If you wanted to know Laramie, you could start with the bullet hole in the mirror at the Buckhorn Bar. Overlaid on a map of the city, its dominant vertical crack aligns with the Union Pacific Railroad and its curved horizontal crack takes in the sweep of Interstate 80, situating the point of impact at approximately First and Garfield. The circumference of the bullet hole takes in the locations of a triple hanging, the former Fireside Lounge, and the Tourism Board promoting Laramie’s outlaw past. The Buckhorn Bar also makes it into this ballistic eye that we ask to be the mirror of Laramie’s soul.

At First Street and Garfield two blocks from the Buck, climb the iron stairs of the pedestrian bridge that spans the tracks. Within minutes, yellow Union Pacific diesel engines speed beneath you. Cover your ears against the roar. Feel the rush of warmth. The bridge quakes. The train cars, container cars stacked with containers, flatcars loaded with lumber leaning against center trusses, covered hoppers carrying trona from Green River, and less often, lines of gondolas filled with coal from the Thunder Basin mines, rumble by. The walls of box cars are moving murals of illegal art originating from LA or New York.
Technically, the trains are moving north and south, but their course will correct. The wind blows your hair. The rails quiet. Look west to Medicine Bow Peak, Jelm Mountain, and the Snowy Range. The view is sweetest on summer evenings. To the east are the shop fronts and roof tops of a well-preserved Western town. The ridge that stretches beyond them barely hints at its importance to transcontinental travel.

The key to getting the railroad from the Midwestern plains to the Rocky Mountain Plateau was a geological, topographical ramp of land that tops out not at the Continental Divide but there. The Summit was the highest point on the original Union Pacific line and is still the highest point on I-80. The route gains nearly a mile of elevation from Kimball, Nebraska, through Cheyenne, and up Sherman Hill. The eight-mile descent from the Summit to Laramie’s altitude of 7,200 feet, is steep—about twelve hundred feet.

A city of tents awaited the first train, which arrived in Laramie City on May 10, 1868. The train’s need for fuel and water prompted the habitation. On the same day, a hundred miles away, the Northern Arapaho and Northern Cheyenne relinquished claim to all lands not on a reservation. Photographer A.J. Russell labeled a photograph “Wyoming Station, Engine 23 on Main Track, May 1868.” Mounted on the headlamp of Engine 23 was an enormous pair of antlers, as if this locomotive was the new beast.

Loco means place, and motive is “something
brought forward” from Old French and Middle Latin, “moving, impelling.” A word hurtling through time from the Latin *motus* and *movere* arrived at this place as motive, “that which inwardly moves a person to behave a certain way.” The railroad impelled a nation to push through the wilderness. The photograph’s long exposure required nineteen men, including one in full buckskin, to hold perfectly still. A black dog atop the wood car blurred as he turned to look at the engineer in the cab.

Take the iron stairs or the long ramp down. By matching lines and curves to points on the map, one might imagine a relationship exists between transportation corridors and violent sites. Travel east through town three miles, past the university, the desirable historic homes, past the suburban sights, stores with electric doors and the car dealerships. Just shy of Garfield’s dead end at Boulder Drive, lies the large metal building that houses the city’s ice rink and the youth hockey teams, the Outlaws.

The Outlaws’ insignia is an un-fearsome cowboy boot on a skate blade, and despite their association with Laramie’s early lore, they are drilled to play by the rules.

At First and Garfield heading west, the pedestrian bridge forms the extension of Garfield over the rail yard and 16 sets of tracks that divide the West Side from downtown. The separation is as much psychological as it is geographical. Bounded by the tracks and the river, the neighborhood is an island. Some remember before the Fair Housing Act, lenders
redlined Laramie at the tracks. No map was needed. Banks didn’t make loans on houses to the west. The residents of this place once called “Mexican Town” lobbied until 1975 to get their streets paved.

East Garfield becomes West Garfield where the bridge touches down at Pine. “Uncle Pete,” the UP railroad, built rows of houses here. Perhaps they seem absurdly small. This is where the boiler maker, the switchman, and the bridge tender lived. This last was the rail man whose job it was to watch the bridge and signal down the tracks in case of trouble. The Germans, the Swedes lived here. The milkmen, the carpenters. Women owned boarding houses, laundered sweat from tattersail and tweed, and some lay in rooms on Front Street for hire—there were Front Streets on both sides of the tracks.

For a small stretch, there is no sidewalk. Garfield doglegs at South Cedar and heads toward Optimist Park, where the Greenbelt takes off along the river and blue flax blooms beside wild flag iris in June. The new Garfield Street Bridge added convenience when it opened in 2006, but the steel bridge it replaced (prominently marked 1925) was too narrow to take for granted. You had to slow down to maneuver it safely, and in that, you crossed knowing you had arrived somewhere different from where you were on the other side.

John F. Kennedy crossed here en route from the airport September 25, 1963. Garfield Street and the West Side’s Lincoln School were tributes to assassinated presidents, the names of sorrows assigned
to features on the land. In less than two months, Kennedy, too, would be felled.

