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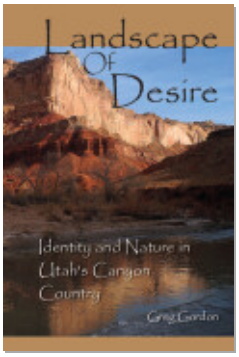
xvi. MORE NAVAJO



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XVI
MORE NAVAJO

Immense pink cliffs streaked with black and red rise above the river.

This move to exterminate cattle rustlers and put an end to cattle rustling seemed to us like the final blow to the Old West. We listened to Butch Cassidy's eloquent call to action, grabbed our Winchesters, and rode out to defend and preserve the Old West. Our peculiar way of defending the Old West was to get a good tough outfit of horses together and plenty of artillery, make a fast dash up into the Belle Fourche or Johnson County country, take a big herd of cattle right from under the noses of the cattle kings, and show 'em they couldn't get away with their game of murdering and exterminating rustlers. . . . "If we let 'em get away with what they've started,'" said Butch, "this here won't be a free country any longer."

—Matt Warner

We take a break at the mouth of Robbers Roost Canyon. On the other side of the river, an impressively smooth cliff rises five hundred feet to the skyline. Textured-red stripes on the cliff face look as if someone knocked over a giant bucket of paint on the canyon rim, and it slowly dribbled down. Thin black streaks also taper down from the rim.

These black and red tapestries draped over canyon walls were long regarded as mineral-laden runoff leached from the strata above. Recent research reveals desert varnish to be the work of microorganisms. These creatures extract manganese and iron from airborne dust and runoff and then oxidize it onto the rock surface. Manganese-rich varnish is shiny black while manganese-poor, iron-rich varnish tends toward red. Water pouring over the cliff provides small bits of organic matter and the bacteria experience a bloom. Too much water, however, fortifies other microorganisms and lichens, which compete with the bacteria and chemically erode the varnish. Sheer cliffs that occasionally drip water but dry quickly offer ideal conditions for these bacteria. Desert varnish takes thousands of years to form and hence doesn't occur on unstable surfaces.

Is desert varnish animal, vegetable, or mineral? Or all three? If something like desert varnish, resembling little more than dried paint, actually thrives on barren cliffs, what are the chances that rock itself constitutes a form of life?

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Indeed, when I stare at the cliffs long enough, great swirls of Indian warbonnets and eagles emerge, the stripes begin to move and the rock takes on a fluidity. Black merges into red, red into pink and orange, and the entire tapestry marches across the wall like shadow dancers or a curtain of rain sheeting down on some faraway mesa leaving the crops untouched.

"Hey, are those petroglyphs?" Seeker asks, pulling me from my hypnosis.

Below the desert varnish we can make out faint red outlines of human-like figures, and we cross the river to investigate. Incised into the rock we find: several figures filled with wavy lines like a weaving, an outline of a man with a halo, a circle of outward spokes, and several indecipherable lines and markings. Sprinkled across the panel are numerous depictions of bighorn sheep.

"So, uh, like what's this all mean?" inquires Mud.

"Well, what do you think?"

"These are obviously bighorns," says Huckleberry. "They might have carved them here after a hunt to portray what happened."

"Or before a hunt, for good luck," adds Yucca.

"Maybe they drew them so the animals wouldn't disappear. You know, like we do with endangered species; we have pictures of them to prove to ourselves they still exist," says Sage.

"What about these hatch marks?" asks Patience.

"A counter of some sort, marking time maybe?" suggests Metta.

"It could just be graffiti, you know a bunch of kids scribbling on the rock," says Yucca.

"Or different tribes tagging the rock, telling others this is their turf," adds Bobofet.

"Could be, but they'd have to have a lot of time on their hands," I reply, keeping an eye on Sage in case she should provide another profound insight. "Imagine how much time and energy it takes to chisel out these figures with an antler and a rock. It's not like they are just scribbling on the rock. They are very deliberate, but they certainly could be a form of communication. These abstract geometrical patterns are most likely symbols that depend upon cultural context and interpretation."

