

Looking West

I'm from the east but have spent much of the past six decades looking west – under the covers as a young kid reading Jack London by flashlight, in my late teens at the National Outdoor Leadership School in the Wind River Range of Wyoming, as a grad student in Minnesota thoroughly distracted by exploring the boundless and infinitely magical lakes and rivers of the Canadian shield. And now, well past eligibility for Medicare, with white hair, a titanium knee and a twitchy back, I'm still looking west. But not so far west.

West is the direction my kitchen windows face. Where I pause at dawn to gaze out while I'm making coffee and, when I'm alone, eat standing at the kitchen counter looking past the herb garden, past the vegetable gardens, past the unkempt meadow where the does first venture out into the open with their spotted fawns in the late spring, and on to Polish Mountain a mile in the distance. West is where our weather comes from. Where the black and steel gray storm clouds gather on summer evenings before they wind through the hollows with thunder and lightning. Where we can watch the snow squalls sliding down the slope. West is where the sun sets behind Polish Mountain, flooding our little valley with golds and purples and colors that only an artist can name and blue shadows flow down the mountain and across the valley until the house is dark. West is where my ashes will eventually be scattered.

The first Europeans to head through here, looking for land and timber and game in the Ohio Valley just on the other side of the Appalachians, were looking west, too – continuing the quest that began with a trans-Atlantic voyage and into the seemingly endless forests of the New World. The Native peoples who they pushed out also looked to the west but as possible if improbable salvation rather than out of any sense of longing or adventure. Before the white settlers came, I imagine that Native people looked to the east where the rising sun offered more promise for sustenance and warmth than the setting sun. When the immigrants came, the east may well have been less appealing.

Just before dusk on clear afternoons and evenings in early September, hordes of dragonflies perform impossible aerial acrobatics over the meadow hunting smaller insects. With the sun approaching the western horizon, the slanting rays backlight the dragonflies' glassine wings turning the insect predators into tiny alien fighter jets.

Later, after the sun has set but when the glow lingers in the western sky, Venus emerges low over Polish Mountain. On clear evenings during the new and crescent moon, Jupiter also is visible just to the south and higher in the sky than Venus, hanging above the shoulder of the westernmost ridge on the farm. I frequently take my last walk of the day then, down the road to the pond and back with the dogs to look at the reflection of the sunset on the surface of the pond. As the blackness from encroaching night consumes the shadows of the trees along the road, they and I can sense and sometimes hear the nocturnal creatures beginning their nighttime routines.