Introductory Remarks:

- First I want to thank the Waterston Prize committee for selecting my essay as a finalist, and for inviting me to read excerpts from the essay. It’s an honor to be here and to be reading along with Waterston prize winner Tara Fitzgerald. Special thanks to Ellen Waterston for her support of the arts; to Jeff Tryens and Patricia for their generous hospitality in hosting me and my children; and to Louise Hawker for her warm welcome.

- I’m going to read excerpts from the second chapter of a memoir, which is set in the Great Basin desert of northeastern Nevada, where I grew up, near the town of Elko, whose economy was then dependent of the three “Cs”: Cattle, Casinos, and Cathouses,” which happens to be the title of the memoir’s first chapter.

- This current chapter describes the very beginning phase of a spiritual awakening in the outback of Nevada, and so I begin with an epigraph from St. Augustine:

  
  The ores of divine providence are everywhere infused, and everywhere to be found.

  - The Hollow Places of the World

    Kenneth Garcia

The margins of the world surrounded me—at least in the physical sense—for hundreds of miles in every direction: a no-man’s land of semi-arid deserts; middles of nowhere; and solitary mountain ranges. I lived in this no-man’s land, in the small town of Elko, Nevada, and worked in its middles of nowhere during the last two years of high school and the first two of college. I spent summers searching for gold in the remote mountains and hills of Nevada, assisting geologists from Newmont Exploration Company. We hiked rocky hillsides covered with gnarled brush and pungent with the smell of juniper and sage. We scoured long-abandoned mining towns and uninhabited landscapes searching for hidden traces of ore. We crisscrossed rugged terrain far removed from towns and highways, accessible only by dirt road or no road at all. When the land became too steep or rugged for a four-
wheel drive pick-up, we hiked in with pack mules. The mules hauled our gear: tents, sleeping bags, shovels, metal placer pans, canned and freeze-dried food, water jugs, and rifles. I scooped soil into small canvas bags, labeled them by location and soil type (gritty, loamy, clay-like), and loaded the bags onto the mules. The geologists carried compasses, maps, and binoculars with which to orient us in the vast open spaces. It was big country, country to get lost in, scorched in, or find oneself in.

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Nevada, western Utah, and southern Idaho comprise a region known as the Great Basin, a semi-arid region in the western United States encompassing some 206,000 square miles, of which 190,000 are desert. The region is bounded by the Sierra Nevada Mountains on the west, the Wasatch Mountains of Utah on the east, the highlands of the Sonoran desert to the south, and the Columbian Plateau to the north. Its rivers and streams have no outlet to the ocean—they flow into one of many salten lakes, where the water stagnates, evaporates into the air, or sinks into the earth, leaving behind alkali flats hostile to life. The mountains and highlands once encircled a small ocean teeming with life. Fifteen thousand years ago, a land breach in southern Idaho caused the ocean to drain away through a massive flood with a volume three times the flow of the Amazon River at its mouth. The basin is now dry, silent, and empty, with shrub growth maturing slowly and with difficulty. Geologists refer to the region as “Basin and Range” due to its intermittent series of mountain ranges running north-south, separated by wide valleys covered with sagebrush, cheatgrass, and Russian thistle (tumbleweed). Author and photographer Stephen Trimble calls the basin a “sagebrush ocean,” stretching boundlessly across the silent, uninhabited spaces. The mountain ranges tower over this sagebrush ocean like enormous islands, just as they once rose out of the watery ocean as real islands.

The region is geologically active. The movement of tectonic plates has stretched the earth’s crust throughout much of the basin, creating hot holes, warm ponds, geysers, steam rising through fissures in the earth, and volcanic seepage. The surface appears calm—serene even—but not far under its crust seething, turbulent energies seek to rise through its attenuated skin. Those intense energies have created a molten brew in which heavy metals such as gold and silver get separated out from other minerals.

Geologists at Newmont were certain gold lay hidden in the hills and mountains of northeastern Nevada, even though prospectors discovered and removed most of the principal veins of gold and silver ore in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In those earlier times mining boom towns sprouted throughout Nevada. They had populations of between 500 and 10,000 people, and
were home to opera houses, churches, hotels, newspapers, hardware stores, grocers, schools and, of course, saloons and whorehouses. Once the ore gave out, the populations dwindled, turning the once-bustling towns into ghost towns. Only a few decaying buildings and mine tailings—the waste ore dug from the mountain side—remain.

