

## Eastward Expansion

*“Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of his life is, but rather must recognize that it is he who is asked.” - Viktor E. Frankl*

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I was in a black room. Well, it wasn't entirely black. A deep brown wooden floor seemed to be a thousand feet below me. Two black-and-white photographs of the ocean, taken moments apart, hung on either side of me, each at the end of a hall. I floated in the in-between; the dark room that forced you to choose this or that: this way of seeing a moment, or that one.

The photographs, part of a series on display by Elle Pérez, were virtually indistinguishable. One was titled “*Force*,” and the other “*Ascension*.” Both depicted the same vast ocean, bubbling up with caps of foam, under a shining moon. “*Force*” stood to my left, “*Ascension*” to my right. I was torn. I knew that there was no wrong hall to explore first, but panic built up inside of me as I stood, paralyzed in the face of a trivial decision. I couldn't help but feel trapped in the space between the two pieces. Something inside of me was drowning under the dread that I would make the wrong decision in a situation where there was none. It brought me back to the first time I drove West.

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Golden cornfields that swayed with the wind, tiny towns and abandoned churches, twisting roads that could make your stomach drop if you accelerated at the right moment—It felt like a mirage. I felt free. (It's important to note that by “West,” I mean that I got on the first road I found headed out of the suffocating suburbs of Maryland. It just so happened to go West.) Newly licensed, I decided to take my great escape from the imposing array of awkwardly distant

houses into my own hands. I was finally alone, and I was finally in control. I spent many hours on those desolate roads, foreign to my societal eyes, consuming every moment with a sharp gasp. I had made a choice, and I would continue to make the choice to drive West for many months to come.

About a year into my routine escapist drives, I was lulled into a trance by the rolling hills. It became an odd habit, where I was soothed by the tiny ghost towns and decaying churches and never ending labyrinth of left turns. I drove in this dim haze. The wheel was warm under my palms, though my cheeks were freezing from the overbearing blast of A/C. Beams of light forced me to squint out the sun. The smell of gasoline leaked in with the aromatic summer breeze, and I couldn't help but feel that, in some crooked way, despite the gasoline fumes and sweaty palms and imaginary icicles forming on my cheeks, the landscape was a little bit more comforting out West.

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The black walls were starting to suffocate me as I was frozen there, Buridan's ass, suspended between two equidistant, identical photos. Something in me knew that a choice had to be made, and wanted to relinquish my responsibility of the outcome to the first force that acted upon my motionless brain. Even if I wound up miserably suspended between two perspectives for the rest of all time, at least I hadn't chosen to do it to myself.

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On some of my drives, I would stop at the Dickerson Amtrak station to turn my car around. It was the perfect place for this: deserted, small, hopeless... I saw pieces of myself here, as I turned into the three-car parking lot beside the train tracks. A blue and white sign stood

sentry. You could keep driving west, cross a green metal bridge, and end up who knows where, or take a right turn back to civilization. Never knowing why, I always took the right turn. A choice had to be made, and I left the outcome up to habit. I watched the little blue sign fade out of my rear view mirror, feeling a little more anxious as I left it behind—I had made the decision that led me back to the land of decisions.

A quote from Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* came to mind: "...When you don't like it where you are, you always go West. We have always gone West." These words echoed as I began my drive home—back to the responsibilities of deciding things beyond which turn to take. I lost my hazy grip on the part of myself I felt at that Amtrak Station. I regained authority over my actions.

I would drive West every time I felt out of control, isolated, or I didn't like it where I was. The simplicity of surrendering any choice I had to traffic laws was peaceful. There is no need to fear making the wrong choice when something else is making it for us. We have always gone West. We pass the tiny ghost towns and decaying churches and feel a part of our soul tugging to stay in that desolate place forever—that place where the landscape seems able to stare into your inner being and say, "I understand." The Dickerson Amtrak Station—an empty lot—understood my loneliness. It was a vessel to be filled by other people, waiting to host passengers, never completed.

We want to give our loneliness a companion—to drive through the rolling hills until tomorrow seems very far away and the loneliness is no longer the lack of something, but the embodiment of a new connection. Yet our palms do not turn the wheel and our feet do not hit the brakes. At the end of a long day, we know that we need to return to civilization—erase the

mirage. We need to make a choice; we need to fill our lives with decisions deeper than habit. It is too easy to lose ourselves in corn fields and winding roads that seemingly never end because then we don't have to deal with the uncomfortable space of suburbia. It is too easy to get caught up waiting for passengers who aren't coming. Out West, we don't have to deal with the space we were unable to fill with something real.

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So here I was, perplexed by an immensely unimportant selection of two nearly identical photographs. I found myself unable to dismiss the foolish idea that there was some horrible aftermath I would trigger by simply walking down the wrong hall. There was no way to prove that this wouldn't happen, and I would be fully accountable for my actions without some higher authority to relinquish my agency to. I would fall short, and I would not have the rules of the road to reassuringly catch me this time. We have always gone West to get away from the paralyzingly black rooms of indecision—to woefully remember the passenger-less Amtrak stations. Why would you ever want to make a choice that might result in your own demise?

As I stared down the dark, desolate hall and into one of the pixilated seas before me, I began to see a stark white path carved upwards in the seafoam: Hope. The waves became a connection—something real and lasting in a materialistic society. We can allow ourselves to be truly at ease with tumultuous times and difficult choices by choosing to see the situation as an opportunity. Yes, I could not choose both photos first, but I could choose the one that called to me and hope for the best. I could choose to make the difficult journey East, knowing that the station will never fill with passengers if people don't know it's there. I could choose connection, and make something good out of my inner loneliness.

To truly help ourselves, we have to be willing to let go. We must let go of the misconception that we are always able to cast away our loneliness and be willing to embrace it, use it, to help others. We must let go of our human inclination to force the steering wheel deeper into the rolling hills, and instead embrace the loneliness which we cannot control, bearing it as a reminder of the things we *can* choose to change.

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I have since gone back to the Dickerson Amtrak station to find a black SUV in the parking lot. It was comforting to know that someone else knew about that place. It certainly seemed a lot emptier back when I spent my time fixating on the cars that weren't there. We have always gone West, and I suppose there is a silent comradery in the familiar spaces we were unable to fill with something real.

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Twenty equidistant feet away from two framed, black-and-white photographs of the ocean, I was finally able to make a decision. We all crave something deeper from life. We crave a meaning that we have sought and questioned for all time. And yet, we have been asking the wrong question. It did not matter which hallway I chose—Just that I did choose. I turned East, and left the dark room. I chose meaning.

*Works Cited*

Warren, Robert Penn. *All the King's Men*. Penguin Books, 2007.

Pérez, Elle. *Force (Fire Island)*. 2019, Baltimore Museum of Art.

Pérez, Elle. *Ascension (Fire Island)*. 2019, Baltimore Museum of Art.