

**Livin' in These Badlands:
Don't Fence Me In—or Out**

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“We mock those who seek, we mark them as outlaws.”

—Charles Bowden, *Blood Orchid*

One of the most gifted of the self-consciously American songwriters, Bruce Springsteen has written a number of songs in roughly the last decade and a half with strong connections to the American West, a region also frequented by two of his main early musical influences, Woody Guthrie and Bob Dylan. These tunes free-range from “Sinaloa Cowboys,” concerned with a pair of down-on-their-luck, Meth-producing brothers from Mexico, to “Reno,” a ballad about a cocky John’s visit to a prostitute, to “The Ballad of Tom Joad,” with its literary links to John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath*. Numerous other western-themed or –set songs comprise a substantial portion of the Springsteen canon. But probably my personal favorite among the Jersey boy’s “West tunes” rides down to us from one of his early albums. It opens, “Lights out tonight, trouble in the heartland,” the words that open the Boss’s anthem “Badlands,” bending the arteries of “heartland” in metaphoric directions at once national and personal—including metapersonally for me as a West River South Dakotan, inhabitant of the regional home to those most famous of *mal pais*, “bad” in two senses at least: as tough terrain and in historically offering shelter to “badmen” or “outlaws.”

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Some of the lyrics to the famous Cole Porter song “Don’t Fence Me In”—recorded by everyone ranging from the utterly unsurprising Roy Rogers and Willie Nelson to the more mystifying Bing Crosby, Ella Fitzgerald, and David Byrne—are routed into a wooden rest stop sign along Route 212 just outside of Broadus, Montana. On the sign, this phrase (as well as much more of the song’s lyrics than he actually wrote) is credited to the apparent true originator of that title’s lyrical hook, a Montanan named Robert (“Bob”) Fletcher. His occupation—he was a highway engineer—casts ironic shadows, given that via his highways, his ilk created likely the single greatest “need” for fencing. After all, few highways today are not fence-lined on both sides. Intensifying the irony is the fact highways can be viewed as a type of lower level fences in their own right, drawing lines of demarcation and death for all creatures great and small. Certainly, the capital punishment highways enacted on these creatures is about as severe a judgment as a trespasser can receive.

Fletcher also fancied himself a poet, but he wasn’t much of one, considering the poem “Open Range,” which Porter changed almost wholesale other than the line “Don’t Fence Me In” and a smattering of other wordings. Still, even today we know the song that sprang from the titular clause. Thus, however worn, it’s also weathered. I’ll quote just one stanza of Porter’s remade version here:

Just turn me loose,
Let me straddle my old saddle underneath the western skies
On my cayuse.
Let me wander over yonder till I see the mountains rise.
I want to ride to the ridge where the west commences,
Gaze at the moon until I lose my senses.
I can’t look at hobbles and I can’t stand fences.
Don’t fence me in.

Certainly, these lyrics form at least a basis for an outlaw's credo.

So, during this Badland era we now live in—while recognizing that all times are at least in part Badlands—juxtaposing these two songs in title and opening for this essay points us to where the hideout for Indians, along with equally wanted dead or alive whites, meets both groups' desire not to be fenced in, to be free: the archetypal and holy vocation of outlawry, perhaps the ultimate expression of the cultural myth of American Contrarianism.

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In “Mending Wall,” contrarian Robert Frost, an easterner who was ours before we were the WLA's, reminds us that a wall is yet another type of fence. One of the sheerest of walls we all ram into is time's. We can't viscerally scale it and cross from side to side, present to past. But we can remember—at some times more accurately, at other times less so—what that wall was like in the very act of its construction. Strangely enough, for me, the 2009 and 2010 WLA conferences at Spearfish and Prescott wrote a poetry of their own that spans my present and past. Driving a car to Prescott tossed this wayfarer into that maelstrom of what Al Stewart tagged “Time Passages.” Granted, these don't constitute the first time I've saddled up a motored cayuse and rode that same basic WLA journey, even since we finally moved west ten years ago. And I hope it is not the last. But the road can, and does, bring an outlaw feel for freedom.

