Flat, brown, and plenty of it. This is how the land looks to many travelers crossing the plains in late summer from eastern Kansas to Colorado's Rocky Mountains. As a native Kansan I have driven the route countless times, and the feeling is always the same: with the mountains as my goal, I steel myself to the reality of about eight hours of Great Plains landscapes along Interstate 70. Starting the drive one recent August day, the flatness of the plains seemed to stretch forever, weighing on my imagination like an iron, with the dream of mountains on the western horizon improbably distant.

Around midafternoon the middle of Kansas I was shaken from the stupor of pounding the super-lab by a surprising vista of Colorado’s Pikes Peak. It was only a billboard image of the mountain, featuring a snow-covered peak, exaggerated in its pointed summit, framed by the red rocks of Garden of the Gods (Fig. 1). The billboard encourages travelers to leave the interstate for a shorter route to the mountains, but for me and countless others heading west, the billboard is more than an advertisement; it broadcasts a geography of hope. As I stopped along the highway shoulder to take a closer look, the incongruity of the scene was striking: amidst eighteen-wheelers roaring past grazing cattle, the image of Pikes Peak sent a siren call of majestic mountain scenery that would even draw the most jaded plains traveler.

Although the billboard prematurely focused my geographical imagination on the mountains, the contrast between the alluring Pikes Peak image and the Kansas windshield reality reminded me that there are, nevertheless, some things I value in the plains. Some residents of the plains pride themselves on their ability to appreciate amusing places, such as western Kansas and eastern Colorado ("Colorado's Outback," according to the tourist brochures). Perhaps from spending so many years out on the plains, I have absorbed what environmental historian Neil Evernden calls the "beauty of nothingness." My plains esthetic includes an appreciation of the open vistas of gently undulating grassy expanses, hardy cottonwoods along a wash, grain elevators on the horizon (the mountains of the plains), church steeples towering above quiet towns, and a landscape reminiscent of Willa Cather's Death Comes for the Archbishop: "Elsewhere the sky is the roof of the world, but here the earth was the floor of the sky" (Fig. 2). At times a scene of the open plains, either in film or in person, has brought me a visceral reaction of longing and joy that lasts a lifetime.

The plains, though, are my everyday world, and like millions before me, especially in summer, I experience the irresistible urge to go west. Whether driven by practical need to take good time across the plains or perhaps their loss for cool mountain climes, most westbound travelers have little inclination to take the time needed to understand the simpler and smaller beauties of the plains. They want mountains.

On this hot August day the tension of mountain dreams with a plains crossing is painfully evident to me at the Conoco station along Interstate 70 in Wabaunsee, a small western Kansas town. A man with a video camera stands next to a white minivan bearing Michigan license plates, recording images of his family’s trip to Colorado. After a close-up of the bug-splattered windshield he pans outward beyond his vehicle, surrounded by gas stations, eateries, and motels, what he next says into the camera microphone causes my blood to boil: "Look at that, there's nothing here." Does
be mean there are too few trees, even though some are carefully nurtured for the benefit of the traveler? Perhaps there are not enough lakes, even though Cedar Blob Blewover, perpetually below capacity in this semi-arid zone, lies just over the horizon? Too few people, even though he probably hopes their vacation offers an escape from the maddening crowds? Maybe he is even unaware of the name of the town he is in, but I still wonder at how poorly the plains compare to places that are not yet even seen. The family hurriedly stocks up on drinks and snacks for the next phase of the journey west, the one in which they decimate the fabled first view of the mountains.

Whether as a kid on family vacations or an adult going alone for rejuvenation in the mountains, it has always been an important part of my plains travels constantly to scan the horizon for that moment when I first see mountains. I am curious to see where I will be when the mountains come in to view and compare that place to other crossings. I also wonder which mountain I will see first: will it be one of the Front Range "Fourteeners," named for their elevations above 14,000 feet, such as Longs Peak, Mount Evans, or Pikes Peak, or will it be another part of the Front Range? With the humidity and dust, late summer is the worst season to expect any sort of distant view. On more than one summer trip I have been inside the Denver city limits before my first mountain view.

