

Northing by Musket and Sextant

John Farrell Lines

STEVEN WHISTLED NEIL YOUNG SONGS TO HIMSELF as the pickup sped north towards Saltillo. From the truck's open bed, he commanded an obstructionless and enviable view of this Mexican wilderness's enormous sterility. For some, it would be considered an unforgettable event, a spiritual moment perhaps, epiphanal even. For Steven, it was merely the latest in a series of hitched rides that numbered in the dozens—rides that had begun a month earlier when he had first stepped into Mexico at a crowded and anonymous border crossing in Juarez. The exotic thrill of a ride with strangers had worn off after the first few days. Today, more than anything, Steven simply felt uncomfortable. He was sitting astride his backpack, wedged tightly between the spare tire and a precarious stack of cement bags. Cramped, bored, and curious, he twisted backwards, popping his spine as he struggled to look at his reflected image off the back window of the truck's cab. The cloud conditions were wrong, though, and all he could do was stare through the dusty glass and out the cracked windshield at the bare hills that rose up in the distance, marking out his destination. He had never seen Saltillo, but he knew he would have to cross the looming Sierra Lunares before he descended into the industrial hub of Nuevo Leon and the series of freeways that would carry him once again to Juarez and a border-crossing back into America.

Turning around to face the disappearing pueblo of Lago Salado, he watched intensely as the iron cross on top of the white-washed chapel descended into the arched horizon. The last image of order sinking before him. He was once again aware of being surrounded by nothing but wind-blown mesas and a blinding blue sky. With little left to look at, Steven set himself to studying the taste in his mouth. Even after two oranges and a Snickers, the acrid taste of the two peyote buttons he had swallowed a half-hour earlier lingered and irritated. He fished through the stuffed pockets of his jacket searching for a stick of gum. Not finding one, he

pressed through the hole in the pocket that led between the jacket and its inner lining. There, in that outlaw space, his fingers encountered a lonely quarter and a flattened sheet of rolled-up paper. He left the coin, but withdrew the scroll-like page, thoughtlessly straightening and unrolling the yellowing surface. Once opened, he recognized the strange paragraphs of an essay he'd typed several months before. The sight of it disturbed him. He preferred to forget the existence of such crumpled affairs. But he read.

The most explosive moment in Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven" comes nearly four minutes into the song when unexpectedly its wispy gentleness becomes a tempestuous storm. My reasons for pursuing a medical career have undergone as dramatic and unexpected a transformation.

Five years ago I flew back to America from Ecuador where I spent two years as a missionary for the Mormon church. My service in Ecuador as a Christian missionary, of course, had very little to do with the medical field, but working in orphanages, participating in building projects, and exploring the cork board and plastic neighborhoods affected my humanitarian sensibilities profoundly. While in Ecuador I became aware of the organization "Les Mediciens sans Frontieres" and the prospect of improving the conditions in underdeveloped countries as a medical volunteer seduced me with its simple goodness. My return to America was charged with social activism and a new life purpose—relieve world

He stopped reading, startled by a shout from the cab. Twisting as before, he glanced back through the glass to where the driver was gesturing at him with a cigarette and raised eyebrows. His mouth formed the word "*Fumas.*"

Steven nodded and met the dark hand half way. Taking the cigarette and lighter, he mouthed the word "*Gracias.*" It took four tries to finally get the cigarette lit against the pounding wind-eddies of a truck doing nearly seventy. When it was smoking thickly, he inhaled deeply and then exhaled. The nicotine raced immediately to his brain—soothing his clenched teeth. The peyote was just beginning to register a physical effect. Returning the lighter, Steven nodded to the driver and repeated the same word as before.

Now, with the cigarette gripped between his chapped lips, Steven spread the paper with two hands and stared again at the rattling letter: *relieve world suffering.*

Returning to Utah, I began my second year at Brigham Young University and pursued my new-found ambition with religious zeal. Besides being involved in the pre-medical society and its related activities and publications, I spent much of my free time working for the weekly campus newspaper. My articles from that year often reflected my "fix the world" enthusiasm—I published critical appraisals of overpopulation, recycling, contraception, and a cover article entitled "The Death of Medical Altruism." And to my surprise and

disappointment, I often found myself at odds with a provincially and religiously conservative administration.