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Famously, badlands or some of their near kin—countless of them pock-marking the American West—have long been the place where outlaws have run to, hid out. Butch and Sundance and *their* Wild Bunch. The scalawag Marquis de Mare and Teddy Roosevelt near Medora, North Dakota. Hundreds of other instances that have included everyone from whites, Indians, Mexicans, and blacks

to more than a few mixedbloods of every imaginable sort. Badlands themselves form fences, walls that serve to hide and protect the Other—and to keep out others or at least hold them at bay.

In South Dakota's Southern "Unit" of its famous Badlands looms the Stronghold, where National Park land encroaches on Lakota Reservation lines and thus confounds both borders and boundaries beyond fencedom as those geographic outlaws land and nature tend to do. Big Foot and his Minneconjou Lakota trekked there, where they remained for a time just prior to Wounded Knee. Interestingly, a dirt and gravel road named after that chief grants easy access to any outlaw seeking free admission to one of We the People's National Parks—that is, to "public land." I know, having used it so myself. Recent years have brought rumors (thus not necessarily truths) that actor Viggo Mortenson, a leftist in matters political, provided ample post-*Hidalgo* money for Lakota activists he came to know while making that film. Further, the rumor rambles that they used the money to buy weapons with and guard the Stronghold against the *wasichu* (my favorite possible meaning for this mist-obscurd word is the poetic and apt "eater of the fat," with its multiple suggestions). The Stronghold figures prominently both in James Welch's masterful *The Heart Song of Charging Elk* and in the overly romanticized Hollywood film *Thunderheart*, among other well-known works.

Much of the Southern Badlands area was long a bombing range for Ellsworth Air Force Base, and here live ordnance still occasionally explodes and has at times inflicted late collateral damage by slaughtering people, including Lakota youth. This still-all-too-live ordnance has also helped create an Indian business of bomb disarmament. One short-term Lakota neighbor of ours in Spearfish, Marshall—married to a Navajo—went through disarmament training in Texas and served as one of many Lakota engaged in the business, not just in the Badlands but also across the U.S.—especially in the nation's West, of course, where the military-industrial both is and gives a complex.

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“Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,” Frost famously intones about divisive impediments stretching beyond the stone imagery in “Mending Wall.” Exemplifying this principle are the ironies inherent in the act of so many Americans rockin’ in the so-called free world when they gloried and gloated as the wall between East and West Germany fell. Now, many of the same people desire that we continue building a much vaster wall, 1,800-plus miles long, in an effort to (further) divide us from Mexico, a land so long used and abused to feed the hungers of the U.S. of A. for the following (*y mas*) reasons: land itself, via forced purchase and other methods of conquest; prostitution; alcohol; vegetables; cheap labor on both sides of the border, through migrants and *maquiladoras*; other abusive economic boons both pre- and now post-corporate in ascendancy; drugs to ease the pains of our anti-living lifestyles, as well as, further back, that other drug, oil. As a Hopi man wed to a Diné woman who was selling their handcrafted items at Four Corners told me a couple of days before the Prescott conference, “Politics.” His phrasing of this single word spoke volumes of disdain but carried a transcendent weight of import, much like Bob Dylan or Van Morrison singing at his best. The Hopi continued, speaking knowingly about how he and his family lived “off the rez,” in Cortez, so his children could attend public school there rather than within the lines drawn for him by the social engineers.

As we all realize, this type of disgust and anger is very real in this nation, though much of it is misguided, inconsistent to the point of self-refutation, hypocritical at best. But even the Tea Party and other “movements” of similar ilk reflect real concerns and likely hit upon more truths than we tend, or wish, to credit them with, however chaff-full their American grain. Freedoms of infinite varieties *are* threatened in this country, by what pass for a right and a left and a center of this nation. Personally, I like and respect any number of people from both “sides” and in between, however more increasingly hegemonic they all are becoming as an unacknowledged center that cannot hold. At the

same time, I find any number of the lines in the sand drawn by both major parties increasingly irrelevant and insignificant, increasingly wall- and fence-building. So many acts and arguments from every direction increase separation, argue from Shangri-Las and Kubla Khan Pleasure Domes and Golden Ages that never in fact existed and never will—nor should.

