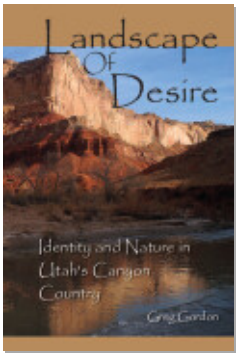
PROJECT MUSE®

xix. WINGATE



Published by

Gordon, Greg.
Landscape Of Desire.
Utah State University Press, 2003.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/10431.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/10431

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XIX WINGATE

If the Navajo is female, then the Wingate is surely male, with its sharp right angles and sheer cliffs that erode into pinnacles. The Wingate cliffs form a rampart of colossal stone soldiers.

It is through the cracked ones the light comes through.

—Hindu Proverb

The students want to get an early start to avoid the heat and decide to get up at 5:30 A.M. We shoulder our packs as the sun first tinges the canyon rim. The mercilessly blue sky promises a long, hot day. The river strips away the rocks as we descend, opening up layer after layer of cuticle for our inspection. With each bend in the river, we cut steadily through the Wingate as we alternate between hiking the sandy benches, wading through the river, and fighting through tamarisk.

We pause for lunch against a sheer wall of Wingate streaked with desert varnish. Dark-green lichens betray its north aspect. As the sun begins to creep up, we seek shelter under the big blocks of sandstone. Patience pulls out a large plastic bag full of energy bars.

"Good Lord, how many bars do you have?" asks Metta.

"Three per day, but I started with forty-five."

Everyone is tired of their particular brand, and so we trade. The students continue their endless debate about energy bars, the flavors and benefits of each. Huckleberry and Mud agree that Luna bars taste good, but use a cheap marketing ploy aimed at exploiting women's insecurities. A final consensus seems to be that they are all overpriced and too small.

There's much less accord about our next move. A few people, including Seeker, today's leader, want to continue on with the goal of reaching the mouth of Twin Corral Box Canyon. A few others want to wait out the heat and resume hiking in the evening. About half are too hot, tired, and ambivalent to care. Finally banking on my insistence that the brief appearance of mares' tails this morning indicates clouds and rain, a compromise is reached—we will rest another hour before continuing.

An hour later, dark clouds loom over the cliffs, yet it is still sweltering. Nonetheless, Seeker musters everyone, and we begin the long march to

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Twin Corral. Around the next bend we encounter the Chinle formation and, not coincidently, evidence of an old roadbed. This road hasn't seen the passage of a vehicle for over forty years, and while we can still make out the berm created by the dozer blade, little else remains. Rockfall and gullies have long since made it impassable to any vehicle. In places rabbitbrush and tamarisk have obliterated all signs of road. This was never really a road so much as a bulldozer scraping a path of optimism across the desert, not unlike other hubristic attempts such as the plan to build a railroad along the Colorado River through Glen Canyon just downstream of us.

In the 1880s when Cass Hite went looking for gold along the Colorado River, he found gold flakes near the mouth of the Dirty Devil. He also realized that this was a good place to cross the Colorado and called it Dandy Crossing. Hite publicized the crossing and the gold discovery, speculating that Glen Canyon would be the next big mining boom. Numerous prospectors found their way down into Glen Canyon and established a few productive placer and sluice operations. Following McKinley's election on the gold standard, prospectors began pouring into Glen Canyon. By 1889, more than a thousand miners were feverishly working the fine sand in hopes of striking it rich.

The discovery of gold in Glen Canyon made the notion of a railroad along the Colorado appear financially feasible, regardless of the canyon's challenging topography. Frank Brown, president of the Denver, Colorado Canyon and Pacific Railroad Company wanted to continue the line from Grand Junction along the Colorado and over to California. Brown and his chief engineer, Robert Stanton, floated the Colorado to investigate. However, they neglected to bring life preservers, and just below Lee's Ferry, Brown was caught in a whirlpool and drowned. The notion of a railroad along the Colorado died with him.

