Landscape Of Desire

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People paying more attention to what other people tell them than to their own perception is the beginning of civilization. Civilization does not occur among healthy people.

—Ken Carey

I awake at dawn in a sleeping bag soaked with dew. Strange, since a few feet above the river bank, all is dry. The color of chocolate milk, the river runs thick with suspended sediment and flotsam. The storms of the past two days have raised the water level and flooded the mud flats. A cloudy day, a cool breeze, strange weather—something moving up from the Gulf of Mexico? The air has an ominous, electric feel to it.

A common yellowthroat serenades us from within the tamarisk thicket as we pack. Seaweed enthusiastically volunteers to lead today. I’m unsure why she is so enthusiastic until I learn that she’s afraid of heights. The river makes a tight horseshoe bend, and by hiking through the Sawtooth, a jagged series of Wingate spires, we can cut off several miles. The route takes us through a notch in the cliff and along a narrow bench high above the river. From below, the trail through the Sawtooth resembles a string glued to the side of a cliff.

“If I don’t lead, I won’t be able to do it,” Seaweed confesses.

It doesn’t look like anyone has used this trail since last year. While not exactly a sheer drop off, stepping off the trail would send you on a five-hundred-foot slide. It’s fine if you don’t look down. But Seaweed looks down and comes to a halt at the worst spot. Confused and on the verge of panic, she retreats behind a rock and wraps her arms around herself. But soon she gathers herself for the final push. She approaches the notch in the cliff that requires us to take off our packs, climb up a short section of cliff, and haul our packs up by rope. Seaweed breaks down and begins crying. It looks like she has given up. Everyone stands behind her waiting patiently. I give her some dried pineapple and mango (amazing what raising the blood sugar can do), and she pulls herself together and confronts the cliff. With flawless
cooperation we set up a fire brigade and quickly get everyone and the packs over the cliff. Taking a well-deserved break, we see a young male bighorn watching us from above.

It suddenly dawns on me that not only is Yucca silent, but none of the guys have spoken all morning. Patience declares that the guys are getting back at the girls for something. I doubt it, but it is interesting how she viewed silence as punishment or intimidation. For the most part, the women respect the silence and talk in low tones all day. I consider how one person influenced the entire group dynamic by simply deciding to be quiet.

After a lengthy traverse along the ledge, we drop down to the river and finally reach No Man's Canyon. As we turn and hike up the sandy wash, Seaweed grows concerned. “Is there any water up here?” she asks.

“I hope so.”

Soon we encounter damp sand then a tiny trickle. “Do you guys want to camp here or keep going?” asks Seaweed.

“Let’s keep going,” responds a chorus of female voices while the men point upstream in agreement.

“Okay a ten-minute break then,” replies Seaweed, clearly disappointed in the response.

She consults the map searching for strength and a way out of the corner she’s painted herself into. For the most part, she has been a terrific leader over strenuous terrain. She has acted decisively in choosing routes across the creek and through the brush. She’s been confident in setting times and keeping everyone going. This seems out of character and has been a pleasant surprise since she has previously shown little enthusiasm for hiking.

But she has simply run out of whatever was fueling her all day. I pray for her to draw on some inner resolve and hold it together. She studies the map, buying time.

“Okay we’ve got three options: camp here, where there’s a little bit of water, or it looks like there’s another place a mile down, or our last option is another mile and a half. So does anyone want to camp here?” she asks.

“Let’s keep going.”

I try to avoid influencing her decision-making process and pull my hat down over my eyes and lay down on Banjo as a pillow.

“Sundog, what do you think?”

“It’s your decision,” I reply.

“Well, I’d like to camp here. I think this is a really beautiful spot and I’m tired, but other people want to keep going. Does anyone want to camp here?” she pleads.

This time she receives “yeah, sure,” and “it doesn’t make any difference,” and nods from the men.
Fifteen more agonizing minutes later Seaweed announces, “Ok, I think we should camp here. Does anyone have any objections if I go look for a site?”

