

## Westerns

### Aaron Hull

#### Hannibal, Missouri ~ 1991

Your parents have brought you to the boyhood home of Sam Clemens. It is their idea of vacation. You have just spent several hours driving south in a Dodge Caravan and now you file up and down the streets of Hannibal, seeing Twain's ghost everywhere. After this, your family will always vacation out West. In the coming years they will drag you all over it. In Mitchell, South Dakota, at the Corn Palace, your stepfather will buy you a straw cowboy hat on which he will affix pins from every notable place you visit: the Black Hills, Pike's Peak, Garden of the Gods. In Lead, South Dakota, you will pan for gold like a prospector, and in the General Store the few flakes you have found will be funneled into a glass vial the size of your pinky. This vile will stand on your dresser for years under a set of mounted steer horns from Dodge City, Kansas, that were bought five hours before a tornado slid down from the sky like a witch's finger. You will drink sarsaparillas at the bar in the Deadwood Saloon, fifteen feet from where Wild Bill Hickok was gunned down dead. This is the year after *Dances With Wolves* and everyone will talk about meeting Kevin Costner, what a swell guy he was. Because you will have seen this film you will press your face to the window, scouting for buffalo. When you stop along the roadside to pee, returning with your new cowboy boots darkly spattered, they will dub you Pees-On-His-Feet. You will have read *Jurassic Park* for the third time and have determined to become a paleontologist. Your stepfather, who works in men's formalwear, will offer you career tips from the driver's seat, since he himself, he reminds you, is a pantologist. They will take you to natural history museums and fossil shops and a real-life dinosaur dig, and you will wander around in the heat and the dust, prying up rocks. You will remove your straw hat to wipe the sweat from your brow and you will gaze at the hills, squinting. You will adopt a kind of knowing posture, your foot on a boulder, your elbow on your knee, and listen to the wind,

picturing your life many years from now. In your sketch pad you will draw the elaborate log cabin in which you plan to live, here at the base of the Rockies, where you will wander and search for, and regularly find, bones, skeletons, artifacts. All of which will end up in a museum. But this will come later. Now, the summer of Twain, because your mother works part-time at a bookshop, the owners have gifted you an illustrated hardcover *Huckleberry Finn*. You do little more with it than admire the illustrations. But so it begins.

### **Wisconsin ~ 1993**

Clint Eastwood rides into your life. He does so first, in *For A Few Dollars More*, on a mule, like Christ himself. And like him, Clint will be your savior, for a time. Next will come, of course, *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly*, which you see only in parts, never whole, on TNT. Later, you will backtrack to *A Fistful of Dollars*, then leap ahead to *Pale Rider* and *High Plains Drifter*. The Man With No Name will cut a trail through your mind that stretches for years, decades, so that some part of you is always pursuing him. You will, at various times, try to imitate him – the lazy catlike posture, the wry smile, the dry delivery. And, of course, the squint. You will shun sunglasses and sunblock and hats in the hope that your eyes accustom themselves to glare and begin to crease at the corners, announcing a kind of weary wisdom born of experience. You will incur your mother's wrath when you bore a hole through the center of one of her Navajo blankets so that you may wear it like a shawl to complement the boots you acquired in South Dakota. You will still, just barely, be able to fit into these boots in middle school, where, during marching band, the whacking of your heels will draw the attention of classmates who say things like, Where'd you get those, the Garth Brooks Store? And though you will pity them their provincialism and be grateful for your western wanderings, that same night those boots will go into the closet, where they will stay.

### **Wisconsin ~ 1995**

Tuesday nights at eleven you watch re-runs of *Northern Exposure* in your room, alone. You push a towel along the base of the door to seal in the light. On your tiny television the picture quality is poor and you must keep the volume turned up to two notches above Mute, so as not to be found out. It doesn't matter, though; you've seen most of the episodes, you know the story, the characters are your intimates. You wish you would encounter them, or those like them, in real life. You know of no one like them where you live, which is one reason why you have decided to someday live in Alaska. Because it is the only way you can imagine becoming like them. Certainly you will fail to become like them if you stay. You will be unable to keep from smiling when the opening credits roll and the bouncy theme music, full of harmonica, begins. And an hour later, when the credits roll again, you will fall asleep to the music looping through your head and an image of your future as a bush pilot in the Last Frontier.