Stanton, however, had seen enough to envision a grand scheme: a series of floating dredges along Glen Canyon to extract gold, powered by hydro dams built in the side canyons. His crew staked one hundred and forty-five claims along one hundred and fifty miles of river. In 1900 Stanton brought in the first dredge, shipped in pieces to Green River and hauled by wagon to Glen Canyon. At one hundred and five feet long, the dredge got stuck on submerged sandbars and the silt gummed up the machinery. His one hundred thousand dollar investment yielded sixty-seven dollars before he gave up and abandoned the dredge.

The gold was so fine that it tended to float, and no technique had been devised to capture the tiny flakes. But in 1909 Charlie Spencer hit upon a solution. He would employ a pneumatic pipe dredge with high pressure hoses to dissolve the gold-bearing Chinle and then trap the gold with mercury. However, the operation required a lot of coal for power.

Spencer discovered coal on Warm Creek and hauled it by wagon twenty-eight miles to the river, where he loaded it on the largest boat to ever float the canyon. The steamer, Charles H. Spencer, also ran into sandbars, but its biggest hurdle was that it required almost a full load of coal to power back upstream. Spencer then devised a tow barge to haul the coal. However, the silt interfered with the mercury so that it was unable to absorb the gold, which slipped away and back into the river. In 1915 the Charles H. Spencer sank.

As we follow the road grade, the Chinle becomes more evident, a rainbow of dirt. Reds, yellows, greens, and blues erode from under blocks of sandstone creating pedestals and podiums for giants. The heat adds to the hallucinogenic quality of this Goyaesque landscape. We round another corner, and I recognize a finger of Wingate along the sawtooth wall that separates Twin Corral Canyon from the Dirty Devil. We reach the mouth of the canyon in time for a dip in the river before the mares tails fulfill their promise and deliver clouds, wind, and rain.

A party of rafts floats by. I wonder how they will respond to a bunch of muddy, naked people frolicking in the river. But the scene is so innocent and natural, they stop to chat.

"What are you doing for water?" a man asks.

I consider this a rather bizarre question from a man floating in the stuff.

One woman offers us water from Salt Lake City. We quickly dump out the brown Dirty Devil from our bottles and fill them with clear, chlorinated water hauled by petroleum from hundreds of miles away.

Loath to set up a tent after our long hike, I crawl under a tilted boulder and fall asleep watching the lightning as wayward raindrops sprinkle my face.

It remains grey and overcast the next morning. Everyone appears listless, a combination of yesterday's march and the weather. Bobofet shows up late, misses breakfast, and is visibly distraught. Throughout the hike, he is in a foul mood, unusual for him. I think he's taking the breakfast thing a little too hard and run though scenarios of what he will say this evening and the different responses I could offer. The canyon narrows with no apparent campsites. Huckleberry, who is leading, is far ahead. Too tired to continue, however, everyone else simply plops down in the creek bed and proclaims this as camp. After our two-hour hike, Bobofet collapses on his stomach. Metta tells me that his hips are in pain from a snowboarding injury, and that he downed lots of medication in order to hike. Once again I'm reminded of the bizarre realities that we create in our heads. We start to inhabit those realities and that blinds us to what is really going on.

"Have you noticed Sage lately?" Metta asks.

"What do you mean?"

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"She glows, this radiance comes out of her."

"Come to think of it, yeah, you're right. And Seaweed actually looks at you instead of at the ground when she's talking."

After breakfast the next day, we investigate our surroundings. Although we still find an occasional primrose, everything is going to seed now, ephedra, sumac, and penstemon. Purple scorpionweed produce long strings of black seeds. The cottonwood seed pods have burst open and a soft down floats on the water. The tamarisks grace the breeze with lacy fronds of pink and white.

We seek refuge from the sun under an overhang. Piles of droppings, both fresh and dried, litter the ground.

"Hey, are these rabbit?" asks Patience.

"I don't know; let's check it out. Rabbit droppings are round and tan. These are more oblong and brown," I say, holding up a pellet for inspection.

"Deer?" posits Mud.

"Seems like a strange place for deer to be hanging out," says Huckleberry.

"Hey, check this out," says Seeker from outside the overhang. "I was taking a leak over here and look . . ."

We peer down into the small gap created by two boulders leaning against each other.

"There's something in there," Seeker adds.

