

## Penn Concedes His Territories · *Michael J. Rosen*

### I.

A man named McCleary is Penn's replacement.  
Spence McCleary. Unmarried. Early thirties.  
By autumn, the territory will be his  
alone, but now, he's Penn's new partner,  
passenger, office mate, shadow, heir,  
and challenger, whose major experience  
in the notions line was with a competing firm,  
was all West Coast, Seattle to Sacramento.

With colored ball-tipped straight pins (a stock item  
whose annual sales Penn has watched decline  
in recent tallies), Penn and Spence are plotting  
the Midwest region, claiming each destination  
like an explorer or an astronaut  
with color-coded pins instead of flags.  
"Looks awfully random," Spence observes, retreating  
a few feet from the map as if searching  
among the clusterings of given points  
for a constellation to name The Great Midwest.

Penn's region borders the Great Lakes, touches  
the Great Plains, includes Great Falls, MO,  
and the States' great river—but Penn has failed  
to convince Spence that there is a claim to greatness  
here, within or throughout, yet it does  
seem great to Penn, who has worn this very route  
into the material of the heartland—or, rather,  
repaired across the heartland, as a danner mends  
a patch in a threadbare, but favored garment.

“Looks like a lot of remnants,” Spence concludes, waving his hand over the map’s dramatic swatches, “the stuff nobody wanted in the middle of nowhere.” Penn’s heard (albeit never seen) the boasted grandeur of his colleague’s West. It bored him, quite frankly. Big-scale bores him. It’s too demanding. It’s plain depriving. Ta dah. And even if no one else is around, you feel obliged to be a tourist with a tourist’s feelings.

“I’m the first one to admit,” Penn says, “it’s not as though we keep the country on pins and needles, but still we’ve got essentials. It’s not that thumbtacks *can’t* compare to microchips they *don’t*. And you don’t compare places, either,” Penn says, “unless you think geography is built of opposites. The opposite of mountains isn’t flat, of ocean, the dry land. Things fit together, Spence. You don’t look at a town and say it isn’t a city yet, or a countryside and think, undeveloped. I don’t think a farm is behind the times just as a shopping mall isn’t ahead.” Spence takes a highlighter and Xs Kansas with an iridescent orange: “The place where time stands still.” This flusters Penn, but eggs on his untenable defense. “Look, Spence, each place is just one time out of a lot of possible times. Topeka, for instance, isn’t backward or ahead, it’s near or far, depending on where you go.”

With Kansas successfully tainted, Spence moves on: Wisconsin is pink, Iowa, chartreuse. The markers, another popular item, are scented: key lime and passionfruit confuse the air. “But even the name,” Spence rejoins, “‘Mid-’

meaning muddle, neither here nor there.  
And ‘-western,’ what’s that supposed to mean? *not*  
eastern or southern or northern or Californian?  
*That’s obvious.*” “I always thought it implied  
‘frontier,’” Penn answers, “As in ‘Go west,  
young man.’” “*Frontier?* Maybe centuries ago  
but not since a seventh of the world saw  
Neil Armstrong pussyfoot around the moon,  
not since Cousteau explored Atlantis,” Spence says,  
pushing the last few pins in Illinois.  
“You know, the lost continent.” Penn knows.

Penn unwinds a nylon thread to link the pins  
into the radiating travel routes  
that are as much Penn’s own as the rehearsed  
synaptic paths of Penn’s motor neurons.  
“You’re right, Spence. What’s lost today is not  
a continent like old Atlantis, but regions,  
the little parts that don’t combine into one  
giant green meaning everything  
between Canada and Mexico.”  
What’s lost on Spence, at least on their first round  
on the road, is the indigenous, the details  
that recognition, not surprise, reveals.  
Penn can remember when a region’s boundaries  
were real. Each had its own identity,  
its own news, its separate history.  
One place found out about its neighbors only  
when there were disasters or visiting relatives.  
“Telegraph, telephone, and tell-  
a-traveling salesman, used to be the news.  
But now,” Penn concedes, in fairness to Spence,  
“news is nothing new. It travels  
from everywhere to everywhere like lightning  
before the thunder—and all you’ve got to do  
is count the seconds before the inevitable.”

On their initial trips together, along  
with notions, Penn found that he was selling the region  
to Spence whose disaffection followed them  
cross-country like an imminent storm.  
“Tell me, Gordon, wasn’t there a day  
when you thought about the world you were missing?”  
Spence asked, amid his running commentary  
on how every locale through the region was flat  
and dreary and so like the one before and—ready?—  
his ultimage charge, “Plain uninspiring,”  
as though a salesman refueled on inspiration  
like his car on Unleaded Supreme.  
Penn took the occasion (assault) to explain  
the difference between their outlooks with Velcro,  
an item featured fully in their samples.  
“Let’s say that everything has tiny hooks.”  
Just for effect, Penn passed Spence a keycase  
sealed with complementing strips of Velcro.  
“Now, if something is going to catch the attention,  
the other surface can’t be slick or hooked itself,  
it has to have that roughened, tangled pile.  
You with me here?” Penn asked as Spence offered  
a token glance in each hook-filled direction.  
“Well, you have to quit looking for the grand  
to knock you over. Think about fraying  
a little. Relax. Wear down your smooth ideals  
and, by degrees, you’ll get attached to things.”