"Like a dollar sign," suggests Metta.

"Or a heart," adds Mud

"Or one of those Darwin fish. How would you know what that was all about five hundred years from now? An outline of a fish with legs and a smile. Wouldn't make any sense," says Bobofet.

"Right, look how much background information is needed to interpret that one symbol," says Metta.

"This guy looks like he's falling," says Mud pointing at a figure on his back with hands and feet in the air.

"Maybe he did. You know, fell off a cliff or something," suggests Seaweed.

"Or he's a shaman falling into a dream state," says Huckleberry.

"Maybe he got killed," says Patience.

"They could be depicting a shamanistic experience or mythological event," says Metta.

"Hey, this looks like some sort of map," says Seeker, indicating a long squiggly line. "It looks like the Dirty Devil."

"How 'bout this guy with the antenna coming out his head like an alien," says Bobofet.

"Maybe he is an alien. They could have drawn aliens that visited them, you know," adds Seaweed.

"Those are probably horns or antlers. All across the world, horns are associated with shamans. Pueblo Indians dress up as kachinas for the dances, and several of the kachinas have antlers on their masks. I imagine that these are depictions of kachinas. There *is* something heroic or mythological about them," says Metta.

"Kachinas?" Patience raises her eyebrows.

"Spirit beings or demigods that journey back and forth between this world and the spirit world," clarifies Metta. "These could also be a religious storytelling device, like the Stations of the Cross or Tibetan tankas."

"There's some spirit beings if I've ever seen one," says Seeker. He points above us, indicating the faint red outlines with broad shoulders, long tapering bodies, and bulging eyes like sockets in a skull.

Lacking arms or legs, these eerie anthropomorphs appear to hover like ghosts, floating out of a past so ancient that we shudder at their possible significance. Distinct from the carved Fremont petroglyphs below, these life-size figures were painted with hematite or ochre by archaic hunter-gatherers centuries earlier. Called Barrier Canyon style (after the next canyon to the east of us), these figures display a high degree of artistic quality, while the Fremont artwork is less stylized and more realistic. With the modern natives, such as Ute and Navajo, rock art becomes even more simplistic, depicting stick figures on horses. Archeologists attribute this diminishment of artistic quality to later cultures investing their artistic energy into other art forms such as pottery, basketry, and textiles.

It appears that we are looking at three sets of rock art, with the eight-foot high ghost figures as the oldest. Thought to date between 1000 B.C. and A.D. 500, the Barrier Canyon hunter-gatherers immediately preceded the Fremont and were likely their ancestors. However, rock art is difficult to date, and these could be much older. Clay figurines resembling the ghost figures were found in Cowboy Cave and date back 8,800 to 6,600 years ago.

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At ground level, the petroglyphs have similar shapes but are filled with squiggly lines. The Fremont modified the archaic style with rectangular bucket heads and added arms and legs. Both styles depict trapezoidal anthropomorphs with headdresses and jewelry. Similar styles of rock art are found east of the Colorado River, suggesting that the Anasazi in these areas may have borrowed Fremont styles and symbolism. Rock art expert Polly Shaafsma believes these similarities provide strong evidence that the Fremont and Anasazi arose from the same indigenous Archaic peoples. "We seem to be dealing with a single tradition encompassing three related but different art styles in which the anthropomorphic figure receives special emphasis. These styles, in turn, are undoubtedly underlain by a single tradition of religious ideology that existed in this area over many centuries," she writes.

Shaafsma points out that the Fremont preoccupation with the shaman motif suggests the retention of hunter-gatherer ideology rather than a priesthood that develops among agriculturists. "Art is an artifactual or material record of the ideological component of a prehistoric social system," she adds.

