Landscape Of Desire

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The names of the cerros and the sierras and the deserts exist only on maps. We name them that we do not lose our way. Yet it was because the way was lost to us already that we have made those names. The world cannot be lost. We are the ones. And it is because these names and these coordinates are our own naming that they cannot save us. That they cannot find for us the way again.

—Cormac McCarthy

Although most famous for his first descent of the Colorado River in 1869, it is the scientific contributions of John Wesley Powell that have proved most enduring. In his exploration of the Colorado Plateau, Powell noticed that rivers paid little regard to topography. The Colorado River flows across uplifts unexpectedly, leading Powell to speculate that the Colorado Plateau was still being uplifted against the entrenched rivers. Although there might be a nearby valley, the water instead often cut straight through massive ridges. Powell reasoned that the rivers were older than the ridges, and the ridges must have risen slowly across the path of the river. This notion was in opposition to his contemporary geologists who advocated catastrophic and sudden earth movements. Powell developed the terms still used to describe these phenomena. “Antecedent” describes an existing river that cuts through a rising ridge and stays on course. “Consequent” is where an obstruction diverted the river into a new channel determined by the new topography. “Superimposed” indicates a river, produced by the topography of one age, stayed its course while the landscape eroded away entirely and imposed itself on the newly exposed landscape underneath. In other words, the river began its present course across relatively flat surfaces, then once the uplift occurred the river became trapped and continued downcutting, often against the expected topography. Geologists now agree with Powell that the Colorado is a superimposed river. Muddy Creek is likely an antecedent river that rose from the San Rafael highlands and cut through the Swell and reef as they rose.

In subsequent years, Powell turned over much of the geological work to Grove Karl Gilbert and Clarence Dutton. “Dutton had looked down across
the San Rafael Swell and seen how erosion, starting at a high central dome, had eaten back into the surrounding country until now the Swell was a hollow ringed with concentric lines of receding cliffs—an immense, rainbow-colored intaglio,” reported Wallace Stegner.

Although Powell and Dutton acted as scientists, they could not ignore the sublimity of this unparalleled landscape. Indeed, these two men did much to alter our collective aesthetic impressions of canyons and deserts much like Goethe taught us to love mountains and not behold them as horrible abodes of evil.

“The lover of nature, whose perceptions have been trained in the Alps, in Italy, Germany, or New England, in the Appalachians or Cordilleras, in Scotland or Colorado, would enter this strange region with a shock, and dwell there for a time with a sense of oppression, and perhaps with horror. Whatsoever might be bold or striking would at first seem only grotesque. The colors would be the very ones he had learned to shun as tawdry and bizarre. The tones and shade, modest and tender, subdued yet rich, in which his fancy had always taken special delight, would be the ones which are conspicuously absent. But time would bring a gradual change. Some day he would suddenly become conscious that outlines which at first seemed harsh and trivial have grace and meaning; that forms which seemed grotesque are full of dignity; that magnitudes which had added enormity to coarseness have become replete with strength and even majesty; that colors which had been esteemed, unrefined, immodest, and glaring, are as expressive, tender, changeful, and capacious of effect as any others. Great innovations, whether in art or literature, in science or in nature, seldom take the world by storm. They must be understood before they can be estimated and must be cultivated before they can be understood,” wrote Dutton.

Yet even Dutton found this area aesthetically challenging. He described the San Rafael Reef: “It is a picture of desolation and decay; of a land dead and rotten, with dissolution apparent all over its face. It consists of a series of terraces, all inclining upward from the east, cut by a labyrinth of deep narrow gorges, and sprinkled with numberless buttes of strange form and sculpture”

While deep in the throat of the reef, we can’t tell that the massive Navajo formation is tilted at forty-five degrees until we exit and look back and see Muddy Creek slicing through the reef like a knife. Before us rise a succession of three smaller reefs, all tilted as well, and an endless flat desert beyond. We find ourselves in an open and desolate landscape once again, an abrupt change after being immersed in a multi-toned wonderland. The shades of red are replaced by shades of grey, and everyone seems a bit depressed by the scenery. The weather doesn’t help either. Behind us, a dark
grey sheet is being pulled over the reef and across the sky, eliminating shadow as it slowly creeps eastward. Battleship grey clouds move in low formation across a surreal, swirling sky. Bursts of light rain begin to pepper the air. I find it fascinating how landscape and weather affect us so much. Most of the students pitch their tents and crawl inside. However, Huckleberry and Patience set off exploring and return excited with stories of immense vistas, castles, and moonscapes.

