

# The Road to Beaver Park

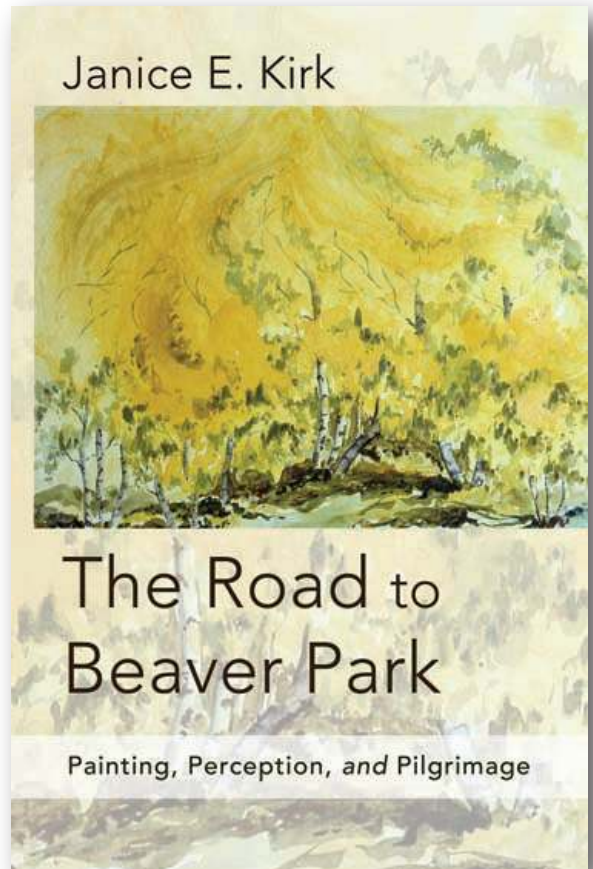
Painting, Perception, and Pilgrimage

Janice E. Kirk

Learn to paint, learn to see—it will change your life.

On Sabbatical, Janice carries her art pack and folding stool into one of the most incredible landscapes on the planet: the canyons, deserts, mountains, and river valleys of the greater Southwest. Awed, amazed, inspired, and humbled by what she finds there, she sketches and paints *en plein air*. The family fishes, hikes, catches bugs, chases lizards, digs fossils, photographs, and studies plants. The year-long campout in National Parks and Forest Service sites becomes a journey of the heart. The family grows to love the way the great outdoors is put together. Part travelogue, part natural history, part field course in art appreciation, the author records her development as an artist as she learns to paint and learns to see. To her surprise, a spiritual awakening sneaks up on her, and the journey turns into something more—a pilgrimage.

Janice E. Kirk is author and illustrator of *The Christmas Redwood, A Forest Parable*; *Cherish The Earth: the Environment and Scripture*, and illustrator of *Wild Edible Plants of Western North America* by D. R. Kirk. She has taught art, language arts, and music, including voice at Simpson University, Redding, California. During a lifetime of family camping adventures in the American West, she sketched, painted, learned nature's ways, and grew to cherish the beauty of the earth.



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"Kirk's account of her family's year camping in the southwest is both an inspiring travelogue and timely clarion call. The average school-aged child spends nearly seven hours *per day* in front of a screen and less than thirty minutes *per week* outdoors in unstructured play. Beautifully written and joyfully illustrated, *The Road to Beaver Park* will help you see nature with new eyes."