And so I conclude, over and over again: a world like this world, like all worlds, needs outlaws. Even perhaps in ways that involve at once more than Civil Disobedience but also less than that oxymoronic demon, Civil War. We need them always, now more than ever. Need to be them ourselves in some form(s).

Yet more than any other song, one of Bob Dylan's best lines violently bears it away: "To live outside the law you must be honest." Especially in a time and place where so many laws and most of our lifestyles are neither that line's last word, nor just, nor decent.

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As most or all of us know, one of the many icons of the Western, in book and film, is the "Good Bad Man." He is protean, takes on many forms from the outright outlaw to the upright outlaw to the Ringo Kids of *Stagecoach* and the Ethan Edwardses of *The Searchers* and the Tom Dunsons of *Red River*. Even the Leone-Eastwood Westerns and other Westerns Eastwood has acted in or directed portray this man in a form that is at once mystery to us and mystery to himself—certainly, as John Wayne and Eastwood themselves were and are, they can be morally problematic. Across the board—or better, across the plains or deserts—the good badman (and occasionally the good badwoman) is undeniably individualistic and flawed while at the same time capable of growth and therefore so very fully human. Ultimately at least on the whole some version of a principled anarchist rather than simply a "bad guy," this character type is more closely related to Ed Abbey's Jack Burns and George Washington Hayduke than to Tom Mix, the Lone Ranger, Roy Rogers, Gene Autry, or a veritable

posse of other white knights. And yes, that posse includes the rose-hued stalwart that John Wayne envisioned himself and his characters as being, an image that Ford, Hawks, and other filmmakers had him roped and hogtied to while using it in truth to expand a select few of their characters beyond what Wayne thought they were, and perhaps beyond what these directors thought those characters were.

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Beginning with my 1960s childhood and earlier youth, I admired these principled outlaws, however flawed they were. That has stretched on to today, both in terms of authors I have come to admire, know, or both—and in terms of their own characters.

These outlaws include, among many others, Cormac McCarthy, Charles Bowden, Doug Peacock, and Ed Abbey; South Dakota's own Linda Hasselstrom, Dan O'Brien, and Vine Deloria Jr.; the WLA's own Ann Ronald.

They include characters Burns and Hayduke, Bonnie Abzug, John Grady Cole and Lacey Rawlins, Llewellyn Moss and Sheriff Ed Tom Bell, and the seemingly unlikely pair of Billy Parham in *The Crossing* and *Cities of the Plain* and the Alfonsa in *All the Pretty Horses*. They include the Mexicans crossing the borders in Bowden's works and those who fail and die at the task.

The literary outlaws, whether authors or characters, are vital to our national and regional consciousness, our national morality.

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A couple of huge elements relevant to the problem of our lack of outlaws, at least to this social observer, loom right here within our own immediate organizational purview: issues of environmentalism and issues of academics, especially the blatant corporatization present in both.

In *The Canyon Country Zephyr*, I have published against corporate environmentalism and the walls it tends to build between its constituencies and between its selves. It has become professionalized and in the process structured itself like what amounts to its biggest enemy. Corporatism always tends toward the fascistic, in large part because it is fascistic—fascistic in structure, in dress, and in most of its “professionalism,” all geared toward enmeshing people in its gears like so many Charlie Chaplins in *Modern Times*. Within its own circles, Corporate Environmentalism has become itself a tool for all manner of corporate thieves who appear *to be* about little but protecting their own interests by manipulating it, making more green out of being “green.” One need not glass any great distance to find major corporatists and big businessmen on the boards of directors for “environmental” organizations. Foxes guarding hen houses indeed, having fenced the hens and roosters in. Granted, many upon many well-intentioned, caring people are members of these groups, but there’s something rotten in Denmark.

