# WE STOOD UPON STARS

FINDING GOD IN LOST PLACES

ROGER W. THOMPSON

**Praise for**
***We Stood Upon Stars***

"Roger's writing reminds me of Steinbeck's—it brings light to life in the most beautiful and profound ways. After reading this book I want to love my wife, kids, and life more. For that, I am deeply grateful for Roger and this book."

—Britt Merrick, pastor, hunter, surfboard shaper

"A poignant travelogue of generations past and present, searching for God in lost places. After reading the first page of *We Stood Upon Stars,* it's obvious Roger's love for adventure and desire to invite everyone else along! I was swept up in 'love like an ocean,' 'grief like a desert,' and 'peace like a river' that flowed through every chapter. From the waves of Ventura, CA, to starlight in the desert, to the taco truck in Marfa, TX, I got lost in the stories of Roger and his family as they learned not only about the beauty of each destination, but the beauty of the journey it takes to get there."

—Leslie Jordan, All Sons & Daughters

"It's hard to know if Roger is an author or an artist. He paints these pages with words so vivid and picturesque that you can almost smell the Rocky Mountain air, feel the salty water of the ocean, or experience the tug of a wild trout on the end of a fly line. Roger is writing the powerful story every man, every father, and every adventurer dreams about living, but for Roger it's not a dream. It's his life. And like a wise teacher, he's showing us how it can be our life too."

—Brian Carpenter, founder of Refuge Foundation, Montana

"Roger Thompson takes us on his dirt roads, into his mountains, and deep into his spirit. Through his humor and humility, he will inspire you."

—Braden Jones, entrepreneur, world traveler, husband and father, co-founder of Intervals, Petunia Pickle Bottom, Sons of Trade

"There is no better story than one that truly becomes your own. As a guy who finds comfort in security, God is continually drawing me deeper into the unknown . . . and it's good for the soul. In this book, Roger invites us on the road less traveled. *We Stood Upon Stars* is a road map to the journey that every man hopes to experience for himself. Get ready to dive right into the heart of a man."

—Gary Humble, CEO of Grapevine Craft Brewery and blogger at HumbleTravelers.com

"We all search for something in our lives, though many of us are unable to express that. *We Stood Upon Stars* does so—prolifically with love, humor, and solace—'rediscovering a wild that never had been lost.' Beautifully written, must read."

—KynsLee Scott, steelhead and trout fly-fishing guide

"What strikes me most isn't the adventures found within this book, but Roger's transparent ability to share the condition of our human heart. Roger's honest reflections undoubtedly beg us to reflect on our own map and trajectory through life. From finding truth behind VW Vanagon maintenance, to the art of teaching his sons the beauty of fly-fishing, to subtleties of the Creator's whisper on the open road—Roger speaks to the father, husband, and friend who are crafting our own unique maps on this journey."

—RJ Hosking, fellow Vanagon owner, friend, @famwithvan

"*We Stood Upon the Stars* is an invitation to adventure . . . permission to explore—both the physical destinations found through travel and the inner places of the heart. Roger warms you up with intriguing (not to mention hilarious) stories, then delivers thought-provoking wisdom at just the right moment. As a mother to four adventure-seeking boys (and married to another one), I know men everywhere will connect with this book as it affirms their dreams, questions, and passions, and ultimately points them to the place where real purpose and meaning can be found."

—Monica Swanson, author and writer at monicaswanson.com

"*We Stood Upon Stars* makes you feel like you are sitting next to a campfire with a best friend, exchanging thoughts and memories of where you've traveled and where you hope to go."

—Kristi Spoon, owner/rancher, Spoon's Rock Creek Ranch

"I've always enjoyed seeing life through Roger's eyes, and now readers get to experience what I have through our friendship for so many years. *We Stood Upon Stars* draws me into beautiful locations, and when I'm not expecting it, Roger drops one of those lines on me that makes me think of something important for the rest of the day. Something eternal. This book is so good for my soul that I can't put it down!"

—Bryan Jennings, professional surfer and filmmaker; founder of Walking on Water

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ROGER W. THOMPSON

WATERBROOK

We Stood Upon Stars

Details in some anecdotes and stories have been changed to protect the identities of the persons involved.

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To my boys of whom I am proud.
Hayden and Austin, may your lives be full of
adventures that one day become legend.