—NANCY SLEETH, Author, *Almost Amish*; Managing Director, Blessed Earth

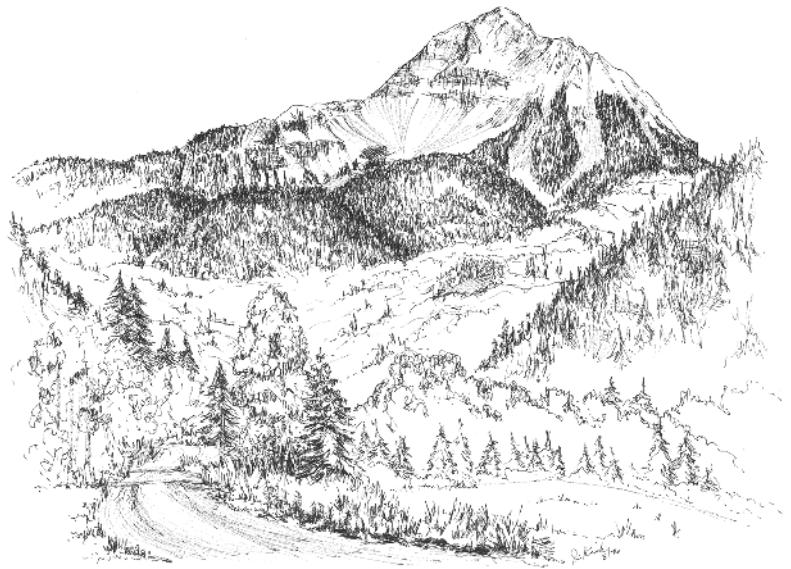
"It is no accident that this book's genesis was a sabbatical experience, for Kirk's prose and sketches are the fruit of a prolonged Sabbath. By slowing down and stripping away non-essentials, Janice and her family discover the transformative power of rest, silence, and contemplative time spent in the outdoors. In this she offers a likely solution to our ecological crisis: natural settings inspire wonder, which reveals beauty, which instills a reverence that leads to stewardship."

—PAUL STONEHOUSE, Associate Professor Adventure Education, Green Mountain College

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# THE ROAD TO BEAVER PARK



**Sunshine Peak, San Juan Mountains, Colorado**

# THE ROAD TO BEAVER PARK

*Painting, Perception, and Pilgrimage*

By Janice E. Kirk

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THE ROAD TO BEAVER PARK  
Painting, Perception, and Pilgrimage

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For Elizabeth and Matthew,  
Julia and Jonathan



[It's] not just the spectacular scenery,  
the waterfalls and big trees and wildlife . . .  
It is also about who we see these sacred places with,  
whose hand we are holding.

—KEN BURNS, *THE NATIONAL PARKS: AMERICA'S BEST IDEA*

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## Preface

My art file overflows with sketches, color studies, and unframed watercolor paintings. Held in reserve because they mean so much, the images record the year that changed everything for me. Over time, each sketch and every painting has become a treasured link to the wonder of a light-filled landscape or portrays detail that suggests the inscape of a solitary flower, tree, river, or dune. The images tell only half the story, however, and in this book, I have recorded the rest.

We stepped away from a fast-paced life one year, went on Sabbatical leave and explored the Greater Southwest. Sketching and painting in the field honed my observation skills and inspired my work. I gained a broadened scope of how nature is put together, literally expanding my horizons. The wholeness of creation, the unity to be found there, became for me a witness to the Source of Creation. It brought me back to Christian faith.

In addition to reviewing my own artwork, research for the book included scanning family journals, Don's photos, Amy's colorful calendars, and visiting National Park Service and other web sites to refresh views and bring information up to date. The best part was sitting with family and asking, "Do you remember when we camped on the San Miguel, on Lehman Creek, or the day we went to the Playa?" Fond memories came flooding back.

We were never the same after that year. Living outdoors generated a familiarity and comfort with nature that all four of us carry to this day. I can still see the overlapping patchwork of plant communities that blanket the West, our life support systems. At times I relive that journey in my mind, and the topography of a huge swath of land once again unfurls, from the northern California Coast, eastward across the Cascades to the ancient lakebeds of the Great Basin, into the rugged reefs and monuments of Mesa and Canyon Country, to the backbone of the North American continent—the

P R E F A C E

Rocky Mountains, a dramatic contrast to the Colorado prairie—and from there back to Death Valley and Sonoran Desert lands. This grand sweep of earth holds tales to tell and lessons for the alert seeker of outdoor truth who is ready to pay heed, to learn, and who is willing to become a contributing member of our vital life-communities.