We as academics as a whole have built our barbed wire fences, our walls, decimated our Badlands with noxious exotics. Overall, we have forsaken the public intellectual. We have built walls with our increasingly arcane theories and specializations and often unnecessary anti-language jargon through forcing much larger meanings and issues into tiny thesis-driven essays featuring cherry-picked support that far too often have little connection to what we claim we write about. Even many who would call themselves artists have aided and abetted this process of, naturally enough, killing the things we love, such as the freedom to oppose walls and to be outlaws in the world and a West gone wrong. In such cases, we fence ourselves in, others out. We tend to forsake our public responsibilities only to wonder about why we are so undervalued.

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Tashuntka Witko, the outlaw better known to most of us as Crazy Horse, at times defied tribal customs and taboos—he is said to have born a bad bullet scar on his mouth and cheek as a result of his pursuit of forbidden romantic love with the wife of another Lakota warrior. He was in addition an outlaw to the so-called whites, yet at the same time a visionary and thus controversial Lakota leader. He is said to have spoken these words, though of course in Lakota, not English: “No man owns the land on which the people walk.” Even if he didn’t really speak these words—we have so many legends of the man but no known pictures of him—he should have, and he surely believed it regardless. It’s damned hard to use up an earth when you don’t think of it as property.

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During my Ohio youth, I despised fences and “No Trespassing” signs. So much so that this hatred translated into my first completed short story, though it’s once again stalled back in revision stage thirty-plus years after I first drafted it: “Forgive Us Our Trespasses.” Semi-autobiographical, it condenses my hundreds of law-breaking trespasses onto private property over the years into two significant and almost completely fictionalized trips over barbed-wire fences. Wondrous times violating those old frontiers.

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Even at a young age, roving freely and tripping over the barbed wire was not new to me. During the school year of 1964-65, my father taught at the Navajo boarding school in Tuba City, Arizona. I was a typical first-grade boy who took the forbidden shortcut to school with a Navajo buddy, ripping his brand-new jeans on one such fence. With other young friends, I sneaked up to and through the barbed wire fence guarding the nearby graveyard a couple of times as well, fleeing and successfully escaping across the desert once when we spotted the tribal squad car heading up the road toward the entrance. My foot sank alarmingly when I inadvertently stepped on a corner of a relatively recent

grave's still loose dirt, making me envision a dead boney hand reaching up and out for me to drag me under, and that was a boundary I never wanted to cross again.

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But others cross that boundary recklessly or willingly. Indeed, we have the Cautionary Tales of the Everett Ruesses and Christopher McCandlesses and Timothy Treadwells of the American West. This trio were all romantic and young in years. And they all were perhaps at least a smidgen too crazy when they departed—Treadwell likely more than a smidgen. But they all were at least outlaws in their own ways, for the most part harmless to others. Decades apart from the earliest to the latest, they sensed something was terribly wrong with the warp of the world.

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A while back I read in *High Country News* about a Navajo woman who was asked by a tourist if the Indians weren't all indeed extinct.

Of course, we occasionally get tourists here in South Dakot who try to ride bison.

And once in the South Dakota town of Custer, as I still held open the Dairy Queen door after the last of the 16 Japanese girls engaged in a short summer program with us at Black Hills State University entered, I heard a local lady query her friends as they in turn exited there, "My, did you see all the little Indians?"

Identity, too, runs fences, in some ways self-imposed, in some erected by others.

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Near my current home, the place of our WLA congregation in 2009, those Badlands of South Dakota incrementally erode their way toward a distant oblivion, wearing away in water, in wind. Starting in 1979, I rode pilgrimage north by northwest from my native Ohio almost every year, sometimes twice, a couple of times even more than that, almost always driving a vehicle coming, going, or both.