It troubled Penn to defend the Midwest,  
the place where he was born, reared, where  
he traveled half his life, and where he’ll retire.  
On drives (alone) through Waukesha and Xenia,  
another kind of map unfolds in his mind.  
Clearly unnegotiable (as if  
a soul besides Penn would give a damn),  
this map is hand-tinted with local color,  
highlighted not with monuments, museums,

exits, or parks, but with one traveller's views:  
places off and on the beaten path  
where Penn has spent his time: the succession  
of storefronts—new car showroom, Baptist church,  
Chiropractic clinic—that he can trace,  
squares where a circus or a farmer's market camped,  
man-made lakes bordered with cottages  
and trailer homes with gerry-rigged additions.  
Here would be Penn's hours on and off the job,  
as though one crossed the state of Work as simply  
as a county line, and *here*, his rests, his meals,  
his clients, considered family by Penn,  
that Spence will marry into, for better or worse.

## II

Other than these last few rides with Spence,  
Penn never shared his travels with anyone.  
He kept them to himself, made few efforts  
toward capturing or recreating what passed  
before and then, neither all too slowly  
nor all too quickly, behind him.  
If Penn were selling vacations rather than notions,  
he would have gleaned much more than souvenirs  
from stops along his routes—souvenirs!  
each one pretends to claim, *you're somewhere else*,  
but woodburned, glittered, or handpainted,  
they all insist, *remember, you're going home*.

Penn remembers a program in the Great Escapes  
Travel Series that he and his wife attended  
at the auditorium of the local college  
where Penn and Marian were graduated  
enough years earlier that the same lectures  
governed a world that Palestine, Chosen,  
Persia, and Latvia had occupied.  
The slide show, "Hitting Below the Corn Belt"

(at least Penn dubbed it that afterwards)  
included three carrousel of black-and-white  
decreptitude, abandonment, distress,  
and quote/unquote, Midwestern rustic charm.  
Penn felt himself profoundly, personally,  
misunderstood by each and every frame,  
and while he'd never considered himself an expert  
on anything but his few lines, Penn grew  
self-conscious on his next few trips, sighting  
would-be slides of what he would portray.

Twice after that, Penn had the inclination  
to share his travels—he wouldn't have said “a lifetime  
of travel” at the time, though recently  
and with reluctant pride, he's heard himself  
pronounce the term. One anniversary,  
Marian bought Penn a compact Polaroid  
and Penn returned each trip with stacks of snapshots,  
each as thick as a slide sandwiching  
a foreign specimen within its fluids,  
and with the unwieldy atlas, spent an evening  
at the dinner table reassembling  
his week-long journey with pictures of quirky motels,  
gingerbreaded public buildings, pastures,  
crosshatched fields, old-fashioned pharmacies  
(old-fashioned *anything*, as though the past  
were more authentic, more emblematic, to Penn),  
and civic monuments commemorating  
people that Penn would learn about from inscriptions  
but then, passing the photo at home, would forget.  
Penn kept the camera with him for a year,  
regaling the family with full-color  
installments of Marco Polo Penn's Midwest:  
a collectable set like the volumes at Shopper's World.  
But Penn observed, even before the children  
(who were too old to feign enjoyment, too young  
to admit to their father they felt none),

that one photo was so much like the next —  
it was the next: a photo, and, incidentally  
another place. And the fault? the camera's? Penn's?  
or maybe a problem with tenses: no future,  
at least immediate, would be returning  
anyone but Penn to those very spots.  
Though never formally expressed, Penn concluded  
travel is even less communicable  
than a hobby (a word that's used to justify  
time to people with other sympathies).

Penn's second attempt began with "Writing for Life,"  
a class at the community college that he took  
as part of his pledge with Marian to be home Mondays,  
to learn to share more of their time apart.  
They both kept journals: a travelogue  
for Penn, a book of memories for his wife.  
Penn's trouble was making the Midwest, familiar  
places he'd been so many times before,  
sound as if he'd actually traveled there.  
What Penn would choose seemed to have been written  
before he arrived; his whole notebook read  
like a diary of staying home with Marian,  
while Marian struggled to find any distance  
to impose on her life, so that she could look  
anywhere but just around. Her journal  
was set in Missouri, in those foreign years  
before she met her husband, before Ohio,  
before the house that Penn sold when she died.  
They each kept a pair of journals, alternately  
writing in one and then the other, and trading  
the latest pages the day that Gordon would leave  
so each could read about and write to the other.  
The children were out of the house by then, his wife  
had fallen ill, and for three years their journals  
crisscrossed in a conversation of their own,  
for Penn and Marian rarely talked of them.

Her illness finally ended the exchange;  
by then, there was no time to spend apart.  
Penn remained bedside, while medication  
kept her traveling outside the here and now  
of pain and self-pity and Gordon Penn.

After her death, his territory changed,  
emotionally, that is. Penn ceased to log  
anything but mileage and expenses.  
Returning to towns he'd never thought twice about  
made him see, despite his late or fraught  
attempts at sharing his routes with his wife,  
that she was what distinguished one place from the next.  
She was variation itself, the constant  
north of the compass needle, that oriented  
Penn to home regardless of the distance.  
One place is different from another place  
not because of the people living there—  
for people live everywhere the same when you think  
of people as reasons for living—but because  
of someone at home or in the car beside you  
on whom no news, however known, is lost.

### III

In retrospect, what Penn is picturing,  
unfolding still in his head, is not a map  
but something like an acupuncture chart,  
where every yellow and red and blue pin  
would chart the keenest points of pleasure and pain  
discovered by asking and by accident  
along the body of his territory.  
And just as oddly as in that ancient science—  
a needle inserted at one point effects  
its benefits at a second, distant point—  
Penn can't explain his general well-being  
by pointing here or there in his Midwest,  
citing each attachment with a reason.  
It's this that Spence McCleary won't inherit.