With the rain and subdued light, the plants, instead of dusty and wilted, appear vibrant, green, and refreshed. Metta and I stroll up a big slab of white sandstone like a tilted chessboard. This hard layer may have been an offshore barrier island between the Entrada mudflats. Frozen within the red Entrada, hundreds of goblins stare back at us across a narrow rift strewn with basalt boulders. Light green drips down from the Curtis capstone and streaks the goblins’ faces and buttocks. On closer inspection, some of these goblins resemble cartoon gorillas. From the top we can see Factory Butte shrouded in clouds like an evil castle. A single ray of light illuminates one of the castle’s towers. A moment later the clouds shift, the light disappears, and all is grey once again.

During the night it really begins to rain, continuing into the morning. Coming down in sheets, the rain turns everything into mud. The creek continues to rise, becoming a thick, grey soup. However, by midmorning a band of blue sky in the west pushes the grey clouds beyond the horizon. As sticky as molasses and as slippery as transmission fluid, the ninety-weight mud accumulates on the soles of our shoes, which become more leaden with each step. We stump over low red hills stripped with violets and greens, colors accented by the rain. Mule ear flowers line a dry creek bed in an explosion of yellow joy, and a Say’s phoebe performs ariel calligraphy while chasing gnats and flies. Gypsum crystals glimmer in the sunlight.

We scramble up the slopes of Carmel, dripping off the massive block of Navajo sandstone that comprises the San Rafael Reef. Unlike the naked Navajo, the Carmel supports sparse vegetation: ephedra, blackbrush, yellow crypanth, paintbrush, and clumps of grass. Single leaf ash and skunkbush find purchase in the cracks. Tiny yellow flowers appear on the desert trumpet, a plant that could have easily been conceived by Dr. Seuss. Standing about two feet high, this buckwheat has a bulbous hollow stem topped by spindly branches terminating in star-shaped flowers. Although some botanists think the inflated stem sequesters carbon dioxide, its purpose remains a mystery.

We drop off a small crest to a block of tilted Navajo sandstone. We stop and investigate a deep pothole on the way up. Although the water is still frothy and unsettled from the rain, Huckleberry, who is doing his final project on pothole ecology, searches out the various denizens: rotifers, daphnia, and water beetles.
“Hey!” Yucca yells. “There’s a rattlesnake over here.”

Coiled under a blackbrush is a small rattlesnake. This universe of slickrock seems a strange place for a snake. An unusual shade of pink-beige, with no other markings, the snake matches the sandstone. Could there be such a thing as a slickrock rattlesnake? A variety of San Rafael rattlesnake that has evolved into a very light color phase? Certainly such a light color would be a distinct survival advantage. Are there others this color or is this creature the only one? Have we stumbled upon an anomaly? Or are we witness to evolution in action?

A shallow waterway, a brief oasis in the shifting sand dunes that formed the Navajo, left behind dark brown outcrops of dolomite that erode into gargoyles and dragons perched atop the white and pink Neopolitan ice cream swirls of slickrock.

“Dude, this is like Disneyland without cables,” proclaims Bobofet.

“Or Willy Wonka,” adds Patience. “Look, there’s a chocolate river,” she indicates Muddy Creek far below.

This topography is so fantastic that it’s hard to believe it’s real except for the texture of the sandstone under our feet. The students keep suggesting it looks like an Indiana Jones movie, as if the landscape were modeled after the movie set. No one has said, “I bet this is where they filmed the movie.”

