Landscape Of Desire

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The notion of a species-wide fixation at the state of early adolescence fits with the kind of boisterous, arrogant pursuit of individual self-assertion that characterizes the consumerist, exploitative model of economic growth, where the short-term profit of entrepreneurs and corporate shareholders seems to be not only the dominant value, but the only value under consideration.

—Ralph Metzner

I begin the day in a funk. Seaweed, who for some unfathomable reason thinks everyone wants to hear the complete works of Joan Baez first thing in the morning, sings with a dreamy look on her face and gazes into the distance while everyone else stands around waiting for her to finish packing so we can leave. I wonder if always being the last to get ready is a subtle form of control. It seems that when someone lacks control over her own life, she often feels a need to control others.

“Let’s hack, dude,” says Bobofet pulling out his hackysack to kill time.

We pass quickly through the greenish Curtis formation and enter the deep red of the Entrada. For the first time it feels like we are in a canyon. We hike past sheer walls and cottonwood benches. One meander after another, the creek slinks away downstream. Stepping out of the creek, a thin, grey film coats our legs. The mud and water dry our skin, and the willows and tamarisk whip across our chapped thighs causing us to curse and scratch.

The sound of the wind toying with the cottonwood leaves and the slow conversation of sandstone are suffocated by an impromptu Phish concert. My mood worsens as Bobofet and Yucca belt out Pink Floyd lyrics as we hike. Old episodes of the *Brady Bunch at the Grand Canyon* come to life transposed with characters from *Star Wars*. Then the food invasion begins—“thebestburritoinSantaCruz butdude I wassofuckedup . . .” The landscape recedes and becomes mere scenery. Conversation focuses on everything we
came here to escape. I think back to our first evening when I asked the students why they were here.

“I just needed to get out of Santa Cruz,” said Patience.

“A change in routine. I go to school, come home, do a bong, go to work, drink all weekend, then start all over on Monday,” said Yucca.

Bobofet nodded understandingly to Yucca. “At home, TV becomes important. You fit your schedule around your TV shows.”

“I’ve been studying environmental issues in college for three years, but I’ve never spent any time in the wilderness, and I thought I should,” said Mud.

“I just knew there had to be another way, an education that doesn’t revolve around lectures and tests. I felt I wasn’t really learning anything in school,” Seeker added.

“Everyone that comes off Sierra Institute, you see them on the street and they just glow, their eyes shine, they seem so alive and I don’t know, focused or something,” said Sage.

“I just wanted to be outside, in the wilderness, not be constrained by someone else’s time schedule,” said Patience.

“I was dealing with a lot of personal stuff my first year and needed to get away from things,” added Seaweed. “I’ve been on anti-depressants for four years, and I want to get off them. I’ve spent my whole life focusing on other people, and I need to gain a sense of who I am.”

All the women echoed her sentiment, saying they wanted to gain a sense of self and not be so wrapped up in others.

Sage added, “I wanted to do this to prove to myself I could.”

“I’m tired of always trying to mold my personality around ideas and beliefs I think are important; instead I’d like to try and find ideas and beliefs that fit my personality,” said Patience.

“I want to explore how humans fit into the environment,” said Huckleberry.

“Babylon, dude,” said Seeker. “Society’s fucked up. I had to get out.”

I drop farther back, knowing I can’t say, “I thought you guys came here to get away from all that crap.” I retreat into my head and try to figure out why the shift to TV talk irks me so. While it’s easy to vilify TV, my antipathy extends toward the omnipresent gushing of all forms of pop culture that occurs on hiking trips. When I complain to Metta, she points out that this is what people who don’t know each other have in common; everyone has seen reruns of Three’s Company.

I wonder how our talk, our tone of voice, that with which we fill our heads affects our outlook and our actions? I try to shut my mind to the drivel, and I find that it’s not so much the inane content, but what it engenders—a
corresponding increase in volume as if modern culture requires us to raise our voices to drown, silence, and suppress the wilderness.

I pause at a creek crossing, watching the students clamor up the opposite bank. I see our little clan as a microcosm. For the most part, Americans are in denial over the ecological crisis. We are too self-absorbed in our daydream-reality to acknowledge global warming and the loss of biodiversity. Restaurants, sports, the stock market, and of course, television receive more attention. These students are the future, and I can't help feeling a sense of frustration and despair when I witness their priorities.