Taking advantage of a summer internship in New York City between my sophomore and junior years, I experienced for the first time the contagious energy of a large metropolis. That summer I made a life-changing decision. I decided to look for work in New York so I could transfer the following year to a local university. I had come to realize the significance of location on the educational process and saw a need to push my educational experience in new directions. Studying in a large urban center like New York had the effect of hearing music played live for the first time. I was enraptured by its power and couldn't leave the arena. I did not return to Utah.

The following year I transferred to Hunter College to complete the remaining two years of my degree. At this point my interest in medicine underwent a dramatic change. New York precipitated a crisis of faith that left my world view permanently altered. Under the weight of modern biblical scholarship, theories of biological evolution, and Einsteinian relativity, my religious world view finally crumbled, leaving my most certain convictions devastated by the collapse. This world-view cave-in also injured my hope in social progress and paralyzed a three-year commitment to that cause.

Although I continued volunteer work at the emergency room and with the community lunch program, my activism was less vigorous. By my senior year it had ended completely. Instead of caring for the needs of the community, I began to treat my own illness, something I had neglected for several years — clinical depression, a condition I am still treating today.

Steven stopped to take the cigarette from his mouth and remembered the voice of his girlfriend in New York as she read his essay for the first time.

"Oh my God. You're kidding me, Steve. You're not really going to tell a med-school committee something like that, are you? They'll never let you in."

"But you haven't even gotten to the end."

"I don't have to. Neither will they. Your application will be sitting in the reject pile before they even get to the word today."

"Just wait till the end first, okay, then give me your opinion. I really think I know what I'm doing here."

"All right. Fine. I'll finish it. But nothing will change the fact that you're doing something really stupid."

That final word rattled inside his head. The way she pronounced stupid that night was exactly the same way she would pronounce it a few weeks later as he held the receiver of a pay phone in an empty subway station.

"This is stupid, Steven. It's over. Stop acting crazy. There's nothing else we can do. Please stop trying to recover something that's not there

anymore. Please understand that. Deal with that, Steven. I am done now."

He looked back down at the letter in his hands and started to read on, then stopped. Something was happening to the paper. The words were beginning to wiggle and shake, threatening to break free. Steven held a white page full of text-based larvae that seemed on the verge of spilling out onto the bed of the truck.

"Oh, damn. Something's starting to happen." Carefully folding the paper so as not to lose any of the mutinous letters, he slipped it slowly back into his pocket and checked the watch on his wrist.

He was inhaling desperately on his cigarette trying to figure out what to do. The back of a pickup didn't seem to be the most desirous place for a peyote trip. But it didn't matter. He had made his choice when he ate the buttons, knowing that today would be his only chance to experience peyote before crossing back into America. Come what may, he had to keep moving north. His plane left the El Paso airport for New York in less than twenty-four hours.

Closing his eyes, Steven engaged himself in an examination of his five senses to determine which were most affected by the peyote's mescaline. Running fingertips down his leg, he quickly decided that the corduroy trousers felt as they normally did. No change in his sense of touch. Similarly, the smoke from the Carlton seemed as cheap and dry as it always had. His tongue slipped around his mouth then swallowed. It tasted bitter, but that was just the lingering peyote residue—an annoyance the tobacco was beginning to finally relieve. Everything still smelled and tasted the same as it should. Satisfied with his progress and the so-far reliable condition of his perceptions, he opened his eyes and glanced around.

The sight of the desert hills paralyzed him. They rose up, jerking and rolling, tossing and falling, behaving raucously, like an agitated sea. The sky was even more animated. Clouds seemed to stream across the heavens as if someone had pressed fast-forward. He stared, transfixed, into a sky that had unveiled its pulsing presence, a living beast, an enormous blue and white creature madly readjusting its streaks and spots and howling at him with the force of a god. Steven lowered himself into the center of the bed where he spread himself out and leaned his head against his pack. The sky howled on.

