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Penn Concedes His Territories · *Michael J. Rosen*

I.

A man named McCleary is Penn's replacement.
Spence McCleary. Unmarried. Early thirties.
By autumn, the territory will be his
alone, but now, he's Penn's new partner,
passenger, office mate, shadow, heir,
and challenger, whose major experience
in the notions line was with a competing firm,
was all West Coast, Seattle to Sacramento.

With colored ball-tipped straight pins (a stock item
whose annual sales Penn has watched decline
in recent tallies), Penn and Spence are plotting
the Midwest region, claiming each destination
like an explorer or an astronaut
with color-coded pins instead of flags.
"Looks awfully random," Spence observes, retreating
a few feet from the map as if searching
among the clusterings of given points
for a constellation to name The Great Midwest.

Penn's region borders the Great Lakes, touches
the Great Plains, includes Great Falls, MO,
and the States' great river—but Penn has failed
to convince Spence that there is a claim to greatness
here, within or throughout, yet it does
seem great to Penn, who has worn this very route
into the material of the heartland—or, rather,
repaired across the heartland, as a darning mend
a patch in a threadbare, but favored garment.

“Looks like a lot of remnants,” Spence concludes, waving his hand over the map’s dramatic swatches, “the stuff nobody wanted in the middle of nowhere.” Penn’s heard (albeit never seen) the boasted grandeur of his colleague’s West. It bored him, quite frankly. Big-scale bores him. It’s too demanding. It’s plain depriving. Ta dah. And even if no one else is around, you feel obliged to be a tourist with a tourist’s feelings.

“I’m the first one to admit,” Penn says, “it’s not as though we keep the country on pins and needles, but still we’ve got essentials. It’s not that thumbtacks *can’t* compare to microchips they *don’t*. And you don’t compare places, either,” Penn says, “unless you think geography is built of opposites. The opposite of mountains isn’t flat, of ocean, the dry land. Things fit together, Spence. You don’t look at a town and say it isn’t a city yet, or a countryside and think, undeveloped. I don’t think a farm is behind the times just as a shopping mall isn’t ahead.” Spence takes a highlighter and Xs Kansas with an iridescent orange: “The place where time stands still.” This flusters Penn, but eggs on his untenable defense. “Look, Spence, each place is just one time out of a lot of possible times. Topeka, for instance, isn’t backward or ahead, it’s near or far, depending on where you go.”

With Kansas successfully tainted, Spence moves on: Wisconsin is pink, Iowa, chartreuse. The markers, another popular item, are scented: key lime and passionfruit confuse the air. “But even the name,” Spence rejoins, “‘Mid-’

meaning muddle, neither here nor there.
And ‘-western,’ what’s that supposed to mean? *not*
eastern or southern or northern or Californian?
That’s obvious.” “I always thought it implied
‘frontier,’” Penn answers, “As in ‘Go west,
young man.’” “*Frontier?* Maybe centuries ago
but not since a seventh of the world saw
Neil Armstrong pussyfoot around the moon,
not since Cousteau explored Atlantis,” Spence says,
pushing the last few pins in Illinois.
“You know, the lost continent.” Penn knows.

Penn unwinds a nylon thread to link the pins
into the radiating travel routes
that are as much Penn’s own as the rehearsed
synaptic paths of Penn’s motor neurons.
“You’re right, Spence. What’s lost today is not
a continent like old Atlantis, but regions,
the little parts that don’t combine into one
giant green meaning everything
between Canada and Mexico.”
What’s lost on Spence, at least on their first round
on the road, is the indigenous, the details
that recognition, not surprise, reveals.
Penn can remember when a region’s boundaries
were real. Each had its own identity,
its own news, its separate history.
One place found out about its neighbors only
when there were disasters or visiting relatives.
“Telegraph, telephone, and tell-
a-traveling salesman, used to be the news.
But now,” Penn concedes, in fairness to Spence,
“news is nothing new. It travels
from everywhere to everywhere like lightning
before the thunder—and all you’ve got to do
is count the seconds before the inevitable.”

On their initial trips together, along with notions, Penn found that he was selling the region to Spence whose disaffection followed them cross-country like an imminent storm. “Tell me, Gordon, wasn’t there a day when you thought about the world you were missing?” Spence asked, amid his running commentary on how every locale through the region was flat and dreary and so like the one before and—ready?—his ultimage charge, “Plain uninspiring,” as though a salesman refueled on inspiration like his car on Unleaded Supreme. Penn took the occasion (assault) to explain the difference between their outlooks with Velcro, an item featured fully in their samples. “Let’s say that everything has tiny hooks.” Just for effect, Penn passed Spence a keycase sealed with complementing strips of Velcro. “Now, if something is going to catch the attention, the other surface can’t be slick or hooked itself, it has to have that roughened, tangled pile. You with me here?” Penn asked as Spence offered a token glance in each hook-filled direction. “Well, you have to quit looking for the grand to knock you over. Think about fraying a little. Relax. Wear down your smooth ideals and, by degrees, you’ll get attached to things.”