Although miners extracted the principal veins of ore, plenty of gold remains hidden in microscopic flecks diffused over a broad area. Newmont hired my friend Warren and me to help look for it. And we found lots of it, without ever seeing it. Only special assaying can detect it and, until recently, no one knew how to extract it profitably.

Just west of Elko a vein of gold runs northwestward by southeastward through northern Nevada, dipping deep underground at places, rising near the surface in others. The gold is dispersed widely so it is not really accurate to call it a vein; rather, geologists refer to it as a “trend,” the “Carlin Trend” to be precise, named after the small town nearby. The trend does not run in a straight line; it twists and turns as it dives and rises. Around 1960 geologists from Newmont Exploration Company discovered where it rises near enough to the surface to extract, and one of the country's most profitable gold mines—the Carlin Gold Mine—sprang to life.

During the summer after my freshman year of college Warren and I worked at Bootstrap, a site fifteen miles north of the Carlin gold mine, and the home to a small mining operation in the early twentieth century. Prospectors had followed and extracted a vein of gold that ran horizontally through a large hill that stood alone in a great, broad valley. The tunnel, carved through solid rock, remained. Newmont bought the mineral rights and began assessing its gold content.

I did mostly grunt work and heavy lifting, but the pleasure of trekking the backcountry of Nevada made the hard work and scorching daytime heat worthwhile. We worked in shifts around the clock throughout most of the summer. I volunteered for the graveyard shift, from 8:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m., to avoid the scorching sun with no recourse to shade during the day. At night the temperature in the high desert dipped to around 50 degrees Fahrenheit—jacket-wearing temperature—contrasted to the mid 90s during the day. Bootstrap was about an hour and a half drive, each way, from Elko, so Newmont provided a small trailer for us to live in during the week. The trailer had no air conditioning, though, so the night crew could not sleep in it during the heat of the day. Instead we slept on cots in the old mining tunnel, where it was cool, dark, and silent. A heavy wooden door at the opening sealed the tunnel enough to keep critters out. Only the howling of distant coyotes broke the silence. Some nights the coyotes came close enough that we could hear their yap-yapping near the door. We were safe within the tunnel, but we kept loaded guns within reach, just in case. The interior of the tunnel presented
us with both a temptation to explore and a fear of the unknown. The fear kept us near the opening; none of us ventured into the darkness.

I worked on a drill rig that bored deep into the earth. The rigs used 20-foot steel poles, about five inches in diameter, with a hollow center, to drill down. A steel drill bit was attached to the lower tip of the pole, a bit designed for scouring rock and turning it to dirt. As the drill bore into the ground, an air compressor forced air through the hollow tubes of the poles, blowing the loosened dirt up the shaft to the surface, where I collected it in a tub. I took samples of the soil at five-foot intervals, placed a portion of the dirt in a canvas bag, labeled
the bag with a number and, on a separate note pad, noted the depth, color, and consistency of the soil. Once the pole drilled down 20 feet, we attached another to it and continued boring. Each drill rig carried thirty or forty of these poles, so we could drill down 500 to 600 feet if necessary. When the lead bit hit a very hard layer of rock, it wore down, forcing us to raise all the poles out of the ground, one at a time, and replace the steel bit with a diamond one (diamonds are the hardest mineral and can cut through almost anything). Normally we drilled down several hundred feet before moving on to another site fifty yards or so away.

Based on the assay results, geologists created a composite map of the mineral content underground. I marveled at human ingenuity, at the ability to investigate nature, to test, explore, and discover what is beyond the range of our five senses. I worked with an assistant geologist named Fred Buechel, a gruff, overweight man in his mid-forties. Beuchel had worked for several mining companies before, but had not been promoted to any supervisory role. He was a crank, a heavy drinker, and socially inept. Most of the summer employees disliked his sarcasm and cynicism, but I liked the way he used geological terms as cussword intensifiers, which I suspected he picked up from reading Mark Twain’s accounts of Mississippi riverboat pilots. Given his profession, it suited him well. He called prominent land forms by anatomical names (tits, pricks, thumbs, elbows), and sexualized references to digging and drilling into the earth. His language had color. He was once married to a Russian woman he found through an advertisement in the back of some magazine. After receiving her citizenship papers, she divorced him. After that, he despised women. His sole contact with them now was an occasional visit to a whorehouse, which one could find in every town in Nevada. When he went to town for “business,” we knew which one.