At the bridge, the prison comes into view. The university runs a cattle operation in the field to the south. Cottonwoods and willow occupy the flood plain to the north. West Garfield ends at Snowy Range Road. Rising from the prairie with the interstate humming beyond, is the Territorial Prison, an impossibly charming sandstone structure, the only prison ever to house Butch Cassidy. Garfield Street, bisecting the railroad and named in grief, terminates east and west in outlaw homes.

Velocity is vigor, and ferocity retains its wildness. Defiance of stricture, as in stealing horses, blowing up the train, or driving drunk after midnight, may hold appeal, but there are problems. The word vigilante shares a root with velocity, but stringing up the bad guys may not free the town to grow always toward the sun.

The hanging is included in the Tourism Board’s Downtown Tour Guide, which says, “In 1868, a gang of hoodlums declared themselves in charge.... Two months of bloody rule followed before the townspeople took matters into their own hands.” The exact site is not known, but the historical plaque is located on Second Street between Garfield and Custer. This is one of three clustered sites encompassed by the Buckhorn bullet hole. What are we meant to see when we look into the eye of the mirror?

Three doors down from the hanging site and across the street, the Fireside Lounge stands on the
corner of Second Street and Custer (yes, *that* Custer). The Fireside was dark and smelly, employed loud bands, and served five-dollar pitchers. It was, in short, unremarkable. For several generations, a story-high pilsner glass mounted atop its low-slung roof bubbled over with foam. The campy, 1960s sign invited
relaxation at the end of a long day in the rail yard or the cement plant. More recently, the sign stood faded and rusty, a home to pigeons who patrolled its ledges, surveyed the city, and ducked behind its open seams to tend their young. The Fireside is not on the downtown tour, yet visitors ask to see it.
Matthew Shepard left with Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney from the Fireside. From the tourist office across the street, you can see the building, closed down and up for sale, scrubbed of its identity. The sign, which hadn’t said Fireside for ages, was taken down last year. The owner hopes to unload the building tied to the murder that put Laramie on the map. The tourism board works to lure visitors with Laramie’s wild landscapes and outlaw past. The first citizens hoped to clear the way for civility. Did they instead set the city on a violent trajectory?

What we know is that tragedy accrues here. October 6, 1998, a buck and rail fence outside of town. In the shorthand of the press, a gay student was pistol-whipped. The event is mapped in a violet sky deepening to purple that returns with the cold each fall.

Purple asters bloom in September for the eight University of Wyoming track and field and cross-country athletes killed seventeen miles south of town, early on a Sunday in 2001. Eight handsome boys who in their photos look loved by their mothers. To see their names and ages committed to the page is to see how wrong the finish.

Clinton Haskins, a steer wrestler on the University rodeo team, was convicted of eight counts of vehicular manslaughter for that night of drinking. He spends his days in the state penitentiary.

Did a Florida man passing through know when he picked up Cindy Dixon at the Buckhorn Bar that
she would die on Rogers Canyon Road if he pushed her out of his car into the cold? She died as her son, Russell Henderson, awaited trial for murder. The nude, frozen body of fifteen-year-old Daphne Sulk was found near the Summit. An autopsy revealed seventeen stab wounds, defensive wounds, and a fetus three weeks old. Billy Broderick survived the shooting by Deborah Sturgis, “a stranger to Laramie,” but walked with a limp until his death last December, in the snow next to his car.

The interstate does not so much bisect Laramie as skirt it. Truck stops are fueling oases on the edge of town. Or you can drive right past and never stop. On mornings after snowplows have worked all night to reopen I-80 and a hundred tractor-trailers have parked along Grand, bottles of urine are left behind.

Before the establishment of the interstate highway system, the Lincoln Highway was the first transcontinental automobile road, and it occupied much the same route as I-80. Motorists arrived via Grand Avenue, the gateway from Cheyenne. Earlier, in the late 1800s, Laramie citizens operated one of the first electric plants in the West. Its lights were likened to jewels. If you travel down from the Summit of I-80 at night, Laramie spills into view as lights across the plains. That array of data points is the Gem City. Above, the stars shine so fiercely, you can scan the Milky Way. On summer days, under the shade of cottonwood trees or on game days snarled with traffic in the fall, Grand Avenue remains truly grand.

The Buckhorn, with its two-headed moose calf,
black bear with cigarette, and murals of antelope scenes, is a wonder. Kindly bartenders tend wounded souls of every distinction from behind the carved oak bar that earned the Buck its listing on the National Register of Historic Places. Flat screen TVs flash sports, and the city’s smoking ordinance is casually ignored until late afternoon.

In August 1971, Charlie Phillips, in a fit of longing for a Buckhorn bartender, aimed from Ivinson Avenue for the C in Coors. The shot shattered the front window and gave us the bullet hole that suggests the conflicted soul of the Gem City. In the Buckhorn mirror, velocity and ferocity converged.