

Wandering Time: The Western Notebooks

Luis Alberto Urrea

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This is a book about mercy, hope, giving thanks, possibility, the search for meaning and the discovery of the simple silver moon. Urrea is off on a wandering quest: at first he's running away, but then he slows down, looks around, takes stock. As he quotes from Thich Nhat Hanh, "To have peace, you can begin by walking peacefully. Everything depends on your steps." Urrea begins to savor the poetry of river names. He eavesdrops in diners and listens in on Nazis eating Eskimo Pies at the zoo. He has the amazing good luck of finding childhood neighbors at the bottom of the Grand Canyon. He exalts in and quotes from his friends: Brautigan and Kerouac, Buckminster Fuller, Basho, Jimi Hendrix, Rosario Castellanos, Wendell Berry and Johnny Cash.

This is a book about letting go and starting over—about what is important enough to put into your pocket. Urrea has come to the conclusion that the "real world" has no taste and, as he says, "...flavor is a wild talent..." His wanderings are about deciding what the "real world" really is. "I have chosen, or am choosing, against more odds than I expected, to live beside the fresh pool of the heart's sweet water." He is learning to speak the new language, "...aspens, aspens, aspens..." His surname, with the Spanish rolled "r", sounds like the aspens, or like the Harleys he describes, circling Little Big Horn. Or like the lions watching for the deer beside that "fresh pool of the heart's sweet water."

Urrea's book of notes and poems and dialogues follows the western seasons. He gets to know the way so well that he can bring his readers, like friends, to the flat rock on the trail to Boulder Creek. Maybe one will find the jaw of a deer or scrape a bullet out of the wall of a miner's abandoned shack. One might even be inspired, like Urrea, to purchase a hand grenade to sit like a strange egg next to the computer as an example of adding some wild flavor for your talent.

This is Urrea's seventh book and he is currently Writer in Residence at the University of Southwestern Louisiana at Lafayette. He has written non-fiction, poetry, a memoir and novel, but this book is particularly for those who carry journals in their pockets and take the time to write in them. It is most certainly a celebration of the world going round, beginning with spring and ending with spring. And like the seeds that come to life in May, it is the revelation that one's past is always a gift.

H. SHAW CAUCHY (March / April 1999)

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