Occasionally, my route was south by southwest, I-70, or when I had the time and money, blue highways, though on most trips these last tended to be just sprinkled in. The further east, the more I relied on the greater wastelands of concrete and steel we call the Interstates, born around the same time I was, in the later mid-1950s.

At any rate, most frequently my main trail ran via Interstate 90 once I reached it up around Chicago. The already mighty Mississippi at LaCrosse, Wisconsin, was my first barrier to crossing into what I fancied the West, the dam-swollen Missouri at Chamberlain/Oacoma in South Dakota another. This second landmark always seemed to me more profound, but even though it's essentially where one leaves humidity and enters aridity, I don't think I ever truly felt I'd passed the boundary into the West until the far drier Badlands region stretching more or less from a bit before Kadoka and on west to, aptly enough, the town named Wall, home of Bill and Ted Husted's excellent adventure into signage and their legendary free ice water and which, however hokey, remains family owned and may still be the most unlikely and quirkiest tourist trap in the West if not the world. Sometimes something there is that loves a wall, too.

Topographically, the Badlands have long seemed to me to represent the west as a whole. The spires and mounds as mountains in miniature, the erosional crackage, the usually dry vestiges of rivulets and streamflow, the patcheries of prairie and the utterly dry desert landforms.

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Reservations lead me to cross and re-cross the fences that mark borders of my own life, in this case specifically borders of time. For those eleven months, the school year of 1964-65, my first-grade stretch, my father, who died just over three months prior to the Spearfish WLA, took a job teaching at the Navajo boarding school in Tuba City, Arizona, as I noted previously. There were many borders dad never crossed, so many walls he never scaled, at least not in reality, at least not to my

knowledge. An extremely quiet man and a kind man despite his apparently strong conservative views on both politics and religion (I was raised mostly fundamentalist Baptist), he loved Tchaikovsky and Beethoven and opera. Obviously, passions burned within.

For various reasons, some private enough that I'm yet unready to reveal them, I suspect he also long loved the American West, the space and the lack of all but nature's walls of wash side and cutbank, of butte, of mesa, of mountain.

That year in Arizona, we attended a Mennonite Mission Church in Moenkopi, a Hopi village just a short jog out of the Navajo's Tuba. It was the only building there with electricity at the time. Though I've revisited Tuba, as noted elsewhere in this essay, I only revisited Moenkopi and that old church a few days before the Prescott Conference. It still is, somewhat sadly, at least by mainstream society's standards, the nicest and best kept building in that village.

Also while in Tuba, we almost always drove the eighty or so miles to Flagstaff for groceries because it paid to. Everything was so expensive on the rez, where wages were much lower except when they were nonexistent. Cross that border and somewhere beyond Cameron gas and everything else dove sharply and mysteriously in price.

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Today, Mexico is much the same as that rez was, as many rezes are, simultaneously strapped by far lower wages and costs almost as high as (when not higher than) those in the prosperous land of plenty, *el Norte*. Cross *that* border from El Paso to Juarez, and the cost may well go higher yet. A significant portion of the 29,000-plus and counting mostly unsolved murders in Mexico since the beginning of 2008—right around 7,000 at the time of the Prescott Conference—occurred in Juarez. What is now often termed “Murder City” is named after the Zapotec Indian freedom fighter and ex-almost-priest Benito Juarez who opposed Santa Anna and ended up victorious over Maximilian—

only to have another Indian, Diaz, assume serpent reins and ride the eagle into a dictatorship fraught with everything from Hearsts to “modernization.” As represented by those Hearsts, that family with strong South Dakota connections to Lead via the Homestake Mine, Juarez (as well as Mexico as a whole) long has served as an economic haven for *Norteamericanos*, the denizens of *los Estados Unidos*, *los Gringos*. Most recently and perhaps most abusively, this historical practice has continued by dint of globalism’s and free trade’s wage-lowering *machiladora* machine as it wended its way toward the even cheaper China. For some time the city has been a port of play for those who would feed *el Norte*’s unhappiest hungers.

