

## America, 2017

by Johnna Kaplan

### East

I spend six hours on a train, rolling south into a snowstorm that is becoming increasingly ominous. An escaped bobcat is loose in the capital. A lunatic cartoon dictator has just become president. It is possible that nothing will ever make sense again.

I am going to the United States National Arboretum, because there is an absurd romance about the concept of a National Arboretum in a nation that feels fragmented beyond repair. I am going to see America this year, what I can see of it, while I still can.

The D.C. sky is colorless, and delicate snowflakes swirl around me, creating an eerie white fog. I pull my hood around my face like a 17th century lady setting out on a perilous journey.

Distantly visible through the whirling snow are the National Capitol Columns, built in 1828 to decorate the East Portico but abandoned in 1864 when the architects changed plans. A historic mistake happily salvaged for a public amusement.

I am the only person walking in the Arboretum, wrapped in my veil of snow. Perhaps the bobcat will appear, blink at me with yellow eyes, then vanish into dust.

The Corinthian columns stand atop a slope, forming a silent sandstone acropolis. I wander between and beneath their useless grandeur. A circular plaque reads, in part, "These columns designed for the United States Capitol continue to reaffirm our nation's commitment to fulfilling the dreams of a flourishing land and people."

The snow, which had briefly given way to a clear and almost sunny sky, begins to fall once more.

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Centralia is a riddle, a place that is not a place. Accounts of its demise note that it once had a population of over 1,000; that it had churches and businesses; that it was normal, except for the abundance of anthracite beneath its streets.

In 1962, a garbage fire ignited a coal seam deep beneath Centralia. It spread through a network of abandoned mine tunnels. Fissures appeared in the ground. A yard split open and formed a chasm which almost swallowed a young boy. In 1984, Centralia was evacuated. In 1992, its

remaining buildings were seized through eminent domain and mostly condemned by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. In 2002, its zip code was discontinued.

In this erstwhile place, I am looking for what remains of a highway. The subterranean fire has rendered it too hazardous to drive on. On Google Maps, it is a thin white phantom limb running parallel to the road that replaced it. It is labeled “PA-61 (Destroyed).”

But the road is not destroyed, not quite. A median runs down the center of it, from which dead trees sprout, like a slim island in a hellish river. In places, the pavement has split open.

A fractured rainbow of spray-painted words and shapes extends the length of the roadway. A “Fuck Trump” in white is answered by a “Hell Yes” in black. There is one “Hillary 4 Prison.” There is a turquoise swastika, which I contemplate for several moments, a symbol calling for my death, painted in my favorite color. But mostly there are layers of initials, names, dates. There is an American flag, and an intricate Día de Muertos-style skull.

On this icy weekday afternoon, several others have come to frolic amid the colorful ruin. Girls in UGG boots take pictures of each other against a backdrop of decay.

It is 2017, and the fire is down there somewhere. Experts say it may burn for another 250 years.

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In mid-February, a Russian spy ship is spotted skulking 30 miles off the Connecticut coast. The story creates a brief flurry of nervous amusement in my little coastal city.

On the evening of the day the ship appears, I walk along familiar downtown streets softened by the pink light of sunset and think how normal everything seems, and how strange that is.

A few weeks later, I drive my car onto a ferry headed to Long Island, past the lighthouses and uninhabited islands of the Sound.

This sliver of New York was Connecticut until 1676, and if you didn’t already know, you could guess. The coasts are mirror images. Except in Connecticut, beaches stretch flat beyond salt marshes painted in soft pastels, while here, they drop dramatically from cliffs and dunes, and their water darkens from a pale teal to an opaque navy blue.

I drive through pristine hamlets, quieted for winter, seasonal businesses shuttered and shrubs shrouded in protective cloth. In Orient, where the ferry docks on the New York side, I find a small graveyard where twenty enslaved people lie buried beside their owners. Their headstones are little stone nubs, while those of the masters, a husband and wife, are tall and flat, engraved with names and dates. I drive west through hamlets with names like Peconic, Cutchogue, and Mattituck. I stop for wooden windmills, and for roadside curiosities like a 20-foot-tall duck. I

drive east again until I reach the end of the land, in Montauk, where a lighthouse stands high on a hill. A gate is blocking the path that leads up to it: the lighthouse, too, is paused for the season.