When we reach the nearby campsite, she drops her pack with a thud and says, “That’s the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do.”

As the men end their silence (save Yucca), we give her a cheering round of applause for leading today’s hike.

The wash splits our camp with half the group camped on either side. The rain begins just after dinner, and we gather under the alcove to have a dry meeting. No Man’s Canyon is where we’ve decided to do our solos. After finding their individual sites, the students will remain on their own for the next forty-eight hours. In many ways the solos function as a rite of passage, marking the transition between adolescence and adulthood.

Metta elaborates on the solo concept: “Rarely in our culture do we get the opportunity to be truly alone. Those times we are alone, we quickly fill ourselves with distractions. We have the TV or radio on or are reading a book or are on the phone. Someone else is filling our heads. This is an opportunity, not just to be alone, but be in solitude, to have a reunion with yourself. By eliminating distractions, by going within, we can come to know the Other. We discover ultimate connections with the world. As Thoreau says, ‘Not until we are lost, do we discover where we are and the full extent of our relations.’ You can make it anything you want to make of it. It can be a personal vision quest or just a chance to sit quietly in your surroundings. The idea is to remain in one place with yourself, so I discourage bringing any books or doing any hiking. You’ll get bored. But that’s okay. Instead of trying to fill time, let time fill you. You might get scared, feel frustrated, contented, and joyful. Let yourself be exposed to all these emotions. There’s nothing to come between you and your emotional state. Seek ‘sympathy with intelligence.’ By fasting and being alone in the wilderness, you might find the self dissolves and you discover your place in the universe.”

Metta passes out small votive candles. “If you get lonely, you can light one of these for companionship. I like to think of it as my friend who’s always there when I need her,” she says.

The rain gradually increases, but we think nothing of it until Huckleberry says, “What’s that noise?” A sound like the rumble of a faraway train pierces the night. We simultaneously share the same thought and jump up. As we reach the creek, the beams of our headlamps reveal a swirling bulwark of water bellowing down the canyon.

“My food’s over there!” cries Bobofet, and he leaps across the stream just in front of the surge of water. The rest of us step back from the bank as the trickle of water suddenly turns into a raging river. “All my stuff’s over there too,” says Seeker. But it’s too late. He attempts to wade across, but just a few feet from shore the water reaches his waist. A seething mass of brown water,
sticks, and logs hurls down the streambed; it’s apparent that no one will be crossing anytime soon. We can see by the cottonwood now in the middle of the river that the water is more than six feet deep. We retreat to the alcove and take inventory. Those with sleeping bags give up their pads, tents, and extra clothes to those without. We tuck ourselves under the alcove and manage to spend the night in some degree of dry comfort.

The next morning the water is still high, and it isn’t until afternoon that the water recedes enough so that Bobofet is able to return. We shuttle everyone’s gear to the alcove. By the second day the water level has dropped enough that we are no longer trapped.

While the students search for their solo sites, I stroll up canyon. Walking up No Man’s Canyon is like visiting an old neighborhood. As I pass former campsites, I recall the people who were there and some of our adventures. Banjo trots right up to the old sites, nose twitching. How much does she remember? Undoubtedly, she recalls the places. Can she remember all the people who fed her or petted her? Does she associate events with locations, the way I do?

I check our previous camps to see how they have fared after our visits. They are all recovering nicely. The first year we camped at this site, it was bare sand; the next a host of evening primrose had taken over. Now it’s so overgrown that you wouldn’t even think of camping here. At last year’s camp, the only signs that anyone had been here are a few flat rocks strategically placed as if to sit or cook on. The cryptobiotic soil hasn’t colonized it yet, but several forbs (mostly mustards and globemallow) grow in what was once a sandy footpath. The alcove itself has changed from what I remember; it seems smaller. It looks like the sand has blown in and filled a good portion of it.

