Landscape Of Desire

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Published by Utah State University Press

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Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/10431.
Everyone remembers the first time. It attains a degree of mythological importance out of proportion to the actual event. I was eleven or twelve, in the midst of those buoyant days before adolescence, when my father convinced his wife, two bratty kids, and his parents to undertake a camping trip to southeast Utah, places he had known in his youth. In Arches National Park, my brother and I crawled through arches, ran around in the Fiery Furnace, followed the crowds out to Delicate Arch, went on an interminably long jeep ride, and played cards in my grandparents’ RV.

Somehow I’d gotten my hands on a copy of The Journey Home by Edward Abbey and was reading it during the trip. (The following year I read The Monkey Wrench Gang and was warped forever.) At the canyon rim at Dead Horse Point I stood on the cusp. Half of me ran around the slickrock chasing lizards, picking up rocks, and crawling under overhangs. The other half gazed into the void. For the first time, I saw a world much greater than my own, one beyond human contrivance, one that stretched back into the ancient past and continued into a future far beyond human imagination. Yet I was a part of it all. Existence was no longer the vacuum experience of growing up in Denver. The world was infinite, and its origins were so far back in time as to be beyond the horizon of knowledge. Time flowed up the canyon layer by layer, through my feet and out the top of my head and kept right on going. I was a connected part of the geology of the earth, just like a dinosaur fossil or a layer of volcanic ash. A whole country spread out before me beckoning; the possibilities were endless.

As it had for thousands of others, the canyon country held my imagination captive, demanding tribute. I returned as soon as I could drive. By the time I was in college, my pilgrimages increased in frequency, and the year after I graduated I took a job as a park ranger in Canyonlands National Park. This landscape on the edge of perpetual collapse added dimensions of depth

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*Was somebody asking to see the soul? See your own shape and countenance, persons, substances, beasts, the trees, the running rivers, the rocks and sands.*

—Walt Whitman
and time, perceptions which had been lacking in my daily life. The canyon country reached out, grabbed my soul, and refused to let go. I didn’t resist. However, the price of love is eternal yearning.

When I moved to Montana to attend graduate school, I found I needed the desert’s clarity more than ever. The cold, grey Missoula winter seemed to drain the vitality out of everyone. The weather suggested hibernation, and I burrowed myself in smoky bars and dim coffeehouses, twisting the threads of my consciousness into a tight self-absorbed ball. Eventually, the March winds began to melt the snow revealing geologic depositions of dogshit. I began to feel a slight tug pulling me southward, a tug that grew as I cut through Idaho and became undeniable as I entered the Utah sunshine.

Instead of the direct route from the interstate, I always took the old road that followed the Colorado River into Moab, Utah, the starting point for most of my journeys. The River Road, as it was known, began at Cisco, a ghost town of collapsing buildings and rusting machinery where the ceaseless winds had impaled generations of tumbleweeds against the barbed wire fence surrounding the town.

From Cisco, the road traveled across open flats and dropped toward the river. A rickety wooden bridge spanned the Colorado. This was my favorite part of the drive. The bridge could only hold one car at a time, so I had to stop before crossing to make sure no one was coming the other way. I couldn’t help thinking what might happen if the bridge collapsed into the murky river swirling below. One year as I drove toward the bridge with the same delighted anticipation that an eleven-year-old has for old bridges, I braked suddenly. The old bridge was gone, replaced by a new two-lane overpass.

I loved that old bridge. I depended upon it to bring me from the world of the interstate to the world of rock and river. It slowed me down, with the corresponding drop in heartbeat and anxiety.

When we’ve pinned our soul to a place, we resent imposed changes. They invalidate our memories, which cease to be living things and become consigned to the realm of ghosts. Such irreversible changes hurl us against our will from past to present tense. Even as the wild landscape disappears, we become enamored of it and seek it out to infuse the empty spaces in our souls that we are busy paving over.

This annual spring pilgrimage to the slickrock country never failed to stretch and pull me like taffy. As a snake sheds its skin every year, I found I needed to shed those winter layers. Although I was motivated by the physical need to shed caffeine and clothing, I was always surprised by the psychic shedding that occurred, often unintentionally. The demons of my consciousness shriveled up and flaked off, and I was left with a distilled essence of self.
For the past ten years I’ve shared this experience, leading university students on a two-month field studies program. I’ve witnessed how extended time spent living in a small group in the wilderness engenders a fundamental shift in the way we regard ourselves and our place in nature. Perhaps it’s Thoreau’s fault that we equate wilderness with solitude. Nevertheless, wilderness has traditionally been a solo male journey, a quest, a search for self-identity. For better or worse, we are humans, not bears, and I’ve found that more than anything else the wilderness teaches us how to live in community, as citizens of the biotic community as well as a human community that we actively create. It turns out that we need each other.

The danger of intimacy is that the sacred becomes mundane. While I’m able to impart a degree of familiarity to the Colorado Plateau, the students yank me from complacency with each new plant or arrowhead we discover. I never fail to learn something new about myself and grow in unexpected ways. It is through them that I can experience everyday beauty with the exuberance of a first time lover.