The archaic rock art seems to be displayed in a highly visible location, high on this cliff face, at the mouth of Robbers Roost Canyon. It would be hard for anyone to miss this enormous canvas. Indeed, the panel seems to be deliberately composed with the images assuming importance. But why are the Fremont petroglyphs hidden from view, lower down and around the corner on a nondescript rock face that no one would ever see? Perhaps it was the act of carving, especially in the case of bighorns, that was more important than the impression upon the viewer.

One can't help but wonder if these wandering desert tribes inhabited a world of dreams. A world infused with beauty, art, and meaning; a world of porous boundaries with no distinction between the world of spirits and dreams and the world of waking.

A peregrine dives off the top of the cliff crying shrilly as we wade back across the river.

We enter Robbers Roost, a small creek lined with willows and cottonwood that invites us upstream, past graceful sandstone walls decked with desert varnish. Bighorn tracks lead up the canyon in the damp mud past the emerald green of oaks and cottonwoods. Bobofet, today's leader, finds an appealing alcove that he is quite excited about camping in.

"You guys won't believe this. It's like a tropical paradise," he says, returning to the group huddled in the scant shade of a cottonwood. We follow him into a grotto, where a deep-green pool flanked by water birch lies in the middle of the alcove. The cliff drips with water, nurturing a dense carpet of false Solomon's seal and poison ivy. A black ribbon of desert varnish cascades down the underside of the alcove, ending at a sandstone drain spout

poised three hundred feet above the pool. We stand before the scene in stunned awe.

Finally Sage says, "I don't think we should camp here."

Bobofet turns toward her in surprise. "What? This place is awesome!"

"That's just it. Think of the impact we would have."

"If we camp somewhere else, we could come here and have class," Metta suggests.

Reluctantly, Bobofet capitulates and leads us out of paradise. We find another alcove around the next bend, this one dry and sandy where our impact will be minimized. That evening we discover that spadefoot and Woodhouse toads use the grotto as an amphitheater, broadcasting their amorous intentions up and down the canyon.

A crazy patchwork of blooms decorates the wash in front of our camp. Naked-stem sunflowers and clusters of rough mules, ears mingle with peppergrass. Penstemon, both the red Eaton and the blue narrow-leaf, square off with fuchsia prickly pears. Gumweed, mounds of yellow crypanth, and lavender desert mint all vie for attention. We key out a purple five-petaled flower. While prying open the corollas, we find a small beetle tucked inside the tubular flower.

"Hey, here's another beetle inside this flower too," says Sage.

"I wonder if they are this plant's pollinators," muses Huckleberry.

"There's a spider over here," announces Mud.

A pale-yellow spider hangs from the plant's leaves clutching a lifeless fly in its jaws. A spotless ladybug strolls through the stems. Meanwhile, a tiny lacewing lands on my thumb. It seems this plant provides habitat for a diversity of creatures. A member of the Dogbane family, we discover this flower has no common name.

"Does that mean we get to name it?" asks Sage.

"Sure, why not?"

And so the students christen this "purple dogstar." Certainly this is a more becoming name than the bastard toadflax growing nearby.

A hummingbird zips past us like a bullet, heading right for the Eaton's penstemon, which waits patiently for it's pollinator, its tubular flowers excluding all other suitors.

"You can tell it's a broad-tailed hummingbird because it sounds like the Jetson's spaceship—bleble, beelbe, beeble," I say.

"Pop culture!" the students gleefully chastise me.

Finished with the penstemon, the hummingbird aims for the red bandana Metta has tied around her head. He hangs in midair, trying to decide if her head is edible. Right color, wrong shape. Finally, he zips off to a nearby box elder where he hovers in one spot for several minutes, flashing

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his bright fuchsia neckware at a prospective female sitting on a branch. He begins flying in a tight figure eight, rising and falling before her in frenzied courtship. Emboldened, he zips off to harass a kestrel that lands nearby.