With a start Steven was shaken from his hallucination and realized the pickup was quickly losing speed. Why were they stopping? They couldn't be near the Saltillo exit. It had only been fifteen minutes since he had slumped to the bed of the truck. His watch, however, told him differently. It had been almost two hours since the sky and earth had burst into life.

"Jeez, that was intense." The mescaline was definitely a more aggressive manipulator of sight and sound than other psychedelics. Not to mention a more insidious suppressor of time. Nothing in his past experiences had prepared him for such a disabling effect.

Suddenly the window behind him began to knock. He listened, spooked, afraid to turn around. The knocking got stronger and more anxious. Finally a shout roused him from his position and he turned to look. The driver was gesturing at him and forming indecipherable shapes with his mouth. The mustache over his lips seemed to be commanding every expression his face formed. A control center of all facial gestures. It was hypnotizing. He couldn't look the man in the eyes. The peyote was still sabotaging perception.

Recognizing that the hitchhiker was comprehending nothing, the Mexican raised his free hand and pointed several times towards the side of the road, then turned the finger back towards his passenger. Although Steven's pupils were unusually dilated, the driver seemed to notice nothing strange about his guest. The blank stare, he assumed, was merely the function of a language barrier and the shock of being abruptly shaken from sleep. Bringing the old Chevy to a stop, he leaned out the windows and spoke. "You go there," he said with his best English accent, repeating the previous finger-pointing performance.

Steven's gaze followed the finger to the fork in the road and the sign that read "Saltillo 80 km." He scrambled down from the rusty bed, patting dust and dirt from his clothes and hair with one hand, carrying his pack and a cardboard sign in the other.

"Te agradezco mucho, señor. Te pago algo?"

Surprised by the foreigner's command of Spanish and offer of money, the driver paused before responding. *"No joven, nada. Cuidate, no mas. Y que te vayas con Dios."*

Steven smiled and nodded. He hadn't heard that expression in some time and felt a wave of sadness pass through him. God was something that still obsessed him as a concept, but meant little as a personal companion. He waved politely as the pickup drove away.

Alone again with his senses, Steven returned to the effect of the drug. The sky and terrain were much less active than they had been from the truck. The ground hardly moved now, but instead rose and fell gently like the belly of a sleeping grandparent. The sky rolled by normally and only whispered now in hushed tones that it was a living presence. The hallucinatory effects were subsiding like they would have done during other trips. But Steven knew that things were still only half over. Hallucinations were usually followed by another stage. Returned to perceptual coherency, the mind was lulled into complacency and susceptible to other attacks. Psilocybin would usually sneak in the mind's back door at that

point and rearrange one's mental props while the mind wasn't looking. That's when the hard part would come, the inner analysis of relationships, people, beliefs, and fear. The mind trying to set the props back in their place but realizing that there wasn't really ever a right place. And depending on the person and the circumstance, the crisis would yield either wisdom or delusion, ranting or tears.

As Steven considered the situation, he decided to keep moving towards the border. He kept his arm stretched into the road, his thumb cocked, backpack at his side. For almost an hour he held the position, getting more and more frustrated, watching car after car speed by, some too full of people to stop, others too afraid of a sweating, bearded man, others just plain uninterested. His mind passed the time racing by as randomly as the speeding cars. Memories of people and distant places hurtled across his inner screen. An attractive woman standing in a bed of black-eyed susans, a graduation cap on her head, a miniskirt wrapped around her narrow waist, a naive grin creeping across her lips. Thoughts of his mother before six children burgled her figure. A twenty-year-old man standing on an airport runway, overcoated, holding two suitcases, smiling against a bright midday sun, blind to his future, and beautiful for it. A father before stress had carved ridges in his face and left deposits in his arteries. Thoughts of a time before suffering and pain had marked his parents' world. Thoughts of a time before suffering had marked his own. The browning photo of a grinning boy, a purple bathing suit, and his three-leveled castle. His plastic shovel stretched triumphantly in the air. And a wave only inches behind him ready to collapse his mighty structure.