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Warren and I hunted rattlesnakes on occasion (one of the drill rig operators said we could sell their venom for cash because medical researchers used it to produce anti-snake venom). The snakes denned in the cavities of rock outcroppings about 10 miles north of Bootstrap. We took poles made of cut tree branches, about six feet long. The tips, sharpened with our pocket knives, formed a Y-shaped fork that looked like your index and middle finger when you spread them. On our initial hunt we came across the first rattler on the road to the outcropping. It crossed the road in front of us. We jumped out of the pickup and grabbed our poles. The snake, sensing danger, slithered up the embankment on the side of the road and coiled itself into a small cavity near the top. We poked at it with the tips of our poles, arms stretched—a good-sized rattler can bite through a pair of leather boots, so we kept our distance. The poking made it angry and its rattler buzzed frenetically, but it soon slithered off
to escape the annoyance. As it crawled, Warren forked it right behind the head, the pointed tips stuck in the ground. With its head immobilized the snake couldn't strike. The rest of its body writhed, trying to get free, but it couldn't. Warren grabbed the squirming body with his left hand to hold it still. With his right hand he firmly grabbed the neck just behind the head as I held the Y-prong tight. I removed the pronged stick so he could lift the snake up. I placed a small glass jar up to the snake's open mouth, its fangs on the inside of the jar and its lower mouth on the outside. The pressure against the fangs forced the snake to secrete its venom into the jar.

We milked five more snakes that day, then let them go. Their venom wouldn't be replenished for some time, so they weren't dangerous. Before driving back to Bootstrap, Warren suggested we take a rattler back for Buechel. I knew just what he had in mind. We caught, milked, and killed another snake and took it back to the tunnel. While Buechel was in town "on business" that evening we coiled the snake up inside his sleeping bag, then waited up for his return.

As he got into the bag, he recoiled in panic. "Holy crap! There's a fucking snake in there!"

When he heard us snickering he cursed up some graphic geology words, which grew in number of syllables as he went.

"Goddamn sons of bitches! I'm going to fire your paleozoic asses! Fucking carboniferous potheads!"

In our spare hours, when we weren't hunting snakes, we played cards and drank beer. Buechel shot at wildlife, mostly lone coyotes and jack rabbits. His rugged temperament seemed just right for these places—places for men in dusty boots who broke rock with handpicks and penetrated the earth with drill rigs and bulldozers. Men who passed the tracks of cougar and deer, and kicked away the shed skin of snakes and bleached antlers, without wonder, seeking no messages, wishing only for a gun. They extracted the gleaming substance of earth, stripped away its mystery, without reverence. I was comfortable among them.

I found solace in the vast, silent spaces, too.

II.

The more time I spent in the wide-open country, the more I noticed an austere beauty that awakened an inner recess of my psyche that I had not known was there. Like a long, dark mining tunnel, forbidding but also mysterious, I felt lured to explore its depths. Something subtle drew me, though I barely recognized it at first. A sense of the land’s awesomeness, even sacredness, filtered gradually into my mind. I had no words to describe it at the time, and even if I had my co-workers, especially Buechel, would have thought me "touched." Treasure of a different kind, I
slowly discovered, can be found in out-of-the-way and unexpected places, even this seemingly desolate region of it.

While contemplating the vastness of the landscape, I began to detect something like a primordial power in nature—could I call it Spirit?—that seemed to permeate the countryside. And Spirit is a stealthy hunter. It does not gather in packs to surround you, like coyotes. It does not remain downwind lest you detect its presence. It rides the wind and filters through the grasses, suffusing the quiet, hollow places of the world.