I return to Orient as the day is darkening, and the sun descends as the ferry plods homewards. The Russians slunk away down the eastern seaboard days ago. We motor up the river, past the drab shipyard where nuclear submarines are made. The lights are on, glinting in the night.

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The Great Gale of 1815 ripped the forest from Rhode Island's Napatree Point, leaving a sandy, dune-spined spit. The Hurricane of 1938 took out the road, and the cars, and the houses, washed them all away, and the people too.

When you live in New England, what you hear about the 1938 hurricane is how it struck without warning. Everything seemed fine. Everything was normal, and then it wasn't.

Napatree Point is concealed behind a 19th-century carousel and a yacht club and hidden by a high dune. I know to climb it because the smooth sand is blazed with footprints.

I descend onto the beach against a wind that burns my skin through layers of winter clothes. A few indifferent seagulls line up along the waterline. One takes flight, wheels above my head, and – I swear – laughs.

There are a few human things: metal traps, scraps of paper, bits of plastic junk. But mostly there are shells, in a muted rainbow of colors; rocks, glinting silver in the sun; and sand, in overlapping shades of grey and tan, wind-whipped into funny little spikes.

This fragile coast, part of what's called the Outer Lands, was formed by glacial moraine and shaped by a process known as longshore drift. The world changes slowly, until it changes instantly, and all that remains are the gentle curve of the shoreline and the wind whipping the sand.

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I go to the place where George Washington crossed the Delaware, driving through serene wooded acres to a ferry house. The sign says it is "the only existing structure...that witnessed the Crossing of the Continental troops on December 25-26, 1776."

We've all seen the painting. Men, horses, and guns crossing the ice-choked water in unstable boats.

I find my way to the bridge above the river, walk to Pennsylvania as cars rattle by, turn and return to New Jersey again, the cold Delaware below me.

We know the story, even if we never really learned it. They assembled in darkness, in columns, trudged through snow and sleet towards a surprise morning battle. Their password was “Victory or Death.”

I stay in a bland suburban chain hotel. Its address is Scotch Road, and for some reason I look it up. Scotch Road, I read, was here in December 1776. Continental troops marched on it. This anodyne road saw this bold, unfinished, unprecedented idea become a nation.

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Searching the map for edges of places, I notice a group of islands just off Portsmouth, NH, a splotch of an archipelago named New Castle. The smaller islands have names like Goat and Clampit. In May, I drive across a causeway to Great Island, the largest of the group.

Old wooden houses stand straight beside the road. One, with little hearts cut out of blue shutters, wins my attention. A historic plaque affixed to it says: George Walton, 1647.

In 1682, unseen forces repeatedly hurled rocks and other objects at George Walton and his family. It was not the only reported instance of a diabolical shower of stones in early New England, but it was dramatic. It was later recorded in a book, titled *Lithobolia: or, the Stone-Throwing Devil*.

Great Island, deceptively staid, is full of invisible dangers. Edges are vulnerable places.

For example: The FAQ of a waterfront park.

*Are there sharks in the water?*

*It is an ocean.*

*Is there an undertow?*

*Sometimes.*

For example: Fort Constitution, built in 1808 on top of two earlier fortifications, where a faded sign notes that during World War II, this shore was protected by underwater mines and an anti-submarine net.

For example: Fort Stark, where dilapidated buildings are fenced off and plastered with warnings. In 2013, a body was discovered here, at the bottom of an elevator shaft. A news story about the incident quotes one local as saying, “You don’t have things like this in New Castle at all.”

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I drive as far east as I have ever driven, and then I keep driving, until my phone service drops off and pings back to life, sending me a text about the cost of data usage abroad. I drive to the first place in America to see the sunrise, a speck of a town called Lubec, on the Maine coast. Canada is just across the Narrows, past the watery boundary between Eastern and Atlantic Time.