On the highest slopes a few twisted junipers survive, reaching for the almost-enough moisture of the passing clouds. One particular old and twisted juniper’s only sign of life is a basketball-sized clump of green on one of its gnarled limbs. All of the other branches are long dead, their shaggy bark fallen away, revealing their dark bones. The juniper twists its trunk around a slab of sandstone and anchors its roots between the slab and mother cliff. Somehow the tree extracts enough moisture trickling down the crack and enough nutrients from the rock to stay alive. Every year the trunk and root grow larger, pushing the slab closer to beyond the angle of repose. When that day arrives, the slab will drop from the cliff with a thunderous crash that no one will hear and impact the canyon floor like a knife hurled into soft dirt. The tree will follow, having insured its own demise through its continued growth.

We stop short of the top to allow everyone to regroup and conduct class in a sculpted bowl of slickrock sheltered from the wind. From our perch in the sky, we can see south for nearly one hundred miles. The Navajo domes of Capitol Reef National Park billow across the western skyline. Below us the rock slopes away to a series of smaller reefs, sinking into the earth like listing ships. A narrow rift parallels the reef before rising to the Caineville Reef, which is composed of thin shales of Summerville formation like a thousand layer cake. Beyond, lie a series of candy-striped hills devoid of any
vegetation, the Morrison. Then the land flattens out, not gradually, but completely flattens as if the response to too much drama is dead silence instead of applause.

Factory Butte, a dark-ribbed outpost of Mancos shale commands the foreground. Dusted by last night's snow, the Henry Mountains shoot out of the plain. Off to the far side of Wild Horse Mesa, we can just make out the snowcapped Abajo Mountains. The Henrys, like the Abajo and La Sal mountains, are laccolithic intrusions. That is, about thirty million years ago a mushroom of magma blistered the surface, shrugging off thousands of feet of sedimentary rock but not quite breaking through. The overlying sedimentary rock has long eroded away, exposing the underlying granite-like diorite. Geologists speculate that these igneous masses brought uranium to the outer crust where groundwater moved it into the Chinle. A triangle drawn between these three mountain ranges would enclose some of the wildest, least inhabited country in the lower forty-eight.

A strip of tamarisk traces the serpentine course of Muddy Creek until it disappears into a vast and desolate plain. While we can't see it, we know Highway 24 lies off to our left, and Hanksville squats tucked into one of the wrinkles of this ancient landscape. At Hanksville, Muddy Creek joins the Fremont River and forms the vast canyon system of the Dirty Devil. A terrific place to lose oneself. I begin to have second thoughts about heading out across all that empty space.

Our entire vista is bereft of human sign, except for the contrails of passing jets and the ORV tracks across the Mancos Shale, which stand out like tracks on the moon. Right below us Salt Wash trickles into Muddy Creek at what was once the proposed site of the world's largest coal-fired power plant. The three thousand-megawatt Intermountain Power Project (IPP), would have transformed this landscape into a vast array of smokestacks, power lines, and railroads, as well as plopping down a town of nearly ten thousand people. However, the IPP site lay within a roadless area. Since the BLM couldn't allow development in a Wilderness Study Area, they simply excluded the area and all potential rail and power line corridors from their wilderness inventory. In 1977, Interior Secretary Cecil Andrus made it clear that the Salt Wash site would not be used for a power plant, nevertheless the BLM eliminated three hundred thousand acres from wilderness consideration. Eventually, a scaled down sixteen hundred-megawatt IPP was built in western Utah, near Delta.

Cutting these lands out of the inventory allowed them to be open to mining exploration and forty miles of new roads were bulldozed, and hundreds of test wells were drilled in the area. "There appears to be a move to push roads into roadless areas . . . prior to study or designation," stated one BLM manager.
The energy crisis of the 1970s also triggered tar sand proposals within the San Rafael Swell. These proposals, approved by the BLM, included the drilling of more than a thousand injection and recovery wells; construction of an industrial plant, fuel storage tanks, a sewage plant, and a network of pipelines; and housing for more than two hundred workers. Large trucks would run through the interior of the Swell every ten minutes. Fortunately, the economic feasibility of tar sands sunk these proposals (thus far).