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The man I like to call the Patron Sinner of the Church of American Contrarianism, Edward Abbey, tended to see all of this, of course. Wrong about a lot of things, he was likely right about more. It doesn’t take much reading of the Old Desert Rat to realize that he was actually about what we so inadequately term Nature and Ecology more because of their connection to his greatest passion, Anarchism (as opposed to “mere anarchy”), which he famously termed “maximum democracy.” Outlawry, replete with Monkey Wrenching.

Maximum Democracy seems to have been replaced in the real world, *muchachos*, by “Maximum Capitalism,” Abbey’s buddy Charles Bowden’s scathing designation for the Drug Industry. Abbey and Bowden and others should be seen as Western Prophets, less in a predictive sense than in the one of calling us to account. And like most prophets, they are best associated with the wildlands—the plains and prairies and mountains and especially the deserts—and they are outlaws, calling us to account to break down the profane walls we have in effect turned into idolatrous sacred ones. And like most prophets, they are essentially ignored and reviled, lack honor

in their own country. And I fear for Bowden that he will become our times' John Reed—or, more aptly yet, Ambrose Bierce: the disappeared prophet.

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Whiteclay, Nebraska, like Harlem, Montana, lurks just off the Reservation. A lazy walk south of South Dakota's Pine Ridge Reservation, its main industry is selling beer to Lakota, both those from the nearby town of Pine Ridge and from elsewhere on the rez. Another form of Maximum Capitalism, a mirror image of and thus a reverse Juarez, an agent of the Infantilization of an Indian Nation. The original Invisible Fence, that state and reservation line that has led to Nebraskan millionaires and at times human fences of protest and blockade. Manned by outlaws, mixed and full blood renegades.

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Like Ann Putnam, I am haunted by Hemingway. My first article-length publication focused on the bipartite "Big Two-Hearted River," which would suggest—accurately—that I am also haunted by waters like Norman Maclean. Not so much Eliot's brown god, but all the dark hidden and unbidden mysteries that hide underneath what appear to be clear currents.

Hemingway reversed Eliot, though of course only after initially also journeying east, and moved westward. He finally died in the west in a manner utterly unlike and in a fashion rejected by perhaps his greatest western character, Robert Jordan. Hemingway blew himself off into a self-created red sunset, his own Blood Meridian when he could no longer stand—or more likely was no longer able to try—facing down himself. Are we all singing our own Bowdenesque Blues for Cannibals, headed the same dead end non-direction, ultimately suicidal in our "lifestyles"?

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We have laid waste to, made wastelands of, the West, morphing its wildness into a voyeuristic Ecotouristic Westworld and a Disney(Waste)land through various sorts of commodification (so linguistically and poetically close to commode-ification). As many writers have noted, including South Dakota native Kathleen Norris, the American West has long been in effect a colonized region, a sacrificial land but in no holy senses, for eastern American and other-nation owned enterprises ranging from timber to precious metal mining to energy extraction of coal, uranium, methane, and the like to second and third and fourth homes (which, in effect, lead to the mining of scenery). Again the Hearstian empire(s) come to mind. This situation has long demanded outlawry, some of which of course has been carried out at times. But in a nation that was so irrational as to legally equate a corporation with a person, it is unsurprising that the concept of sabotage has been deformed into terrorism by those who are the Inlaws of the world.

Just as one part of the infamous Production (Hays) Code consisted of denying the filmic Western its wastes, even as far as streets and horses were concerned, in practice if not theory, we deny and ignore the waste we lay. Out of sight, out of mind—but not out of reality. And very much *in* David Milch's *Deadwood*, which among other things can be seen as utterly rejecting the Code, as an act of artistic outlawry.

Yet I still see the West as our last great hope, in large part because by itself this land stubbornly shows every sign of rejecting the “United States of Denial” rather than continuing in the awful offal of that buffalo wallow, that chamber-pot emptied into Main Street in Milch's *Deadwood*, the Chamber Pots of Commerce. The nation's “resources” are limited and thus limiting despite the heralded but disturbing Bakken: oil, water, mineral, air. At some point, the land itself will prove the ultimate saboteur, the outlaw beyond capture. But it will suffer the outlaw's scars, too—and already has suffered far too many of them.