He and Huckleberry crawl inside. "They're a couple of bighorn skulls here. Adult males with full curls," says Huckleberry.

"They're half buried. Looks like they've been here for years," adds Seeker.

"How did the sheep get down in there?" asks Patience.

"And why two?" asks Sage.

"Do you think the Fremont set them there, like an altar or a ceremony or something?" asks Mud.

"I don't think they are that old," says Huckleberry emerging from under the boulders.

"Still, in this climate, they could be," says Metta.

"Do you think they could have locked their horns together and pushed each other off that cliff?" asks Yucca, pointing to the cliff above the overhang.

"Or maybe there was one badass bighorn who used that cliff to push off rival males," suggests Bobofet.

"But how did they get under that rock?" asks Patience.

"Maybe a mountain lion dragged them there," suggests Metta.

"Maybe a mountain lion knew that bighorns hung out under that overhang. I mean that's probably all bighorn scat under there, right? And this mountain lion pounced on them from above," says Sage.

"Or maybe it's just where bighorns go to die. Sort of like a bighorn graveyard," says Seaweed.

"Could it just be a coincidence?" asks Mud.

"It is a little odd to find all this scat in one place and then find two skulls nearby," I admit.

"Do they hunt them here too?" Mud asks suspiciously.

"No, the population can't take it. While they only counted forty bighorns in the Dirty Devil in the last census, the Department of Natural Resources estimates there are seventy-five sheep here. They occasionally augment the population by bringing in a few more sheep from elsewhere and dropping them in Sam's Mesa. But the population just hasn't taken off and will probably need more animals transplanted to reach a viable level. Although that carcass I found in No Man's Canyon indicates they are expanding their range," I say.

"If their range is expanding and this seems like ideal habitat, there's no competition from livestock and no hunting, why is the population so static?" asks Huckleberry. "Are they not reproducing?"

I shrug. "No one knows. It's hard enough just to count the sheep that are here, much less try to determine what's going on with them."

"Maybe the transplanted animals don't like it here; they're used to some place else," Sage suggests.

"Maybe. Part of it may just be a factor of the low population itself. When you get into these low population levels you encounter all sorts of problems: male-female ratios become skewed, breeding individuals can't find each other, disease, inbreeding, predation. If just a few crucial individuals die, it can mess up the whole herd," I indicate the horns below.

Back under the overhang, Yucca finds what he considers to be bat guano.

"Oh, yeah, that's amberat," I say.

"Amberat?"

"Yeah, pack rats combine their feces with urine and create this tarry stuff," I clarify.

"Yech," says Seaweed, wrinkling her nose.

"It's pretty cool actually. The pack rats incorporate all sorts of other materials, like cactus spines and pine needles into the amberat and build middens. The middens protect them from predators. The really cool part is that the sticky amberat acts as a pollen and insect trap, and it's resistant to weathering. Each generation of pack rats adds to the midden, so the middens provide an ecological record. Based on pack rat middens we know what the Colorado Plateau was like during the Pleistocene."

"Sort of like a time capsule?" says Mud.

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"Exactly. Ecologists have found pack rat middens dating back forty-five thousand years. The middens tell us that up until ten thousand years ago, Engelmann spruce, subalpine fir, and limber pine, species now found at higher elevations, dominated the Colorado Plateau. This indicates a much wetter climate. As the climate dried, Douglas fir and ponderosa pine took over. Then about five thousand years ago, Utah juniper and pinon pine became prevalent in amberat. That's about the same time that hunting and gathering replaced big game hunting."

"Do they find any animal remains in this stuff?" asks Patience bending closer to the midden.

"Some—mostly bones of rodents the pack rats have stashed. Sometimes the feces of other animals. You can imagine how many centuries of bighorn scat is beneath us. Down in Glen Canyon, they discovered a cave called Bechan, which means 'big shit' in Navajo. It was full of Pleistocene dung including Colombian mammoth and Shasta ground sloths."

"That's some big shit," jokes Yucca.

"Hard to believe that mammoths and ground sloths were running around here," says Bobofet, gazing out at the desiccated landscape.