Lubec looks as if the wind has carried everything unnecessary away, and some necessary things too. It feels like an abandoned frontier outpost. In a little park, there is a memorial to lost fishermen. Signs advertising lodging are everywhere, as if people frequently find themselves in Lubec without warning and have to hurriedly arrange a place to spend the night. A row of miniature American flags, the kind tiny children grasp in their fists at small-town parades, are stapled to a faded storefront. Salt and time have battered them, but failed to rip them down.

I check the time of the sunrise and set my alarm early, but I calculate wrong. When I wake at 4:00 a.m. and slide open the hotel room door, the sky is a dull pale blue already, and there's a gleaming strip of golden pink on the horizon. A wooded island in the distance is still shrouded in night, but behind it the low-lying glow is gradually rising higher, adding pastel layers of yellow and peach.

No one else has come outside to witness the first light of day. I am alone at the edge of America, wondering if I'm in the right place at the wrong time.

## **South**

Frederick, MD, is just slightly south of the Mason-Dixon Line, the line where strangers almost-smile at you on sidewalks, the line where memories of the Revolution and the War of 1812 begin to be overtaken by tales of the Civil War.

Aesthetically, Frederick is perfection: facades of brick or wood shingles, painstakingly preserved to honor their imperfections. Shutters with antique holdbacks. Rusty metal star anchors adorning exterior walls. Brick sidewalks punctuated by trees.

Each revitalized block is a palimpsest. Shab Row, an exquisite cluster of shops, was once a slum, and before that a neighborhood of African American artisans. Its name may derive from Sherbro Island, off Sierra Leone, home of an 18th-century slave-trading port.

A shining ribbon of water glimmers through the city, a linear park where ducks bob beneath curved pedestrian bridges. It was built as a flood control project; beneath the streets, massive tunnels channel water away from downtown.

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Avoiding bad traveling weather inland, I flee to Charleston, SC, like a bird blown astray in a storm. The CVB website promises, "Everything you've heard is true."

It also suggests itineraries. There are tours of Fort Sumter (“Travel back in time to the site where the Civil War began...comfortable, spacious boats boarding daily...”) and “adventure sightseeing plantation tours.” One, claiming to be “America’s most photographed plantation,” pairs an image of spectacular live oaks with the words “if these trees could talk.”

One itinerary is called “On a Whim.” The text teases, “Charleston’s cocoon of gentility is a visual feast for anyone who enjoys curious details, secret alleyways, an unexpected pop of blue, and Instagram.” Ashamed, I admit: I do enjoy those things.

In the morning, a parade of vehicles searches for parking spaces, driving slow circles around the Confederate Museum. Pedestrians snap photos of storefronts painted like a roll of Smarties. Everything you’ve heard is not true. And yet. There *are* unexpected pops of blue.

I turn down a shaded street of pale houses and exuberant palms. Patterned bricks and tiles line paths that sneak between buildings. A tired white horse clops by, driven by a silent guide, his carriage momentarily empty of tourists.

Above the gate on the arched entryway of an old slave market, black lettering spells out MART. The building is a museum now. I stand on the cobblestones in the heat, thinking how the word “museum” safely sorts events into the past, as if they’re over, as if they can’t get out and bleed into the present. The palm fronds cast their shadows, black and grey, across the sidewalk.

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In Birmingham, AL, streets burrow underground then emerge again, split themselves around grassy medians, widen and empty out as they travel from shiny center to industrial outskirts. Sometimes a gate closes and a long, long freight train ambles by.

Out where the city blends into its suburbs, a statue of Vulcan rises alarmingly from a red mountain. Raw materials extracted from the earth here were loaded on those long trains and transported to the Sloss Furnaces, to be blasted into pig iron by men who toiled in a complex racial hierarchy. I wander this historic landmark’s horror movie corridors between massive rusty boilers and oversized tools that look like they’ve been abandoned by giants. A crew sets up for a fashion shoot and the past hangs untouched in the air.

Downtown, it seeps up through the sidewalks as I walk between sculptures of snarling metal police dogs, past a statue of Martin Luther King, Jr., to the 16th Street Baptist Church. I watch Europeans in cowboy boots lift expensive cameras to better ogle the memory of American tragedy.