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My family left Arizona, moved back to Ohio, to a new town at least, the rust belt industrial city of Springfield, then roughly ninety thousand souls purgatorily wedged between Dayton and Columbus just off of I-70. I soon learned—actually, by instinct taught myself—to trespass, at first merely because that was the only way I could spend much time in real woods and then because whatever of the wild had filtered into me in the West required satiating, somehow. So forgive us our trespasses? I don't think so. Ed Abbey's Hayduke says something to the effect that it's immoral not to trespass, and in the process not to cut gaps in fences or pull up all the surveying stakes in sight and mind. The ideas sound sacramental to me.

Woody Guthrie's "This Land Was Made for You and Me" revised standard version:

This land is my land,
This land's not your land,
I got a shotgun,
And you ain't got one.
If you don't get off,
I'll blow your head off—
This land is private property.

It's far more important to respect the land than to respect property and its harbingers and demarcators, the fences.

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Then the family I was born to returned to Arizona for the summer of 1968, lived in a small camper at a campground and revisited remembered haunts. After that, eleven long years passed where life walled me from the West, yearning to return. In those years and on into today, I became what my writer friend Gary Ferguson likes to call both himself and me: a black sheep of the family. I like to call it that well enough, but more than that, I like to call it an outlaw.

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I love and admire outlaw animals and plants of the West as well, both those native born and even many of the so-called noxious, alien, exotic plants and animals. Bison, bear; coyote, wolf; cougar, bobcat, lynx; Shih-tzus, labs. The sociable water ouzel or dipper, the hummningbird, the magpie. The cacti and true forget-me-nots, the yucca and cholla and palo verde. And on and on, the poetry of nomenclature formal and informal, the informal the best.

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Yes, the child is father of the man and teaches the progeny to “murder to dissect” in too many seemingly well-built theories and systems, themselves fences and walls in most applications, none of which approach being of ultimate worth or of the adoration we heap on them. The very act of consumption in life and in art equals waste. It’s in the well-made and entirely organic art (as opposed to artifice) in which we need to live and breathe and have our all-too-human being.

Nietzsche was the first theorist of the Cowboy Myth, seeing it in one of its most evil forms, the Herd Instinct—and as a herd we’ve soaked and stroked ourselves into endless conformities, most centered on reducing all life—human, flora, fauna, inanimate—to Bio-economicus. And in the process reduced ourselves—or let ourselves be reduced to—Homo-economicus.

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Perhaps the truly defining American characteristic is selfishness. It’s blood-spattered its way across our national and regional histories. The most materialistic of nations, we’ve certainly perfected it with a vengeance. “The business of America is business,” and no, Marx—neither Karl nor Groucho—did not say that. For once not silent enough, Calvin Coolidge did, he the same president who summered at Custer State Park in the southern Black Hills of South Dakota yet still proceeded

then acceded to a Hoover vacuum and all the depression that brought. Selfishness: the primal and primary form of the unethical. Quite a barrier to strive to get past, perhaps one we can't cross over.

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We all ought to be outlaws, violating borders, fences, badlands, whether as citizens, as workers, as leisure-ists, as academics, as writers. We all need to live more wildly than we do, heeding the dangers of that, too, yes, but realizing the dangers in not doing so as well. Humans are meant to some degree to be wild animals, however we construct and control that wildness. Freedom's more than just another word for nothin' left to lose—we have it to lose, too, and we've been in the process of losing it for some time. Only by reclaiming and, yes, to a degree remolding it and the West and our own wildness can we save what is best of the American West. If not, it will remold us, and moldy hum-unkind we will be, remain.

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Black is the color of the bad man businessman's suit.

A tie is an American fascist's noose.

A noose is a fence.

Don't fence me in.