

“*Who owns the West...?* If we mean the land and waters beneath our feet; the moon, sun, stars, and gravity that cast their spells upon land and water; the light before our eyes; if we mean this millions-of-years-old realm created by celestial hydrogen explosions, ages of inconceivable heat, molten rock, ages of cooling, slow congealing, ages of ice and of ocean and of oceans breaking apart, upheaving, throwing their floors skyward to become what we now call ‘mountains’; if we mean these endlessly rearranging carbon compounds, these cycles of condensation/cloud/snow/rain/river, these daily and yearly anglings of sunlight and the responding migrations, photosyntheses, dormancies, hibernations, and transformations that give us our lives—if we are honestly asking who *owns* this fugue of flux, harmony, humanity, inhumanity, trout streams, terror, peace, and change, then, great God Almighty, what a ridiculous question! This stupendous work we so ineptly call ‘the West’ owns itself. Is itself. Possesses itself completely, and us with it. Humans discussing ownership of wonders this vast are like bird-lice discussing ownership of their host heron in flight. ‘Who owns the right wing? Who the left?’

“The heron just soars on. ...

“This impermanent beauty, this ‘West,’ designs to host us, sometimes kills us, and ceaselessly blesses us. But allow Itself to be *owned* by us? Never! No matter how we define it, no matter what the fleetingly enthroned do to it, this abused but inconceivably great blessing will go on blessing inconceivably.”

David James Duncan,
“Who Owns the West?: Seven Wrong Answers,”
in *My Story As Told By Water*
(San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club, 2001), 78f.