Steven searched for a cigarette. Instead he once again discovered the folded printer paper. He opened it with care and found its words reattached to the page. He skimmed them.

Led Zeppelin, explosive moment, participating in building projects, seduced by, campus newspaper, the death of altruism, New York, evolution, collapse ... illness.

And then more slowly he began to read.

With this treatment I also began a close analysis of the human personality and its relation to the mind. I read books related to the origins of consciousness, the structure of dreams, and the development of personality. Of particular interest was Ernest Becker's The Denial of Death which informed other readings in psychology. Suddenly, a career in medicine presented a startling possibility—medicine could be a vehicle for exploring a new ambition—to map the contours of the human mind. Understandably, my current interest is in the field of psychiatry which I would pursue in medical school and beyond. This is where the guitars and drums currently play loudest.

My turning inward, however, and my new-found interest in psychology have not betrayed

Steven looked up, startled by the sound of a deep horn. Red brake lights. Euphoria rushed through him. A hundred feet ahead an eighteen-wheeler pulled off to the side of the road. An arm extended out the driver's window, made circles, waving him forward.

A half-minute later he pulled himself up into the cab, out of breath but ecstatic. Big rigs were a rare catch. He hadn't had one in almost a dozen rides. As it pulled back onto the asphalt, Steven ventured the proverbial hitcher question.

"Hasta donde llegas?"

Still concentrating on the road and increasing his speed, the driver shifted gears and spoke into the windshield. *"Voy hasta Chihuahua."*

The three words were like elixir. Steven made two fists and ejaculated, "There is a god."

Chihuahua was over five hundred kilometers to the north. From there it was a mere four-hour trip to the border in Juarez.

The driver smiled knowingly at him and offered Steven a Marlboro. *"Gracias,"* smiled Steven as he took the cigarette and lighter. *"Usted no puede saber cuanto me agrada estar sentado aqui en tu camion."*

"I think I can," responded the driver. "Actually, I think I know exactly how you feel. I've done my share of hitching, too."

"You speak English. I mean, you speak amazing English. I'm sorry, but I'd never have guessed. No offense. But I've never met a local down here who doesn't speak English with a tell-tale accent and tangled syntax. Are you actually from Mexico?"

"Yep. Born and raised."

"So where'd you learn to speak English so well?"

"Actually, I speak a few languages. I've gotten around over the years. Seen a few places, learned a few things." The speaker was a handsome man, still unusually trim for a trucker. And unusually tidy. His enormous side burns were meticulously trimmed and his jaw and upper lip were smooth, recently shaved. Most remarkable, though, were his blue eyes. Beautiful, but mysteriously out of place. The headlights of a Cadillac set into the frame of an El Camino.

"So how'd you learn to speak such good Spanish, Steven?" The passenger sat speechless. Paralyzed. How did the driver know his name? Somewhat trepidatiously and aware that the peyote could still be affecting his perceptions of reality, Steven spoke. "Do I know you from somewhere?"

"I don't believe so. Why? Do I seem familiar to you?"

Steven wanted to say yes. Something about the driver was strangely familiar, intuition told him he had known the driver from somewhere. But instead he answered negatively. "No. I don't know how I could ever have met you. But you knew my name was Steven. What's going on?"

How'd you know that?"

"Oh, I see. You hadn't realized that the ID tag on your backpack is exposed. It also tells me you're from New York. But I thought I'd ask you about that a little later. First, I'm curious about how you learned to speak Spanish so well?"

Steven glanced at the plastic covered information card hanging off his backpack and laughed, relieved that the stranger was still only a stranger.

"I lived in South America for a couple of years. My dad was in the state department." Steven delivered the lie with the ease of someone who had given the same response many times before. The way the practiced school teacher in a bar can pass himself off as an attorney without even slightly raising the suspicion of his buxom prey.

The driver, however, unexpectedly paused. "Is that it? The whole story? It sounds so canned, so easy. Bar talk almost. Have you got a secret you don't like talking about? C'mon, cowboy, how did you really learn to speak Spanish so well?"