Two days after I leave Alabama, white supremacists gather in Virginia to intimidate, to injure, to kill. Dormant fears to come to life, black and white photos to turn to color.

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I fly into Atlanta and drive out of Atlanta. A man stands at a busy stoplight, holding a paper scrap that reads, "A long way from home."

I drive to Rome. My rental car struggles to reach a clock tower at the top of a hill. Georgia's Rome was named for ancient Rome; it has seven hills and three rivers winding between them. There is a storm gathering, a warning breeze cutting through the Southern heat.

In front of City Hall is a replica of the Capitoline Wolf. The city's website explains: it was a gift from the governor of that other Rome, sent in 1929, "by a signed order of the Italian Dictator, Benito Mussolini," In 1933, Romulus, or perhaps Remus, was "kidnapped," and Italy sent a replacement baby. The statue was taken down when Italy declared war, but in 1952 they put it back.

Downtown Rome has a 1920s movie theatre called the DeSoto and blocks of small storefronts. Children play in little fountains, couples sit on benches, and songs about Jesus seep through car speakers in the pre-thunderstorm heat.

I once read a theory positing that optimists believe America is like Athens, and pessimists believe America is like Rome. Georgia has an Athens too, incidentally, a crowded college town I spent an hour in and instantly disliked. If America declines, falls, torn apart from within by incompetent leaders or breached by invaders or decimated by disease, I suppose there are worse fates than ending up like Georgia's Rome. It's quiet, at least. There are fountains and children playing. The people strolling around the clock tower seem too content to even notice the coming storm.

## **Midwest**

I fly to Minneapolis, land at an airport terminal named for one of the nation's most glamorous Jew-haters. Welcome to Minnesota, we have the nation's largest shopping mall, we also want you dead.

Downtown, I feel like I've been inserted into an urban planning firm's proposal, the kind that gets projected onto a screen at a municipal zoning meeting. Very young corporate drones, overwhelmingly white, dressed in Madewell or Everlane, walk to lunch in groups like kindergartners tethered together on an outing. Clean light-rail trains approach stations, and inoffensive buildings stretch towards a perfect sky. Bars proliferate.

Slowly, the city starts to reveal itself, as cities always do. Overhead, pedestrian Skyways connecting buildings, like glass elevator shafts turned sideways. They link 69 blocks across

seven miles, the longest such network in the world. At the waterfront, the site of the earliest bridge built across the Mississippi – not the first in Minnesota, but anywhere, ever, along all of the river’s 2,300 miles.

I sense there is something important I should learn here, where the Mississippi begins its long journey. But I leave, and follow the river south.

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The Great River Road zigzags slowly from the headwaters of the Mississippi to where the river empties out below New Orleans. It is sometimes called a “National Route,” as if the rest of them aren’t, as if we’re not all irrevocably stuck together.

I am driving the stretch that belongs to Wisconsin, into the so-called Driftless Area. Back before memory, when massive glaciers drifted across the land, this region was spared.

I drive through farmland where roads have no names, just letters, placeholders waiting for populations who never materialized. County Road QQ is followed inexplicably by County Road E.

Rugged bluffs rise above the road, towns balance in the narrow space between them and the river.

Stockholm, population 66, where Swedish flags fly outside tiny storefronts, and businesses have names like Stockholm Pie & General Store.

Trempealeau, where I text my mom, *I’m in Trempealeau*, and she texts back, *You made that up*.

La Crosse, Prairie du Chien, Potosi.

The Mississippi changes from grey-blue to pale silver.

I get lost on roads that cut strange angles through cornfields, and just when panic begins to set in, I emerge from the maze and I’m crossing into Iowa.

I ride up the bluff in Dubuque in a rickety funicular and look down at the river. I imagine it rolling all the way south, dissolving into the Gulf of Mexico beyond those last wisps of Louisiana that are already more water than land.

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Galena, just across the water in Illinois, is no prettier than dozens of other Midwestern river towns, but it believes it is. It also believes in wine, cheese, flavored popcorn, gift shops, and Ulysses S. Grant. There is a U.S. Grant Museum, and you can tour the house where he received



the telegraph telling him he was president, or stay in the hotel that served as his campaign headquarters.