I hope my story will encourage readers like you to step outdoors and “take another look.” I hope you discover the wonders of the natural world, gain a new perspective, and come to cherish the earth. May the journey bring joy. May it bring peace. May it lead to the Source of Life.

## Acknowledgments

Thanks to family for jogging my memory. Thanks especially to Don and Amy, who kept journals. Don's entries covered the first part of the trip from July to November. Unfortunately, his second journal was lost somewhere along the way. Amy wrote her diary during the second half of the trip, and her colorful calendars recorded our itinerary each day. Lots of family photos kept the details accurate, but I have edited journal entries freely. Any inconsistencies are mine alone. Thanks also to the National Park Service and America's state parks. Their active websites not only offer maps, but also animal and plant lists. Their information refreshed facts about geography and geology. If I had questions, the staff obligingly replied to emails and helped to clear up important details.

Thanks to those who were kind enough to critique my early drafts. I appreciate your eagle eyes and helpful comments. At the risk of leaving someone out—please forgive me—I am grateful to Allan Hansen, Brian Larsen, Daun Weiss, Edy Harrington, Judy Gama Strausser, Marilyn Livingston, Ned Livingston, Maxine Cambra, Nancy Milton, Pat Underwood, Robert Milton, Tammy Douse, Tom Wolph, and Ryan Belong. My especial thanks to Caroline Kirk, Maggi Milton, and to my husband, Don Kirk, who read the manuscript more than once and gave thoughtful and unflinchingly honest critiques.

I also wish to acknowledge my debt to art instructors Bert Oldham and Elizabeth Burnham. Even though it has been many years since my classes at Shasta Community College in Redding, California, their artistic teachings still echo in my ear. My thanks also to Pastor Bill Feeser of Saint James Lutheran Church in Redding, whose encouragement and spiritual insights have expanded my understanding of the joyful Christian Way.

Readers will appreciate the camping freedom we had in 1976–1977, but times have changed. Today more campers are enjoying the outdoors.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Too many can overwhelm beautiful places, ruin campsites, and destroy local habitats. Forty years have passed since our trip. In most of the places I mention, open camping has changed to recreational day use only, or the sites have become regulated campgrounds. Our thanks to the U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, State Parks, and the National Park Service for guarding the beautiful and sacred places of the earth and for constantly improving their campgrounds.

# PROLOGUE

## Sabbatical 1976–1977

### *A Time Apart*

WE TOOK NATE, AGE eleven, and Amy, age nine, out of school along with borrowed math, social studies, and spelling books. We rented the house to friends and arranged to have our mail forwarded. We packed the trailer and camper truck with provisions, camping equipment, fishing gear, and even my featherweight sewing machine. Don installed a CB radio as a safety factor and purchased Walkie-Talkies. The children stored their pup tent, sleeping bags, and assorted books and treasures in the camper benches. Don packed camera gear, snake hook, fly rod, and tackle box. He bought a rock hammer for each of us, and we declared ourselves rock hounds. His study project would take us to the Rocky Mountains in the fall and the Sonoran Desert in the spring. This would be a firsthand look at wild edible plants and their plant communities, studies that were central to his graduate work. Don packed every available natural history field guide and ready-reference in the book box. That's when I determined I needed a project too: I would use the time to finally master watercolor painting.

I gathered my student painting equipment into my old wooden paintbox. I purchased a dozen nine-by-twelve-inch sketchbooks, extra tubes of watercolor paint, and a Boy Scout backpack with square corners that was just the right size. I pre-cut good watercolor paper to store under bunk cushions along with a large, sturdy board for support. I also packed drawing pencils, erasers, drafting pens, and India ink in a metal tackle box.



