag at the counter. It's a huge, two-story former bank with a great selection of books and good music playing. There are dozens of customers and all of them look like my kind of people – book people, of course. I'm glad I did this – come to the one part of the city that feels familiar and comfortable. I can say I've visited L.A. now. The ride back is good. I take my time and do my best to relax in traffic, to literally go with the flow.

I leave for the airport in the dark at six a.m. the next morning, thinking I'll beat the traffic, but what should take 42 minutes ends up taking more than two hours. Then the plane sits on the runway for two-and-a-half hours because it's unseasonably hot outside, which apparently affects how much weight a plane can carry, so they keep trying to unload more and more stuff but can only leave when seven passengers agree to be re-rerouted.

But nothing bothers me this morning. No one's waiting for me at the other end and I'm in no rush. It was a good trip and I'm sincerely grateful for the books, the photos, the fridge magnets, the time spent with family, the lost-and-found key and the comfortable home that awaits me. I finish *Love is the Wine* before take-off.

The Sheikh says we are well provided by God, only we rarely realize it and are rarely grateful. This is why God is hidden – he's hiding from the complainers. He says remembrance of God is one of the fundamentals of Sufi practices. And it's simple: all we need to remember is to say "I am here. I am present, at your orders."

When I get home, I will read Joseph Girzone's *Trinity* and get almost nothing from it. He says God's ways are impossible to understand and then, ironically, proceeds to explain official dogma that explains God's ways. I still can't understand the three-in-one concept and decide to give up on dogma once and for all. At least this much is clear (and out of the way).

Durant says the Church "overlaid the incomparable ethics of Jesus with a complex structure of incredible dogma", eventually seeming to forget the real meaning of Christ's teachings. John C. rejects the idea of a Magic Jesus and Iris M. says that magic is actually the enemy of religion – that religion degenerates into magic. I'll use their arguments to support my rejection of the dogma I never understood anyway

I'm certain Durant is right when he says mankind has no conscience and that order needs to be imposed with structures and unifying stories. And I believe Durant's theory that Christ is the common story that has held western civilization together and that the slow disappearance of this story is one of the main causes of the polarization that threatens to tear things apart. There's no one to look up to anymore, just a maniac at the helm surrounded by sycophants.

Durant calls himself a Christian because he admires the man and makes a persistent effort to live like him. I'll take this from the philosopher-historian (and Iris M. who says much the same thing) and call myself a Christian.

And, finally, I believe those who say we need God's help to see and understand what's really going on. We need grace. And grace, as they say, just comes to us if we are patient and attentive. *Don't try*. An interviewer once asked Charles Bukowski how he writes poetry. It's important that you don't try, he said, "either for Cadillacs, creation or immortality. You wait, and if nothing happens, you wait some more. It's like a bug high on the wall. You wait for it to come to you."

