

## Dominions

by

Peter Fish

August in Virginia reeks of damp cardboard. My first Virginia August did, anyway. Groggy from a cross-country trip, I spent arrival day attempting to locate the many boxes of belongings, mostly books, I had shipped by rail ahead of me. They had arrived in Virginia. Amtrak knew that much. But where, specifically, they had arrived remained a question. I went to the freight office in Charlottesville, then Culpepper, then back to Charlottesville. On that second visit, there they were: twenty cardboard boxes, sodden, my name barely visible in badly blurred marker.

My understanding of trains is that they are closed to the elements. But somewhere between San Francisco and Charlottesville the boxes had been drenched—by a Kansas thunderstorm, maybe, or derailment into the Mississippi River. I hoisted one box up, and it tore open as if made from dough. Wet, heavy books spilled to the freight office floor. I remember *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty*—hardbound, a beloved Christmas present—flopping dripping and ruined to the concrete like a haddock.

I ferried the boxes back to the apartment I'd just rented. Every box collapsed. It was hot, I was sweating. The shipping plan was a mistake, the move was a mistake, my life was a mistake. By dusk I still hadn't finished. I hauled one last box to the front door and noticed that the world was now sparkling, everywhere, with tiny dancing lights.

“What are these?” I asked a woman coming out of her front door. We had met earlier that afternoon. Given how I felt, I expected her to warn, “You’re experiencing the first signs of heat stroke.”

Instead, she was just puzzled at my ignorance. “Why,” she said, “fireflies.”

Fireflies. I put down the box of books, I watched the dance. I had grown up with a California form of fireflies: the lifeless electric sparkles in Disneyland’s New Orleans Square. But these were something new.

The myth of the West is that no one ever leaves. That the whole American epic is best understood as a move from used-up East toward the new and shining Pacific. Manifest Destiny, the transcontinental trudge across the Appalachians and the Great Plains to the land of big mountains, big trees, big skies—why would you turn back?

Nobody believed the myth more deeply than I did. I was born in California, raised there and in Utah; I studied the West in college and spent my career working for a publication that called itself the Magazine of Western Living. When, after a decade of working life, I pulled up stakes and abandoned San Francisco and a steady income to spend time writing in Virginia, many people were disconcerted, including me.

A California coworker brought me a postcard. It featured a hillbilly couple: old man, old woman, both in coveralls, both smoking corncob pipes on the rickety porch of their tumbledown shack. “Howdy from Virginia!” the greeting said.

“Is this where you’re going to live?” the coworker asked.

“I don’t think so,” I answered. But maybe it would be.

Another editor was more cheerful. “The Albemarle Pippin!” he shouted.

“What?” I asked.

“The Albemarle Pippin. Queen Victoria’s favorite apple.”

I looked it up. The Albemarle Pippin was indeed a prized grown-only-in-Virginia apple, a favorite not only of Queen Victoria (who exempted them from England’s apple import tax) but of Thomas Jefferson himself. When I live in my shack, I thought, I can sit on the porch and eat barrels of apples.

But then I was in Virginia, not living in a shack but in a blandly adequate apartment complex, close to campus, close to the center of Charlottesville life, The Corner. The idea was that, freed from magazine deadlines and earning money, I would write. I would drink coffee and haunt libraries and be inspired by all the writers who had been inspired by Charlottesville before me—Poe, Faulkner, and more recent luminaries like Peter Taylor, John Casey, and Ann Beattie.

That was the plan. But I was flailing; I couldn’t concentrate long enough to type a sentence. I had, I suddenly apprehended, thrown myself into a foreign country. In California no one smoked; here, everyone did. Accents threw me. California considers

itself the Greenwich Meridian of speech: We don't have accents, everyone else does, and boy, did they have them in Virginia, where I could not distinguish Tidewater from Piedmont from Southern Appalachian but was constantly saying, "Excuse me?"

The inability to comprehend what people were saying to me was coupled with an inability to comprehend Virginia manners—their luxuriant and time-consuming abundance, contrasted with my lack of them. In California I considered myself easygoing and mild-mannered. In Virginia I was as brusque and demanding as a Broadway press agent. "Can we hurry it up?" I'd fume—silently but intensely—as the Kroger's checkout woman asked the woman in front of me about her children, and her aunt, and her aunt's children and her aunt's garden. In California I was a namby-pamby motorist; here I was the Dale Earnhardt of Albemarle County, exasperated by pickup-driving farmers who always seemed to be creeping slowly in front of me, occasionally dropping mattresses or bags of trash in my path.