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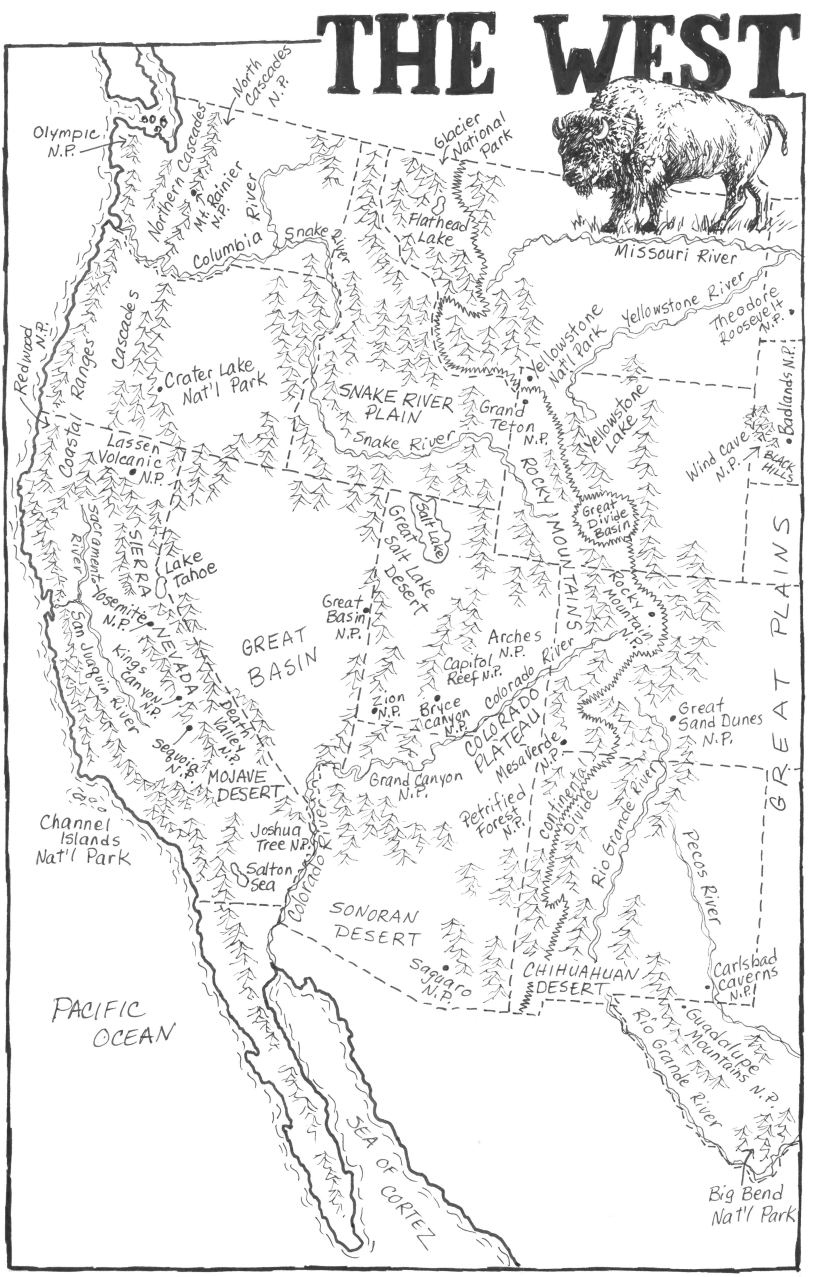
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Introduction

# A Word About Maps

I make a lot of wrong turns. They come easily. A slight distraction or curiosity and I'm down a washboard road rattling my van and teeth, making for a distant landmark. The turns come after full consultation of the maps. I'll study the topography for hours, memorizing mountains and watersheds. I'll glance at the roads as well, but I've traveled enough to know roads of men can't always be trusted. It's better to trust in immovable things.

We make our homes in this world as best we can. We scratch at the earth to make a living or to make a difference, and always we have a feeling there is something more. Something missing. So we search.

We search mountaintops and valleys, deserts and oceans. We hope sunrises and long views through canyons will help us discover who we are or who we still want to be. We also search our own inner landscapes and describe our emotional and spiritual state with topographical language. Love like an ocean. Grief like a desert. Peace like a river. The language of our hearts reflects the language of creation because in both are fingerprints of God.