All morning Yucca continues his verbal assault on the wilderness. He runs all over the place, yelling loudly and singing at the top of his lungs. Deprived of distractions, he has to create his own. Metta says, “We have no distractions except our own lunacy.”

I wonder how many of our distractions are based on fear. Is it a fear of this strange and foreign place that compels us to cloak ourselves in the familiar? Or is it a fear of quiet, which might lead to introspection.

As usual, Metta turns my complaint into a challenge, “We should try speaking with our whole spirit, with all our being.”

“But language is primarily a mental act, and I find that only when I’m physically engaged am I able to act with my whole being,” I counter.

“Try being physically engaged while you’re speaking,” she suggests.

“But it’s not a matter of life and death. Something like skiing or rock climbing demands your total attention. Let’s say you were captured by guerrillas in some third world country and had to talk them out of killing you, then you’d be speaking with that total concentration, but could we be carrying on a conversation with that intensity?”

“It would be emotionally exhausting,” she admits. “But then maybe we’d have a lot fewer meaningless conversations about pop culture.”

“I guess that’s why those conversations bother me so much—people invest their concentration into those areas, although trivial, they are far from meaningless. We impart so much meaning into those superficial conversations,” I say.

“I see it as verbal vomit. People come out here and just have to get it out of their system. This is such an intense environment that people need to cushion themselves, otherwise the intensity is overwhelming,” says Metta.

Every course I struggle with how to get people to quit talking about TV and movies and pay attention to what’s going on around them. I can’t help thinking that by inhabiting superficiality we avoid exposing ourselves. At the end of a program, students often say, “I wish we hadn’t talked about TV so much.” I’ve tried the authoritarian approach, which only means the students change their conversation when I’m around. I’ve tried offering suggestions,
and then we spend the rest of the course trying to decide what counts as “pop
culture.” At what point do I raise the subject so as not to arouse resentment?
I know the longer I wait the better, yet how long can I tolerate it? This year
I promised myself I wouldn’t say anything and see what happened. And now,
I just have to bite my lip.

“Patience,” I tell myself, and she turns around.

The canyon walls peel back at Lone Tree Crossing, where we encounter a
wide dirt road coming in from the east, crossing Muddy Creek and continu-
ing west toward Mussentuchit Flats, an intriguing name that immediately
sparks my interest. Exploring Mussentuchit Flats is even more compelling
than wanting to drink from Poison Spring.

I think that would be a lovely name if this were to become a wilderness
area, “Mussentuchit Wilderness.” Of course that would draw hordes of
curiosity seekers. Sometimes I think it’s better just to leave places alone and
unadvertised. In its first two years of existence Escalante-Grand Staircase
National Monument recorded eight hundred thousand visits to a place pre-
viously unknown. Some of this attention will doubtless result in better man-
agement, but I can’t help feeling that with it comes increased tourism and a
different sort of exploitation. We live in a profane world, a world where even
wilderness is reduced to commodity. After all, the Wilderness Act was
written to meet the recreational needs of a growing population, giving only
a passing nod to ecological importance. A recent Forest Service document
declared, “Wilderness is for people . . . The preservation goals established for
such areas are designed to provide values and benefits to society. Wilderness
is not set aside for the sake of its flora and fauna, but for the people.”

Perhaps what we need is a system of ecological reserves, places that are
managed for their ecological integrity and not for tourism. It would say
something about our maturity as a culture and as a species if we could rec-
ognize the inherent value of setting aside a place, letting it be, and simply
observing.

We pass four more dead cows mired in the mud at Lone Tree Crossing. The
stench is unbearable. Brian said Lone Tree Crossing was where their allot-
ment ended, thus crossing the road brings us into another grazing allotment.
We notice little difference at first as we enter a wide expanse of greasewood.
A thin white crust coats the bare dirt and graphically marks the path of
motorbikes.

“What’s all this white stuff on the ground,” Patience asks.

“What’s all this white stuff on the ground,” Patience asks.

“Taste it,” I suggest, still grumpy.

She looks at me quizzically.
“No really, taste it.”
“Tastes salty.”

The sporadic rainwater that flows down this wash pulls calcium carbonate and other soluble minerals out of the highly alkaline soil, leaving behind a gleaming white residue called caliche. This is the same white deposit that coats the bottom of tea kettles when hard water is used.

At one end of the flats a steel pipe protrudes out of the ground. These holes were drilled for natural gas in the 1980s. Apparently they turned up empty and were abandoned.

