

Third Night in The West

or

Sir, Your Aridity is Flowing

At last our permanent apartment became available and we moved in. It turned out to be beautifully spacious, nicely furnished, and convenient to all necessities of life, and a five-minute walk to work. What more could one ask for? Yet, as the days went by, a feeling nagged at me that something about the apartment was not quite adequate. It hit me finally. The owner, in an attempt to make everything convenient for us, had stripped the apartment of books and we were facing rows of empty shelves.

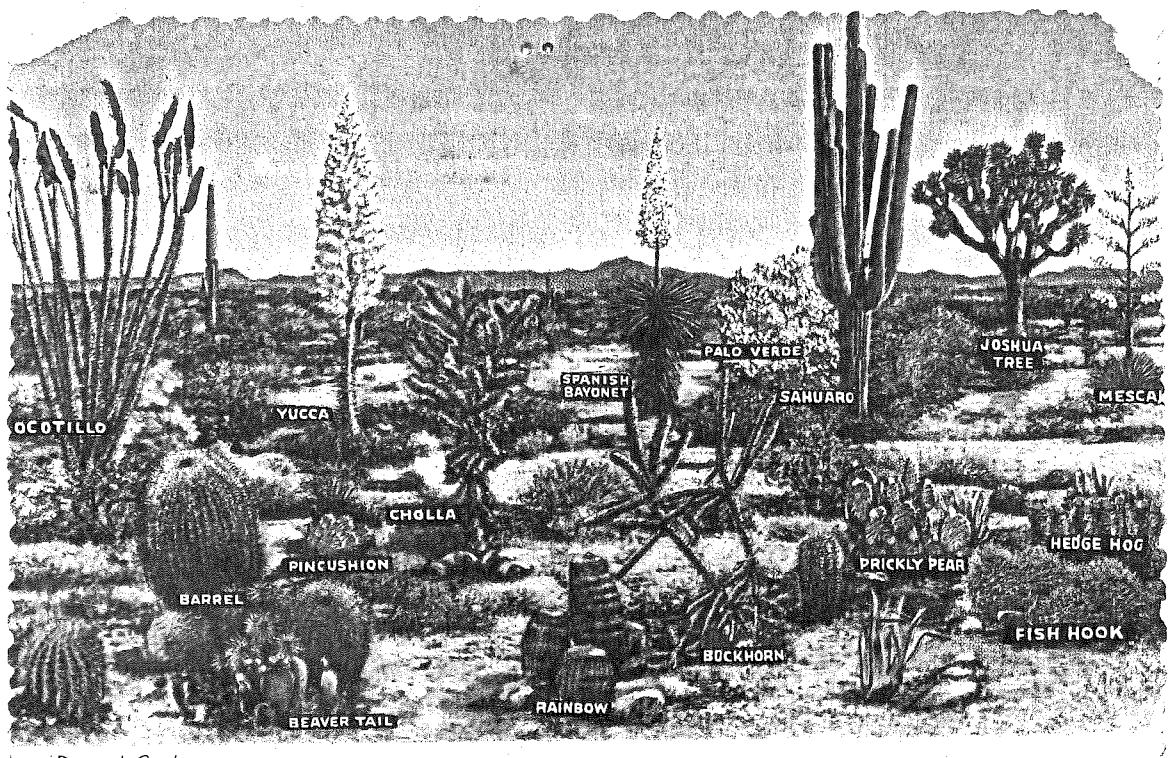
Not fair, I thought, not fair. Here I am sitting in your chairs, drinking out of your cups, sleeping on your sheets. It is an unwritten part of the contract that you allow me to read your books. You haven't deprived me of your coffee pot; why have you withheld

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your books? Didn't you realize what a consumer of books I am? What a bookaholic? A book a day, at the very least. Six over a long weekend. I eat books. They are my staff of life, my fix, the heavy pack on my back. You say that the books in your library aren't so great? A few technical works on the equations of mathematical physics, a manual of first aid, and your grandmother's beat-up copy of "Harold: Last of the Saxon Kings" by Bulwer-Lytton? Sir, you do not know what a rich find that would have been compared to the meagre fare on which we book addicts are forced on occasion to subsist: the backs of milk cartons, gum wrappers, the fine print on bank deposit slips.

Confess, dear owner of this lovely but arid condominium. But you are far away in Europe, and how could you know? Therefore ego te absolvo in absentia. I absolve thee from thy sins. These yawning shelves I soon shall fill. I went to the library, and in my extreme isolation proceeded to fill the shelves with the complaints of famous exiles: the Memoir of Chateaubriand and the Recollections of Alexander Herzen. It was weeks before I could force myself to take out the relatively cheerful story of the Irish potato famine.

I was just getting to the part in Herzen's life



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where he persuades Garibaldi to visit him in Teddington near Hampton Court, when I was beset by itchiness in my arms and legs and considerable scaliness of skin. I diagnosed the trouble as being due to the dry air. I applied Jergen's Lotion with some success, but the itchiness didn't entirely disappear. I sought help from the neighborhood druggist. He said it was a common condition and sold me a superlotion, with much more "lotioning power", as he put it. I asked him what to use when I took a bath and he gave me an additive for the bath water. "One capful will coat your body completely. But watch out because it makes everything very slippery."

So by day I superlotioned myself and at night I poured a capful into the bath. He was right. The surface of the tub became so slippery I could hardly get out of the tub. I decided it was better to risk some itching than a broken rib cage. I went back to the druggist.

Myself: "What'll I do now?"

Druggist: "Don't bathe."

Myself: "Don't bathe?"

Druggist: "Well, every other week at most."

Myself: "People do this?"

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Druggist: "You'd be surprised how many."

Myself: "How do you sell bath soap then?"

Druggist: "You win some, you lose some."

"As the sun sets in the west," goes the classic film travelogue, "we leave the wonderful land of Obervallia, Land of Many Contrasts." The West does not strike me as a Land of Many Contrasts. It contains many things, but a few overwhelming aspects dominate the whole. The West is like Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, last movement, the throbbing of a few motifs, the mountains, the distances, the aridity; and for all its inner diversity, these items unify it in a striking way.

Its large cities, Phoenix, Albuquerque, Tuscon, Salt Lake, Denver are oases. One sees it clearly from aloft. One flies for miles over desert and then, suddenly, a circle of green as a result of irrigation. The lack of water places a limitation on population and on heavy industry, though many "desert rats" deny this. It is the source of endless court actions and of wild schemes such as the trans-Nevada Siphon or hauling icebergs from the arctic to Los Angeles.

According to some authorities, The West can be defined as The Arid Zone of the United States.

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Setting this to mean at most twenty inches of annual rainfall, this enlarges my previous definition to include portions of all the contiguous states. The West begins at the 98th meridian of longitude west of Greenwich.