This book is filled with maps of sacred places to help in the search. The details of each map were gathered from personal travels or from

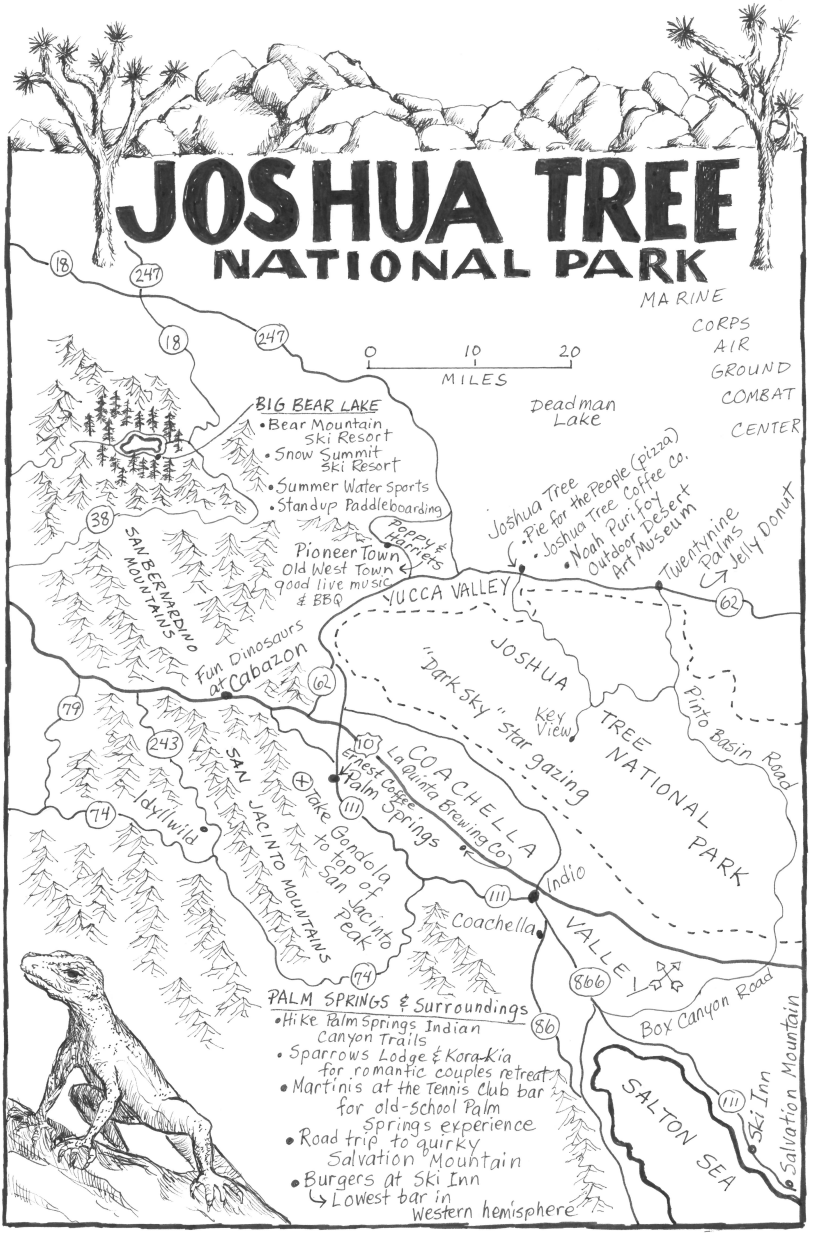
those of close friends. They lead to secret shorelines that will deepen our love for our wives and to rivers where we cast a line with fishing buddies who, through wild trout and campfires, will become enduring friends. These maps lead to distant lakes where in safety we can cry out our hopes and shames and hear mountains echo with assurances that we are not alone.

Individually these maps propose specific adventures throughout the West. They highlight fishing holes and wilderness and the best breweries to help cap the day. Collectively these roads through the wilderness present the map of a man's heart.

While traveling I'll often veer onto a road that wasn't on my route. This is the beginning of adventure. It's how I've discovered tiny towns and sunsets and secret fishing holes and the Philipsburg Brewing Company in Montana. It's also how I've gotten myself desperately lost. And since it takes an act of Congress to get me to turn around, I keep going over switchbacks and single-lane roads until either the curiosity is cured or I run out of snacks. Before turning back I get out and survey the landscape, looking to mountain peaks or rivers or stars for clues. It's always there, deep in the wilderness, with my wife or my kids or my buddies or alone, where—in desperation for answers or simply curiousity—I am met by God.