"They had company too. The North American lion, long-horned bison, saber-tooth cat, camel, dire wolf, and jaguar all lived here ten thousand years ago."

"That doesn't seem that long ago, really," says Patience.

"How big's a ground sloth, anyway? Aren't they those huge things they found in La Brea tar pits?" asks Yucca.

"The Shasta ground sloth was nine feet long and five hundred and fifty pounds, and the Harlan's ground sloth stood twelve feet high and weighed over eight hundred pounds."

"No wonder they went extinct," says Bobofet impressed.

"Actually the Shasta ground sloth would do quite well in current conditions. At Bechan Cave the sloth's baseball-sized pellets revealed that it ate globemallow, Mormon tea, yucca, cactus, salt bush, and mesquite."

"So what happened?" asks Mud.

"Aren't they now saying the Native Americans killed off all the big mammals?" asks Patience.

I nod. "Uh huh, the 'overkill hypothesis.' Ecologist Paul Martin suggests that the arrival of humans in various places around the globe has coincided with extinctions of large animals. In North America skilled hunters arrived in a continent rich in big game and quickly moved through the landscape, killing off the species as they went. Large animals have a slow reproductive rate. So they could not sustain this onslaught from a predator they'd never before encountered."

"But what about saber-tooth tigers and lions; it seems that people with spears would have a hard time killing them too," says Bobofet.

"If all their prey disappeared, they wouldn't have anything to eat," says Huckleberry.

"Oh yeah."

"Still, I have a hard time believing that a bunch of guys with spears would be able to knock off that many animals," insists Seeker.

"So do a lot of other scientists. In fact, on the Colorado Plateau and Great Basin only mammoth and ground sloth remains show up at human kill sites. However, one hundred and thirty-five species went extinct over a relatively short time period of four hundred years. Small mammal species were unaffected. What else could cause that?"

"Well, like the pack rat middens show, didn't the climate shift? It seems small animals would be able to survive the drier conditions. Doesn't seem like there's a lot for a mammoth to eat around here," says Sage.

"Some scientists theorize that the oscillating glaciations of the Pleistocene destroyed the large animals' habitat, driving them into smaller and more isolated patches. This spelled doom for species that were widespread but lightly distributed across the continent. Only those that could adapt, such as the pronghorn, bighorn, bison, and wolf, survived."

"So why did they die off all over the world then?" asks Huckleberry. "Did people kill them all off in Europe and then follow them across the Bering Land Bridge and then knock them off here and all the way down to South America?"

"Could be. Another possibility recently proposed is that many of these animals died off from diseases brought by dogs and rats as they accompanied humans across the Bering Land Bridge. Just as small pox decimated the indigenous population, these new pathogens found a continent full of animals lacking immune resistence."

"That still doesn't explain why the megafauna went extinct in Eurasia," insists Huckleberry.

"True."

"Couldn't all three be contributing factors? An unstable climate reduced the populations so much that humans were able to kill enough of them to keep their populations from recovering," suggests Metta.

"Or vice versa," adds Huckleberry.

"It seems that humans are just a plague upon the planet," says Mud. "Humans killed off all those animals and now we're killing off—what's the latest statistic?—half the world's species will go extinct in the next hundred years."

"That's the estimate. Twenty-five percent in our lifetimes. That's between two and ten million species gone by 2020," I confirm.

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"I think it's presumptuous to assume we are endangering the planet," says Huckleberry. "We're overpopulated, just like deer on an island. We'll keep consuming until everything is gone. Then our population will crash, which may be a good thing. We may succeed in killing off ourselves and higher life forms, but the cyanobacteria will continue, and a few million years later other things will evolve."

"So environmentalism is pointless?" Metta asks.

"Essentially," he responds.

"But if people find out about these things, how destructive their lifestyle is, they will change," suggests Sage.

"Is it really lack of information?" I ask.

"It's easier to deny there's a problem than to change your behavior," says Metta.

"And people don't want to feel guilty. Either you're contributing to the problem or you're not doing enough to change it," says Seeker.

"All we can do is live our lives as an example. When people see that there's another way, that you don't need all these material things to be happy, they'll see that and think," says Patience.

"Is that all we can do?" I ask.

