

CHAPTER 1

ROADTRIPPING

“Wait—you’re going to follow the path of a group of fictional characters?”

I was at a holiday party in Providence, Rhode Island, and I’d just finished explaining to a famous poet from Boston that I was working on a project about *Blood Meridian*, Cormac McCarthy’s 1985 western (or anti-western). My book, I explained, would be part travel narrative, part something else that was still a little (very) murky to me. I was acting on a writerly hunch that it would be fruitful to retrace the route of the Glanton Gang on their murderous spree through Chihuahua, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California.

The poet laughed. “That’s crazy.”

“You’re absolutely right,” I said, because *crazy*, coming from a poet, is usually a compliment.

The committee on faculty scholarship at the institution where I teach was rather less amused by my request for research funds to go hunting for a gypsum lake in New Mexico and rent a bicycle and pedal between Yuma, Arizona, and San Diego, California, in early May when it would be hot as hell: “Can you explain further how each of the trips you propose will directly contribute to the book you are writing?” they pressed. “Perhaps you could explain the structure of the book and what parts the travel will most directly inform.”

In response, I wrote a smarty-pants-sounding disquisition on the imperative that creative writers follow their intuitions. I invoked my unconscious and its critical role in my process. I said I was inspired by the Third View work of the photographers Mark Klett and Byron Wolfe and the writer Rebecca Solnit, especially their book, *Yosemite in Time*, in which they re-photograph iconic images of the park shot by earlier photographers to show how Yosemite has changed over time as well as to consider ideas about wilderness. Perhaps I would do a literary version of that work and show how McCarthy (who also retraced the route of the *real* Glanton gang in order to write *Blood Meridian*) transforms the real landscapes in the

process of making landscapes for his book. Reminding the committee that I was not a literary critic (God no! I'm a fiction writer!) and that my work would *not* primarily be a work of criticism (Yes, I used italics to emphasize my point!) I conceded that my project was a little crazy, though no more outlandish than other responses to the novel. At a conference on *Blood Meridian* in 2010 at Texas State University, a group of scholars threw a 25th birthday party for the book that included a “tombstone-shaped birthday cake that bled raspberry filling...[and] was covered with gray textured icing, candy skulls, and chocolate scalps.”¹ The keynote address took the form of haiku.

I got the money.

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For a long time, *Blood Meridian* has puzzled me. It has some elusive quality, something just beyond my grasp, something that remains forever and always mysterious. It's a book that I've read about a dozen times in the last twenty-five years, puzzled over, dreamed of, bragged about, used in the seduction of men, discussed in faux intellectual terms, taught, and vowed never to teach again. My Vintage International edition from 1992 is starred and underlined and heavily annotated;

the cover, long hanging from one corner, has finally fallen off.

The novel opens with a character only known as the kid who, for no explicit reason, sets out from his Tennessee home at the age of fourteen to seek his fortunes on the frontier. It's 1847. The kid wanders through the south, fighting men; he meets a man named Toadvine, and they nearly kill each other when neither of them will budge from the wooden planks to the jakes. The next morning after coming to, they team up and kill a man and burn down a hotel. Then, the kid breaks a bottle over a barman's head and shoves the jagged glass into the barman's eye socket, because the man won't give him a drink. All of this happens in the first two chapters, which are just twenty-seven pages. A man called the judge also appears here: he rises at a revival meeting and accuses a preacher of having sex with a goat and an eleven-year-old girl. Later, he says he never set eyes on the man before. The kid joins up with a volunteer army that is pissed off by the end of the Mexican-American War and the terms of the Treaty of Guadalupe; the Comanche ambush the ragtag band of soldiers, slaughtering almost every last one, slathering themselves in gore, and sodomizing the dying. The kid survives and, with a fellow soldier

named Sproule, who is suffering from consumption, makes a desperate journey through the desert without water or weaponry. They encounter many gruesome sights, including a tree hung with dead babies. Eventually, the kid is captured and taken to a prison in Chihuahua, Mexico.

After that, the kid throws in with the Glanton Gang, a motley crew of Mexicans, Native Americans, black Americans and white ones, including the judge. The head of the gang, Captain Glanton, has a contract with the Mexican government to hunt Apaches and harvest their scalps. After leaving Chihuahua, they set out along the borderland of Mexico and the United States, riding by horseback, and bedding down at night in deserts, old corrals, town plazas, and windy plateaus. The gang escorts a family of jugglers, who tells their fortunes one evening. Glanton shoots and scalps an old, lame Apache woman. They keep riding. Someone deserts. A white man named Jackson tells a black man named Jackson that he can't sit near the fire, and black Jackson slices off white Jackson's head. The gang narrowly misses an ambush by Apache, but each assumes his position, including the kid who is "letting off the shots slowly and with care as if he'd done it all before in a dream."² They keep riding,