Farther up, two species of willow crowd the streambanks; horsetails and rushes are moving in; bunch grass flourishes. Purple scorpionweed and orange globemallow dot the trails. Fields of peppergrass, carpets of primrose, serviceberry, and penstemon are all in bloom. Lavender cave primrose dangle from seeps in the canyon walls.

Although the sky is blue, it rains in bursts and fits. Small clouds rip past on the wind and indicate a warm front is pushing this rainy, grey weather out. This canyon drains a vast area. The numerous branches veer off like a lupine leaf—three main forks and one hidden fork all funnel down to a constricted main branch—explaining the tendency of this canyon to flash flood. No Man’s Canyon meanders through the Wingate in tight bends with extensive benches and alcoves. It soon becomes choked with boulders.

Pushing through a willow thicket, I come upon a scene from Tahiti: a small moss-covered waterfall plunges into a deep, clear pool. I don’t know whether to jump in the pool or take a shower under the waterfall.
I stare down at the pond. Blue dragonflies patrol its margins. A predaceous diving beetle, black with yellow spots, quickly submerges out of sight. Whirligig beetles (genus *Gyrinus*) race around on the water surface like dozens of tiny black bumper cars. Their eyes are split horizontally so they can see through the air above them while viewing the water below. Holding their antennae on the water surface to detect ripples, they discern where other beetles are or where prey might be struggling. Like a bat’s echolocation, the ripples from the whirligig’s own movement bounce back from other objects on the surface, allowing the whirligig to place itself in space.

A few feet away, a violet-green swallow skims the surface of the pool picking off fat water striders. Like the beetles, water striders use ripples to find prey, detecting vibrations through the hairs on their feet. The strider rushes over to its prey, jabs its beak in and immobilizes it with a poisonous digestive juice that enables the strider to suck out its prey’s insides. Miraculously held aloft by surface tension, the striders race around in a mating frenzy. I often find myself drawn more to their reflections than the actual creatures themselves. The indentations made by their feet on the surface magnify into saucers when looking at their shadows. The striders glide about on the margins of two worlds—not of air, not of water. Imagine spending your life peering through a plate glass window and never being permitted to enter.

I consider that if I jump into the pond, not only will I be disturbing all these creatures, but my body oils, sunscreen, and insect repellent will be introduced into this tiny ecosystem, polluting the water and damaging many of the organisms I can’t see.

The potholes in the slickrock are even more delicate. When filled with rainwater, these pits in the rock explode with life. In just a few hours, eggs hatch and crustaceans and insect larvae emerge from dormancy out of the sediment in the thin skin of soil at the bottom. Algae begin to grow, and microscopic rotifers eat the algae. Worms and crustaceans, such as fairy shrimp, feed on the rotifers. Snails, shrimp, mites, and insects all rush to eat, grow, mate, and lay eggs as quickly as possible before the pothole dries up. The shrimp only need two weeks to complete their life cycle. The beetles and striders, on the other hand, need a continuous source of water as they will overwinter as adults.

A small waterfall (just the right height for sitting under) feeds the pond. I’m surprised by how warm the water is. Standing on a rock, I peer over the waterfall. The creek runs across a bed of Kayenta sandstone and is heated by the sun—how idyllic. Behind the falls, moss drips with water. A red-spotted toad, no bigger than a nickel, hops along the rock shelf.

I boost Banjo up above the waterfall and then realize that I will have to lower her back down. So she will have to come with me all day instead of...
returning to camp on her own as she often does. Where the Kayenta ends, so does the water. Rainwater percolates through the Navajo formation, hits the hard layer of Kayenta, and is forced out in a perennial spring lined with leafy thistle and clematis. We enter a wide canyon lined with buffalo berry, ephedra, sumac, and prince’s plume, quite a change from the riparian zone downstream. Like stinking milkvetch, prince’s plume indicates selenium in the soil. This three-foot tall plant is quite distinctive with its yellow flowers that wave in the breeze.