## THE ROAD TO BEAVER PARK

That year I painted *en plein air*, which meant I was at the mercy of wind and sun, gnats, mosquitoes, and deer flies, disturbed by passers-by and visiting dogs. I was too warm or too cold by turns. I grew alert to crawling ticks and free-range cattle. Yet that year I carried my art pack and folding stool into some of the most incredible landscapes on the planet: the canyons, deserts, mountains, and river valleys of the western United States. Awed, amazed, and humbled by what we found there, I sketched with pen and pencil and worked with watercolor paints. I looked, walked, listened, sniffed, and absorbed the changes in temperature and the shift of air currents. I felt the miracle of rain, saw the contrast of light and shade, and observed the myriad forms of leaf and twig and branching vine, insects, small mammals, fish, and fowl. To this day, my mind overflows with those images of abundant life.

For all of us, this was no intellectual exercise. This was a journey of the heart. We grew to love the way the great outdoors is put together. Daily we came to know it better and to understand what makes it work. Each day held something different: field study, fishing trip, sketching trip, photo shoot, rock hunt, picnic, travel adventure, wildflower quest, or discovery hike. After fourteen months, we returned home with field study completed and watercolors in hand. Yet our Sabbatical study trip surprised me with more than I ever anticipated or planned. Somewhere along the way, our journey of respite and renewal turned into pilgrimage.



The most important thing is the awakening.  
That joy of awakening and discovery is what it's like to be a child.<sup>1</sup>

1. Paul Gorman, qtd. in Louv, *Last Child in the Woods*, 296.

# PART I

Point out the road I must travel;  
I'm all ears, all eyes before you.

—Ps 143:8B THE MESSAGE



Rocky Point, Patrick's Point State Park, Northern California Coast

# 1

## The Pacific Coast

*Trial Run, April 1976*

### Tide splash, transition, and other time

Look for the edges between habitats: where the trees stop and a field begins; where rocks and earth meet water. Life is always at the edges.<sup>1</sup>

“Watch out for sneaker waves,” Don hollers. “Keep one eye on the sea!” Nate and Amy dash toward the ocean. “Cold water will keep them from going out too far,” he adds, “and the water is shallow for a long way out.” We turn away from the beach. I shoulder my art pack and follow Don into the dunes.

Walking with a naturalist is hardly heart-pumping exercise. We amble along, look, touch, sniff crushed leaves, and listen to the surf. We note locations and area conditions. Don points out the lay of the land. Natural drainage troughs serve to channel runoff. Signs of erosion mark the dunes. Dune succession is easy to see on this beach, from flat sand to foredunes, back dunes, and coastal land.

The dunes have their own ecosystem. The early springtime wildflowers beg identification. Don pulls out the wildflower guide to check names:

1. Ibid., 172.

## THE ROAD TO BEAVER PARK

beach pea, dune tansy, bush lupine. White-crowned sparrows flit through the chaparral broom. We follow deer tracks in the mud where a small creek meanders to the sea. I stop to sketch dune grasses, lines of slender stalks bending with the wind.

We top the rise of a major dune and gaze out to sea. The flat beach extends north and fades into fog near the headland.

“Are we really going to do this for a whole year?” I ask.

Don grins at me. It’s unbelievable! Don has been granted a sabbatical leave. Officially it’s field study in the Rockies and the Southwest. For once we will have the freedom to explore during fall and springtime, the very months that are impossible on a school schedule. I am brimming with questions and plans.

My tour leader plunges down the sandy slope to the beach. I follow, a shoe-filling endeavor. The beach is partly land, partly water, and the balance shifts back and forth. The sand looks barren but is home to a mixture of plants and animals both aquatic and terrestrial. Don calls this a transition zone, technically an ecotone, since it is rich with life from both land and sea. “Transition zone” rings in my ear. An appropriate term to describe not only the beach, but also us at this moment in our lives. A year apart from our normal routines and home habitat will change us all.

We separate. Don wanders over to where the children dig near the water. I plunk down beside a low mound in the sand. I empty sand out of my shoes and admire the hardy plant—sand verbena—that clings tenaciously to the shifting landscape. The wind peppers me with tiny grains, but I open my sketchbook and draw the yellow blooms. I move to the other side of the mound and find a warm spot out of the wind. I sink back against a driftwood log. My mind spins. Will the tent trailer be adequate? We need warmer clothes and blankets. Will the children keep up with their studies? What about mail delivery? And will the house be OK? Will togetherness become a burden? How am I going to spend my time? I have the answer to that. I will review my art lessons, hone my drawing and painting skills, and perhaps, at long last, I will learn to paint watercolors. I will have time to practice, practice, practice.

