

## Table of Contents

<b>Overture:</b> The Unpaintable West . . . . .	1
<b>One:</b> The Inner Geology of Clarence King. . . . .	25
<b>Two:</b> Henry Adams at the Fair . . . . .	53
<b>Three:</b> The Cruelty of Seeing. . . . .	85
<b>Four:</b> Some Versions of the Pastoral. . . . .	99
<b>Five:</b> Sublime America . . . . .	141
<b>Six:</b> Lonesome America . . . . .	159
Acknowledgments. . . . .	187
Notes. . . . .	191

*Few people even know the true definition of the term “West”; and where is its location?—phantom-like it flies before us as we travel.*

George Catlin

## Overture

# The Unpaintable West

What do these figures mean? An old man, a boy, a bear cub chained to the prow of a pirogue floating downstream on a calm river in some golden morning of a past that no longer has a history.

They gaze at us. The boy leans on a skin-covered box that holds what we think is the cache of furs, his chin rests on his hand, a gun is under one arm, a mallard he has shot beside him. His face is dreamy, sweet. The old man glares at us. The smoke from his short pipe drifts behind him. The bear looks at us with the dumb stare of animals that we can neither enter nor interpret. The reflections extend themselves from the bottom of the boat, lose their outlines in the smooth water.

Because of the reflections we don't know if the painter George Caleb Bingham saw them or simply imagined them.

### STILLNESS

The report from the boy's gun has stopped reverberating. The hole it has made in the morning has closed. Everything is still. Mist blurs the lines between sky and tree-lined shore and water. Or maybe sky and shore and water are

only now forming themselves in that gold of a morning, composing themselves out of this stillness.

The river will run beyond the frame the canvas has made of this moment.<sup>1</sup> Flow on down to the shanties along the wharves of St. Louis, to the cheap hotels and eating houses, the dives and the river women. For now we have only the stillness.

Yet a tension remains underneath the painting's resolution. The snags, the chained animal, the disturbing glare of the old man evoke an unpainted presence at the edges of the canvas. Rivers come from somewhere, too. And so, in order to tell one story, I will begin with another.

#### THE GREAT UNKNOWN

In the fall of 1804, where the Knife River flows into the Missouri in the present state of North Dakota, the American explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark reached the earth lodges of the Mandan Indians. It was here, among these friendly farmers and buffalo hunters, that they would stay through the winter, preparing for the expedition into the great unknown, to the Missouri headwaters and across the divide into the waters of the Columbia and, they hoped, as far as the Pacific Coast. They had reached the edge of an imaginary landscape. Beyond the Mandans there were only things they had heard tell of. The Stony Mountains. The river they called, after the French, the Rochejhone. Another river called the Oregon or River of the West that mapmakers thought would provide the long-sought Inland Passage to India. For everything was conjecture.

That spring, with a complement of picked men, a store of medicines and trade goods for the Indians, a collapsible boat, Clark's slave York, a French-Canadian translator named Toussaint Charbonneau, Charbonneau's young Shoshone wife, and the son that had been born to her that winter, Lewis and Clark set out from the Mandan lodges. They would see the rivers feeding into the Missouri, the Little Missouri, the Rochejhone, the River That Scolds All Others. The Rocky Mountains. Finally, the Columbia itself. And then the Pacific Ocean.

2 Their project was to make the imaginary landscape real. So at every opportunity they measured, they observed, they drew. And they wrote. Always they wrote. In sandstorms, attacked by mosquitoes, weakened from dys-

entery, bitten by fleas, cold, hungry, they wrote. They wrote when the ink froze in their pens. And when the expedition ended in St. Louis two and a third years after it set out, after the balls and the dinners and the speeches, they were still writing.<sup>2</sup>

Constantly running through the journals, with their careful descriptions of new animal and plant life, of the Indians and their habits, of the geography of new plains and mountains and the rivers that fed the great Missouri, is the theme of wonder.

It was the essential purpose of the expedition to describe this wonder. Sitting in skin or earth lodges or under the open sky, the whites and the Indians interrogated each other through the medium of maps, a kind of language beyond words. Maps smudged with charcoal from the fire on elk skins or on reed mats or traced with sticks in the sand, embedded with the Indians' memories of cold and heat, of hungry bivouacs and plains plentiful with meat, of sights seen at eye level and canoe level and from the backs of their ponies. Then William Clark dipped his quill in ink, and drew the symbols on a page of his journal, coordinating what he had seen with his observations of the planets and the stars. Thus the American captains knew where they were, and whence they had come.

