

Joan Frank

Red State, Blue State: A Short, Biased Lament

THE BEGINNING'S THE THING.

That telltale beginning. I'm thinking now of a certain rocky pass we always find ourselves driving through, as we enter one of the red states. For some reason—as if by wicked plot—it's always a splendid, sunny day. The rock's natural formation acts like a tall corridor guarding the narrow pass. A delicious tension builds as we hum through this corridor—unable for a time to see anything but the strip of sky above us—aware that something temporarily beyond our sight is looming, about to break open.

We're changing atmospheres, crossing over.

The payoff, sure enough, is swift and dramatic. Once emerged from that steep-walled passageway we suddenly behold, out our front windshield, a vista resembling the Mormon vision of Heaven.

The moment wants a soundtrack, a surge of celestial music. At great distance, far below in all directions, spreads a blue-yellow-pink-green quilt of fields and farms and homes, peaceful and clean and fertile, like some painting of a promised land, depicting the best way humans might conduct their lives.

My throat closes; my eyes fill with tears. We stare spellbound at the tableau—a soft-focus illustration of peace and plenty. Chastened, both of us (husband and self) commence the kind of thinking each of us reliably defaults to whenever we're blindsided by beauty.

(Me: Time travel! Brigadoon! Why can't it be this lovely everywhere?)

(Him: Wonder what it might cost to buy a small cabin out here, say just for summers?)

Be assured: when surroundings dazzle, Blue-leaning humans romanticize. We assume that a landscape's loveliness seeps into its inhabitants; that locals, infused by its power and glory, will show a caretaker's pride in the homeland—like park rangers or docents. A pristine setting must automatically mean a far-seeing, open-minded, open-hearted people, right?

Oh, man. Why is the reverse so often true?

We drive on, still in awe. But the small visual cautions start to come into focus. Hand-painted signs, often shaky and misspelled, warn that property is private: trespassers will be made sorry. As we cruise slowly through main streets, it strikes us that no individuals of different colors or ethnicities seem visible except as service workers, confined to service-worker-hidey-holes. Too soon some strange vibration begins to harrass our minds like radio static, snaking through our bodies to exorcize awe and in its stead, create what you'd have to call—putting this gently—a bad feeling.

Other trigger images swarm forward: a snarling bumper sticker. A neon Freeway Evangelism slogan, often in the form of a sour reprimand, lit up night and day on a roadside marquee. A series of political posters bearing hostile messages, planted in front yards or plastered against barns

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/3

or propped against the chassis of defunct cars. A giant billboard drawing, jutting from the dusty furrows of agribusiness acreage, of Jesus's clenched, bleeding hand. It might be a monster truck roaring angrily past, flanked by two fluttering American flags as big as itself. This always gives me special grief—the flag stuff. So solemnly loved and pledged to, hand over heart, all my childhood—our beautiful flag has somehow been hijacked in recent years to come to symbolize a robotic, whitewashed, vicious patriotism, emblemized in turn by an extended middle-finger and a single, familiar curse suggesting anyone who disagrees with the flag-flyer should vanish, or die.

I can feel our faces sagging. In the words of the GPS: Recalculating.

The sinking feeling may sink faster with words uttered by a gas station attendant or grocery clerk or waitress—a glance or glare, a conversation overheard, a turn of language, a casually dropped slur—or the sight, in the midst of hardscrabble housing, of posh, gated communities encased by elaborate security, including an armed guard or two.

Both of us will feel the subtle poison commence its journey then, feeding like a slow-drip straight into the (otherwise gorgeous) air, land, water.

After that—and here's the deal—they're never quite the same, the land, air, water.

Even though they themselves have no opinions (only the instinct to exist), they're changed. You can never view them the same way because their beauty's become linked to a sensibility bent on hatred, exclusionism, and greed. Somehow the radiant earth and water have soaked up, and come to stand for, something dark and ugly.

This is when the car grows quiet. Road trip bliss gives over to something else entirely.

We don't talk about it. After all, we've got our little styrofoam cooler in the back. We've got the fruit and the sandwiches, the popcorn and granola bars; cool road music, books on tape. We're theoretically high on adventuring, gypsy rovers primed with expectations, lighting out for the territories.

Except we're now staring at landscapes and townscapes, feeling scooped-out.

Reader, we are made sad to visit the Red places.

Oddly, this flip-over happens afresh every single time. As if we've deliberately blurred out memory, so expectations can roll back to innocence between visits. But that innocence of ours is also driven, I think, by optimism. Margaret Atwood, author of a slew of graphically dystopian novels, noted in an interview: "Humans have hope built in."

For that reason, we venture into the Red zones hopefully—at first. Remember, they are often very beautiful. Mountains or lakes, desert or prairie: it begins breathtakingly.

Then it changes before our eyes, every time. No matter how majestic or serene or glittering it had first appeared, it reconfigures, grows brittle. Leering. Barren or, worse, rotten at the core.