This landscape is enough to make one seasick—it’s all up and down and sideways jumbled. One canyon is below me, and I’m here in a much larger one. Canyons stacked upon canyons. Curved sweeping walls of Navajo sandstone dripping with desert varnish compose the skyline in all directions. We encounter a pile of boulders. Knowing Banjo won’t be able to scramble up, I tell her to stay. After the boulders lies a sandy wash that terminates in a great bowl at the base of an immense Navajo alcove ringed by a horizontal seep. Water from the storm poured off the cliff and scooped out a giant sandbox. The wind rippled the sand and the recent rain soaked into the troughs darkening them while the sun dried out the crests. Two-tone stippled ripple marks are the result. The echo from the bowl is such that slapping my hand against the sand creates a loud reverberating drumbeat. A most magical place.

A few minutes later Banjo trots up having discovered her own route around the boulders. Huckleberry’s afternoon peregrinations find him in the same place, and we head back to camp together. He expresses surprise when Banjo returns to her route around the boulders instead of following us. I’m glad Huckleberry showed up because even with two of us, lowering a sixty-five-pound dog down over the waterfall would be sketchy at best. I worry that she might try and do it herself and skitter right over the edge. Just then we hear the sickening sound of claws scraping across the sandstone and look over the edge to see Banjo standing proudly at the bottom wagging her tail.

“I wish she wouldn’t do that,” I say.

We encounter Seaweed who had searched unsuccessfully down canyon for a solo site and is now looking upstream. Unable to decide on a spot, she finally settles under an overhang near camp. Finding a solo site can be an arduous process. Where does one want to spend the next two days? Each site offers something different. I can sympathize. I’m often plagued with the same indecision when trying to decide on where I want to live. How do you know when you’ve found the place?

The next morning, the students leave for their solos. Seeker hugs Bobofet before leaving, starting a trend among the men.
“Look at that!” exclaims Patience in astonishment.

With the students settled into their solo sites, it’s my turn. With no particular destination in mind, I allow myself to be pulled by the kachinas of aimless wandering. I climb a scree slope where rocks balance precariously. One large slab, balanced on a single point, teeters when I step on either side. A piece of pale-yellow Navajo sandstone like a giant mushroom looks like it might slide down the Kayenta ledge at any moment. It’s like walking through a gallery of gigantic sculptures.

I follow a coyote’s tracks up a side canyon. I nearly step on a backbone lying in the wash. “A bighorn?” I think, noting the arched back. The jaw bone lies nearby. I soon find the horn sheaths but no skull. A young male brought down by a mountain lion perhaps?

Startled at my find, I stop to contemplate the scene—death in the desert. Is this a sign? Have I found the spot? Was I led here by these tracks? What to make of these horns? Was I meant to find them, to take them? What is their significance? As I begin to ruminate on life and death, I notice that the coyote had defecated right on the sheep’s spine. “Not very respectful,” I think. “How like coyote to take a dump right on death.”

“The trickster teaches many lessons,” says an interior voice.

“No. Coyote shows us something. It’s up to us whether we learn anything from it or not,” I argue. I wonder if I’ve been taking myself too seriously lately.

I enter a small side canyon that descends into a slickrock toilet bowl, a horizontal arch carved by rushing water, known as a pothole arch. I drop through the lid into the bowl and settle down on the smooth rock tucked between the swirling sandstone cliff and a juniper huddled out of the wind. When the wind blows, sand and small rocks rain down on me.


The shadow of the overhang moves across the slickrock marking the passage of time. The warm rock feels good next to my bare skin, and I curl up in the embrace of a slickrock cradle, a fluted venue carved by runoff during the occasional storm. My body fits perfectly into the polished sandstone. I lie back at a forty-five-degree angle and watch the clouds roll by. My back, rump, and legs are all supported, like floating in amniotic fluid. I absorb warmth from the rock below and from the sun above. I could lie here forever.