My first day *en plein air* is less than productive. My senses are overwhelmed. The warmth of the sun, soft sand, the space of sea and sky before me—I want nothing more than to sit and absorb it all. This sandy earth feels more solid than I remember. Every move I make hollows out even more sand, shaping a bowl to hold me in place. I squint in the bright light, the

## THE PACIFIC COAST

better to see down the beach to the waterline. That flat playground is the edge of the landmass that rises out of the sea. I draw with my eyes the long undulating lines of surf and beach that disappear into the distance. The view expands into space—infinite space and light—everywhere light in the overarching sky. My art professor would point out that I'm looking at the most basic art components: mass, space, and light.

At times like this, why is it I feel so much a part of the earth? What draws me to the vastness of space? Why do I seek the light?

A wind gust scatters sand over me and ends my reverie. I put my sketchbook away. I can't paint today. The wind will blow sand into my watercolor pans and ruin the colors. I shoulder my pack and run to catch up with my family.

We walk the waterline and sidestep incoming surges that swirl over the sand. Bits of seaweed and aquatic grasses float on the tide and drape themselves gracefully on the beach. I stoop to pick up a perfect snail shell, a tiny marvel of functional housing. Small pieces of sculpted driftwood lay half buried in the sand, along with scraps of bright orange-and-white crab shells. I can't resist reaching for occasional stones that glisten in the receding water. Smooth and round, the white pebbles lay in my hand like small moons.

The children dance around us, playing tag with the waves. They spot the first sand dollar shell and race back to show us. Off come their shoes, and splashing begins in earnest. I kick off my sneakers and wade into the shock of cold water. Waves rush in. I am knee-deep. I hold my breath as the tide pulls away again, swirling sand around my feet. Laughing, we splash back toward shore, our feet blue from the cold. The next wave follows right behind us, and we run to rescue our shoes.

On this day of sun and sand and splashing tide, we first sense "other" time—something apart. Our odyssey will not be governed by clocks or calendars, just seasons and cycles, day and night, patterns of existence that break up time, define it, give it a point of reference. I watch the waves come in. The rhythmic succession flows shoreward. With my artist's eye, I try to memorize the curving path of tidewaters, the ripples on the surface. Those lines on paper will take on their own rhythm. The tide swirls higher, and we scramble even farther back on the sand to put on our shoes. Our space-time dimension has come right down to practical matters: it's lunchtime.

We enjoy two more days before the rains begin. We hike the Rim Trail, which leads into deep forests of spruce and fir. I sketch ferns with their own

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rhythmic leaf patterns and spirals of emerging new fronds. When Don and the children take the long trail down to the rocks, I sit on an overlook bench and try with little success to paint the ocean view, with its shoreline curving into the distance. My painting is too watery, too pale. Later we all stand at the rail and hand around binoculars, looking for the unmistakable spout of water that signals a whale.

Each evening we hike down to the rocks and wait for sunset colors. We climb onto gigantic boulders and sit as close to the crashing waves as we dare, just out of the waterline. We identify brown pelicans that fly close to us in follow-the-leader formation. They rise and dip like trained dancers. Western gulls idle along the tide line, pecking at piles of seaweed. An enormous wave crashes right in front of us, spraying our rock as we scramble. I jump back from the front slab to the next one. Deep in the crevice between the massive sedimentary boulders, the tidewater swirls around, bringing garbage with it. A plastic jug and other debris float onto a gravel bar and stay there. How out of place it looks, how wrong. I turn away.

The low sun disappears behind a fog bank on the horizon. Colors soften somewhat to an orange-violet, but the fog veils any dramatic drop into the ocean. My painterly eye records the monochromatic color scheme. Why does it seem so right? Everything belongs here except the garbage.