My hope is these stories and maps will help you with your own adventures and discoveries. That you'll go to the edge of your known world. Then a little beyond. And that in lost places you'll find what it is you're searching for.

Travel well,
Roger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Ski Inn
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# The Light That Has Always Been

*Joshua Tree National Park, California*

I live on the western edge of the continent, under the storied shadows of great men. And I wonder if I ever can become one of them.

Grandpa rode out of the Oklahoma dust bowl on the back of a Harley Davidson after the Great Depression. His father, my great-grandfather, was driving. To make better time, his father tied Grandpa to his body with a rope so Grandpa could sleep without falling off. Though in oven winds, sleep seldom came.

The motorcycle's engine labored as it bled gasoline from the carburetor, acrid air smelling of metal and burnt fuel. The heat rose from volcanic depths of the Earth, radiating through an endless strip of tar laid by desperate men working government projects to put meat in the bellies of their children. The wind brought no relief, nor did the night. For days they traveled, through sand and bleached-bone deserts, bound to one another and bound to a hope that things would be better in the West.

The Harley Davidson 45 was a workingman's bike, within reach of even a Depression-era preacher such as my great-grandfather. The leather

seats still smelled of farmyards near where the Harley was built, and the flathead engine was the most dependable design of any bike its age. Even when something would go wrong, an owner with a basic set of tools and an average knowledge of engines could repair it. In this way it was most American.

The heart of the flathead beat through valves in a sideways rhythm, giving the bike a slight tremor as the two rode west. Accompanied only by engine noise and thought and sounds of a wind, it seemed they had all of America to themselves. And with nothing separating them from the heat and the dust, the motorcycle, carrying two bodies bound together, became one with the landscape.

In the wide flat of desert, smells provided the first sign of things to come. A dead animal could be smelled long before it was spotted. Bacon on the skillet promised a café where men with cracked skin gathered over coffee in cracked mugs. When talk turned to rumored rain, the voices would lower, either out of reverence or fear of scaring it off.

These were days of struggle, the highway a string held taut between opposing troubles. To the east lay desolate farmlands and cities crushed by economic collapse. To the west lay the relocated desperation of migrating people.

Millions of ragged souls were led not by fire or cloud, but by hunger and hope in the promises of the West. For most, the promises would prove false. The migrants would arrive to dreamed-of opportunities that had evaporated. Grandpa once told me Okies were the Americans hardest hit by the dust bowl and the Depression. Landowners were eager to exploit the endless supply of cheap Okie labor, and Californians hated them for their feral appearances—their bodies carved by starvation and the lack of basic essentials, such as water for bathing. Law keepers feared them because of their sheer numbers.

My great-grandfather prayed for the hungry and the desperate with his

fists clenched on handlebars and teeth gritted to keep the dust from his lungs. He knew them well from his years spent preaching in the Oklahoma Panhandle. And they knew him because he had become one of them. He lived at the same level of poverty, raising his family in converted chicken coops and trailers perched on cinder blocks. He preached in several brush-arbor churches on the same day, traveling miles from one to the next, being paid with nothing more than half a bag of vegetables gleaned from the skeletal farms of those who came to hear him.

With his son now tied to him, he sped west. There, desperate people would need to know the same hope he preached in the dust bowl. Though this highway-like life may connect struggle to struggle to struggle, there is a final destination—an eternal life without struggle in a land without dust and death.

When my great-grandfather arrived in California, he would build a church and tell this to anyone who would listen.

The great deserts of the West—the Mojave, the Sonoran, the Great Basin—funnel travelers into Southern California through a pass between two great mountain ranges. The San Jacinto Mountains to the south and the San Bernardino Mountains to the north rise higher than ten thousand feet and greedily capture any remaining moisture from the Pacific Ocean. The towering ranges ensure that rain does not reach the deserts to the east, where one could die of thirst in sight of mountain peaks covered with snow. The mountains reminded travelers moving through the pass that most of what they hoped for lay just beyond their reach. Many would return home once the great illusion of the West stripped them of all that remained—their dwindling money, their hopes, their human dignity.