During lunch hour—which for the night shift came around midnight—we shut down the drill rig for an hour. While the other workers took naps in the pick-up trucks, I took solitary walks over the hilltop. I lay on the ground gazing at the stars and listening to the night sounds. I carried a flashlight and a rifle, but on many nights I didn’t need the flashlight; moonlight illumined the way. The distant hills and valleys gleamed like quicksilver. Sometimes I thought I sensed a kind of in- and exhalation of the earth, something living, yet invisible. Is the earth alive? Breathing? Is that possible? It seemed such a mystery, like when you lean over to hear an infant’s soft breath, to detect whether it’s still breathing. When you realize it is—what wonder!

One morning, in the tunnel before we fell asleep, Buechel asked, “Where the hell do you go during your lunch breaks? You got a coyote sweetheart out there or something?”

I laughed. “I just wander around. Have you ever really observed the country out there in the moonlight? You can see so far. And it’s so quiet. It’s eerie, but beautiful.”

“Beautiful! This desolate place? There’s nothing out there but dust, sagebrush, and coyotes.”

“Yeah, but not just those,” I protested. “There’s beauty, too.”

“Yeah, well what’s that stuff covering your boots and pant legs every day? And what are those thorns in your socks, beauty incarnate?”

I knew just what he meant. The land got so dry it turned powdery. With every step we made, the ground belched a miniature dust cloud that settled on our boots and pant legs. The little burrs from cheatgrass seeds clung to our cotton socks and irritated the skin. We had to stop occasionally to pluck them out.

“But seriously,” I said, “there’s something mind boggling out there, something mysterious, you know?”

“Oh, Jesus!” he said, “All I see is a bunch of dirt and weeds. Mysterious! You get some sleep so we can go out tomorrow and find more gold. Then you should go invest in Newmont and be rich as hell. They’ve found a rich lode, for sure. That’s why they’ve brought in more workers—to work the drill rigs around the clock.”

“We kind of are already, aren’t we?” I said before he finished speaking.
“Kind of what?” he asked.
“Rich. You know, with all that—I don’t know.” I paused to find the words.
“With all that spiritual beauty out there.”

*Beauty. Spirit. Nature.* All kind of mingled and interwoven in ways that were inexplicable to me, as hidden as those flecks of gold, unless you knew how to look for them.

“You’re full of it,” he said as he turned over on his cot. “The earth’s just a lump of inorganic stuff with an itty bitty covering of organic stuff, that’s all.” I intuited otherwise, but did not have the language with which to express my emerging awareness.

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I brought my bike to work, and began riding in the evenings before my shift began—wandering aimlessly along dirt roads and cow paths. One weekend I didn’t return to Elko with the others.

“You’re staying here all weekend?” asked Warren. “Alone?”

“Yeah.”

He looked at me, puzzled. “What about Jan? Aren’t you seeing her this weekend?” Jan and I had dated since high school and usually went out together on weekends. “What’s she going to think?”

“If you see her, just tell her I’m working through the weekend.”

“Just tell her he’s a weirdo!” interrupted Buechel, “that he’s got a breccia brain—you take a handful of jagged little rocks and squeeze them together with cement-‐like mud, and you get a brain like his that doesn’t think too keen. If he wants to stay here and commune with dirt, let him.”

The next day I biked on a gravel road leading northward. After half an hour I reached the top of a rise where I caught sight of a vehicle about ten miles away, heading in my direction—not really the *vehicle*, but a cloud of dust billowing upward from a moving point on the road. The dust formed an elongated cloud held aloft by air currents before gradually spreading out and floating back to the ground. I did not want to eat that dust, so I left the road and biked over the untrodden countryside: across creases in the land, through tall sagebrush and Russian thistle that scratched my legs and ankles. I stopped at the edge of a narrow ravine and climbed down it, wondering if I could discern something of its history. Had it formed from the waters of ancient streams, or had the earth cracked and split like wood drying too fast? I rode from one rise to another, horizon to horizon, criss-‐crossing the valley in a general northward direction, just to see how far the unbounded space could go before I reached something human—a fence, a ranch house, an east-‐west road, anything. *Such a boundless land.* An inner void, pregnant with something I didn’t
know, opened as I gazed on the ever-receding horizon. A void at once frightening and comforting. I couldn't explain it.