Salt Wash narrowly escaped the IPP only to have the Bureau of Reclamation propose the construction of a salinity control project. As irrigators pump water out of the Colorado and its tributaries, the water spreads over the fields and leaches the salts from the soil. The water then runs back into the river increasing its salinity. As the salinity of the Colorado rises, it becomes less suitable for irrigation and drinking water. To counteract this salinity, the Bureau proposed pumping the naturally saline water along Salt Creek out of the ground to a treatment plant that would inject the water some three thousand feet underground. In addition to the fourteen-foot-high well heads, treatment plant, and eleven-acre evaporation pond on Salt Wash, power lines would be built from Highway 24 to Factory Butte and along the Moroni Slopes below us. Each ton of salt would cost about ninety dollars to remove. Leaving the salt in the water causes an economic loss of about fifty-two dollars per ton of salt. In 1986, the Bureau issued a finding that this project would have no significant environmental impacts. The project has been put on hold.

After lunch, Banjo and I continue up to the highest point on the reef, a bald, pink Navajo dome. Nothing higher than this point, we cling to the wind. The view opens to three hundred and sixty degrees. Immediately to the north rise the Wingate cliffs, the Hidden Splendor Mine, and beyond a vast labyrinth of Moenkopi canyons. Directly below us, an anonymous squiggly line on the map is really a thousand-foot precipice giving way to a crazy jumble of canyons, slots, domes, and fins of Navajo sandstone. A country known to only a few bighorn, Seager's Hole is so broken and precipitous that it appears nearly impossible to traverse without a trapeze artist's set of ropes, slings, and carabiners. A hell of a place to lose a horse as they say.

Banjo perches on the ledge next to me, her face into the breeze. White-throated swifts zip about on the wind, in and out of cracks in the sandstone. They fly by inches from my face. I can even see the long whiskers on the sides of their beaks that they use to detect insects. Now, however, they aren't nabbing insects but reveling in the sheer joy of flight. All creatures seek joy and exuberance. Even Banjo will tolerate heat, thirst, exhaustion, and sore feet just to get to the top of this reef, where she can feel what? Exhilaration
in being alive perhaps? It’s not for the view; cataracts cloud her eyes. At thirteen, she usually stays in camp sleeping, and I’m surprised that she insisted on tagging along today. Often she will stop and wait in the shade when she gets tired, but today she kept plodding up the loose sandstone scree. Just so she could get to the top?

Watching these swifts, these twisting, spinning boomerangs of flight playing on the wind, I wonder if we might not learn something from them. It seems that we might be jealous of the joy other animals are capable of experiencing, something that our bulbous brain often gets in the way of. We equate intelligence with evolution, but what about joy? We seem inordinately preoccupied with the intelligence of animals, pitting them against each other and rating how they measure up to the human standard in our smug state as the “thinking animal.” Can joy not also drive natural selection? Would not the most joyous be the best at successfully producing offspring?

Picking my way back down the loose slabs of rock, I spy a dark pool below, welcome relief for a thirsty dog. By the time I reach it, I’m surprised to see that the pool has dried up completely. What I thought was the dark surface of water turns out to be dark mud, pine and juniper needles, and other bits of organic matter left by the evaporating water. However, Banjo finds a small pothole nearby. She wades right in and attempts to drink it dry.

I take off my boots, plunge my bare feet into the soft sand, and look up at the cottonwood and ash trees. I think I should be heading back soon. My watch broke last week, and I have only a vague inkling of what time it is, not that it really matters. Date and day are even less relevant. Although I’m tired, the canyon beckons. Leaving my pack, water bottle, walkie-talkie, boots, and clothes behind, I follow my instinct up the canyon. I slowly walk up the fluted slickrock, up the sandy wash and through a small section of narrows. The runoff has created a series of pools that drop in the sandstone not unlike the sacred Inca baths near Machu Picchu.