The first thing I notice is the quiet. No voices, no human energy, and if I stay quiet long enough, I blend into the rock. I can hear the rocks crack and move and shift as the canyon settles. A side-blotched lizard inches its way down the twisted trunk of an ash. It reaches a rock and does a few
pushups. These lizard pushups have long intrigued me. When two lizards meet, they face off a few inches apart, each pumping up and down several times. Then one lizard runs off, sometimes chased by the other, more often not. In some species, the males sport a bright blue patch under their throat and the pushups could help display that patch to rival males or to attract females. In species without a throat patch, it could be a form of posturing much the same way a cowboy swaggers into a bar.

This lizard, however, is pumping with no other lizards around. Some speculate that it may also be physiological. Just as a fish needs to keep moving to push oxygen through its gills, lizards might need to keep their blood moving when they stop. This little lizard gives a couple of pushups and then runs on, pauses and does a few more. Unlike primates, lizards’ eyes are on the sides of their heads, thus they lack parallax vision and depth perception. Only when something is moving can a lizard gauge how far away it is. Or when the lizard itself is moving. Deer bounce to look around and get a sense of depth. Could it be that lizards do pushups for the same reason?

I watch as the lizard forages, scraping loose sand in search of food, not unlike a towhee scratching the ground. Then it jumps up into a lupine and starts licking tiny insects off the leaves. Lizards are supposed to run along the ground not dangle from vegetation like monkeys.

The longer I spend out here, the simpler life becomes. As the day warms, my thoughts become slow, reptilian. I begin to think in terms of sun, shade, and water. Even food seems an extravagance.

An over-eager hummingbird startles me awake at dawn as it attempts to feed off my purple sleeping bag. A canyon wren mocks. A flycatcher sounds off. While I meditate, a cottontail hops up and sits next to me. Then it hops around behind me, munches on some rabbitbrush, and skitters off. The rabbit soon returns and sits on my sleeping pad. For a moment I contemplate the notion of making a mad lunge for it and having roast rabbit for breakfast. But watching it groom itself in front of me, I realize it’s more meaningful to me alive. I’d rather go another day without eating than kill this creature with its big eyes and soft fur. Its sheer vulnerability is disarming.

What is the significance of this visit? When you are visited by a wild animal first thing in the morning, it must be a good sign. What is it about encounters with wild animals that makes us feel so blessed as if they are somehow reaffirming our existence?

The low-angled morning light highlights strands of spider silk stretching between the scant branches of the single-leaf ash growing out of the center of the slickrock bowl. Like the juniper, the ash appears half dead. Many branched, desiccated limbs twist skyward. Thinly distributed, heart-shaped,
waxy leaves provide meager shade for the twinberry growing at its base. Seeking water, the ash sends a thick root across the rock, snaking down over the lip and along the roof of the overhang. It drops into a pool, soaking up available water long after the last rain. A surreal effort to sustain green life. But how did the tree survive until its giant root finally reached water? And even more perplexing how did the ash know to send its root in the right direction?

I am no longer surprised to see trees, deciduous ones at that, growing straight out of a crack in the rock, yet it continues to amaze me. I attempt the yoga tree pose and wobble uncertainly. The world appears too jumbled to grow straight up. The angle is all wrong. I'd send my roots deep into a crack to anchor against wind and gravity too. Not coincidentally the crack serves as a convenient funnel for water, much more important than soil. In the rainforest, epiphytes, or air plants, live in the crooks of trees. Is there a word for rock plants?

Not unexpectedly, along the canyon's north aspect, ash, ephedra, and mountain mahogany bunch the watercourse. One can trace the water's path down the slickrock and talus by connecting the green dots.

An Eaton's penstemon grows right out of the slickrock. Fine-grained sand dusts its pubescent leaves; red tubes hang down as if ashamed of their brilliance in this stark land. Suddenly a hummingbird appears and probes each blossom inserting its bill the full length of the flower.

