Landscape Of Desire

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Attitudes change through example rather than arguments. The uncompromising attempt to live one’s highest ideals openly and consistently is therefore the most effective social action one can take. To live in opposition to the principles one proclaims is also the surest way to destroy them as social options. If, to avoid betraying one’s conscience, a person must walk out on society, then by all means let him walk out.

—Jim Corbett

A few bends beyond Hatch Canyon, we climb up on the Cedar Mesa bench and hike in a straight line while the river loops and twists below, cutting deeper into the cross-bedded sandstone. We break in the shade of an enormous solitary juniper, the only tree in sight. As we pass mudstone pinnacles topped with blocks of white sandstone, the students debate whether these can be considered twin monoliths. Huckleberry contends that the term “monolith” precludes plurality. Yet there they are—twin monoliths.

The mesa finally sinks to the river, and we thrash through a dense stand of tamarisk to reach the water. After forty days and forty nights in the wilderness, we come to the end of our journey. We’ve witnessed the abuses of overgrazing, explored the terrible legacy of mining, assessed the impacts of roads and motorized recreation, yet none of it has stopped us. But now our progress is stymied. All along we knew it must end here.

We never spoke of it, for to give it voice would give it power. We kept our sorrow at bay by keeping it silent and out of sight. Now it lies before us. Metta gathers everyone in a circle on our final river crossing. Holding hands in the middle of the river, we feel the current push against our legs, the current that we first beheld as a tiny creek laden with cow shit on the other side of Interstate 70, a lifetime ago.

A short and final walk along the river brings us to the road and van. After dropping my pack, I take a short walk downstream. The water deepens as Lake Powell backs up to meet the incoming river. After a few bends, the downstream flow ceases and slack water begins. On the canyon walls,
about four feet up, a salt-encrusted bathtub ring marks the lake’s high water.

Returning, I pass Seaweed standing by the bank of the river singing, “As I went down in the river to pray, studying about that good old way. And who shall wear the robe and crown, good Lord show me the way. Oh sisters, let’s go down, let’s go down, come on down in the river to pray.”

Sitting on a contorted slab of sandstone, I gaze north, upriver, from where we’ve come. The Cedar Mesa forms a nearly flat, continuous bench clear back to Hatch Canyon. Remnants of White Rim and Organ Rock point skyward. The wide open canyon peels back revealing the layered Moenkopi. Above it, the sheer cliffs of the Wingate shed boulders onto the colorful Chinle slopes. Along the skyline poke the domes of the Navajo, the formation we started in three weeks ago.

Stereotypical white puffs of clouds hover in a cartoon blue sky. The shadows of the clouds move across the landscape, borne on a stiff breeze from the south. I gaze down at the sinuous river bounded by dense green forests of tamarisk. The pink and white fronds wave in the breeze like eunuchs’ fans.

Why are there so many tamarisks here? Lack of floods? Because it’s closer to a source area (Lake Powell), and we are watching it march upriver? Could the fluctuating lake levels have anything to do with it? Perhaps after the high water receded, tamarisks moved in and became established before anything else had a chance.

Come evening, I suggest that everyone go sit by themselves, watch dusk, and reflect. An animate dark cloud rolls overhead.

“Oooh, that looks evil,” declares Seaweed.

“Only people are evil; clouds can only be clouds,” says Sage.

Nevertheless, the grey foreboding mass of water vapor bubbles, boils, and rolls like a stampede of sky-dwelling buffalo. Each of us in our own spot watches the cloud fill the canyon. Pipistrelle bats dart and click up and down the watercourse. In the diminishing light, I peer northward; I feel I should know something. A beam of light from the setting sun shoots into the west. The cloud drops a brief sprinkle over the red sandstone monoliths and passes, revealing the Great Bear. Punctuated by Venus below, a crescent moon dangles over the canyon wall like a question mark.

Metta lights the remaining votive candles, and we form a circle around a circle of candles. Everyone is quiet and reflective. The students talk of the inner changes they have experienced over the past six weeks. They express their love and awe of this river.

“Something shifted last week. All through high school, I felt like I was falling, not really knowing when I would land, and sometimes I didn’t even
know if I was falling. I just felt like I wasn’t connected to anything. Last week I was sitting looking up at this cliff, and I was, like, holy shit. Everything just fell into place, and I stopped falling. I realized I’d been falling all these years, and I just stopped,” says Bobofet.