eventually coming across an old presidio where a group of prospectors is holed up after having been chased by savages. Before the gang rides out the next morning, a twelve-year-old boy is found dead. They ride on, and Tobin tells the kid a long story about the judge making gunpowder in the middle of nowhere. They keep riding, and a bear carries off one of the Delawares.³ They continue riding, mostly at night, for two weeks until they finally come upon the Gileños (aka the Apache) camped along a lake, and they slaughter them. The kid, who has been largely absent, attempts to come to the aid of one of his fellow gang members who has been wounded by a lance, but Glanton warns him off and then shoots the injured man. Later, David Brown, another member of the gang, asks someone to help him remove the arrow from his thigh, but all refuse except for the kid, who pushes it out. “Fool,” a man known as the expriest tells him. “God will not love ye forever” (162). The judge kills and scalps an Apache baby he saved from the massacre, and Toadvine threatens to kill the judge, but doesn’t. The gang keeps riding and fighting until they reach Chihuahua, where they redeem one hundred and twenty-eight dried scalps and eight heads, dine with the state governor, and party until the city turns into a ghost town

and all the young girls are locked away and someone scrawls, “Mejor los indios” (171). In small towns they are greeted as heroes, but when they leave, the streets are empty. They ride on and ride on and ride on, slaughtering a tribe of peaceful Native Americans known as the Tiguas, emptying small villages with their guns, killing Mexican soldiers, twice returning to Chihuahua to redeem their scalps. After the last time, the governor ends his program of paying for Apache scalps; instead, there is a bounty of eight thousand pesos on Glanton’s head.

At this, roughly the midway point of the novel, the gang keeps riding and killing, riding and killing. They fight an ongoing battle with the Mexican cavalry, who is now pursuing them; several gang members are mortally wounded, and the rest draw arrows to see who will “take care” of them. The kid is supposed to shoot Dick Shelby, but doesn’t, and then he gets separated from his comrades and once again wanders through the desert alone. When he finally catches up with Glanton and the rest of them, they ride towards Tucson, killing more people along the way, and then on to Yuma, where they seize a ferry operation at the Colorado River from a doctor, double-cross the Yuma, the local tribe, begin extorting money from travelers,

continue raping women and murdering everyone, and fall further into depravity. The Yuma attack. The kid, the judge, and a few others escape, and the judge and the kid have a showdown at Carrizo Creek; the kid barely survives and straggles on to San Diego, where he is promptly thrown into jail and visited by the judge, who blames him for the deaths of the members of the Glanton gang. Then the kid gets out of jail and looks for his comrades. Years pass; he works as a guide for parties crossing still wild land. He meets back up with the judge in a bar in the final pages. Someone shoots a dancing bear. A little girl weeps. I won't tell you what happens at the very end. I don't want to ruin it.

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I have, of course, left some things out. There are many long descriptions of the landscapes of the southwest, of deserts and mountain ranges, gypsum lakes and sandstone cities, the sun ascending or descending and each one's effects on the sky, distant lightning and thunderclouds. The judge frequently holds forth—on geology and history, on man's relationship to nature and the nature of men's hearts. He kills puppies, too. Pack mules are pushed from cliffs. The men get drunk a lot.

Most novels are comprised of a series of causally connected events. B happens because of A. In *Aspects of the Novel*, E.M. Forster distinguishes between story (or anecdote) and plot. Story is a “narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence” while plot

is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality. “The king died and then the queen died” is a story. “The king died, and then the queen died of grief” is a plot. The time-sequence is preserved, but then the sense of causality overshadows it. Or again: “The queen died, no one knew why, until it was discovered it was through grief at the death of the king.” This is a plot with a mystery in it, a form capable of high development. It suspends the time-sequence, it moves as far away from the story as its limitations will allow. Consider the death of the queen. If it is in a story we say “and then?” If it is in a plot we ask “why”?⁴

For most of *Blood Meridian*, the acts of violence are random and disconnected. Native Americans, Mexicans, and even some white Americans keep being killed mostly because the Glanton gang’s relentless movement (the *they rode on* and *they rode on* and *they*

rode on that punctuate each chapter) keeps bringing them into contact with new people to kill. While a desire for money initially sets one plotline in motion (the Glanton gang rides forth from Chihuahua in search of Apache whose scalps can be redeemed for bounty), it doesn't account for the characters' all-consuming zeal for blood. *Why do the characters do what they do?* isn't the right question to pose about *Blood Meridian* because the characters, either as mythic figures or historical actors, have limited autonomy on the stage that McCarthy creates for them.

Except that from time to time the novel breaks its own rules and halfheartedly invites us to contemplate the kid as a character whose thoughts and feelings motivate him. *Blood Meridian* begins and ends with the kid, but as my summary of the plot (or the not-plot) indicates, the kid fades into the background during the middle of the novel, except when he is separated from the gang.

Over the years, I've found myself wondering why McCarthy does this, and by *this* I mean the following: Why introduce the kid as the protagonist only to make him disappear during many of the most horrifyingly depraved scenes in the middle of the novel? Why bring him back in the end? (This, of course, leads to a few