We enter a low canyon and a new formation, the Carmel, the thickest and oldest of the San Rafael geological group, which also includes the Entrada, Curtis, and Summerville. We soon begin to encounter more plant life than before. While still overgrazed, this allotment is in noticeably better condition than the previous one.

Upon reaching camp the prattle resumes in full force.
“Dude, let’s hack,” says Bobofet.
“Maybe, I’ll go down to the river and do some reading, dude,” says Yucca testing the group’s mood.
“Did you see that show about . . .”
“Dude, shut up!” Seeker says, fed up with the banter.

I wander upstream for a dip in the creek. With the afternoon free, I begin thinking about all that I need to do. Surprisingly little. Gone is the future, its concerns and demands. I realize the amount of stuff I have at home is obscene. When it’s removed, we soon discover we don’t need antiperspirant, dishwashers, and fabric softeners. Even the van is a cache of obligations, responsibilities, schedules, and commitments.

I’m a bit surprised at our evening meeting when Huckleberry says he’s frustrated with all the pop culture chatter. I know it’s too early in the course to bring it up, but it’s interesting to hear where everyone is with it.

Seeker draws some connections, “The way I see it is that if we are always talking about pop culture then we give it voice and importance, and the machine becomes more powerful and dominates the power of our thoughts. If we’re going to save the world, we have to be conscious of where we are devoting our energy and power.”

“But you guys wouldn’t even be here if it wasn’t for your lives back home,” counters Seaweed. “We’re not endorsing pop culture, it’s not like we’re saying, ‘Ooh, Britteny Spears, she’s so cool’—we’re critiquing it.”

“Could we just not talk about TV all the time?” Huckleberry asks.
“I don’t know anything else,” says Bobofet rather forlornly.
“We’re a product of pop culture, why should we deny that?” asks Patience. “I think it’s interesting to see how pervasive pop culture is,” says Mud. “I’m reminded that this is a process a lot like meditation,” Metta mentions. “When we meditate it takes a long time for our minds to quiet down and focus. All sorts of bullshit comes bubbling to the surface before we can start tackling real issues. Maybe we just have to get the pop culture out of our system. Given that we’ve spent our entire lives immersed in it, it may take awhile.”

“Can we still talk about music?” asks Yucca.

In the evening I lie awake staring up at the stars. There’s the Big Dipper, Leo, Gemini. I notice one star grow bigger and brighter, then it disappears. Did I just witness a natural phenomenon or was this a piece of space junk? We’ve even invaded the sky, I think, watching the satellites pass overhead. I recall the recent proposal to launch an advertising satellite, a giant sky dwelling billboard. Brighter than even the moon, it would continuously broadcast a series of ads and symbols such as the Nike swosh and “Drink Coke.” As a concession to the opposition from environmentalists, the satellite’s proponents suggested rotating in the recycling symbol as a public service. One can imagine the impact this would have on indigenous cultures—shamans, kachinas, demigods, all replaced by a pantheon of corporate deities. Thankfully, this proposal has been shelved (for the time being) as advertisers realized it would generate negative publicity.

We all recognize that something is fundamentally wrong with our culture, yet we resent anyone telling us that our particular habits, our lifestyles, contribute to the problem. I think back to my days in college when I railed against the machine like Huckleberry and Seeker. I think back to all those fiery radicals I knew at the university. They are all married now; most have children, houses, new cars, careers, and mortgages. What happened to us? How easily we acquiesced and bought into the whole thing. Yet based on conversations with old friends, I sense that we still know in our hearts that it’s all wrong.

I think back to last week when I visited my grandmother, she kept asking, “Don’t you want ice cubes in your water?”

I kept refusing, somehow thinking that this would maintain my independence from the corporate industrial complex that threatened to take over our lives and bodies with each purchase that subtracted from our humanity. I had to take a stand against every damn plastic bag that would seize us and insure our domestication. I wouldn’t sell out. What slippery slope into Armageddon awaited should I capitulate to a simple luxury? Surely on the eve of Passover, she would understand.
“Let me put some ice cubes in your water,” she insisted.
“No, Grandma it’s fine,” I snapped.
“Do you have TV dinners?” she asked, concerned about my bachelor lifestyle.
“I don’t have a TV,” I replied a bit haughtily.
She stared at me, perplexed.

Metta reminds me that “consumer” derives from the Latin *consumo*, “to spend everything, to destroy utterly, to destroy by fire.”