The day becomes absurdly hot, and we move from shade to shade trying to avoid the gnats, horseflies, and deerflies that torment us. In the afternoon I walk up canyon looking for a shady alcove that might catch a breeze to keep the insects at bay. I spy a small cave high up the cliff and scrabble up. Some rocks are piled in a rough wall at the entrance as if to block the wind. Behind the wall is an area free of debris, just big enough for a person to lie down. Bits of charcoal scattered in the sand indicate an old campfire. Deeply incised into a rock are the initials and date of the camper, "JB 1903." These were probably the initials of Joe Biddlecome who pioneered the Robbers Roost Ranch on the mesa above the canyon. At my feet lies the carving implement, an old horseshoe. Unlike a modern horseshoe, this is smaller and rounded. Toward the rear of the alcove, I notice a couple of pits dug in the sand, suggesting that someone was searching for something. More pot hunters perhaps? Or someone searching for some of the loot Butch Cassidy reportedly stashed in these canyons?

Although Butch Cassidy and the Wild Bunch made this area infamous during the 1890s when it was one of their chief hideouts, Robbers Roost received its name twenty years earlier when a horse thief named Cap Brown frequented the area. Cap stole horses in western Utah and brought them into this no man's land, moving them from water hole to water hole across the desert and into Colorado where he sold them for a tidy profit. One time Cap was followed by a posse as he dropped into the Dirty Devil. He decided to ambush them as they rode down Beaver Canyon and scare them off. In the ensuing gunfire, one of Cap's young cowboys was wounded. He made it up the Angel Trail before his fate bestowed the name Dead Man's Hill to a nearby knoll.

Bringing horses out of the canyon and up the slickrock posed a challenge, and the rustlers often had to throw sand on the rock to give the horses' hooves purchase. Eventually so many horses and cattle traversed the trail that their hooves wore grooves into the slickrock. Cap said he named the Angel Trail because one needed the wings of an angel to make it. Cap also built the corrals on Twin Corral Flats.

This remote region owns a long tradition as a refuge for those seeking to escape civilization and its institutions. The first white men to see the Dirty Devil were probably three Mormons who were wanted for the murder of a gentile physician and advised by Brigham Young to hide out in the vast unknown of southern Utah. During the 1880s when polygamists were fleeing

the feds, Ebenezer Hanks and several other families founded the isolated village of Hanksville where they could freely engage in their practice.

The Homestead Act notwithstanding, any cowboy who attempted to start a small ranch of his own met with stiff opposition from large ranch owners, who in effect controlled the public lands for their own use. Independent cowboys retaliated by rounding up and bestowing their own brands on maverick livestock. Furthermore, once a calf was separated from its mother, it was technically a maverick. This practice was tacitly acknowledged and tolerated by the ranchers. But once the cowboys crossed the line to rustling (altering existing brands), they were considered outlaws.

Charles Kelly, author of *The Outlaw Trail*, reported that unlike other parts of the West, the rustlers of the Roost country were well organized. Each rustler would only pick up a few strays and then move them on to the next station where another man would add a few more. "None of them had *stolen* any stock; they had merely moved a few head of strays off their own range," he wrote. The cattle were finally assembled in Robbers Roost and then sold at Green River or in Colorado. "Profits were split all the way down the line. This system was so foolproof and so profitable that almost every other small rancher in southern Utah was a rustler on the side," Kelly continued.

Mike Cassidy was one of those cowboy-rustlers who operated about seventy miles west of Robbers Roost near Bryce Canyon. A Mormon farm boy named Robert Leroy Parker fell in with Cassidy who taught him the tricks of the trade. During this time Robert was falsely arrested, jailed, and mistreated by the sheriff. This incident left him with a lifelong grudge against the law. Robert was named after his grandfather, one of the original Mormon handcart pioneers who left Missouri in late summer of 1856 with his wife and four children. For three months they walked and pushed their belongings across the Great Plains, reaching South Pass, Wyoming, in mid-October where they confronted deep snow and starvation. As one of the leaders and one of the strongest in the party, Robert Parker broke trail through deep snowdrifts. Eventually his strength gave way, and he died one night frozen in his blankets. In later years his eldest son, Maximilian also guided emigrants from Missouri to Utah. Maximilian married and settled in Beaver, Utah, where Robert Leroy Parker was born. A few years later the family moved to a ranch near Circleville.