We sit a few moments longer in the twilight that separates daylight from the darkness of the coming night. I study the series of gray tones that now cloak the rhythm of the sea. What a lesson in values! Only a master painter could manage so many gradations of gray without losing the scene.

The children lead the way up the steep trail by the fading light. It is time for campfire stories, hot cocoa, and early-to-bed. Tomorrow we will hike the redwood grove a few miles north of camp.

A wind comes up in the night. It sighs through the trees and scatters fog drip that has collected on needles and branches. The huge drops of water resound on the roof of the tent trailer. By morning, the rain has begun in earnest—a soft, steady, soaking drizzle. We scrap plans for our redwood hike. We play games and read the books we brought. Later we drive to the grocery store to buy seafood and get a weather forecast. The coastline is socked in; clouds and rain will continue for several days.

Nate has caught a cold, and we can't keep warm enough in the tent trailer. At night when I climb into bed, the bedding is damp where the outer edge of the mattress meets the tent. By morning, the dampness has crept inward. We have no good way to dry it out. The four of us huddle

THE PACIFIC COAST

inside the trailer discussing our options. Clearly, this arrangement will not do for prolonged bad weather. We need a rig that can handle minor illness, storms, wind, and desert heat. We pack up and head home. The redwoods will have to wait.



[God] alone stretches out the heavens and treads on the waves of the sea . . .  
When he passes me, I cannot see him; when he goes by, I cannot perceive him.

—JOB 9:8, 11, NIV





Piñon Pine Cone, Nevada

## 2

### The Great Basin, Nevada *Eagle Lake and Bob Scott Campground*

Sagebrush country, a horned toad, and desert art

“WAIT, MOM!” NATE SHOUTS just as I am shutting the house door. “The bug net!” He dives past me at the last minute to find that basic piece of equipment. I’m glad he thought of it now. Don is already in the driver’s seat, but the rest of us—Amy, teenage cousin Tevis, and me—pace beside the truck and trailer. I rack my brain for anything else we might be forgetting as I dig into my purse for dark glasses.

Our neighbor shouts from the fence, “God bless you! Have a great time!”

I wave back and smile. Little do I realize how prophetic her farewell will prove to be. At this moment, however, I doubt that God has anything to do with this trip. We have taken to heart the old Scout motto: “Be prepared.” Well, we will be once the bug net is found.

Nate comes back panting. “It was under my bed,” he says.

Don asks, “Do we have the snake hook?”

The answer is affirmative, so we all climb in and Don gears up for the long ride ahead. It’s July of 1976, and we are finally on our way. Our homemade camper sits like a little cabin on the four-wheel-drive pickup truck. The new twenty-foot Prowler travel trailer follows along behind. We

## THE ROAD TO BEAVER PARK

are going to love it; it's self-contained with a bathroom and even a shower, and it will be our protection against bad weather and travel conditions. Not to be forgotten, Don and the boys have loaded the rowboat upside-down onto the top of the trailer. They dream of lake-fishing in the Rockies.

Our road leads out of the valley and rises into the Northern California foothills. The United States of America is two hundred years old this month—land of the free, home of the brave. We venture forth.

*DON: Already delayed one day because of car trouble, so I stop to check things on way to Lassen. Discover two of three boat straps have come loose. If I hadn't tied the boat on at the rear with rope at the last minute, we would have lost our boat. We stop at Bogard Ranger Station for lunch. Temperature warm. Drive on to Eagle Lake. Hot. Park in camp next to someone else from home.*

*Eagle Lake sits in an ancient crater mostly forested with ponderosa pine, some incense cedar, and open areas of sage. Lake is warm, water level quite low. Western grebes common. Two grebes in courtship ritual dive to the shallow bottom; each picks up a large strand of algae in its beak. They surface and present the algae symbolically to each other almost neck-to-neck, then swim side-by-side, peering this way and that, drop the algae, and make up-and-down motions with their necks, bending them into sharp shepherd's crooks. Looks painful, but to the birds it's a necessary preliminary to breeding.*