The gnats and black flies are out, and I climb from under my little overhang to seek the wind. I traverse a small shelf surrounded by domes of sandstone like swirls of raspberry ice cream and enter a flat area. The cliff rises on one side, and the other three sides drop off two hundred feet. A very gnarled and stunted as, a bonsai created by time and wind, grows out of the rock. This little space resembles a Japanese garden. Yet garden is the wrong word, for this has never been pruned nor cultivated by humans; it exudes wildness. I get the eerie feeling that no one's ever been here before. I look around for a sign, a pottery shard, a piece of burnt wood, anything to signify human presence. Nothing but the wind through the rock. There is indeed something terrible and beautiful about these places of human absence as Stegner noted when describing the Dirty Devil, "a vast and terrible desert such as Christ and the prophets went in." I walk around avoiding the thick, crenelated cryptobiotic crust. I feel that even my footprints are a desecration. There is no way out but the way I came.

I look for a place to sit, but every place seems too sacred. Finally I plop down against a rock in a little cove. The contents of my pack come spilling out. Around me, I create my own space, separate and comforting. Water bottle and binoculars on one side, raincoat on the other; I've insulated myself just slightly. I reach down and pick up a piece of milky chert, unusual among
all this sandstone. Turning it over I realize it’s half of a hide scraper. I hold it in my hands, somewhat comforted.

Come nightfall I walk up the creek bed barefoot and soundless. The fallen silver cottonwood leaves, I’d never before noticed, reflect the moonlight like thousands of silver dollars. I walk up to an old cottonwood embracing a large rock at its roots, a sublime still life. The thick root snakes horizontally along the canyon wall instead of plunging vertically into the soil. I sit by the tree. The evening is so beautiful I nearly burst into tears. I can feel my heart expand, pushing against my chest seeking to burst free of bodily confines and free-fall through the universe. I feel as if I love someone so much, so deeply that my heart will burst. Yet there is no object for my affection, no one being, not even this tree. Nothing, save a pervasive and all encompassing compassion. I feel diffuse and scattered, alone and beyond words.

We converge on the third day. By previous agreement we remain silent until everyone returns from their solo. One by one the students filter back. Yucca arrives with his head shorn. His scalp looks rather odd with knobby protrusions where his dreadlocks once were. We gather around the fire pit Metta has prepared. Yucca has been working on his bow drill, and he begins the magical process of creating fire. He places a spindle of cottonwood about the size of his index finger on top of a flat fireboard. The fireboard has a notch cut where the punk can fall out. Using a willow bow and a length of rope, he spins the spindle back and forth while pressing down with a hand socket cut from tamarisk. Soon we smell smoke rising from the fireboard. He stops and pulls away the fireboard revealing a pile of glowing punk. Yucca leans back on his heels to catch his breath.

After carefully scraping the coal into a prepared tinder bundle of cottonwood bark, he gently blows it to life. Smoke curls from the tinder. Then it bursts into flame. He drops it into the fire pit and we cheer.

We begin hauling wood to build up the fire and then pile on grapefruit-sized rocks. After several hours the rocks will be extremely hot, and we will transfer them into the sweat we have constructed out of willows and sleeping bags. This sweat lodge ceremony symbolizes our reconnection with each other after our solo journeys.

I can’t help but feel some apprehension about appropriating a Native American ritual, considering that we’ve already appropriated their land. After attending several Native American sweats, I asked one of the elders, a Blackfeet pipe carrier, what he thought of white people borrowing the sweat lodge ceremony.

“As long as it’s done with respect. You know, we are all in this together; we are all brothers and sisters. Anything that helps people connect with the earth is a good thing,” he told me. “The only thing I have problems with is
these people who use the sweat to make money. You know, they charge peo-
ple to have a ‘Native American experience.’ If they want a Native American
erie, they oughta come up to the res. The sweat should not be used
for money,” he added.