Steven sat stunned. The only other time someone had seen through one of his rehearsed lines was an interview with his bishop as a teenager. He had lied about touching a girl's breast. His bishop knew better, and questioned him until, with tears dripping from him cheeks, the truth was finally confessed.

"Look. I don't like to really talk about it, so I keep my stories simple. If you really want to know the truth of it, I'll tell you. You see, I was actually a missionary for the Mormon church for two years in South America. I don't like talking much about it because it begs so many other questions. Do you know what I mean?"

"Yes, I know exactly what you mean. I now have a dozen new questions I'd like to ask you, but we've got plenty of time till Chihuahua. But, first, would you like to know who I am?"

Steven had completely forgotten to ask the driver his name. It was a curious oversight. Since it was always one of the first things Steven asked a driver. "Of course. I'm sorry I hadn't asked. *Como te llamas, compadre?*"

Elohim smiled. "*Me llamo Elohi.* Elohim in English."

For the third time in as many minutes Steven froze up. The sound of the name Elohim made him shudder. The only time he had ever heard the name before was in church meetings. In the most reverent of circumstances and in the most solemn of places. Elohim, the most sacred of all names, the name of Him, the holiest of holies, He, the Unnameable, God.

Stunned, but curious, Steven ventured a question. "Do you know the significance of your name to certain people, to certain religious communities?"

"Yes, of course. Many Christian religions recognize Elohim as the proper name of God. At times it can be a bit unnerving to people, but usually they get over it pretty quickly. I mean, think about how many Mexicans have named their first son Jesus. And look at me. Could anyone really think that God smokes Marlboros and drives a truck? Besides, I don't have gray hair or a beard."

Steven laughed. And then shuddered again. He would have to be much more careful next time about the circumstances under which he took peyote.

"So, Steven, I don't get much opportunity to talk to Mormons. How does one grow up different from other kids? And how did you get where you are now—hitchhiking through Mexico?"

Vicente Fernandez crooned soulful Spanish love songs from the rig's tape deck as Steven began to unfold his history. He spoke of a childhood in the suburbs, of a two-car garage, baptism at eight in an indoor font, piano lessons, Boy Scouts, the priesthood, his job at Baskin Robbins, a patriarchal blessing, a mission call to Ecuador. Elohim listened thoughtfully, nodding at times, asking questions at others. Encouraged by such a thoughtful audience, Steven continued on with more detail.

An hour later the conversation was still gaining speed. Steven was reaching a summit of sorts. "So being brought up in a radically orthodox Christian home was a nightmare. You know, all those things I've just laid out: the food and drink prohibitions, the night and morning prayers, daily scripture reading, the hymns, monthly fasting, weekly church attendance, tithe-paying. It was a process that molded me in the most fundamental way. My identity was the expected product of an assembly-line religion. A religion that manufactures authority-worshippers. But, and this is an important but, at the center of that cloned identity was a precious thing—a core of certainty—the beautiful certainty of being a beloved child of god—a literal spirit offspring of the divine. And with that knowledge comes meaning and purpose. Life has an ultimate direction and immortality is a guarantee. Can you see how comforting all of that is? How peaceful and satisfying a life like that can be?"

"Yeah, Steven, I know exactly what you mean. There is great comfort in knowing your origin and your destination—it makes everything in between the two so much easier to bear. Life is simpler and happier that way. The belief in the existence of God provides so much more than just something to do on Sundays. It gives life a desperately needed story line—a script you can read from and act out till the last days of life. God is security. And joy. And a necessity. But you don't see it that way any more, do you? Your mind has no room for God now, does it?"

"No way. God is something I can't accept anymore. It's something only the weak-spirited in our societies need. The rest of us just resign

ourselves to the sad realities of our short, painful existence and live life for its occasional pleasures."

"What a depressing picture, Steven. But it sounds like someone else's picture, something underlined in a book, something to quote. I don't think I believe you. If that's really the case, then why did you come to Mexico? A little fun? A few adventures?" Elohim said that last part with a carefully controlled irony, then returned just as quickly to his serious style.