Or did they? For they were entering a world of such strangeness that once, Meriwether Lewis, hunting on the Medicine River, pursued by bear and buffalo, missing shots at a bobcat, thought it might be a dream. (The spines of prickly pear, jabbing into the soles of his feet through his moccasins, reminded him it wasn't.)<sup>3</sup> Always they matched what they had faintly heard, told by Indians to other Indians, then translated through the French Canadians, with what they saw. And always what they saw was new.

Meriwether Lewis at the Great Falls of the Missouri:

*After wrighting this imperfect discription I again viewed the falls and was so much disgusted with the imperfect idea which it conveyed of the scene that I determined to draw my pen across it and begin agin, but then reflected that I could not perhaps succeed better than pening the first impressions of the mind; I wished for the pencil of Salvator Rosa or the pen of Thompson, that I might be enabled to give to the enlightened world some just idea of this truly magnificent and sublimely grand object, which has from*

*the commencement of time been concealed from the view of civilized man; but this was fruitless and vain. I most sincerely regretted that I had not brought a crimee [camera] obscura with me by the assistance of which even I could have hoped to have done better but alas this was also out of my reach.*<sup>4</sup>

*Butifull. Grand. Sublime. Specticle.* Confronting the magnitude of this new landscape, the language of observation gives way to the poetics of the late eighteenth century. Even Clark, the less literary of the two captains, called one scene of river and ravines *romantick*.<sup>5</sup>

There is always, for the reader, a special poignancy in these journals. For if we see these scenes through the eyes of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, we see them as well with our own: the poignancy of these first views of wonder, of the first meetings with tribes who had never seen a white man before, is that they are doomed at the moment of their telling. It will never be new again.

#### THE BEAUTIFUL AND THE SUBLIME

To name something means to have it in your power. Meditating on his recent discoveries at the Great Falls of the Missouri, Lewis compares two scenes:

*Nor could I for some time determine on which of those two great cataracts [Colter Falls and Rainbow Falls] to bestoe the palm, on this [Colter Falls] or that which I had discovered yesterday; at length I determined between these two great rivals for glory that this was pleasingly beautifull, while the other was sublimely grand.*<sup>6</sup>

In adopting the categories of eighteenth-century aesthetics to describe this landscape, Lewis sets up a dialectic that has, implicit in its terms, a meditation on power.

The sublime, that reminder of the awesome grandeur of God, of the liteness and contingency of man, cannot be possessed. Indeed, the sublime possesses you. The author of the sublime is the virile god who engraves the words of the laws with his finger on the tables of stone: to gaze on the terrible infinite without the mediation of a prophet or the veil of aesthetic distance is to perish. It is only beauty that can be gazed upon without such distanc-

ing. And beauty, for Edmund Burke, who fixed these terms for his generation, is above all things feminine.

*Observe that part of a beautiful woman where she is perhaps the most beautiful, about the neck and breasts; the smoothness; the softness; the easy and insensible swell; the variety of the surface, which is never for the smallest space the same; the deceitful maze, through which the unsteady eye slides giddily, without knowing where to fix, or whither it is carried.*<sup>7</sup>

To gaze on the beautiful is to possess it. But, says Burke—and the statement is surprising—it is not commonly imagined how near love approaches to contempt.<sup>8</sup>

Meriwether Lewis and William Clark came to the great unknown to map, to describe, to name. Because they came as men of science, and, when they were overcome by splendor, as poets, they did not defile what they saw, but the very naming of that wonder, in its innocence and joy, began the process of its destruction. After an arduous trek across the divide, and in the midst of the dangerous descent of the rapids of the Columbia, a few miles below The Dalles, the captains saw an Indian wearing a sailor hat and jacket with his hair tied up in a queue. In a village a few miles farther on, they found a British musket, a cutlass and several brass tea kettles.<sup>9</sup> Beyond the falls of the Columbia they met an inscription in their own language. It was the name *J. Bowmon* tattooed on the arm of an Indian woman.<sup>10</sup> Already they had begun to hear a few words of English from the Indians. When they reached the coast they would hear more: *musquit, powder, shot, nife, file, damned rascal, sun of a bitch*.<sup>11</sup> Lewis, the soldier, knew very well what Burke had meant about love and contempt. When the Wahkiakum women of the lower Columbia knelt, their cedar bark aprons parted, and what the Americans called the “battery of Venus” was “not altogether impervious to the penetrating eye of the amorite.”<sup>12</sup> In his stores of medical supplies Meriwether Lewis carried four pewter penis syringes.<sup>13</sup>