I’m enjoying my unencumbered state although I must walk slowly and carefully, paying close attention to where I place my bare feet. I walk differently barefoot; I just can’t plod wherever I desire. I must pick my way, carefully placing my feet. It forces me to go slow, notice things, small things underfoot. I walk quietly, centered like a cat and sneak up on lizards. The soles of my feet have become thick and pachyderm. My toenails grow crenellated like the Wingate cliffs. My skin is becoming dry and leathery and the color of sandstone, deepening to a dark orange.

This is an inverse wilderness, instead of mountains, the land recedes. Instead of scaling peaks, we descend into the earth. This vast sky doesn’t fill me with anything, but rather empties me so that my mind matches the landscape. My thoughts, like the plants, become sparse and simple. I focus not
on the grandiose but the simple, a single primrose wilting in the day’s heat. Shade and water become essential; nothing else matters. All matter is reduced to its mineral essence, water, sulphur, gypsum. Consciousness is reduced to its essence. I am alive right here right now. All else is irrelevant. I begin fantasizing about not returning. Just keep walking; leave everything behind. Just disappear into the desert naked and alone, surviving off paintbrush and ricegass, lizards and rabbits. Growing lean and tough.

Was this the final temptation of young Everett Ruess, when he disappeared into the canyon country in 1934? After graduating from high school, Everett spent three years wandering the back country of the Southwest with only his burros for companions. By all accounts an exceptional young man, Ruess repeatedly stated his preferences for wilderness over the comforts of civilization. “I have seen almost more beauty than I can bear. . . . such utter and overpowering beauty as nearly kills a sensitive person by its piercing glory,” he wrote.

“As to when I shall return to civilization, it will not be soon, I think. I have not tired of the wilderness; rather I enjoy its beauty and the vagrant life I lead, more keenly all the time. I prefer the saddle to the streetcar and the star-sprinkled sky to the roof, the obscure and difficult trail, leading into the unknown, to any paved highway, and the deep peace of the wild to the discontent bred by cities,” Everett wrote in his last letter to his brother. The next day he set out with his burros for an extended exploration of the Escalante country. His burros were found fat and healthy four months later in Davis Gulch, the site of Everett’s last known campsite. Likely he was killed by cattle rustlers and dumped into the Colorado. But maybe he just simply walked off. This is what we want to believe: that he disappeared himself into the desert, that he finally merged with beauty, that he dropped out completely.

What a strange notion to hold in our hearts, this desire to disappear into the unknown, to simply meld into the rock. The draw is nearly irresistible, and yet we always return to civilization, wistfully looking over our shoulder to what might have been, our wild, shadow selves.

I round a corner and scores of painted lady butterflies stream out of the canyon. They are everywhere, bobbing through the air, floating on the surface of the pools with their wings spread, lovely in death. They keep pouring out of the little slot like clowns staggering out of a VW. Eventually the canyon ends in a unique pour off. The rushing water has carved a small arch where the runoff drops into a large pool. I lay back on a rock and watch the blue sky and clouds drift past. By the time I get back to Banjo and my stuff, it has begun to rain lightly.
“I shall call this Keyhole Canyon,” I proclaim to the dog. “Why name it?” she asks. Has anyone been here before? Why would they? It’s just one of dozens of nameless canyons that lead nowhere. No, better it remains anonymous. And the next naked soul who wanders up here can delight in her own discovery.

After such a blissful day, I return to camp just as the sun returns and head to Muddy Creek for a quick dip. Emerging from the water, I notice several sets of jeep tracks through the mud. I could envision the destruction upstream even before Seeker tells me how bad it is. What had been a newly established ATV trail yesterday has just become a jeep road. Metta says five jeeps had come through. Mud had gotten photos and license plates. Not that the BLM would take any enforcement action since the jeepers told her the BLM office had suggested this route. I feel deflated as all the joy and wonder I experienced this day is ripped out.

Sage spent the afternoon keying out a vetch that we’d never seen before. It turned out to be an endangered species, endemic to the San Rafael.

“It got run over,” she says.