I walk the length of Main Street, thronged with tourists, then escape to the streets that run parallel, the backstage of the show that is Galena. A uniformed Grant walks past me on the sidewalk, and I want to berate this hapless impersonator for expelling the Jews from the South, for stoking hatred in a nation already divided by it, for self-serving false apologies.

But I say nothing. I turn and walk down Main Street again. This time a bearded man wearing a baseball cap is strumming a guitar, singing "Light One Candle." No more than a tiny handful of the tourists can have any idea what the lyrics are about. But there he is, singing of a Jewish uprising in the hometown of Ulysses S. Grant.

As I walk away, I spot something I missed earlier. Heavy, utilitarian floodgates stand open, poised to enclose the center of Galena if the water rises. Some towns paint bright murals on their floodwalls, but perhaps Galena doesn't want to draw attention to this infrastructure, doesn't want to admit that its belief in itself is not as unwavering as it appears.

## **Southwest**

I fly into Las Vegas in the glittering dark then head for Arizona in the early morning, craving places whose history I barely know and whose landscapes look, in satellite images, like cracks in weathered wood and grey veins in brown skin, like ancient wrinkled paper spread flat and pale marble with deep red streaks.

I drive into the November heat. Road signs warn of winds and dust storms. Town names are afterthoughts: Why; Surprise. Rivers are the absence of rivers, with names that recall early miseries.

Dirt tracks loop through cactus wonderlands. The cacti are preposterous and wonderful, like tall green people with extra arms reaching out to friends with no arms at all. The landscape is pure, thrilling Looney Tunes, from the roadrunners that bob along the sidewalks to the cattle ranches with their names in metal above their driveways to the impossibly slim man in jeans and cowboy boots I watch crossing an empty street into a shadow.

In Tucson, threads of Southwestern history I never studied in Northeastern schools braid together and tangle: Mormons and Mexicans and Conquistadors, Pima and Apache, a Civil War battle between Confederates and Californians. An elaborate turquoise dome, more Middle Eastern than Southwestern, stands atop an old courthouse, warm against the cool blue sky.

I drive into the mountains, rounding switchbacks as the air gets thinner.

I come up on a U.S. Border Control checkpoint and think I've driven to Mexico by mistake. But I am not lost, only naive. I did not know that Border Control can station itself at places that are not borders.

I drive on, along bone-dry roads where signs warn of floods.

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In New Mexico, the signs become insistent. DUST STORMS MAY EXIST. They continue like a Burma-Shave ad of disaster preparedness, explaining what to do in the event of a surprise haboob.

New Mexico is terror wrapped in stunning, comfortless beauty. My mind grasps for reference points, like a radio scanning for a signal, but this high desert is not quite like any other place.

I traverse black rock mountains, like giant piles of onyx, on which small, solitary trees occasionally grow, their leaves flaming gold. I cross a bridge spanning the empty space high above the Rio Grande, its delicate steel forced into the rock walls of the gorge. I drive into a sea of snow that isn't snow but gypsum, white and fine, that blows across the road and doesn't turn slick beneath my tires. I walk on a boardwalk over an undulating gypsum beach, but there is no water, only more pure white dunes.

I am stopped at another border that is not a border, waved through because of my rental car, and my Connecticut accent, and my deceptively pale skin.

I stay several nights in the sky: 5,300 feet, 6,900 feet, 7,200 feet. I research altitude sickness: what one might do to prevent it (nothing), how one might predict if one will suffer from it (impossible.)

I drive through whole national forests without seeing evidence of humans. I count occasional cars as I drive between towns through rugged landscapes of grey-green hills and red alien ridges. In the mornings my rental car beeps disconcertingly and its dashboard thermometer flickers between numbers, flashing an ominous snowflake.

The golden trees reappear near Socorro. They glow molten ocher in outlying neighborhoods of Albuquerque, and bathe the quietly captivating streets of the Old Town in fiery light. They are there in Santa Fe, too, as I wander adobe-lined alleys and hidden courtyards.