“I couldn’t just pretend that I’d go back as the same person. It’s not like a ten-day trip. I couldn’t just put myself on a shelf and come back to it. I had to deal with myself and my issues. I couldn’t just forget for ten days. It was right there in front of me all the time,” says Seaweed.

“I came out here in a state for turmoil within myself, and it’s not that I’ve figured anything out, but the turmoil is gone,” says Yucca.

“I’ve gotten really into bird watching, which surprises me because it’s everything I don’t like: getting up early, being quiet, being patient, looking at small things in detail. I called my mom during resupply and said, ‘Guess what, Mom? I love bird watching.’ And she said, ‘You?’” says Patience.

“I feel a greater connection to myself, but it’s the land that helped me get there,” nods Mud, concurring. “On our first trip, I couldn’t wait to get back, take a shower and eat ice cream. But, you know, once I got those things, it was like, okay, so what? It wasn’t what I had built up in my mind. It didn’t satisfy me at all. Now I don’t want to leave,” she adds.

“I was down by the river today, and I noticed that the lump on my hip is gone,” says Sage excitedly. “I’ve never felt so empowered,” she adds.

“I’m not sure what it was I needed, but this was definitely it. I can now go back and recognize the bullshit for what it is and hopefully not get caught up in it. I realize how much I don’t need,” says Huckleberry. “I know this place better than where I’ve lived all my life,” he adds.

“I came here looking for clarity,” says Seeker. “But all I found was this muddy river full of silt and goo and worms and stuff.”

“How do you go back? How do you take this with you?” Sage asks.

“How do you stay sane in an insane world?” asks Huckleberry.

“Is the inability to cope in an insane world a mark of sanity?” inquires Metta.

I’m a teacher; I’m supposed to have answers. I don’t even know what questions to ask. The curtain is drawn, the veil lifted. Now that we know real from unreal, sacred from profane, are we condemned to a life of disenchantment and duality? We leave this place and our community behind; we leave the magic and beauty we’ve created and inhabited and return to a world so infatuated with itself that it excludes all that it has not created. A world where magic and beauty are commodities and fetishes. We return with eyes intense and glowing, eyes wide with wonder and lined with wisdom, eyes so clear you can see the shadows of water striders in them. Others will take one look at us and know we’ve been to the center of the earth and drunk the elixir.
We will stand confused on Concourse B, berated by smells, noxious perfumes, canned air, plastic. We will be beset by CNN and news of another war; we will stand at the snack counter overwhelmed by choices and impatient clerks. We will climb into cars and hurl ourselves through space at unforgiving speeds. The lights will dim the stars. Without the constellations to guide our dreams, we will become lost in a world of fantasy that everyone regards as real. Caught in the consumer web our eyes will fade and gloss over. We will forget the magic but remember a place where it resides. And that memory will haunt us, forever.

In the morning, I walk out to the cliff edge to greet the sunrise. The others soon join me for this final soak in beauty.

We load up the truck and drive into Hite Marina for gas. After three weeks in the backcountry my senses are wide open. It seems insane to be speeding along at twenty miles per hour. I glimpse a loggerhead shrike and a kestrel. They pass by all too quickly. My emotions are raw and immediate. I react instantly to every input. I feel the gravel crunch under the tires as if it were grinding into my own skin.

I feel emotionally transparent, as if all the joy, pain, beauty, and loss of the world permeate every pore. I feel the exuberance of the rising sun, the stiffness of my body, the overwhelming loss of Glen Canyon, the paradox of life as a great blue heron flies over Lake Powell.

Suddenly I perceive the world with extreme clarity, in one of those rare instances, call it religious ecstasy or rapture or a psychedelic experience although it involves neither religion nor drugs but feels like both. My mind and soul are completely open to everything. I just want to absorb it all, experience it. Yet I am so afraid of losing it, knowing it will pass, that the doors will shut, and I will be calloused and functioning again.

Sometimes I think our greatest tragedy is that we continue to operate as if nothing is wrong. We live our lives, go to work, drive our cars, become obsessed with petty concerns while the world collapses around us.