"Without making people feel guilty. And then they'll just deny there's a problem or do little things out of guilt," says Sage.

"What about fulfillment? Can you work for change out of a sense of fulfillment and well-being rather than from a sense of guilt?" inquires Metta.

"But it's so overwhelming. Global warming, destruction of the rainforest. How do you avoid despair?" asks Mud.

"I guess just by doing the little things that need to get done. Maybe it won't ultimately make much difference whether you ride your bike to school or drive, but the act itself is what's important. By engaging in these small acts, which are really forms of protest against the global juggernaut, you are honoring, not just the earth but yourself. Even if no one else is willing to do so, taking responsibility for our existence is a matter of self-respect. It's a practice, like minimum impact on a bigger scale."

"Still, half the species suddenly went extinct with the dinosaurs and life rebounded. Things evolved. And after the Pleistocene extinctions, life continued," insists Huckleberry.

"No doubt, tamarisk, Russian thistle, scorpions, and rats will all survive just about anything. But do we really want to turn earth into a planet of weeds? These 'edge species' or generalists do really well in disturbed environments. Deer, coyotes, chuckars . . ."

"Humans," adds Mud.

"But is that the kind of world we want to inhabit?"

"It seems like that's where things are headed. Even out here the exotic species are taking over," says Seeker.

"Yeah, it seems that everything we come across is dead," adds Bobofet.

"You know, I did think we'd see a lot more wildlife out here," says Patience.

"Well, after the Pleistocene extinctions, many mammals went underground, literally. Smaller species adapt more readily to changing environmental conditions. The shorter your life span, the quicker you can evolve. So dinosaurs, in essence, became birds, and mammals went back to being small and nocturnal. There are sixty-five species of mammals out here, twenty-one of those are rodents and nineteen are bats. You just have to redefine your concept of wildlife. Over sixty species of reptiles and amphibians inhabit the Colorado Plateau and Great Basin. We had the age of fishes, the age of reptiles, the age of mammals, maybe next is the age of insects. Over half the species on earth are insects. We have somewhere around twenty thousand species of insects on the Colorado Plateau. Utah has one hundred and sixty-nine species of ants. And big sagebrush hosts forty-six species of aphids. Although there's no longer any lions here, we can still see ant lions."

"Ant lions?" asks Patience.

"Yeah, let's see," I say, scoping the sandy floor of the overhang for the telltale pits.

"Here." I crouch down at a small inverted cone in the sand. "This is an ant lion trap. An ant walking along falls in here and can't get out because it's too steep. The ant lion, buried at the bottom of the pit, grabs it from below."

"Here's an ant," says Yucca, dropping it into the pit.

"No!" exclaims Mud.

Attempting to climb out, the ant sends a stream of sand grains down into the pit alerting the ant lion, who in a sudden flash catapults out of the sand and seizes the hind end of the ant in its jaws. The ant lion thrashes the ant back and forth, knocking it senseless, and pulls it back into the sand out of sight.

"Cool!" exclaims Bobofet. "Did you see that?"

Mud looks horrified

A few moments later, the ant lion flicks the ant carcass out of the pit, having sucked the insides out of its prey. I scoop up the pit and spread the handful of sand on a notebook. The ant lion's massive pinchers are clearly visible. "Take a look through your hand lens," I suggest. "See how all these hairs angle forward. That helps it lodge into the sand so it can pull its prey down. This is actually the ant lion larva, which lives for one to three years then hatches into an adult, which only lives for a month."

"Jezz, what's the adult look like?" asks Seeker.

"It's pretty innocuous. It looks like a damselfly and only lives long enough to breed."

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The ant lion scurries backward across the notebook leaving a small trough. It drops off the edge and quickly disappears into the sand.

"You know, it looks disturbingly like Piglet," says Sage.

As we drop down toward the creek, Banjo makes a curious prodding with her nose at the base of a cottonwood. Looking closer, I see a small bull snake clutching the leg of an enormous Woodhouse toad in its mouth. Judging by the toad's size, it's probably a female. We stand and watch in fascinated horror as the toad struggles pathetically to free herself from the snake who has a viselike hold on her leg. The snake, meanwhile, is simultaneously trying to prevent the toad from getting away while eating it. The snake twists itself upside down and wraps its body around a piece of wood to gain leverage while the toad manages to get on the opposite side of a small stalk of rabbitbrush.