#### THE PHILOSOPHE

In the mind of Thomas Jefferson were stately rooms: busts of Newton, Bacon and Locke, fiddles, gadgets, cabinets of curiosities, labor-saving devices, librar-

ies of books, porches opening to graceful gardens, and well-ordered fields. Around this rural hive of elegance and learning were the farms tilled by free white yeomen, the independent farmers who were the foundation of democracy, a bulwark against the polyglot rabble of the city. The farms fell off into a contested frontier of rough pioneers, distillers of whiskey, breakers of raw land, and then, beyond the Mississippi, into a vast unknown. Because he was a man of the Enlightenment, Reason shone its ray into the unknown. And so from his vast reading Jefferson filled this emptiness beyond the Mississippi with smoking volcanoes and mountains of pure salt, with the lumbering forms of Mammoths and Giant Sloths (in the great chain of being there were no links missing, no final extinctions). And somewhere there was a passage that would open the new republic to its destiny on the shores of the Pacific, and that little strip of coast, just beginning to be known to English and American sea captains, where the Columbia emptied into the Pacific.

But always, in the imaginary landscapes of Jefferson's mind, were the Indians, the aboriginal peoples of the land. Unlike the slaves who lurked about the margins of his ideal landscape (some of whom were his secret children), a troubling cloud passing across the sunny clarity of Jefferson's thought, complicating its moral scheme, the Indians were interesting. Eloquent, capable of intellectual motion. Like other Virginia planters there was a twig for Pocahontas on his family tree. For the Indians, too, he had a place.

So, like white sachems before him, Jefferson sent out medals and certificates and gifts—glass beads and kettles and fishhooks and blankets—and men in blue coats and brass buttons to announce that the Indian peoples of the new land had a new father. A loving and kindly father, indeed, whose other face was coercion, displacement, threat. Settled on their neat farms in that American pastoral that was Jefferson's dream, blending and perhaps intermarrying with whites whose habits they had adopted and whose religion they now shared, these settled Indians (they would be in debt to the white traders) would have much land to sell. And if the red men would not civilize themselves and would not sell, well, as Jefferson pointed out to William Henry Harrison, on the Indiana frontier, the other side of love was fear.

*and that all our liberalities to them proceed from motives of pure humanity only. Should any tribe be fool-hardy enough to take up the hatchet at any time, the seizing the whole country of that tribe, and driving them across the Mississippi, as the only condition of peace, would be an example to others, and a furtherance to our final consolidation.<sup>14</sup>*

Having ripped ourselves from the terrible grasp of Mother England, it remained to conquer Mother Nature and her red children.

The light of Reason that emanated from Jefferson's study made its way across the far reaches of the Missouri watershed, sought an opening through the Stony Mountains, pushed on to the Western Sea: there, at the edge of the continent, in November of 1805 a handful of American soldiers, a few French-Canadian and French-Indian hunters, a Shoshone Indian woman, and a slave voted on where to make their winter quarters.

#### COMING HOME

*O! how horriable is the day waves brakeing with great violence against the Shore throwing the Water into our Camp &c. all wet and Confined to our Shelters.*

William Clark, November 22, 1805<sup>15</sup>

*The rain Contines, with Tremendious gusts of wind, which is Tremds . . . The winds violent Trees falling in every derection, whorl winds, with gusts of rain Hail & Thunder, this kind of weather lasted all day, Certainly one of the worst days that ever was!*

William Clark, December 16, 1805<sup>16</sup>

It rained all winter long. Rain and more rain in the huddle of shelters they built inside a stockade on the banks of the Lewis and Clark, and the horrible roaring of the waves on the seacoast and the fleas and the poor elk and the miserable Indians with their flattened heads squatting like frogs around them, smoking and farting and clucking their untranslatable language and the smoke stinging their eyes and the clothes rotting and the blankets rot-

7

ting and the damp and the eternal rain. The captains' store of trinkets had shrunk to a few handfuls and the Indians were unimpressed with the merchandise. They higgled for days over a handful of roots.<sup>17</sup>

Since the expedition's start Sacagawea had been feeding the men, finding stores of wild artichokes the mice had hidden in the earth, probing for roots with a digging stick, discovering wild licorice, white apples, wild currants. Medicinal plants for the men who were constantly sick with malnourishment and bad water and spoiled food.