*Osprey fly about one hundred feet overhead. Also in camp: yellow pine chipmunks, gray squirrels, golden-mantled ground squirrels, Steller's jays, deer, even cattle. Robins all about. A young one hops after an adult bird, chirping mightily, and finally pecks at the ground. All it gets is a beak full of pine needles, but it will soon learn.*

The next day, we break camp early, too excited to sleep. The morning drive leads down out of the Cascades into western Nevada sagebrush country. We turn east at Reno, and the Great Basin Desert unfolds—undulating foothills, alkali lakebeds, meadows dotted with cattle, dry washes, and rocky canyons. Wide valley floors give rise to mountain ranges colored by minerals, sparsely vegetated at their lower altitudes, and topped by timbered upper slopes.

Sand Mountain comes into view. An artist's delight, the sculptured white dune stands out against dark blue mountains in a windswept gallery of pure form. Dunes are unexpected in this part of the desert, and we stop to photograph. The white sand is made up of quartz particles ground from Sierra granite by ancient glaciers. Over the centuries it washed down to the

## THE GREAT BASIN, NEVADA

Walker River Delta. Picked up by winds that swept across the desert, the sand was deposited over thirty miles to the northeast at the foot of these mountains. The white dunes have built up to about six hundred feet high. With our binoculars we can see a dune buggy nearing the top and a family of hikers.

Don and Tevis set up their cameras. Nate and Amy scout around in the sage. Amy stalks a small butterfly that flutters from bush to bush, just out of reach. It looks like a Sand Mountain Blue butterfly, unique to this area. Nate spots a horned toad partially submerged in the sand and catches it. Not a toad at all but a lizard, it is fairly docile and submits to being handled. Its back is covered with red-and-gray spines that look exactly like miniature mountain ranges, a living topography of perfect protective colors. The children carefully examine the horned lizard. I walk a short distance away to listen for singing dunes. Shifting sand can produce a soft rustling sound, even an eerie boom at times. I listen intently, but today the desert only whispers, a soft stirring in the sage, not singing. I'll have to come back. We load up again. Nate reluctantly lets the lizard go. It belongs here, not in captivity.

The next sagebrush valley opens wide. Don points out ancient watermarks on the hills that ring the basin: old lake levels long forgotten. The land assaults my senses as we drive. Mountains rise and fall, stretching away into the distance with a geologic rhythm. This is basin-and-range topography—a series of north-south mountain ranges that spread across Nevada. To me, they look like stupendous waves on a sagebrush ocean.

We drive halfway across the state, negotiating canyons before we climb yet another mountain pass. The highway follows the Pony Express route of the late 1860s for some distance. We stop to see the ruins of crumbling stone walls where the way station served riders along the old east-west track. Don identifies rabbitbrush and other plants. We hunt for the spring but find no sign of a water source. They must have had a good water supply nearby. We keep glancing at the horizon, and I half expect a lone rider to appear and sweep past us in a cloud of dust. History comes alive in the imagination.

*DON: Bright sunshine today. Head for Bob Scott campground east of Austin, Nevada. Arrive about 3:00 p.m. and set up travel trailer. The boys and I go four-wheeling to the south up Austin Mountain. Elevation here is about 7500 feet. Beautiful aspen groves grow high on the mountainside, with no other trees around. Lower down are forests of piñon pine.*

## THE ROAD TO BEAVER PARK

In the evening at the camp table, we read parts of *Roughing It*, Mark Twain's story of traveling by stagecoach on a different route across this desert. That was in the days of the silver and gold strike in Virginia City, Nevada. The stagecoach was filled with mailbags, which required that Twain and his brother lie on top of the pile. As the stage traversed this rough, untamed territory, the brothers bounced and slid around, fending off Twain's unabridged dictionary, which "avalanched" loose as the coach shifted, threatening damage to life and limb. We laugh, but next morning we make sure everything is tied down before we start out.