The air is scented like incense, like medicinal herbs. In Taos the concoction becomes stronger, disorienting and strange. Devoid of tourists, this tourist town feels bored of its own reputation, and old, and tired - or maybe I am old and tired. It is my birthday.

I buy myself turquoise earrings then drive to Taos Pueblo, a few minutes and a thousand years away. I am uneasy about what it means to pay a fee to wander through a neighborhood and stare at other people, other Americans, as if they are museum exhibits. But I go anyway. A clean streak of river ripples through open, dusty ground. The world's sleepest dogs lie in the dirt. Beyond, there are mountains, distant and pale, and in their shadow, mud-walled buildings cluster together, stacked up, conjoined into ancient apartment blocs with turquoise doors. Wooden ladders lean against exterior walls, connecting the first floor to the second, the top floor to the sky. The Red Willow people who live here have been living here since long before the United States was the faintest glimmer of an idea in anyone's mind. Perhaps they will be living here long after that idea is forgotten.

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I cross into Colorado and know instantly that it will do exactly what it says on the tin. (It's a cute tin, with little fir trees on it, and it's made of recycled materials.) A rustic sign hangs in a rough log frame. *Welcome to Colorful Colorado*, it says, though the colors here are subtle, the windswept browns and greens of the mountains. Colorado knows I will stop and snap a photo, do some marketing for them free of charge.

Black and white birds with elegantly too-long tails swoop and flit low to the ground beside the highway. I see one and think it's astonishing, and then I see another and think I'm lucky, and then I see three and four, I lose count of them, and I realize they are something Coloradans must regard as commonplace, as I regard seagulls. They are black-billed magpies, I discover. Their tails can account for over half their total length, and when persecuted, they become wary.

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I cross Utah in near-constant slack-jawed awe at ever-present uncanny sandstone formations, red-brown against the sky.

Some are majestically tall, others round or spiky. Some should topple over, but they don't. Some are lumpen yet finely wrought, like ancient fertility statues. They populate an arid land, but they were formed by water, and the ground undulates like a seabed. In some places, the pale rainbow shades of the earth laid bare are more spectacular than the famous arches we few off-season visitors have come to see.

Past knobs and bobbles and needles rising from the uneven ground, past red cliffs and rock faces with improbable apertures, I hike up a trail that is essentially a sand staircase on which a thousand sneaker tracks have laid down an inscrutable cuneiform in the pink dust. In about a half-mile, it climbs a few hundred feet, a simple walk turned test of endurance. I am reminded once again that I am a creature of sea level. But I continue, breathless, to the top, where you can stand and look out at Delicate Arch, the one from the Utah license plate and a trillion Instagram

pictures. Off in the distance, it looks like a collectable miniature of itself, like you could balance it on your palm.

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I stop for a night in the Navajo Nation, passing first through Monument Valley where tourists park on the shoulder and photograph themselves posing on the dotted yellow line. The iconic setting makes less of an impression than the relentless wind, whipping my open car door closed; or the Indian man, walking through a featureless swath of high desert beside the road as I drive; or the sight, from my hotel window, of a McDonald's sign, luminous in the pink twilight.

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Back in Nevada, before I catch the final flight of my year of wandering, I go to the Neon Museum, an outdoor lot where the glowing icons of the Vegas Strip come to die. Here, the massive relics that once advertised the likes of the Golden Nugget and the Tropicana Mobil Park and the Stardust Resort and Casino are preserved, stacked in towering piles in the sand. Even without the guide's narration, they tell you all you need to know.

We are a nation that wants to be lucky. We drive for days on back roads and highways, guided by promises on billboards. We incorporate and appropriate whatever culture will entertain or enrich or distract us until we're bored and move on. We build cities in deserts and swamps and the middles of nowheres, believing they'll flourish, and sometimes they do. We believe everything will be fine. We live in a country built by people who believed impossible things.

I visit the Neon Museum during the day, but at night, the guide says, they turn the signs on. Not all of them, though – they wouldn't do that even if they could – because the lights are meant to be seen from afar. Close up, clustered together, they would be overwhelming: the glare of what America once dreamed it could become would blind you.