When the vote was taken about the expedition's winter quarters, Clark noted in his tally "Janey in favour of a place where there is plenty of Potas."<sup>18</sup> Somewhere along the route he had taken to calling Sacagawea Janey. The "Potas"—potatoes—were the wapato roots that would become the expedition's staple. Later that November Sacagawea gave Clark a piece of bread made from flour she had been saving for her child. It was the first bread he had had for months. The flour had gotten wet and the bread was sour. Clark found it delicious.

At Christmas the captains distributed meager gifts: tobacco for the men who smoked, a handkerchief for those who didn't. Lewis gave Clark a shirt, drawers, socks. Another of the men gave him a small basket. Sacagawea gave him two dozen weasel tails. That spring she had fallen deathly ill and the captains had doctored her, and once, when Charbonneau had struck her, Clark had intervened. She had not forgotten him.

On the sixth of January, Clark set out with a party in two canoes to see a whale that had been reported washed up at the seashore and perhaps take some of its flesh. About the time Clark was making his way to the sea coast, on the other side of the continent, Thomas Jefferson, the president of the United States, composed a letter to his children the Cherokees, who had lately visited him, about the virtues of the settled life that they had begun to take up. Already the Cherokees had made much progress. They would need corn mills (Jefferson insisted on these); then they would need laws. Then they would need judges . . . Jefferson sat in his study thinking of virtuous Cherokees: at Fort Clatsop one of the expedition's men came near having his throat cut by an Indian who wanted to rob him. On the same day Lewis reported that Clark had reached the great beached whale and found that the Indians had stripped it of every edible part and left nothing but a vast skeleton.<sup>19</sup> On the twenty-third of March, the corps of volunteers for North Western Discovery started for home.

Near the end of their journey, after more than two years of hardship in the wilderness, of near starvation, of clothes that rotted on their backs in the endless rain, and forced marches and broken pirogues and back-breaking portages, they met, west of the Mandan villages where they spent their first winter, two trappers from Illinois who talked John Colter, who would become (perhaps) the first white man to see the Yellowstone geysers, into turning back up the river from whence he'd come on a trapping expedition.<sup>20</sup> Henceforth, known, the Wilderness was ready to be exploited.

#### JOURNEY'S END

By the fourteenth of August 1806, the Lewis and Clark expedition had returned to the Mandan villages. Six days later, while floating down the Missouri, Clark took the time to write Charbonneau. There is a poignant urgency in the letter. Clark was urgent for Sacagawea's security, and for the future of her boy. Clark goes on to offer Charbonneau a piece of land, horses, cows, and hogs if he wishes to live with white people, a horse if he wants to visit his friends in Montreal. He offers much more. He concludes the letter:

*Wishing you and your family great suckcess & with anxious expectations of seeing my little danceing boy Baptiest I shall remain your Friend*  
WILLIAM CLARK<sup>21</sup>

On the shores of the Pacific, Sacagawea had taken bread from her child and given it to Clark. Now, floating back to the civilization of St. Louis, he remembered her and the boy. Clark was no longer a child in the wilderness, but its conqueror.

What Clark so urgently wished came to pass. In 1808 Sacagawea and Charbonneau brought the boy to Clark in St. Louis.<sup>22</sup> There Charbonneau tried and failed to settle. We see the last of Sacagawea in the summer of 1811. A journalist on his way up the Missouri to Fort Manuel found himself on the fur company steamer with her and Charbonneau.