"Look, it's using that tree to pull itself free," says Sage so wrapped up in the drama that the rabbitbrush has assumed immense proportions.

"That toad doesn't stand a chance," proclaims Patience.

"That's an awfully big toad," comments Seeker.

Seaweed can't watch and walks away. The snake finally manages to swallow the toad's foot and works its jaws up the toad's body. The entire leg is inside the snake now. We all admit it's just a matter of time. The toad continues to halfheartedly try to escape. The snake keeps working its jaws trying to somehow gain a purchase on the toad's rear, which is too large for the snake's mouth.

"That poor toad," sympathizes Mud. "Shouldn't we do something?"

"The snake has to eat too, you know," says Yucca.

"I know, but it seems so cruel."

"If a hawk swooped down and picked up the snake, would you feel bad for the snake?" asks Huckleberry.

"Well, no," she confesses. "I don't know. The whole thing is so confusing."

Twenty, thirty minutes pass. Both animals struggle while we debate the ethical dilemma before us. As the snake reaches up for another bite, the toad suddenly pulls free and hops away with a mangled and bloody leg. Fatigued, she pauses at our feet. The snake is on her instantly. It tries to bite her, but can't find a purchase and rests its head atop the immobile toad, both ectotherms exhausted from the struggle. Eventually the toad gathers energy and hops away. The snake, aware of our presence, slithers off, perhaps fearful it could become prey itself. How have we influenced the course of events? Would the snake have pursued the toad, or would it have given up anyway? Will the toad die of her injuries? What's our role in all of this?

Unlike the larger Woodhouse toads, the red-spotted toads keep themselves well hidden during the day. We wait until evening when the toads

emerge from their root and rock refuges along the creek. Tadpoles nervously crowd the pools. Many have already sprouted legs in a feverish race to reach adulthood before the water dries up. As darkness approaches, the high-pitched croaking of red-spotted toads fills the air like dozens of ringing telephones. In contrast, the Woodhouse toad sounds like a baby crying. The small pools burst with red-spotted toads jumping on top of each other, not bothering with trivial details such as gender in their frenzy. Soon toads hop over from neighboring pools to join in, and nary a female in sight, as if someone blew a whistle and announced, "Orgy at the pool." The toads will continue to mate and lay eggs through summer, as long as there is water.

Later, Seaweed reads her essay, an intense and powerful piece about her freshman year at college. She describes the chaos of her dorm room through vodka-hazed eyes. Hung over, she stood naked in front of a mirror and examined her waif-thin body. She recounted her battlescars, twelve lines under her left breast, eleven under her right, fifty-six on her thigh, and words in bold capital letters—FUCKMEHURTMELOVEME—all incised with an Xacto knife. She poured rubbing alcohol over the fresh wounds to accentuate the pain. After the latest self-mutilation, she grew disgusted and ran outside in her robe clutching her cigarettes and knife. She found refuge under a tree and began caving into a sapling with her knife. Suddenly she realized what she was doing to the tree and to herself.

We sit in stunned silence when she finishes reading. Finally Metta reaches over and touches Seaweed on the knee.

"Are you all right?" she asks.

"Yeah. I've been working on it this whole time. The hardest part was reliving it when I was writing it. But it's been really cathartic. Every day that I'm out here, I just feel stronger. Thanks for listening."

Eating disorder—no doubt. She's still a finicky eater, although she has started eating breakfast and is putting on weight. Cigarettes—that would explain the constant out of breath on any hill. But self-mutilation? She sports two pierced ears, not lobes but entire ears, a pierced eyebrow, tongue, and bellybutton. I had wondered why she always wore long pants. However, the next day, she is wearing shorts. I steal a quick glance at her leg and notice that words are indeed imperfectly embossed on her thigh. I begin to see her in a new light. It's as if she radiates confidence and strength. Sharing her story, her secret and her shame, she no longer has anything to hide. Her vulnerability engenders respect.