"No. I sense differently, Steven. You wanted something bigger, something more worthwhile. You were seeking. You were intent on something. Maybe clues, maybe visions, a sense of subtle order within the randomness and absurdity of things. I understand you, young man. I respect you. For above all you still seek truth. You believe it still exists, that it can still be found in some form. Steven, doubt no more. For it can. It is here. In this desert. In this truck. Sitting near to you. You saw it when you climbed aboard. There are no accidents. No coincidences. And there is a God, Steven. You confessed it yourself when you climbed in. Don't betray your instinct. Your intuition. You are repressing the most elemental part of you. There is truth and goodness and a soul that lasts forever. Trust yourself, Steven. You know this is true."

For several hours they said nothing, allowing cigarette smoke, radio static, and the roar of speed to fill the void. Steven thought hard about Elohim and his words, his voice, and his sermon. He wanted to believe. It had moved him. Touched something vulnerable deep inside. He felt the presence of the divine. And he knew he was very near either wisdom or a higher state of delusion. Deception or enlightenment.

The rig hurtled north, shaking wickedly. With twenty tons of cargo behind the cab, the passengers shook like forgotten coins left on a subway car. Steven concentrated mightily to simply keep himself erect and get his cigarette ash to fall inside a rattling ash tray. The sun set bright red to the left of the truck as a bone-white moon rose to the right. Despite the commonness of the scene, the dusk for Steven that night was charged with something holy. He was speeding home with a glimmer of new faith. God appeared to be once again at the helm.

At eleven Elohim pulled the rig into a highway restaurant. They ordered huevos rancheros, tortillas, and coffee. They ate in comfortable silence. When the check came, Elohim paid the bill and bought two bottles of water and a roll of toilet paper. He gave one of the bottles to Steven, then made his way to the moonlit parking lot. Without stopping at the rig, he motioned for Steven to follow him. They walked a hundred yards beyond the truck into a barren desert. Elohim tore off several handfuls of paper and handed them to Steven. Under the full moon, they squatted in

the dust. With their backs to each other, they took their time. Steven marveled at the sky. Marveled at the possibility of a god. As they walked back towards the rig together, Steven didn't notice the stone Elohim carried in his hand. Although it probably wouldn't have mattered. It only required one solid whack against the back of his head to send Steven collapsing to the ground.

When he awoke several hours later, the moon was on its descent nearing the western horizon and the restaurant was closed and deserted. The parking lot was empty, and his wallet and passport were gone. His backpack had never left the truck. Under the single lamplight of the parking area, he felt the wound and dried blood on the back of his head. He sat down, held his head in his hands, and sobbed. When he was done, he searched himself for a cigarette. Found one and lit it. Then, as he had done two times previously during the day, he withdrew the tattered page from his pocket. He read quickly again from the beginning, then slowed as he reached the end.

betrayed my original reason for pursuing medicine. My original zeal to volunteer with Les Mediciens sans Frontieres is surging again and although no longer a function of a Christian imperative, my concern for the underprivileged still abounds.

Led Zeppelin ends their song appropriately where it began. After a descent into rage and a tour through a legitimate side of reality, meaninglessness, the song returns to the gentleness of the original movement—but a gentleness matured and wiser because of the experience. I have made my ascent from a stormy realm and feel like I am standing on old ground that I can now see much clearer. T. S. Eliot wrote, "And the end of all our exploring, will be to arrive where we started, and know the place for the first time." My reasons for pursuing medical school have changed according to the trails my life has taken, but with my recent treatment and restored sense of identity I feel as though this five-year journey has come full circle.

And now, as I survey the landscape around me, for the first time I think I know my place.

Steven folded the letter and returned it to his pocket. He knew now, better than ever, what a tremendous lie that was. In fact, to him the landscape that he stared into did not even offer the consoling presence of palpable space. Steven saw nothing and felt nothing but illusion. Shapeless terrain. And directionless weight. Steven felt only the great absence of things. The pain of philosophers. And the sadness of prophets.

In truth, Steven had no idea where his place was. But despite it all he stepped back to the road. To his credit, he still knew which direction was north.