But how should I live in this world? How can I justify any degree of participation in a system so destructive to life, land, people, children? Do I just ignore it and live my life? How can I go about changing it when I still buy gas?

The sight of Lake Powell always ties my stomach in knots. I oscillate between anger and nausea. I follow the porta-potty pumping truck down the highway to Hite. Inside the metal prefab building, painted NPS-puke-beige because of a mandate to blend into the natural surroundings, I scan the aisles. T-shirts, post cards, candy bars, beer—the usual. I find nothing palat-
able. I sense the total boredom and emptiness of the gas station clerk. Finally I buy juice and a muffin.

Tearing open the plastic wrapper and biting into the homogenized food product, I nearly retch. This muffin, a superficial attempt to mimic a baked good, is my only choice? Is this the world I inhabit, convenience stores, RVs, reservoirs? Something is wrong here. I kick the gas pump. “I hate this,” I tell Metta, who nods sympathetically. “Not just this,” I wave my hand vaguely at Hite, “but all this bullshit, the entire petroleum complex, roads, cars, Wallyworld.”

While everyone is in the store satisfying their consumer urges, I walk to the phone to check my voice mail. I hesitate for a moment. Part of me wants to just draw my head in like a turtle and wait for the storm to pass, but out of force of habit, I pick up the phone. You always think that nothing changes on the outside, same old media B.S. We often joke in the backcountry, “What if there’s been a nuclear war, and we don’t know it.” But we don’t really expect anything to happen. Although, sometimes we wonder if someone has died without our permission.

Three weeks, three messages. The first is from my friend who tells me that sixteen kids and a teacher were killed at my old high school, Columbine. I hang up, forgetting the other messages. I have no desire to connect with anyone. I realize the futility of the attempt. How could I explain? Unable to converse on a superficial level, it would leave me feeling even more alienated.

I stare out at the squadron of houseboats mired at Hite. A concrete ramp descends into the stagnant brown waters of the reservoir. A Dodge pickup, not unlike the one I’m driving, backs a trailer with a power boat down the ramp. My last visit to the nameless suburb where I grew up replays through my mind. Just a few months ago I spent a week visiting my father and could hardly muster enough courage to venture beyond the house. I was actually frightened to drive anywhere. My fears were irrational; they stemmed from the transformation of a place I once knew into a homogenous other.

I recall my attempt to walk up the new trail behind the house. I breathed in the chickadees and nuthatches and nearly felt safe. Once I reached the top of Plymouth Mountain, site of my first overnight backpacking trip, my pulse quickened. Bulldozers and graders were scraping new building sites below. When we moved here, we put our mailbox next to eleven others. Now one acre plots barely contain multi-decked monoliths with four car garages sprouting like enormous fungi over secret boyhood meadows and ridges where I had spent countless adolescent hours wandering the creeks, fighting through oak brambles, and pondering my existence. For years my family and other residents fought a proposed gravel pit on Plymouth Mountain. The
issue was finally resolved when the county purchased the land and developed it into open space with picnic shelters and bike paths. The giant parking lot is full all weekend. “All pets must be on a leash.”

One Saturday a woman berated my brother for letting his dog run free. She told him there were mountain lions and bears that would eat his dog. My brother shook his head, “Not anymore.”

Dad suggested we go to dinner at a new seafood restaurant next to Colorado’s largest shopping mall. We pulled out of our driveway onto a wide strip of blacktop that replaced the two miles of muddy, rutted dirt that my brother and I once walked every day from the school bus stop.

We passed the crumbling farmhouse where old Willie Couch was born. Willie was in his nineties when he died ten years ago. He lived on the small ranch behind us before it was subdivided. He told us stories of how his mother had to bake biscuits to keep the Indians from burning down the house. He used to drive his cows into Denver to sell, a two-day trip. When he died, it took half an hour to reach the outskirts of town. In five minutes we will be on the interstate and it’s now impossible to tell where the edge of town even is.

When we reached the main canyon, we turned and drove through what was once the Ken-Caryl ranch, one of the largest along the Front Range. It was sold to Johns-Manville (my father’s employer) who took a piece for their corporate headquarters (visible from our house) and sold the rest to real estate companies. We wound through wide streets of two hundred thousand dollar pastel tract homes, developments with names like Quail Run and Oak Meadows. Just before we boarded the interstate, we passed what used to be a prairie dog town. Then it became a gravel pit. Now a temporary real estate office announced new home sites.