*DON: Late in the night, a hippie couple pulls in across from us and camps. They drive an old 1953 Dodge. Early morning around 6:00, they try to start up and can't, so they find somebody up who has jumper cables. All the noise, confusion, and car exhaust makes it impossible to sleep, so we get up too. We walk up to the prospect hole where last evening the kids found garnet-like quartz just lying on the ground. Turns out to be a cinnabar prospect hole, the quartz stained with iron. Take off about 9:30 from Bob Scott and head to Lehman Caves, seventy-five miles past Ely. Heavy headwind again.*

Every turn of the road brings new images. In the desert sunlight, I'm especially struck by strong contrasts of dark junipers against low brush. Shadowed cliff faces oppose rounded hill shapes. A lone cottonwood casts dramatic shadows, the darkest element for miles. My art lessons for the day are in the vivid contrasts and rhythmic placement of earth forms.

During lunch break, I pull out my watercolors and try to paint the fleeting pictures. Watery blobs are all I can make of the hill shapes. It looks like I have never had a lesson in my life, but as a matter of fact, I have done lots of drawing, including a year spent sketching wild edible plants. I have taken three classes in watercolor, but somehow this is different. Lacking the control of classroom or home studio, I am all thumbs with my travel equipment, and the wind is blowing my paper. I need some large clips or a rubber band. Lessons are all very well, but I know at some point every serious artist has to figure out how to do it their way, find their own images, learn what works for them, and develop a personal style.

I sigh and prop my sketchpad against my art pack to dry. My visual memory doesn't translate to paper yet. Not only is my technique poor—too much water in the brush—I am overwhelmed by the variety of landscapes and forms I see along the road. Something tugs at my memory; I feel like

THE GREAT BASIN, NEVADA

I have been here before. Aren't these the same art elements I identified at the coast?

It's the big three: *Mass*—the desert showcases earth forms so varied and at times so enormous that I gain a new sense of reality. From boulders by the side of the road to whole mountain ranges that rise dignified and implacable, the contours unfurl as the road winds through them. *Light*—the abiding light of the sun casts brilliance and shadow in varying degrees from light to dark as it dominates the daytime sky. It illuminates the wonders of the earth down to the smallest detail. *Space*—the hollows of valley and canyon depths are filled with space that extends in all directions, boundless. It fills the immense bowl of the sky from horizon to horizon and beyond.

*DON: Driving across the Great Basin Desert, we see a steady progression from arid to moist conditions. There's more diversity in the plant cover. Every mountain range appears wetter and higher, with increasingly lush plant and animal communities. The Snake Range is the highest. That's where we're going. All this space expands the mind. We see bigger, think bigger, breathe bigger.*

The children clear the picnic table, and we travel on. I'm beginning to agree with Bernard de Fontenelle (1657–1757), the French mathematician and philosopher who said, "I always think of nature as a great spectacle, somewhat resembling the opera."<sup>1</sup> Scene after scene rolls by. My road-riding viewpoint is changing. I no longer think in terms of mileposts, road conditions, camp comforts, or time schedules. Mentally, I shift into drawing mode. We round another curve, and each rock, bush, tree, and creek bed takes on a particular identity—an actuality. My artistic instincts prod me to render each particular form in literal detail. I want to capture the descriptive line, shape, gesture, and character that give individuality. Don, my resident naturalist, itches to study it all, to accurately describe true-to-life behavior, character, role, status, position, capacity, and especially relationships. It's clear that he and I bear a kindred spirit that is at once curious and creative. Artist and scientist both begin with hands-on, ground-level observation. To skip this step of learning is to miss basic information.

Don gears down for the slow climb up the last mountain pass of the day. Slow speed is all the better for me to see what's alongside the road. From short grasses to mountainside terrain, the scenic wonders roll past. We travel in a monumental work of art.

1. De Fontenelle, *Lapham's Quarterly*, 264.

THE ROAD TO BEAVER PARK



Give me your lantern and compass, give me a map, So I can find my way.

—Ps 43:3, THE MESSAGE



Lehman Creek, Snake Range, Eastern Nevada