Nevertheless, I feel uncomfortable in mimicking a Native American
ceremony. Thus we construct the sweat and abide by the rules of the sweat,
but create our own ritual within. I once sat around a campfire with elders
from several different tribes and listened fascinated to their debate. It seems
that there really is no set sweat lodge ceremony. Everyone’s grandfather did
it differently; it varied from tribe to tribe, from generation to generation.
Tribes also borrowed freely from each other, incorporating their own tradi-
tions. I wonder if in some ways it isn’t more appropriate to immerse our-
selves in Native American ideology now that we are inhabiting this
continent rather than imposing old world religion upon Turtle Island.
Wouldn’t the ceremonies of the people who’ve lived here for a thousand gen-
erations bring us more communion with this place?

When the rocks are hot enough and the sweat is ready, we gather and
smudge with sage. Metta elaborates on the sweat: “Through all of our efforts
and energies, we create this sacred space. The sweat is shared sacred space,
the same way our stories are. We use the sweat to reconnect with ourselves,
our origins, our ancestors, our planet, and each other. We fast to cleanse and
purify our bodies and mind. We sweat to complete that purification and
unite our bodies and souls. We experience hunger and uncomfortable heat
so that we may appreciate all that we have and give thanks. Dark, warm, and
moist the sweat symbolizes the womb, Mother Earth. When we emerge, we
are symbolically reborn.”

The women circle the sweat sunwise and enter while the men tend the
fire outside. We hear muffled voices, then silence. Shortly thereafter singing
and chanting resonates from within. They emerge dripping with sweat and
plunge into the creek laughing with relief.

As the men prepare to enter the sweat, we deposit our offerings at the
altar I set up, a flat rock flanked by the pair of bighorn horns. It’s dark and
cramped inside. Pouring water on the hot rocks quickly elevates the tem-
perature. I feel my pores open wide and beads of sweat form on my skin.
Soon rivulets of sweat run down my forehead and into my eyes. I’m being
flushed from the inside out.

We evoke the four directions and welcome the ancestor spirits. We offer
thanks for the willows, for the food we all thought about while fasting, for
healthy bodies, and for the people in our lives. We offer thanks to our parents.

Seeker says, “I’d like to offer thanks for my dad and my moms who
raised me.” He pours water on the rocks that instantly turns to steam. “I call
them my moms—they’re the women my dad lives with in the commune—but I didn’t know my real mother for the first eight years of my life,” he continues. “I was conceived on the second floor of a Rajaneesh ashram in Punjab. My parents then followed the Rajaneesh to Oregon. My dad became disillusioned with all the apocalyptic preaching and left with me, but my mom stayed on.”

Bobofet says, “I’d like to offer prayers for my sister who was killed by a drunk driver. My dad couldn’t deal with it; he became an alcoholic, maybe he was one already. I guess it was too much for him, and he abandoned us. I haven’t seen him in ten years. I don’t even know if he’s alive. But I offer prayers for him too, wherever he is.”

For the first time in a week, Yucca speaks: “You guys are probably wondering why I cut my . . . accck.” His voice cracks and he clears his throat. “I wanted to wait until the sweat to break my silence. That’s weird hearing my voice again. Anyway, during my solo I went down to the creek and saw my reflection and decided it was time to stop hiding. I was hiding behind my dreads, so I took my knife and cut them off one by one. I put them on the altar as an offering. I dug up a yucca root and made some shampoo and washed my head.

“When we divided the sweat along gender lines, I wasn’t sure where to go. I guess I’ve always had these feminine traits. I always played with girls and dolls. I guess it upset my old man. He was always telling me to stop crying and act like a man. But I don’t know what it means to act like a man. When I was in junior high, everyone called me a faggot. I didn’t know why. But at some point I realized that women don’t hold any physical attraction for me. I mean, I don’t know for sure if I’m gay or not. I’ve never had any sort of sexual relationship. But I figured it was time to stop pretending I was something I’m not.”

“That takes a lot of guts, man,” says Huckleberry.