As for Virginia's view of me, the state seemed to look upon all Californians as undesirable invasive weeds, kudzu with surfboards. I sometimes thought locals were drawing up a compare-and-contrast-list of the two states' most famous achievements and residents. Thomas Jefferson versus Richard Nixon. Martha Washington versus Pamela Anderson. Real fireflies versus Magic Kingdom imitations.

And then, in my grumpiness, a strange thing happened. I fell in love—both with the place and with a woman, so that the two feelings are inseparable in my mind. She was a writer, too, not from Virginia but from the East. She knew fireflies. To share a new world with someone you've fallen in love with is one of the great pleasures known to humankind. We walked The Lawn at midnight, we browsed used bookstores, we had lingering Sunday breakfasts where we tried grits and Smithfield ham, the latter of which seemed to me the strangest combination of hardship (salty enough to survive a trip to Mars) and luxury (God knows the ham wasn't cheap) I had tasted. We went to writers' parties where, if we were lucky, we heard John Casey or Peter Taylor holding court.

Late October. Halloween costumes in the drug stores, pumpkins on porches, the glowing Blue Ridge autumn, longer and more subtly beautiful than the autumns of Vermont. We drove south on Highway 29 to a farm stand said to possess Albemarle Pippins. It did. The apples were as good as promised: Queen Victoria would have

sacrificed the whole British Empire for one. We ate apples at the farm stand picnic table; we filled paper bags with apples and ate them on the drive home. As we swung over a hill and saw Charlottesville in the afternoon sunlight, I thought, I'm home.

Another strange thing. It turned out that being 3,000 miles away from the West made me see it more clearly. In November, we made the requisite trek to Monticello. I was, I think, expecting to be interested but not awestruck. And yet, there I was in the Monticello entrance hall, stunned by of all things a pair of elk antlers and a Mandan buffalo robe. The Lewis and Clark expedition had sent them back from Fort Mandan, on the Missouri River. I had been to Fort Mandan, I had seen it. It was the West.

"A rising nation," Jefferson had promised in his first inaugural address, "spread over a wide and fruitful land, advancing rapidly to destinies beyond the reach of mortal eye." Standing on Jefferson's hilltop, you feel the power of that destiny. And that sense that on his little mountaintop Jefferson, despite his personal frailties, was thinking with hard lucidity about what a government, what a nation should be as its people swept toward the Pacific. Virginia was the theory, the West the practice, the Old Dominion guiding the New.

It casts a long shadow across the West, Virginia does. That painter who made New Mexico mesas immortal? Georgia O'Keeffe grew up in Williamsburg and taught art at the University of Virginia. Prairie writer Willa Cather was born near Winchester. Once I made a pilgrimage to Medicine Bow, Wyoming, solely to see the setting for the archetypal novel of the American West, the book that first gave us a Western schoolmarm and a tenderfoot and a stranger with a past. The book is Owen Wister's *The Virginian*. The best Virginia poems I know—"Monticello," "Old Dominion"—are by the very Californian poet Robert Hass. And the best rock-and-roll song ever written starts out like this: "I left my home in Norfolk, Virginia, California on my mind." Three minutes and a continent later Chuck Berry's on the Pacific coast: "Tell the folks back home this is the promised land calling and the poor boy's on the line."

The trouble with promised lands is that you get only one of them. I had loved the West and now I loved Virginia, but at some point I had to choose. It was summer, again. I had always planned to leave come summer, but now I wavered. The university was being helpful; I could stay, if I wanted. I could make a life here.

I didn't. Fourth of July, municipal fireworks at Washington Park, and, on our walk home, the lights of the fireflies that had returned with summer. It was beautiful, in the way things are beautiful when you know you are going to leave them. Even now, pinning down my reasons for the abandonment seems like pinning down mercury. Homesickness, maybe, a stubborn refusal to become someone I hadn't intended on becoming, an atavistic desire, like Chuck Berry's, to be near the Pacific. I broke up with the woman; I bounced untidily west, stopping in Texas for a while before settling back where I came from. On the last leg of the drive home I passed the imitation Mount Vernon at Forest Lawn Cemetery, just off the Ventura Freeway, and felt depressed. California seemed strange to me, desiccated and harsh.

I went back to Charlottesville a couple of times, saw the woman I loved, which was awkward in a way I had expected, and the place I'd loved, which was awkward in a way I had not expected. It's been a long time since I've been back, now. I live in San Francisco, ten blocks from the ocean. I read the *Charlottesville Daily Progress* online. If I'm feeling flush around the holidays I may order a Smithfield ham. But you can't get Albemarle Pippins in California. There's nothing like them at all.