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/3

We don't talk, after that second shoe falls. We keep driving, looking into the invisible middle distance, both of us working through our private clots of dismay.

I always start out wanting to suppose that we—Red and Blue—can surely, in an emergency anyway, reach each other: that we can do this easily and even cheerfully, across the obvious gaps. How we'd manage it, I reason at first, is by addressing basic human needs together: food, shelter, education. This naiveté gets slapped down fast: even hinting at those subjects can quickly launch an aggressive defense (junk food, trash culture, xenophobia, anti-intellectualism). It's only a short hop then from dismay to hopelessness, sometimes horror (shootings). The possibility that Red minds may ever arrive to any meeting with Blue minds—may ever want to—feels stillborn.

We joke sadly, en route, that none of this should be news. We nod together at the example of 17th century satirist Jonathan Swift, who famously posited a war between two camps of otherwise-civilminded beings: they fought about opening boiled eggs at opposite ends. But Swift's send-up doesn't convey the modern stakes, the despair and fear we feel. Those endless egg-wars did not, in Swift's telling, threaten the whole damned planet, a threat growing larger since (at this writing) the 2016 American presidential election.

Home is suddenly looking better and better.



Berkeley-based author Arlie Hochschild, in her Pulitzer-nominated investigation *Strangers in Their Own Land*, interviews the grown sons and daughters of a deeply Red region, many of whom have lived all their lives in environments ruined by corporations they still support—people who often demand (and receive) regular help from a government they openly, sometimes violently despise. And while I sympathize with Hochschild's discovery—that these men and women feel betrayed by everything including their own ideals, relying upon religious notions for assurance of pending (if post-life) relief—I cannot catch a glimmer of the hope that Hochschild seems to hold, for connecting in some fruitful way with them.

We're talking about Hochschild's shiny ideas as we cruise past drug-stores, big box stores, fast food franchises. American flags line the streets. Meth-addicts and fundamentalists line the backroads.

Of course we all know Blue friends who, for reasons of work or family, must live in Red states. They cope with the strain and loneliness in different ways—creating a cocoon of the home base, networking with like-minded types; flinging themselves at projects, exercise, charities. They schedule intervals of escape. Not least, they pick their battles. (If there's no protest march where you live you organize one or travel to one. If the campus where you teach decides open-carrying of weapons is fine, you make sure students know your office doubles as a safe space, that you'll help anyone feeling targeted, and so on. You lobby and demonstrate for better legislation. You quietly hunt for a job in a Blue community. You drink.)

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/3

Sometimes you just throw up your hands and leave. I have those friends, too.



We also know that fortresses of Red sometimes dwell, against odds, inside Blue, and vice versa; that a few states are so fiercely divided as to create a bizarre, two-headed effect. We think of them as bipolar. Within one state, pockets or stripes of okayness may exist, tiny arty villages where we step from the car for a bite or a stretch and the cautious initial vibe is this-feels-do-able. Pockets or stripes also exist where, when we stop to ask directions at the nearest bar, the message telegraphed soundlessly is get-the-hell-away-fast-as-you-can. We jump back into the car and gun it out of there.

How did this distribution come to be?

My husband points to what he calls early “settlement patterns.” Rural or sequestered areas, left to themselves, tend to seal off, suspecting the Other (any Other) as a possible marauder. Whereas townships and cities (living in closer proximity, expecting influx and egress, sharing services and systems) are more often forced to cooperate, giving leeway by default, assuming resources will be pooled and divided to benefit the larger whole. These are generalizations, but a clear peal of truth rings from them.

What’s un-ignorable is that certain places sooner or later make us feel unwell. In turn (despite our best efforts), that can forever skew perception—shrinking and soiling, somehow, that place’s very place-ness.

In some crazy way, that’s the part that hurts the most.

It’s not the place’s fault.

So when our tour is done and we find ourselves at last driving home back through the rocky pass?

By that point we don’t notice weather, or care. We can’t wait to see that pastel-quilt, bible-story panorama recede behind us til it disappears. When it does, the wash of relief contains a pang of shame—but also a sense of loss.

What was lost? An idea. An ideal. The beauty didn’t translate. It didn’t carry over.

Some will scorn these thoughts as mere wrinkles in the silken duvet of white privilege. True: there’s no escaping the bitter reality expressed by people like Ta-Nehisi Coates (born in crack-maddened Baltimore), of an America that so hates and threatens black bodies and lives, the owners of those bodies and lives feel they have no choice, whenever possible, but to gather their kids and flee.

Yet other countries suffer similar realities. At this writing the United Kingdom wrestles with Brexit. Germany faces the rearing cobra of a resurgent, immigrant-scapegoating right. So do Holland and of course, France. And those are first world models!

It makes you want to hang a “Temporarily Closed for Renovation” sign on the planet. “Thank you for your patience! Watch this space for our new, improved design!”

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/3

But people don't seem able to stop being born, growing up, and having babies themselves. All of them want to make good lives. Maybe that's where our best shot has to lie.

"Humans have hope built in."