It was here, between the desert and the hope, that my great-

grandfather built his church. He and my grandfather found a place to build in the unincorporated area of Cabazon, California, located in the pass between the mountains. Money was scarce. A good offering at a church service might consist of bread baked by a family that had received an extra ration of flour or wheat. So Great-Grandpa preached under a tent, and my grandfather went to work for a concrete-block company outside the young resort town of Palm Springs. While movie producers and starlets lounged around newly built swimming pools, Grandpa spent his teenage years mixing cement and water with the more unbearable elements of the desert—sand, gravel, and heat. He formed into molds the very thing he was trying to escape. Through toil he transformed the desert, breaking its will, turning it into something human.

The sun worked behind him, baking the molds and baking his neck and arms. Since there was no money, the concrete company let him keep every fourth block so he could build his father's church. As he mixed concrete and baked blocks, he looked past the desert and the mountain pass gateway to the interior of a golden California where anything seemed possible. Shortly after completing the church building, he would move on to find his purpose. Continuing farther west, he would build a life for himself and his family for generations to come.

In the morning, my wife, sons, and I pass the site where my great-grandfather's church once stood on our way to Joshua Tree National Park. I tell my boys about their great-grandfather and their great-great-grandfather, and they wonder how the world could ever have been so cruel. My head filled with thoughts of motorcycles and desert heat, and I yell at my boys to stop playing with the windows so the perfectly cooled air won't escape. They go back to watching movies or playing video games. I go back to enjoying music and my iced latte, and I wonder if I

would have tied them to me on a motorcycle or if I would have just given up and starved to death somewhere near Amarillo, Texas.

We continue our journey to Joshua Tree because I want my boys to understand something about where they come from and because, after years of running from the shadows of men in my life, I'm now running toward them. I am hoping for shadows to become a cover of cloud to guide me through the desert.

I have been running for fear of being defined by my history or finding that I never will measure up to it. But you can't outrun your own story. Only with the hard pruning of time can you edit it and rewrite the ending.

Like most of the Gen X generation, I didn't know anything about Joshua Tree National Park until U2 recorded an album with the title *Joshua Tree.* In my youth I drove through the desert with windows down and music up and asked questions that reached the stars. And oh, the stars. They lit up the night sky, hanging so low it felt like I was driving through light from heaven. I've tried often to recapture that feeling, but some feelings are meant for a specific time and cannot be reclaimed.

I tell this story to my sons.

"Dad, that's boring. When are we going to get there?"

Joshua Tree National Park is a rock-climbing paradise. People come from all corners of the world, working their fingers into cracks in the rock to ascend desert walls and touch the eternal. We arrive to greetings of chalk-handed climbers equipped with ropes and shoes to wedge into split rock. Though we have none of this, there are plenty of boulders for us to climb and explore.

We camp in Hidden Valley, nestled among rocks the size of buildings. As if we've discovered an ancient city, we search the boulevards and alleyways connecting neighborhoods of stone. But upon further inspection, the boulders seem more alive. The strata give each formation a depth

and personality. Some have weathered storms well. Others have been eroded by wind and rain. Still they sit, as they have since the first mornings of Earth. Today they tell us stories of weather and of those who wander the desert.

The travelers who didn't come here for climbing came for the stars. We are wired to look up, to seek the dark sky and wonder what is out there and where it all came from and what our purpose is in it. The stars direct even the compass. And the clarity of the desert is the best place to look and to seek. Sometimes being lost in the desert is the closest we'll be to finding our way. About 10 percent of the Earth is covered by desert. Perhaps our lives should reflect the same.

The Joshua tree itself looks tormented. Angular branches twist and contort, the limbs desperately rising toward the sky. At the end of each limb is a collection of long spiked palms that resemble a character from a Dr. Seuss book. Legend has it the Joshua tree was named by early pioneers who wandered west looking for a place to build a better life. In their search they came upon a strange tree with limbs raised to the sky, which they thought resembled the upstretched arms of Joshua, leading people into the Promised Land.

Men always have sought the West. Westward movement has provided purpose, drive, and opportunities to achieve greatness. Now the American West is done. Even the mountains and deserts have been gentrified, the rugged edges dulled. The land has been settled and businesses, schools, and churches built. And men are better at building churches than attending them. Now, with streets mapped and towns gridded and cars and phones outfitted with GPS, men seem more lost than ever. What purpose can men find when there is no more West to conquer? What greatness can they achieve?