Mike Cassidy had acquired a sizable herd by questionable means and hired Robert to take it to Colorado to sell. At Hanksville, Robert met up with Cap Brown who guided him and the livestock across the Dirty Devil and into the Robbers Roost country. They spent the night at the mouth of Beaver Canyon, and Robert saw for the first time the country that would be his impenetrable hideout for the next fifteen years. From Robbers Roost he

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and Cap herded the horses north toward Green River, where Cap left him on his own to take the horses toward Moab and then into the booming mining camp of Telluride, Colorado. Robert wasn't the first and certainly not the last to lose his innocence in Telluride.

In Telluride Robert fell in with an unsavory crowd, including Matt Warner and Tom McCartry, leader of the infamous McCarty Gang. Charles Kelly reports that these three were responsible for a train robbery outside Grand Junction in 1887 in which they failed to open the safe and netted nothing of value. At some point, Robert borrowed his mentor's surname and became known as Butch Cassidy. Butch, Matt, and Tom continued their exploits, holding up the bank in Telluride and escaping with $10,500, a considerable sum in 1889. Although the posse had conceded the chase, the outlaws rode to Brown's Hole in northeastern Utah and then fled south again to hide out in Robbers Roost. Nervous still, they soon rode north to Wyoming where they split up.

Meanwhile, J. B. Buhr, a tailor from Denver, attempted to start a large ranch in Robbers Roost country during the 1890s. J. B. headquartered his ranch near Hanksville and hired Jack Moore, a competent cowboy but a rather unscrupulous character. Jack ran the line camp on Robbers Roost Flats and invited his outlaw friends and their acquaintances to join him. The outlaws would drift in during the fall, spend the winter at the Roost, and then head out in the spring.

For a cowboy, Jack didn't think much of cows, often complaining of overgrazing and even supplying the outlaws with beef poached from wayward cows. Jack often rustled cows himself, herding them to Green River or to Colorado. He was finally arrested for cattle rustling but jumped bail. Jack reportedly fended off a posse that chased him into the Dirty Devil by ducking behind a boulder and poking out a charred willow that resembled a rifle in the diminishing daylight. Finally Jack was shot by a rancher in hot pursuit of rustlers. In 1899 Jack's wife and J. B. were charged with harboring criminals. They were tried in Hanksville where J. B. supplied a keg of beer for the trial. They were soon acquitted. A few years later J. B. sold the ranch, and he and Mrs. Moore left Utah together.

Butch Cassidy's most infamous exploit was the Castle Gate payroll robbery in 1897. Castle Gate, the region's largest coal mine, lay tucked in a narrow canyon near Price. Since Butch was known only by reputation, when he rode into town on a big grey horse, everyone took him for a cowpoke. Castle Gate was a mining town and no one rode a horse in town. To allay suspicion, every day for a week, Butch rode his horse at a full gallop through the town to meet the train and back again. Town folks assumed he was training his racehorse.

The day the mine payroll arrived, E. L. Carpenter and two assistants each carried a bag of money from the station to the company office a short distance away. Two men sat loafing at the foot of the stairs to the office. As the paymaster walked past, Butch stuck a gun in the side of one of the assistants and relieved them all of their burdens. Although the robbery took place in broad daylight and in full view of the station, pursuit was slow. When he attempted to notify the sheriff in Price, Carpenter discovered the telegraph wires had been cut. Butch and his partner, Elza Lay fled down the San Rafael and into the Robbers Roost country with eight thousand dollars in gold.

