

Answers

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The west is a promise. It is a promise that just beyond the next sharp bend or next endless stretch of road that there is *something*, something worth having that can't be touched anywhere else. Riches, resources, or a home for a vagrant kind of soul. A promise that once drew treasure hunters; gold miners and desperados driven by greed as much as need, by outlaws and wanderers. By ranchers driven by the necessity of space and the persecuted seeking some semblance of freedom and opportunity that never existed for their forefathers. A promise of a place where the ability to survive was qualification enough to be seen as human and where sometimes justice was queen, while at others, blood and squalor and trails paved with tears won out. Where the independent minded fled the masses and where the corrupt sought exemption. Where the athlete went for a challenge . . . where the moneyed now seek the best views. The desert is now home to the likes of Las Vegas, and somewhere behind a jagged fence line, a mansion looks out on the Dallas Divide. Oprah lives outside of Telluride while on the other side of the pass sits the old mining town where my immigrant great grandfather once made moonshine. The west is a promise of every kind of contradiction, of every dream that wanderlust can endeavor to imagine.

But the west is also a hard reality. It is heat and storms and snow, rattlesnakes and falling rock, earthquakes and possibly aliens, assuming one is inclined to believe less like Skully than Mulder. The west is where the weird come to retire—in the gated community of Area 51 and the tourist-town charm of Roswell—it's where the strange go to be apart under broad swatches of sky. It's where people and fortunes disappear and treacherous byways give way to unfortunate accidents. It's where fortune seekers of old paid in blood and black lung for the hope of coal and

gold which have since been replaced by other resources infinitely more valuable in the modern age of nuclear power and high populations: oil. Farming subsidies. *Water*.

The shouting over that precious resource starts at ten thousand feet where tributaries turn to creeks, tumbling off of rock and pine to the grassland below where it continues and, meanwhile, somewhere down the line people bite their nails in an incongruent desert paradise of recycled water and light and neon cowboys. But the water, like the mountainside that has, over time, crushed and frozen and buried and starved miners and road builders and explorers and commuters as payment for daring those slopes, does not come easily. It tempts the definition of *finite* in great, sudden swells, sweeping away the roads that lead to their headwaters and tearing out the foundations of the houses that perch on their banks. *You asked for water*, say the skies and say the mountains, as every hundred years or so they offer it ten-fold. They surrender it in such excess that the ground can't absorb it and the dams burst and the people standing knee deep in mud when the flood passes are looking at no simpler a solution than they'd been looking at the day before. The west is a promise, but it sometimes presents more like a deal with the devil: It calls in its debts with precious little warning, long after the dealers have forgotten that they're bound to laws of even exchange. Deserts run dry till they flood. The prairie is endless until it comes to a careening halt against the mountains' feet. Snow sits quietly before the avalanche. From the foothills' shrub-shrouded sides to the rain and sun where the coast meets the crash of the sea the question is never *if* there will be a price to pay, but when, and how high.

That is not to say, though, that the west knows no forgiveness; that it's any more evil than it is good in its state of reckless nature. To say that the west is wicked would be to say that God is comparable to man, would be to say that the rivers don't know their own courses and their own cycles— their currents and their own changes of pace as they wear down the embrace of

their own banks. That the mountains don't know where they stand and that their indifference to the fall of trees and passing of time stems from meanness and not from the understanding that things die and that things grow, that as time moves their iron innards inevitably corrode; would be to say that they don't know that to stand like sentries across the plains unto eternity is their way. It is their way. And their way cannot be defied by the natural movements of the world. Men may dig out their cores, and fire and blight strip them of their dressings, but they themselves will go on long after the trees and the men are gone, standing—if worn down—until the world hangs naked in the solar system under an expanding sun. The mountains know this. Perhaps we know this. Perhaps it is that act of knowing this that draws us westward, towards those old immovable spirits that make their homes in rock and water and trees and snowcaps. Perhaps their endlessness is their promise, and it is this that draws the flighty, briefly present human heart westward until humanity spills like water across the plateaus and the deserts and the bluffs and the cliffs and the beaches that meet the sea.

The west is a promise of eternity. It is a promise of adventure, of hope, of beginnings. Of sanctuary and wildness. It is all of these things. It drives a hard bargain and offers, in exchange, a raw and uninhibited world where the same elements that grant life also grant destruction, but where, nevertheless, life continues to exist. Where human life continues to run to in multicolored droves. The west is a promise not of winning or losing, or of failure, or success. The west is a promise of movement, and of being moved, when looking at the vastness of prairie or the agelessness of the mountains. It is a promise of questions.

It is the promise of answers.