I came to a large rock outcropping surrounded by brush. One side of the outcropping had a large overhang about six feet up, creating a shady spot—a good place to crawl into and have lunch. I wriggled through the brush on all fours until I got under the ledge, and sat with my back against the rock. It was utterly quiet except for a breeze whispering through the brush. A few bird feathers and bones of small animals were scattered here and there. *A hawk must use this place for lunch, too. Good choice.* I wondered if any other human had sat here. Probably not. As I drank water from my canteen, I imagined this recessed nook as a kind of sacred space, and thought this: *around the hollow, sacred spaces revolves the busy world that, uneasy with a presence unseen, refuses to know its own quiet center* (or at least some inchoate thought that I later translated into those words). I sat still in the nook, listening. The wind whirled about, raw and pure; it filtered through the brush, gently, rhythmically. The place was lonely; severe; comfortable.

During my walks and bike rides I began collecting the sheddings and remains of animals: deer antlers, snake skins, golden eagle and hawk feathers, and dry animal bones bleached by the sun. I hung them from the timber just inside the doorway of the tunnel. I hung the jar of snake venom, too (we never bothered to find out where we could sell it). It was my attempt at art. Buechel pretended to scorn my decorations, but I knew he liked them because on one occasion he brought me a badger skull to hang.

"Here's something for your freak art show," he said, and tossed me the skull. A few days later he brought a coyote tail he'd cut from one of his kills. I hung it with the rest.

One day Warren and I were assigned a double shift—all night and the next day. We gouged soil samples from the wall of a ten-foot deep trench dug out by a Caterpillar. After a few hours in the mid-July sun we needed a break. I sat in the last sliver of shade against one wall of the trench. A hard, pointed rock, barely above the surface and hidden by a layer of dirt, jammed into my tail bone. Unwilling to give up the only shady spot around, I began to dig it out. It was firmly lodged. Digging further, I discovered a horn-shaped object extruding from a large boulder below. It was of a different material than the rock, yet encrusted to it. *Could it be the petrified horn of some ancient animal?* It was too thick to be a deer or antelope antler; more like a bull's horn. Yet if buried ten feet underground it must have been deposited there millennia ago, long before cattle came to this part of the world. Perhaps a buffalo horn? No, it had spiral-like wrinkles around it. It didn't look like any horn I'd seen. I chipped off the extrusion from the rock with a hand pick and stuck it in my ruck sack. In the evening I showed it to Buechel.

"Do you have any idea what this is?" I asked. He turned it over a couple of
times, spat on it, then wiped off the wet dirt with his shirt tail. His facial hair showed several days of growth. He wiped sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief, then examined the object with a magnifying glass.

“Coral” he said. “Coral rugosa to be exact.”

“Coral? Here? I thought coral grew on the ocean floor, in the tropics.”

“It does. Hundreds of millions of years ago, this place used to be under a tropical ocean.”

“No way! You’re pulling my leg.”

“No, I’m not,” he said. “The slow movement of tectonic plates shifted the continent way up here. That’s a piece of coral, alright, probably from the Devonian period.”

“When was that?”

“About 400 million years ago, give or take a few years.”

Buechel was a crank, but he knew his geological history.

“So was this thing alive at the same time as the dinosaurs?”

“Earlier. About 150 million years earlier.” He paused a while. “If you go over to the Toquima Mountain Range, you’ll see plant fossils that are 600 million years old. And I’ll tell you something else. Someday the valleys in the Great Basin will be filled with ocean water again. This entire basin is stretching and expanding, just like the Atlantic basin did after North America separated from North Africa. Eventually the stretching will open a breach to the Pacific Ocean—maybe in southern California, maybe in northern California—but when it does, this will be ocean again and a big chunk of California will be an island. The Humboldt river and all the smaller streams will have an outlet to the ocean instead of emptying into alkali flats. That’s inevitable. Probably not before we get the gold out of this hill, though.”

Beuchel, it seemed, knew something about the geological future, too. *How could someone who knew the deep history of this land not see beauty in it?*

I held the coral up to have a close look. “So this thing lived 400 million years ago?”

“Yeah. Maybe only 398 million.”

“Ah, so it’s not very old, then.”

“Nah. Not much older than your mama,” he said.