*The woman, a good creature, of a mild and gentle disposition, was greatly attached to the whites, whose manners and airs she tries to imitate; but she had become sickly and longed to revisit her native*

*country; her husband also, who had spent many years amongst the Indians, was become weary of a civilized life.*<sup>23</sup>

As it happened she was going upriver to die. On December 20, 1812, a Missouri Fur Company clerk at Fort Manuel noted in his journal the death from putrid fever of Charbonneau's Snake squaw. "She was a good and the best Women in the fort, aged about 25 years she left a fine infant girl."<sup>24</sup> Once, importunate, she had demanded to go with the canoes to the Great Water that she had traveled so long to see, and a great fish washed up on its shore. Six years later, dressed in a white woman's clothes, she had died between the world she had been born into and the one she helped create.

Toussaint Charbonneau accompanied a few expeditions, and translated for Maximilian of Wied on the upper Missouri in 1833–34. One story has him going off with the notorious Edward Rose and trading with the Shoshones for a group of captive Arapaho women with the idea of selling them as wives to the *engagés* of the trading posts along the Missouri.<sup>25</sup> In 1838, at the age of seventy-one, Charbonneau married once more. The girl was a captive Assiniboin of fourteen. There is an account of the magnificent chivaree the men of Fort Clark gave him, with drums, pans, kettles all beating and guns firing. The old man went to bed with his young wife, the fort's clerk wrote, "with the intention of doing his best."<sup>26</sup>

What he was, he remained: profane, half-savage, a lover of women, a good hand with boudin. He could live no other way. Charbonneau died penniless sometime between that final marriage and 1843. It is he or his ghost that stares out at us in Bingham's canvas, brutal, tough, smoking his short pipe, having seen things upriver and in St. Louis perhaps better left unsaid.

And what of the boy, his son? Baptiste, or Pomp as Clark would call him, was taken in by Clark and educated in St. Louis at Catholic schools. Then he turned to the life of the hunter. He might have been a figure out of a romance: the free-spirited child of nature who turns his back on civilization and its charms and returns to the forest. At the age of eighteen, he met young Duke Paul of Württemberg in a traders' village at the mouth of the Kansas. He went to Europe with the duke for six years, learning a smattering of languages and fathering with the daughter of a soldier a child who died in infancy. By 1829 he was back in the West. He was at the famous rendezvous of 1833 on the Green River. In 1846, with the coming of the Mexican

war, he became a guide for the Mormon Battalion. With the war's end he became alcalde of the Mission San Luis Rey, where he was, according to some reports, a harsh judge of the Indians. But his portion of white blood could not insulate him from suspicion of that portion that was Indian, and he resigned. And the frontier shrunk around him. He went north with the gold fever of '48. The Placer County, California, Directory of 1861 lists him as a clerk in an Auburn hotel, another bit of humanity left beached with the end of the gold rush. In the spring of 1866, he went gold hunting again, and died of pneumonia in eastern Oregon after crossing a swollen stream on the way to Montana.<sup>27</sup>

Meriwether Lewis had long been dead, killed, probably by his own hand, in a tavern on the Natchez Trace in 1809. William Clark, more successful in his life and in his death, died in 1838. Jefferson, who had sent them to map the great unknown, had died in 1826. He had not lived to see his children the industrious Cherokees driven from their farms and settlements down the Trail of Tears, and could not guess the hard terms the exploitation of the wilderness he had helped open to white settlement would impose on the future of the land.

#### DESTINY

Forty years after Lewis and Clark arrived at the Pacific, when Bingham painted *Fur Traders Descending the Missouri*, the land that the Corps of Discovery had mapped had been crisscrossed by white trappers and empire builders. The Osage warrior who lurked above the river Bingham had painted as *Fur Trader's* pendant had become a nostalgic reminder of a savage past. It is as if, in the rush of commerce, Osage warriors had simply become irrelevant. The fur trade had entered its long decline. The streams that flowed down from the Rockies had been trapped out and much of the game had been driven off. In Europe the fashion in gentlemen's hats had changed from beaver to silk. The last rendezvous of the fur trappers had been held in 1840.<sup>28</sup> Smallpox, introduced by the fur company steamer, had made of the lodges of the friendly Mandan, where Lewis and Clark had spent the winter of 1804–5, one vast desolation. "The scene was horrible," an eyewitness wrote Albert Gallatin in about 1837, "the large level prairie surrounding the Village had been converted into one great grave yard, whilst hundreds of (loathsome) carcasses . . .