Where, not many years ago, buffalo literally roamed, the interstate transports thousands from suburbs to office parks, passing countless subdivisions and malls. Highlands Ranch once formed a levee against suburban creep, until it too was sold and subdivided as Denver spills into Colorado Springs.

We exited onto a wide four-lane boulevard of convenience stores, multiplex shoe stores, automotive toy rentals, office supply salons, tanning and pizza booths, and video groceries. My head spun in a state of consumer vertigo. One store simply proclaimed, “MORE OF EVERYTHING.” Each boulevard was an exact replica of the one running parallel to it a mile to the west, like those pictures you see of someone looking into a mirror with another mirror and another and another. I felt as if a noose was closing around my neck. Not until we returned home was I able to take a full breath again.

In high school each of these fields had a name; during the outing with my dad, I recognized nothing. All landmarks were gone. The swales had
become cull-de-sacs, the creeks turned into highways, the cottonwoods made into Costco. The cattle trails had been paved into bike paths, and the hills transformed into car dealerships. Yet no one seemed to mind, after all, there was an REI nearby.

This happened so fast and so haphazardly that this nameless suburb now contained more than fifty thousand. Fifty thousand souls and no place to call home other than “southeast unincorporated Jefferson County.”

Although, it’s been nearly twenty years since I last stepped inside Columbine High School, I can picture the classrooms, the desks, the halls, the library sunken into the middle of the school like a giant fishbowl. I recall all of the teachers I had. I think about hatred. Columbine was (still is) a homogenous suburb, white, upper-middle class.

I think of the trouble we caused, the violence, the vandalism, the drinking and drugs. We thought we were tough; we thought we were badass. The most hideous and destructive thing we could imagine was doing donuts on a wet football field. We felt confined in a place with just houses, subdivisions of four thousand units and four basic floor plans broken only by the occasional strip mall. We would venture into Denver, Littleton, or Englewood, places where we could feel a heartbeat. More often we drove west. We drove out into the fields, past signs warning of a new Safeway on this site. We drove into the empty places and built bonfires, tapped kegs of beer, and railed at the stars. We had names for these places, Land of the Lost, The Rocks, The Hideout. Not very imaginative names, but names nonetheless. We may have been drunk, but we could more or less feel our feet on the ground. Still, we watched with each passing month, the bulldozers pull it out from under us. Eighteen years ago we had those fields, those rocks, places we could call our own. Now they were gone.

Last March I stumbled upon one of these old empty places quite accidentally. It was different now, and I didn’t recognize it at first. I sat at an outdoor table drinking a latte and staring out at a vast parking lot. Then it dawned on me where I was. A group of high school kids streamed into the Bagel Shoppe. Did they feel the same alienation I felt, staring out at this soulless expanse of strip malls and fast food? Where do they go to howl their angst?

We drive across the steel bridge spanning the Dirty Devil. Sorrow wells up unexpectedly, and tears fill my eyes. I pull off the road by the bridge, get out, and gaze down at the flooded river, placid and green. A McDonald’s cup sits upended at the cliff edge.

The students remove their Walkmans and filter out of the van.

“This isn’t the Dirty Devil,” says Mud matter-of-factly.
“It’s green!” proclaims Yucca.
“Where’s our river?” demands Patience.
Sage and Seaweed burst into tears at the sight of the lake backed up.
“What did they do to our river,” Sage sobs.
I have no answer. I want to drop to my knees and plead, “Dear Lord, forgive us, and may this never happen again.”
We stand arm in arm in silent witness.
A motorboat towing a water skier passes beneath us. The skier loses a ski and goes down. The boat circles back for him idling for a moment beneath the bridge and then speeds away, skier in tow once again. One by one we turn from the scene unable to look any longer, unable to confront the sadness welling up in our hearts. The students load into the van. I look inside; everyone is in tears. For once I am at a loss for words. Metta reminds us that today is Memorial Day. Bobofet takes out a pen and walks over to the sign on the bridge that reads “Dirty Devil River” and writes “R.I.P.”
A snowy egret passes under the bridge and wings upriver.