### **Wisconsin ~ 1999**

You're in U.S. History when Carolyn walks in and plops a crisp copy of *On the Road* on your desk, no explanation. The photo on the cover is the famous one of Kerouac and Cassidy against a wall, their arms slung over each other's shoulders. A bright sun carves deep shadows into their faces. For a long time you will mistake the one on the left for Kerouac. You turn to Carolyn, hold up the book, and shape your face into a question. Just read it, she says. You will, but not for another year, when you're working on an assembly line in, of all places, a book bindery. The machine breaks down a lot and there is too much time in which to sit and think. When it does, you pull from your back pocket the book you keep tucked there like a second wallet. You picture yourself driving through the night across a vast continent—always west, never east. The floor manager, a man as lean and creased as a Leone character, spots you, always, and says, Put the book away.

### **Wisconsin ~ 2005**

You read *The Dharma Bums* for the first time. Someday, you think, you will work as a fire lookout in the North Cascades. You carry the book around with you for weeks, dog-

earing, underlining, memorizing, before pressing it into your roommate's hand and telling him, You must read this. He does, and soon afterward you are calling each other Japhy and Ray. You each begin to plot some other life for yourself. He will move faster. In a year he will be gone to Seattle, unwittingly taking your Kerouac with him. In his absence you will forget, for a time, the strength of a Western pull.

### **Wisconsin ~ 2008**

College is a memory. It is ten months after graduation but you have not left. You are bored and uncertain, and, in spite of all, have initiated the process of becoming a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant in the Marines. Working in a kitchen you scrape together enough money for a creative writing course that will be taught by a young, accomplished author. The day you register you order his two books, and when they arrive you read each one in a sitting. The author is from Oregon—central Oregon, the high desert, where each story is set. Reading them, you grow ridiculously happy. The author speaks with a baritone drawl that you imagine his characters must use, too. At semester's end you have a new plan, and come June you are living out of a tent as one of a seven-person trail-building crew. Home base is southern Washington, an hour from the Columbia River Gorge, at the foot of Mount Adams. Your crew "roves," and you work all over the Pacific Northwest and California. You hike miles out into the backcountry, spike camp, then hike more miles in to your worksite. Along with your overstuffed backpacks—full of tents, sleeping bags, Thermarests, cookware, fuel, canned goods, polypropylene base layers, and far too many socks—you lug the tools with which, hopefully, you do more good than harm to the Pacific Crest Trail: pick-mattocks, pulaskis, rockbars, handsaws, crosscuts. You dig many miles of tread, pry many boulders loose from the earth, swing a double-jack sledge to crush many fist-sized rocks. Your hair turns as blond as when you were a boy, your eyebrows go white, your skin coppers and tightens. Your body begins to resemble an anatomy chart. When, after ten days in the backcountry, you head to the Safeway to buy chips, chocolate snack cakes, beer, grapefruits, the other shoppers slow their pace, stare, try to keep a distance. The clerk will eye you with a satisfying mixture of awe and disgust before asking, What do you *do*? When you tell

him, you'll swear a flash of jealousy bolts across his face. The backcountry glow, they call it. It becomes an addiction, enough so that, come next season and seasons after, you will be back for more.

### **Desolation Peak, Washington ~ 2008**

You have brought your new copy of *The Dharma Bums* – a gift from your old roommate, a replacement for the one he forgot on a beach somewhere on the Olympic Peninsula. Trying to convey your excitement, you tell the others in your group that, for you, this is a kind of pilgrimage, one you have dreamed of for years but never thought possible. It is shocking how many have not read Kerouac, annoying how many others have and also want to claim him as theirs. You have never liked to share. At the summit, people lean against the white walls of the lookout and doze in the sun. You go off alone and sit cross-legged on a rock and peer at Mount Hozomeen. *Hozomeen, Hozomeen, the most mournful mountain I've ever seen*. It is exactly how you pictured it. Exactly how Kerouac painted it. Exactly how it appears on the cover of the book, but in color.

### **Deschutes National Forest, Oregon ~ 2009**

The air reeks of juniper and sage, just as he said it would. The dirt under your boots looks like it has been shipped in from Mars. The air is so dry you wonder whose nose will begin to bleed first – an image lifted from one of his stories. You move among your crewmates as though you have spent half your life here. You crush sage between your palms and press them to your face. The smell is like you would hope: a little like cat piss. On the ground are scattered the gnarled and withered remnants of juniper branches. The sun has bleached them so pale that they look like bones. Everything you see and smell and taste and touch and hear comes to you filtered through sentences that you weighed on your tongue a year ago.