Butch set up a luxurious camp in the Roost while waiting for things to cool down. Whenever a posse pursued outlaws heading into the Roost, they always rode white horses to notify the outlaws of their approach. This prevented the outlaws from being taken by surprise so as not to put the lives of the posse in jeopardy. After being fired upon from a safe distance, the posse, having discharged their cursory duties, returned to more civilized enclaves.

The Salt Lake Tribune stated, "[T]he coal company may as well give up any attempt to capture the holdups or regain the cash. The robbers are too well organized and the country so unsettled and so little is known that a sheriff's posse would fare badly should it attempt to dislodge the desperadoes."

To stimulate action, the governor of Utah put a five-hundred-dollar price on the head of a dozen of the Roost's better-known rustlers. Sheriff Tyler of Moab figured he'd supplement his income by pursuing two of the rustlers, Blue John and Silver Tip, after their visit to Moab resulted in the disappearance of several horses. Tyler and six deputies entered the Roost from the north with assistance from a guide. They found the stolen horses grazing on the mesa and the four rustlers camped in an alcove at the head of Robbers Roost Canyon. The outlaws had left their horses on the mesa above and were trapped. The officers could fire at will from the rim. Silver Tip kept up a steady stream of bullets while the others escaped up an exposed trail to the mesa. Although Ed Newcome received a bullet in the leg, the escaped outlaws were able to cover Silver Tip while he ran up the trail to join them. The outlaws split up and got away while Tyler and his men returned to Moab empty-handed.

A few months after the Battle of Roost Canyon, Butch Cassidy and the Wild Bunch returned to Robbers Roost with thirty thousand dollars from the Wilcox train robbery in which they had blown up the safe in the express car with dynamite. The next year Butch passed through Robbers Roost for the last time, returning from the Winnemucca, Nevada, bank robbery. In 1902 Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid left for South America where they attempted ranching in Argentina before slipping back into their outlaw

habits. Despite persistent rumors to the contrary, the preponderance of evidence suggests that Butch and Sundance died in a shootout with army troops in San Vicente, Bolivia, in 1909.

Many speculated that the loot from the Castle Gate payroll robbery was buried at the Roost and searched these canyons for hidden treasure. But only one known recovery took place. In 1930 a mysterious stranger arrived at the Robbers Roost Ranch. The foreman noticed the man retrieve something from a cave, load it onto a pack mule, and disappear back into the desert.

Remembering and recording is a universal human condition. Legends and stories are passed from generation to generation as part of our collective consciousness. Perhaps rock art functions the same way, binding the landscape to culture while striving to make sense of the world and attempting to derive order from chaos. By recording the successful hunt or paying homage to the animal spirit or the keeper of the game, people bound their history to the rock in much the same way their ancestors recorded their shamanistic visions. Art thus created a sacred geography so that culture and landscape became inseparable.

Walking this river is our attempt to weave together landscape and culture. At first glimpse, there appears a great divide in our consciousness, as if the two hemispheres of our brain have been artificially severed, but we retain a ghost memory. We *feel* something in wilderness, it speaks to our innermost being, but it lacks any cultural significance. We lack language and context in which to place our experience. We've created a society bereft of landscape, a satellite of consciousness. While we may never know the precise significance of rock art, and although we suffer from the hubris of conquerors, we can nevertheless recognize that our wilderness has a history. Walking down Muddy Creek we are forced to examine the ultimate folly of nuclear weapons. We experience first-hand our culture's priorities; we see the impacts of overgrazing and mining and ORVs. Farther downstream, along the Dirty Devil we connect with our western mythology, camping where Butch Cassidy camped. We also create our own mythology: This is where we saw bighorn sheep; this is where we got stuck in quicksand; this is where we found a spearpoint. The wilderness is no longer other, but infused with cultural and personal meaning.