It troubled Penn to defend the Midwest, the place where he was born, reared, where he traveled half his life, and where he’ll retire. On drives (alone) through Waukesha and Xenia, another kind of map unfolds in his mind. Clearly unnegotiable (as if a soul besides Penn would give a damn), this map is hand-tinted with local color, highlighted not with monuments, museums,

exits, or parks, but with one traveller's views:
places off and on the beaten path
where Penn has spent his time: the succession
of storefronts—new car showroom, Baptist church,
Chiropractic clinic—that he can trace,
squares where a circus or a farmer's market camped,
man-made lakes bordered with cottages
and trailer homes with gerry-rigged additions.
Here would be Penn's hours on and off the job,
as though one crossed the state of Work as simply
as a county line, and *here*, his rests, his meals,
his clients, considered family by Penn,
that Spence will marry into, for better or worse.

II

Other than these last few rides with Spence,
Penn never shared his travels with anyone.
He kept them to himself, made few efforts
toward capturing or recreating what passed
before and then, neither all too slowly
nor all too quickly, behind him.
If Penn were selling vacations rather than notions,
he would have gleaned much more than souvenirs
from stops along his routes—souvenirs!
each one pretends to claim, *you're somewhere else*,
but woodburned, glittered, or handpainted,
they all insist, *remember, you're going home*.

Penn remembers a program in the Great Escapes
Travel Series that he and his wife attended
at the auditorium of the local college
where Penn and Marian were graduated
enough years earlier that the same lectures
governed a world that Palestine, Chosen,
Persia, and Latvia had occupied.
The slide show, "Hitting Below the Corn Belt"

(at least Penn dubbed it that afterwards)
included three carrousel of black-and-white
decreptitude, abandonment, distress,
and quote/unquote, Midwestern rustic charm.
Penn felt himself profoundly, personally,
misunderstood by each and every frame,
and while he'd never considered himself an expert
on anything but his few lines, Penn grew
self-conscious on his next few trips, sighting
would-be slides of what he would portray.

Twice after that, Penn had the inclination
to share his travels—he wouldn't have said "a lifetime
of travel" at the time, though recently
and with reluctant pride, he's heard himself
pronounce the term. One anniversary,
Marian bought Penn a compact Polaroid
and Penn returned each trip with stacks of snapshots,
each as thick as a slide sandwiching
a foreign specimen within its fluids,
and with the unwieldy atlas, spent an evening
at the dinner table reassembling
his week-long journey with pictures of quirky motels,
gingerbreaded public buildings, pastures,
crosshatched fields, old-fashioned pharmacies
(old-fashioned *anything*, as though the past
were more authentic, more emblematic, to Penn),
and civic monuments commemorating
people that Penn would learn about from inscriptions
but then, passing the photo at home, would forget.
Penn kept the camera with him for a year,
regaling the family with full-color
installments of Marco Polo Penn's Midwest:
a collectable set like the volumes at Shopper's World.
But Penn observed, even before the children
(who were too old to feign enjoyment, too young
to admit to their father they felt none),

that one photo was so much like the next —
it was the next: a photo, and, incidentally
another place. And the fault? the camera's? Penn's?
or maybe a problem with tenses: no future,
at least immediate, would be returning
anyone but Penn to those very spots.
Though never formally expressed, Penn concluded
travel is even less communicable
than a hobby (a word that's used to justify
time to people with other sympathies).

Penn's second attempt began with "Writing for Life,"
a class at the community college that he took
as part of his pledge with Marian to be home Mondays,
to learn to share more of their time apart.
They both kept journals: a travelogue
for Penn, a book of memories for his wife.
Penn's trouble was making the Midwest, familiar
places he'd been so many times before,
sound as if he'd actually traveled there.
What Penn would choose seemed to have been written
before he arrived; his whole notebook read
like a diary of staying home with Marian,
while Marian struggled to find any distance
to impose on her life, so that she could look
anywhere but just around. Her journal
was set in Missouri, in those foreign years
before she met her husband, before Ohio,
before the house that Penn sold when she died.
They each kept a pair of journals, alternately
writing in one and then the other, and trading
the latest pages the day that Gordon would leave
so each could read about and write to the other.
The children were out of the house by then, his wife
had fallen ill, and for three years their journals
crisscrossed in a conversation of their own,
for Penn and Marian rarely talked of them.

Her illness finally ended the exchange;
by then, there was no time to spend apart.
Penn remained bedside, while medication
kept her traveling outside the here and now
of pain and self-pity and Gordon Penn.

After her death, his territory changed,
emotionally, that is. Penn ceased to log
anything but mileage and expenses.
Returning to towns he'd never thought twice about
made him see, despite his late or fraught
attempts at sharing his routes with his wife,
that she was what distinguished one place from the next.
She was variation itself, the constant
north of the compass needle, that oriented
Penn to home regardless of the distance.
One place is different from another place
not because of the people living there—
for people live everywhere the same when you think
of people as reasons for living—but because
of someone at home or in the car beside you
on whom no news, however known, is lost.

III

In retrospect, what Penn is picturing,
unfolding still in his head, is not a map
but something like an acupuncture chart,
where every yellow and red and blue pin
would chart the keenest points of pleasure and pain
discovered by asking and by accident
along the body of his territory.
And just as oddly as in that ancient science—
a needle inserted at one point effects
its benefits at a second, distant point—
Penn can't explain his general well-being
by pointing here or there in his Midwest,
citing each attachment with a reason.
It's this that Spence McCleary won't inherit.