RED POLITICS AND BLUE IN WYOMING

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AN INTRODUCTION TO THE STATE

I've spent many years repairing windmills with my father-in-law at his Four Mile Ranch. The mills pump water to the surface for cattle and sheep to drink. There are nineteen of these windmills on this broken patch of land, which looks west to the Bighorn Mountains and east to Powder River. The repair is mostly grunt-and-sweat labor done by hand, though we've got an old rig truck that we use to pull the galvanized pipe out of the deep wells. At the top of each well tower is a platform where a single person can stand to work. The two-by-six floorboards are saturated with oil and grease, and I have to twist around like a contortionist to get at some of the windmill parts. In high winds the fantail brakes on the mills sometimes slip, and the assembly swings around and hits me. I wear a heavy belt clipped to the tower so that I can't be knocked to the ground, though I still get pushed off the platform once in a while and dangle there a moment or two before I can scramble back up along the belt line. When the winds are calm and I'm changing the oil in a wellhead, there's time to stare out into space and think while the oil quietly flows into the gear-box reservoir. After a day of such work, I'm worn out and fall into bed early. I close my eyes, and for a few minutes, before I drift off into what I think of as practice for dying, I'm inexplicably happy.

In the brief Wyoming summer, my wife and I sit in the shade of an apple tree that I planted too close to our deck, at an outdoor table made from the cover to the old coal chute. We don't heat with coal anymore, but instead use natural gas and logs from the cottonwood trees along the banks of Four Mile Creek. The whole family goes there in September: my wife and our daughter, my mother-in-law and father-in-law, my sister-in-law, and my two nephews. We park a six-horse trailer beside the creek and set up a thirty-six-inch circular saw driven by the power take-off of our ancient tractor, then spend the day dragging storm-downed branches over to the saw to cut them, throwing the cut wood into the horse trailer. At the end of the day we haul the wood to town, toss it back out of the trailer, and stack it in the garage and shed. After that, I sweep the trailer clean for the horses. When the work's finished, I pull two apples off the tree beside the deck. This early in the fall, they're just starting to turn red and are still a little sour. I give an apple to one of the horses and eat the second apple myself.

I've been thinking lately about the colors red and blue. One October morning, a few weeks before the last presidential election, I was shoveling deep, wet snow off the deck. The trees still hadn't dropped all their leaves, and the snow weighed so heavily on the branches that some gave up and snapped off. One tree split in two, the downed half nearly filling the yard. In a hurry to clear the snow, I somehow cut my left hand while shoveling. When I came back in, the hand warmed up, and the cut began to throb. I took off my glove and saw bright red blood smeared over my skin.

My life in Wyoming has many brilliant blues: the sky as it stretches down to touch the mountain peaks; the cold water of Meadowlark Lake; the shirt my mother-in-law gave me for my birthday. But on televised maps following the 2004 election, the great square of Wyoming was shown all red, among a sea of other red states.

When I first moved to Wyoming, long before I'd ever worked on a windmill, I was invited to participate in a statewide literary conference that included an open-mike poetry reading. Anyone could sign up to read for five minutes before an audience of fellow writers. The first reader was a white woman in her seventies who walked slowly, her bearing upright and dignified. She explained that she was the reincarnation of an eighteenth-century Indian maiden whose spirit had given her the poems she was about to read. She turned in a circle, showing off the buckskin fringe on her dress, then closed her eyes and began to chant. When she'd finished, a young woman dressed completely in black approached the lectern. Her short, spiked hair was streaked with green, and her jewelry appeared to be made of extruded aluminum. She announced that she was a feminist, activist lesbian poet, then read a poem of "social outrage," during which she repeatedly lunged forward as if she might leap into the audience. Now and again, she pushed her glasses up on her nose. Next came a middle-aged man wearing bluejeans, a cowboy hat, hand-tooled boots, and a belt buckle that was, as we say in Wyoming, "as big as a dinner plate." He read a rhymed cowboy poem concerning stock tanks, coffee on winter mornings, and the good old days when people took care of each other.

The open-mike session went on like this for two hours. Everyone listened respectfully and, it seemed to me, happily to poems they must have detested. Or did they like each other's work? In the cities where I've lived, the cowboy poets would have had their cowboy-poetry gathering, and the angry young lesbian poets their angry-young-lesbian poetry event. The reincarnated Indians would have met at a private weekend workshop. In the city you'd need free drinks just to get these people in a room together, and then you'd need a cop to do crowd control. The congeniality those poets showed at that reading is one of the best features of Wyoming.

Here's my point: Coding our states red or blue according to whether they have given their electoral-college votes to a Republican or a Democratic candidate tells us very little about the people who live there and with whom we pass our lives. This simple-minded labeling is degrading. It isolates us and forces us to lead lives that are intellectually and emotionally impoverished. Worse, it is an early symptom of the thinking that led to ethnic cleansing in the Balkans and to the restructuring of Baghdad into separate Sunni and Shiite neighborhoods.