But early afternoon I see something rising from the plains: thunderheads lined up to the left and right of the highway. Time and again, thunderheads are the first markers of the mountains during a summer crossing. Billowing surrogates for the mountains themselves, they exceed the height and sometimes mimic mountain shapes. More than just landmarks, mountains create their own weather systems that trail eastward for many miles across the shortgrass prairie. The origin of these clouds marks the place where rock meets sky.

Signs along the interstate continue to remind me of a distinctive Great Plains sense of place. But with my mind on the mountains, I can only take so much of plains oddities, such as "Live 5-legged steer" or one sign's dryland crop humor: "Happiness is a crock of beans." At the Colorado state line I notice that nobody in the eastbound lanes stops to take a picture of themselves at the "Leaving Colorful Colorado" sign, but they sure do on the westbound lanes at the welcome sign. A large, informal cloud has evolved to accommodate photographs of the giddy moment when symbolically, many leave the plains (Fig. 5). The scenery is the same on both sides of the sign, of course, but the mystique is far different.

In eastern Colorado my senses are on full alert for that first view. The thunderheads draw closer, even while the mountains seem as distant as ever. But the ranges must be drawing nearer; the air is drier, and at Avenida, Colorado, the elevation suddenly tops five thousand feet. Here is a name that fits the place: Avenida—Spanish for "on top of." I begin to feel as though I am looking down, rather than up, at the horizon. Yet still no mountains in view. At Flager, a few miles further west, I see another hint of the high country: hillside letters. Many towns on the Great Plains lack the necessary geographic feature to display this common western icon that geographer James Persons calls a signature of community identity. But in Flager they make do with the slope of the interstate roadcut, offering a small taste of greater elevations to come.

By mid-afternoon I am passing Genoa, Colorado, where the Wonder Tower has been the big attraction since 1926. Reckoning travelers to stop for a few minutes to appreciate the (hypothetical) view of six states, the sixty-foot tower is something of an ashen monolith, especially in this era of polluted skies. Promoting the idea that a person can see Colorado, Kansas, Wyoming, Nebraska, New Mexico, and South Dakota causes me to wonder if a more appropriate list of the six states in Genoa would be the State of Colorado, State of Deceit, State of Rumor, State of Myth, State of Despair, and State of Tourism Hucksters. Yet this particular dirty topic saves an otherwise dry summer day. The afternoon heat builds and the prairie dogs hunker inside their burrows. It is so dry today that in contrast to central Kansas, no insects hit the windshield; they apparently prefer irrigated cornfields to dry grasslands.

Just a short distance past the Wonder Tower I glance to the southwest and blurt out, "My God, there's Pikes Peak." That is the way the first view is: after so many miles of building suspense about which mountain will be first in view. It is a sudden and thrilling vision. Maybe I will never see six states from Genoa, but the west view has earned new respect from me.
West of Limon, Pikes Peak, a solitary monolith standing sentinel over the plains from its lofty perch. For mile after mile, Pikes is the only Fourteener in sight, and it is easy to understand how it has stood as the preeminent mountain in the dreamscape of plains travelers and dwellers, from Lakota visionary Black Elk to explorer Zebulon Pike.

Long dips of the highway into the Bijou Creek watershed then begin to obscure my view of the peak. The cottonwoods that trace the wandering lines of the creek's tributaries must comprise one of the longest unbroken native riparian forests in the western plains. The dark green leaves of the trees add another color into the western landscape, hinting of greater forests to come.

Near the end of this crossing of the plains, when my shadowy mountain dreams have been replaced by solid visions, and tired hopes have blended into exciting prospects, one thought remains: bring me that horizon. Cresting a rise a few miles east of Denver, the profile of Longs Peak, an unmistakably high, square summit from this vantage, abruptly joins Pikes Peak in the westward view. The Front Range keystones are in new place; Longs on the north and Pikes on the south. Each additional mile traveled quickens my soul. Even the very name “Front Range” refers to this unforgettable plains perspective. The appeal of mountains visible far out on the plains as the inspiration for the white fabric spires of the Denver International Airport terminal that are intended to evoke the snow-capped peaks of the Front Range (Fig. 4). Miles back, only a huge thunderhead seemed to mark the approximate location of Mount Evans, the highest of the three Fourteeners often visible from far out on the plains. Soon, however, the dark purple ridgeline delineating the entire Front Range is fully revealed, punctuated with those Fourteeners that have invited me and generations of other travelers to hit the western road.