### **San Bernardino National Forest, California ~ 2009**

The mule drags the horse packer behind it at an easy gallop, carving a broad circle between rocks and the pronged heads of McLeods and over many yards of cat's claw.

The mule circles back, weaving between trailers and trucks, and only pauses when the rope runs taut. The man's foot is looped somewhere midway along the rope's length, and as the mule strains forward, you watch the man lift off the ground as at a séance. His wife catches the reins and shouts for someone to cut the rope. You stumble forward, withdrawing the knife your father gave you months ago, when he said, Thought you could use this. It is not a great knife, part of a set that came in a box embossed with Winchester's famed logo: a cowboy harrying his horse. The kind of set you might buy at a department store. You drop to your knees in a cloud of dust, unfold the knife, and cut the rope. When he stands, the horse packer's shirt hangs in ribbons. His arms are bloodied. A few of your crewmates jump into Wilderness Medicine mode, try to make an assessment, but the man shirks them, says he's fine, he's been through worse. After gathering himself he extends his hand, thanks you. Other hands clap your shoulders, your back. Voices say, Nice work, way to move. You imagine this must be how athletes feel when they've saved the team from some sudden loss. For awhile, you walk taller. That evening, a fierce wind blows through and snaps your project sponsor's tent poles, so that he must go tent to tent, begging shelter. You lay curled in your bag with your headlamp held to the pages of Owen Wister's *The Virginian*, and because you are finally beginning to feel less like a chatty Uncle Hughey and more like the eponymous Virginian, you wait calmly to see what happens.

### **Portland, Maine ~ 2010**

You work in a bookshop run by a Bostonian. On your lunches you sit on a bench overlooking Casco Bay – at the braided water, the low shoulders of islands. You always, of course, bring a book. It is never, as it maybe should be, a book about sailors or lobsters or lobstermen. Instead you read books about, or set in, the West – by authors like Jim Harrison, Cormac McCarthy, Rick Bass. You recite passages of description at a whisper, blocks of dialogue, trying to catch their rhythms. Back at work, your boss tells a loyal customer, who comments on your few words, that you are one of those laconic Western types. Shelving books, you smile.

### **Yosemite Valley, California ~ 2011**

When you wake and click on your headlamp and aim its beam at the dark tent wall, the boxy shape of a muzzle is unmistakable. You lie in wait as it circles the tent, clutching your Winchester folding knife, wishing you had followed your father's advice to "pack heat." Whatever it is, you can hear it taking an interest in your pack. Later, after much searching, you will find the pack a hundred yards from the tent beside a low creek. The front pocket, where, you will remember, you forgot a small Ziploc of trail mix, has been ribboned apart by claws and darkened by the damp imprint of a snout. Inside, you find a few overlooked peanuts, a lone M&M, and your worn copy of *The Crossing*. The book will be unmolested but for one corner crinkled with moisture, as though a tongue has grazed the paper, to taste.

### **Manhattan ~ 2013**

Another East Coast city, another gig at a bookshop. James, who likes to think in categories, when he finds out where you're from, says, Y'know, you really strike me as more of a Westerner than a Midwesterner. James has never left the Northeast. He thinks Wyoming is a made-up place. He confuses Idaho with Iowa. Still, you can't help feeling as though he's delivered a compliment, though you won't ask him to explain. You'll just nod, give a quick smile, and say, Thanks.

### **Boulder County, Colorado ~ 2015**

You sit in a field lined with cottonwoods and wire fencing to keep the horses in. It is spring now, officially, and the air is full of the watery sounds of doves and meadowlarks. Behind you comes the roar of the four-lane highway, one of many arteries that shuffle traffic from suburb to suburb west of Denver. Two time zones behind you the sun has already set and someone you love has just watched it dip behind the cliffs beyond the Hudson. If you are lucky, you will manage to pry her loose and coax her west, as you have always said you would, to stay. She is an Easterner by birth and rearing but not, you think—you hope—at heart. Beyond the fields stretch the

mountains, their snows already leached so that what a week ago appeared full-white are now lined like ancient faces. As usual, you are looking west.