I understand the tendency to generalize, but I'm impatient with it, because my experience in Wyoming has allowed me to see the strange beauty of each person. There are so few of us here that we are given the gift of being able to live this way.

A BRIEF DIGRESSION INTO NOTHING

In his book *The Globalization of Nothing*, sociologist George Ritzer argues that we live in a world increasingly shaped by "nothing," which he defines as "centrally conceived and controlled social forms that are comparatively devoid of distinctive substantive content." In other words, "nothing" is anything without a personality and life of its own — a demented mirror image of the Zen concept of nothing, which is just as real and present as something. In Zen we turn nothing into something; in modern, corporate American life, we turn something into nothing.

Ritzer describes four types of nothing: nonthings, nonpeople, nonservices, and nonplaces. Nonthings are Old Navy T-shirts, Arizona-brand bluejeans, and Nike athletic shoes. They are exactly the same no matter what mall you buy them in, in a red state or a blue, and you always pay the same price. (From a corporate perspective, that's about all there is to say about the red-blue difference.) Nonpeople are counter workers at Burger King, or telemarketers who call at dinnertime. These are real people who become nonpeople when they enact scripted encounters with customers (or potential customers), who in turn become nonpeople by participating in the script. Corporations created these nonpeople when they created the nonjobs they occupy. ATMs and websites are examples of nonservices. And finally there are nonplaces, best represented by shopping malls and Las Vegas casinos. Of them we can say, as Gertrude Stein said of her hometown of Oakland, California, "There's no there there." (No offense to Oakland, which is no more or less a nonplace than any other contemporary city.)

Imagine a hypothetical casino built on the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming. This casino, if built, would have a real presence: It would be a building. It would sit atop dry sage grasslands at the foot of the Wind River Mountains, on land saturated with the history of the Arapaho and Shoshones, and later the bloody arrival of the Europeans and their drive to eradicate the native people. The ghosts of 60 million buffaloes paw at this earth, making the dust rise. In distant boarding schools, chalk dust hovers in the air above the desks where Indian children sit mute, forbidden to speak their own languages. Scraps of paper — torn-up treaties or lost food-stamp coupons — blow in the wind. A white rancher who owns a chunk of the reservation drives by the casino in a late-model pickup. In the distance a dust devil blows across the sun-dance site, where native men honor forces larger than themselves by swinging on the ends of tethers hooked into their chests until the hooks pull out, taking small chunks of flesh with them.

Then there's the casino itself, which would be like any other casino in Las Vegas or Reno or Monte Carlo. Even if the cocktail waitresses were tribal members dressed in beaded moccasins with their hair braided into shining black strands, it would not be Indian. When casino workers punch out, do they return to being real people? Do we all live a portion of our lives as real people and another portion as nonpeople? Do we spend more time as nonpeople in 2006 than our ancestors did in 1906 or 1806?

In our private lives, we spend relatively little time as nonpeople. Yet, even in private, I know what it means to have a scripted encounter with another person. I've caught myself playing a part — saying and doing only what my institutional role allows.

The nonthing is distant and abstract. It shies away from human feeling and connection. We live in a world where we are made into nonpeople so we can be manipulated by the advocates of global uniformity. In this nonworld we are apt to end up with our heads bowed in a church whose appearance is eerily similar to that of a corporate headquarters or a state prison. These are the universal features of the society in which we live, equally common in red and blue states.

When I first started working with my father-in-law on his windmills, I'd often bring the wrong part for a repair, or forget an essential tool. We'd end up having to go back to the barn, or even into town, to get what we needed. My father-in-law, a lifelong Republican, would come with me, both because there was little work he could do on the mills alone and because he liked to talk. I loved listening to him tell the history of the ranch and the early Basque settlers in northern Wyoming. One day when we had to go to town, my father-in-law did something I'd seen him do many times before, though I'd never said anything about it: he parked his pickup and got out, leaving the doors unlocked, the windows down, and the keys in the ignition. This time I spoke up. "Don't you want to take the keys?" I asked.

"No. What if somebody has an emergency and needs to get to the hospital or something? This way, they can take the pickup if they need to."

I have thought many times of his answer: What if somebody needed the pickup? This way, they could use it in an emergency.

The last car I bought was a Volkswagen Beetle with a diesel engine. For the first few months I had it, the battery kept going dead. The local mechanics couldn't find anything wrong and recharged the battery a number of times, but it kept dying. Finally I went back to the dealer, 165 miles away, where I learned that when you turn the car off, you have to lock it or the electrical system will keep running and the battery will go dead. No amount of explanation by the congenial VW service representatives could make me understand why it was to my advantage to *have* to lock my car whenever I got out of it. Every time I go to the garage to get something out of the car or put something in it, I forget to bring the keys, and back to the house I go. What kind of society won't allow the owner of a car to decide whether or not to lock it?

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