“Your mama, maybe,” I said as I tied a string around a wrinkle of the coral and hung it along with the coyote tail, deer antlers, and other items. I pondered my decorations.

“Could any of these animals hanging here have descended from this coral? You know, maybe the coral evolved into an animal and one of these things is its descendent,” I said.

“Probably not, but you might be, with that fucking precambrian fossil brain of yours.”
It was the night of the full red moon of August. We had finished our work at Bootstrap several weeks earlier. We knew it was time to move on when the big yellow earth movers started arriving. Mining engineers, geologists, and surveyors wandered the hillside, surveying, calculating, pointing things out to one another on maps and drawings. Newmont would soon blast the hill with dynamite and shovel loads of earth into the giant trucks, which would haul the ore to the Carlin Gold mine for crushing and heap-leaching.

In a typical heap-leach operation, miners remove tons of ore from hillsides or open pits, crush it into dirt, and pile it onto clay or plastic liners. They then spray large quantities of cyanide solution over the ore. As the cyanide percolates through the layers of dirt, it draws microscopic flecks of gold and extracts up to ninety-seven percent of it from the rest of the ore. This “pregnant” solution concentrates at the bottom of a drainage system, where the miners distill and process it further. We completed our work without seeing a speck of gold. Buechel had predicted it right; the increased activity and earth movers confirmed it.

Newmont sent Buechel and me to the Prospect Mountains in central Nevada, just south of Eureka—a nineteenth-century boom town now turned into a lethargic community of around 350 inhabitants. As we drove through town we noticed a handful of old-timers sitting on benches in front of decaying buildings. “What do you think these old guys do all day long?” I asked. “They probably reminisce about the old days and hope a new deposit of gold gets discovered so the town can spring back to life with saloons and whorehouses.”

Buechel and I explored the region surrounding Prospect Peak, the highest mountain in the range at 10,400 feet, and the site of significant mining operations in the 19th century. Extensive tailings fanned out from the mouth of several tunnels. Tons of dirt had been removed, so the tunnels went in deep, perhaps forming honeycombs inside the mountain. We planned to spend two weeks there.

I collected soil samples at 100 foot intervals while Buechel analyzed rock outcroppings and applied drops of chemicals to the dirt I dug up. He smelled and licked chips of rock he broke off with his hand pick, tasting for hints of certain minerals. We worked our way gradually over a nine square mile area, with frequent stops, side trips around ravines, and slow climbs up the mountainside. Because of Buechel’s weight, he had to take it slow. We pitched a tent alongside a spring, and in the evenings gathered firewood, and cooked our meals. We hunted cottontail or grouse for dinner.

The alpine terrain, well above the sagebrush zone, boasted rich grasses, berries, pinyon pine, wildflowers, and springs—good country for sheep-grazing. We
chanced upon a flock almost daily. A Basque sheepherder made a point of visiting us regularly, glad for human contact. He spent nights alone in a metal-covered wagon stationed near the bottom of the canyon. He rode up the mountain on horseback each day to check on the flocks and share wine with us from a leather *bota*. He spoke little English, so we conversed in pidgin and by gesture.

One morning Beuchel and I discovered two dead sheep lying in the brush. We walked over to have a closer look. As we approached we saw others. Three. Four. Five. Then many others, twenty-three in all. Dead sheep strewn everywhere.

“What the hell happened here?” I asked.

“Dunno,” said Buechel. “Maybe they ate some poisonous plants clustered in the area.”

Later that day, we met the sheepherder and pointed out the site to him. On the following day rangers from the Fish and Wildlife Service came to inspect the scene. They determined a lone mountain lion had killed them, not for food, but for sport. None of the sheep—not one—had been eaten.

Buechel and I did not sleep in the tent that night or out in the open, knowing a killer was on the loose. We slept in one of the mining tunnels on the side of Prospect Peak. Its shabby wooden door closed well enough. We kept our loaded rifles nearby.

The night witch set loose by the full moon forbade me sleep. I lay for a long time on the cot, pondering the great expanse of geological time and our miniscule span of life within it. Though just a microscopic fleck within its enormity, I felt a strange kindredness toward it. I wanted to walk about, but dared not because of the cougar. I decided to explore the tunnel instead. I put on my boots, grabbed a flashlight and rifle, and walked into the darkness.