Most people live in cities that grew from the visions of men whose names are plastered on street signs and buildings. I've looked at the buildings and have wondered how my name will be remembered. And I have tried to look beyond, to the stars and my youthful clarity of driving streets that have no name. But few stars can be seen from the city. There is too much man-made light. A false light. Now the questions asked no longer reach to the stars; they reach only as far as city lights allow. Without the stars there is no way to double-check the accuracy of the compass.

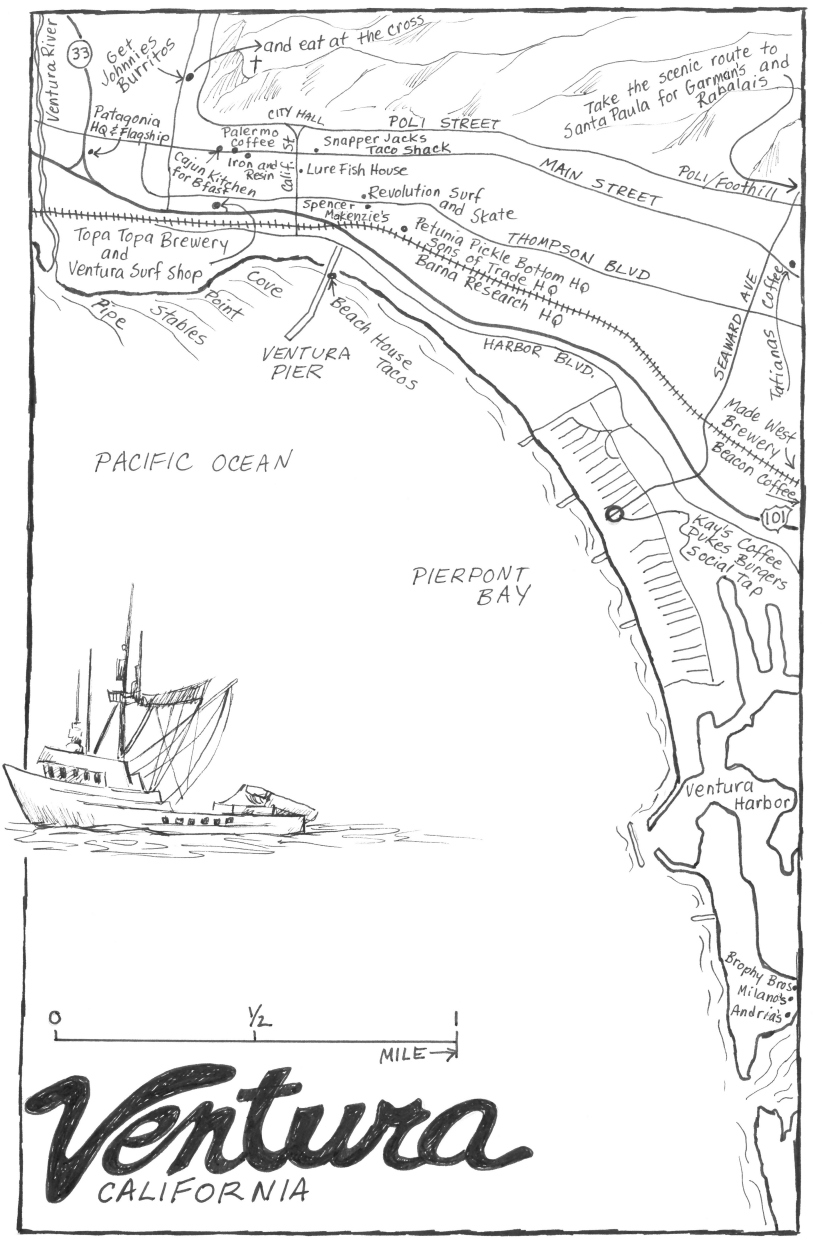
In the desert there is only the light that has always been. And in descending darkness, stars fall upon us. I am surrounded by heaven and stand like Joshua, silent, with arms raised. The stars demand bigger questions. Something within us prompts us to ask, yet the stars do not answer—at least not right away. They return our questions to the heavens where they gather with all questions asked in the dark and reappear in some future night as a star to help navigate the way.

As our last night at Joshua Tree National Park begins and my boys and I search for a path back to our campsite, an answer emerges. My kids don't need the greatness that comes with building buildings and traveling to settle in the West. My boys think I'm great just because I'm here with them. Between unnamed boulders and boulevards, I realize a new name has been given to me. It will be known only by two, and that is purpose enough.

"Dad."

"What?"

"Where are you going? The campsite is this way."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