

Cross-country in the American West

The West Will Swallow You: Essays by Leath Tonino

Trinity University Press, 2019

“The West Will Swallow You” is Leath Tonino’s second collection of essays concerning his self-described “aimless appreciative wandering” around America’s back country. The first collection, “The Animal One Thousand Miles Long” (reviewed here last February) was about his wanderings in Vermont; this one is about his experiences in Colorado, Arizona, Nevada, Wyoming, California, and Utah. The title comes from the reactions of his Vermont friends and family when he told them he was going to go to college in Colorado. Knowing his history of wandering and adventures, they said he would never return: “The West will swallow you.” He admits they weren’t completely wrong. For a decade in and after college, he explored, worked in, and became fascinated with the West. Its immensity. Its variety. Its vistas of eons of geologic time. But he doesn’t feel he has to choose between East and West. Behind all his “promiscuous” wanderings is a wish to connect with “that pulse of a planet often buried under blacktop and cast in bluish screen-glow, but nonetheless present, relentlessly present.”

Tonino’s essays, all but a few previously published in magazines, describe a kind of exploration few people undertake. Tree-climbing, for example. “A Room of Boughs in a City of Lights” describes his climbing and sleeping in a redwood tree in San Francisco’s Mount Sutro Open Space Reserve, gazing at the lights of the great city as they go on and feeling, in his hammock 80 feet up, the power and safety of the great tree. A later essay finds him similarly ensconced in “Doug,” a Douglas fir in Arizona. He also goes “Creeking,” that is, studying “a nature sunk in concrete gullies” under the asphalt of Colorado Springs, where he encounters little flows of water and the unexpected denizens of tunnels and drains, “spaces

torn between civilized and wild.”

The most powerful essays in the collection concern more standard though still unorthodox wanderings. Having worked for two summers on Arizona’s Kaibab Plateau, near the north rim of the Grand Canyon, he and a friend decide to revisit it in February—when initially idyllic conditions suddenly disappear in a storm that makes them climb out of the canyon in blizzard conditions, then cross-country ski in powder above their knees. Another portrait of the exciting dangers of western storms is “Favor the Road,” concerning the men who plow US Highway 550 over Red Mountain Pass (11,018 feet). Perhaps the best of the essays, “The Unknown Country,” has made Tonino one of the 2019 recipients of the Ellen Meloy Fund for Desert Writers. It describes his two-week trek through Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, a 1.9-million-acre area preserved by President Clinton in 1996,

but reduced by half by President Trump in 2017; plans to allow mining and drilling in 700,000 of those acres are now held up in court. Tonino’s two-week walking and hitch-hiking adventure takes him through the geologic wonders of this country, following the footsteps of Almon Harris Thompson, who mapped it in 1872.

His plan is to “drop below politics,” to acquaint himself with the landscape, and to talk to the people who love it. For all the power of the essay, readers who wish to appreciate it fully need to turn to the internet for pictures, which the collection unfortunately does not supply. Words, as Tonino says elsewhere, “are our weakest hold on the world”—especially in a country that is “strange, spooky, utterly unknowable, utterly unknown.” To look at

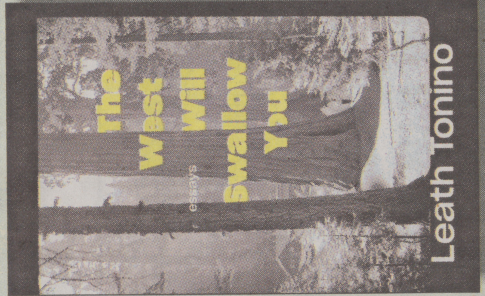
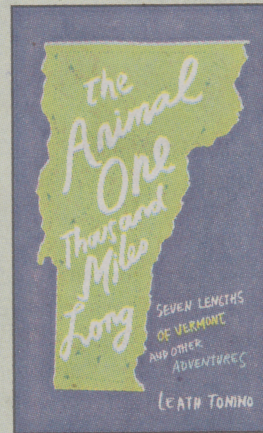
the pictures of Grand Staircase-Escalante is to see what he means, not just about the monument, but about our planet’s pulsing heart.

Laura Stevenson lives in Wilmington and her most recent novels are set on Boyd Hill Road.



One-Minute Book Reviews

Laura Stevenson



6102-b1-21