I shone light on the walls and felt the layers of earth, one upon another. How old are these rocks, I wondered? If an ancient coral fossil ten or twelve feet below the surface was 400 million years old, how old was this rock deep inside the mountain? A billion? It boggled the mind.

The tunnel went straight into the mountain for at least a hundred yards, then branched off in three directions. I took the branch on the right, the wider one. After another hundred feet or so, the tunnel descended steadily, deeper into the darkness. More branches. Then cross branches. Again I took the larger one, reasoning it would be the main branch. By following the larger tunnel consistently I should be able to find my way back. After a time, the air became tight. It grew warmer. Another branch veered to the left. I began following a rise. The vein of ore must have trended horizontally, then twisted downward before gradually ascending. Walking became labored, breathing more difficult, though I was used to climbing hills. I stopped frequently to catch my breath. *Altitude sickness*? I felt a momentary disorientation. What if I got lost in this maze of passageways? Would Buechel think to look for me
here? He was accustomed to my nighttime walks; he would assume I had gone outside; would look for me in the morning, and wonder if the mountain lion had dragged me off to its lair.

What would happen if I died in here? Would they find me? If not, I imagined two endings. One was this: if Newmont found gold, they would tear down this mountain and my remains would end up in a heap-leach pile, dissolved by cyanide. The second was less dispiriting. The earth’s movement would close the tunnel and fuse my bones with Devonian or Ordovician rock. Some geologist would discover them ten million years from now and place them on exhibit as an example of a primitive hominoid form. Viewers would speculate on what thoughts I might have had, and what dreams and promises I never fulfilled. Would they be able to deduce from DNA that I had thoughts and dreams? Could scientists, by then, recreate my memories—such as bike rides toward a boundless horizon? Could they recreate the wonder and mystery of that?

I continued along the passageway. If I got lost I could shout for help from Buechel—if he could hear me, anyway. I imagined him banging on a placer pan repetitively, and I would follow the sound back. That image led to a curious question, given the circumstances: Would I even want to shout for help from Buechel? Would death be any worse than the smirk on his face when I found my way back? I could hear his words, “Hey, Tonto, did you find some creature back there with an Archaean brain like yours?” Yet, I knew he would worry.

Soon I noticed a musty, acrid smell. And foul. Was it the odor of death? It grew stronger. Soon I entered a widened chamber, a small cavern of sorts. I shone light all around. There were bat droppings agglomerated on one side wall. They spread onto the floor, rank and hot, the outer layer still moist. Ghoulish stuff. I started to turn back, but then noticed there were no bats. They must be outside, hunting insects. There had to be an opening somewhere nearby. How else could they get out? I continued past the chamber. Soon a hint of outside air mingled with the musty, stale air of the tunnel. As the outside air became stronger I perceived a soft light up ahead. It came from an opening above, right where the tunnel came to an end.

A wooden ladder, old and decrepit, rose to the opening. Why did the miners use this opening? They couldn’t have hauled ore out through here. An escape route, probably. Two of the ladder’s rungs were missing, others were creaky. I pressed against it, shook it, pulled on the rungs within reach, stood on the bottom one. It was usable. I carefully ascended.

Outside, the full moon glowed fiery orange, not far above the eastern horizon. I walked to the top of Prospect Peak to get the best view, and peered over what seemed the edge of the world. To the north a few dim lights from Eureka shone in the distance. In all directions the sky extended limitless and the earth seemed to stretch out with it. The great valley below waited expectantly, like a womb, to be
filled with glory. There was a mountain range thirty miles beyond, and another, ninety miles, stretching like millenia over the vast empty spaces. The moon’s light bathed the earth in a soft sheen like the lustre of the ocean just after sunset, or before sunrise. Yes, yes, Spirit hovers over these boundless spaces. Seeps in and fills them. The great valleys are like lungs through which it breathes in and out, rhythmically, glacially. The moonlight was gold, space infinite, and Spirit rested patiently, everywhere. I knew this, though I was unschooled in things spiritual. Something broad and expansive filled me. And I intuited this, too: the long decades and distances between saints are too much. We no longer expect to hear, out of those silent spaces, a word that will bless.