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**'The Best Material for the Artist in the World'**

by Kenneth Chamlee *(Honorable Mention)* Issue: Spring 2018

*Albert Bierstadt joins* *the* *Overland Trail Survey Party, South Pass Route, 1859*

 I.

*Two dollars* to sleep on a thin tick

sharing a floor with snoring gold fools!

Pike’s Peak crazed Missouri with dreamers

and thieves, but we were the road builders

and hundreds waited to sign each day.

Anxious to paint mountains and skies, I

quit St. Jo after the grand send-off

and walked up to meet the survey team.

At Troy the wintered mules were phlegmy

and gaunt; they could not have pulled a cart,

certainly not our army wagons

with months of provisions, tack and tools.

Colonel Lander fumed and wired for more.

Now the long train drags slowly forward

like a snake humped with an outsized meal.

Storms boom and raw roadcuts churn into

deep mires of sucking mud that pop spokes

from their iron-banded wheels. Lander whips

the struggling mules as if rage alone

could move them. Only five miles some days.

Other days the prairie hums and sways

in easy undulations. The green

whirr and shush soothe me, but the day’s heat

fires the night’s riot and fierce storms rake

our tents and lift them like sails. Entire

reservoirs of rain gully our camps,

river away bedrolls and pots. Then

mosquitoes rise from the bluestem and

haze us in a singing smoke of needles.

 II.

During rests I fix our camera

on its heavy legs, tedious box

of glass and acids, making silvered

plates of timid Shoshone children,

women patting meal by their lodges.

A camera is a type of truth

but stereographs cannot convey

like bold sketches—such exquisite dress!

Shouldered blankets red as a blood moon,

fine necklaces of bear claws and quills.

Some warriors will pose with a clutch

of arrows, but others are afraid

to see faces form on gray paper

like spirits enthralled in heavy mist.

Still, I did not expect the tatters

and beggared faces of children who

stare at our swell of wagons knotted

with barrels and larder kept for trade

and favor with other tribes and posts.

Impassive eyes track our every task.

III.

During my errant apprenticeship

in Westphalia, a dim alehouse

or an opened home never seemed but

a few miles or hours from the last.

Parish churches, common as mullein,

rose toward the same sky as wrecked castles.

Often I would hear the Kyrie

when I passed by at vespers, seeking

the cool of a twined ravine, a strewn

ashlar as the day’s dinner table.

Now, westward, each wearing mile reveals

a stark distinction—America

is as raw as a poorly-shod foot.

Towns and stores are shade-rare and ranches

days between. The fickle Platte, at times

a muddy drudge, will suddenly rush

down tiers and tumbles of stones broken

like bombarded walls. Cattle and sheep

wandered German roads but a hundred

thousand bison block our way for hours,

flooding north in a tide of flies and

bellowing. After our mess, the wolves’

unholy songs edge us to the fire

and the hard comfort of our rifles.

One wavering noon a purple braid

runs the hem of the horizon. Day

after day it reweaves itself until

the plains buckle like a parlor rug.

Behind timbered foothills, gray mountains

jag upward, ice-topped and teased with clouds.

The dull Berkshires are groundlings to these

Titans, rising to European

majesty, our western Dolomites!

Everything in me is tingling now—

my hands are forks of Kansas lightning,

my brush galvanized with the power

to suspend antelope in swift chase,

hold deer wary to a storm’s menace.

I gather encampments of tipis

from the Wind River and ground them

against the backdrop range. Each day is

a race with dwindling light. I may run

out of millboard and oils but not scenes.

Hills drop-terrace into gravel shoals

shadowed by willow and cottonwood.

The great distances, glazed thin by day,

suffuse rose-orange in twilight’s dust.

In my studio, these sketches will

spark memory as I paint the west

I feel—limitless, unreckoned, new.

Polite frames will not suffice—I need

easels hewn from seasoned oak hefting

canvases wide as a wagon’s span!

IV

After South Pass, our small party leaves

Lander’s crew to its shovels and sweat

and puts the Wasatch to our backs.

We follow a free regress, stopping

where we want, shooting grouse and rabbits,

sketching, writing letters, enjoying

our lives immensely until the game

vanishes, then our supplies. Hungry,

seeking the Big Blue and Wolf River,

we keep painting though we are reduced

to water and flour, no leaven

to make a biscuit. At last we ride

upon a trappers’ camp, nothing but

a shallow cave’s green-scabbed overhang,

though the stew and whiskey are welcome.

Miles north, a massive prairie fire glows

like a pulsing forge reddening night,

reminding me that while we mend brushes

Church has brought volcanoes and jungle

to a draped gallery in New York.

His *Andes* allures a public keen

to peer beyond the fringe of rumor

and share a claim. Viewers parse the scene

with tubes like glassless telescopes,

scouting each circlet’s story, lost in

equatorial air, fancying

birdcall, nameless flowers’ scent and sway,

but how much more they will want to see

our country’s snowcaps and cataracts,

buffalo and lodgepoles seen from bluffs.

His tropic patent is now my spur—

I will stand the Rocky Mountains high

on Broadway and invite the world.

The tingle in my hands redoubles—

I lift a brand from our campfire, coax

its red nib, then sweep my initials

toward the lacework of stars above me.

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