

desert souls

by sam deleo

*“We know the sap which courses through the trees as we know the blood that courses through our veins.
We are part of the earth and it is part of us.”* — Chief Seattle, 1854

I could trace the sun’s passing by the trail of its rays up and down the salmon-colored canyon walls outside the lodge. Occasionally, the wind creased the sparse grass on the plain. None of the other rooms were occupied in this side of the building and only a couple of Winnebagos and a pick-up truck cooled in the shade of the parking lot on the other side, travelers in need of a break from the dry desert roads. The lodge consisted of about 25 to 30 rooms and had an attached restaurant. Next door was a convenience store with gas pumps and a small tackle shop, all run by the same Navajo family who owned the lodge. Outside the walls of these three buildings stretched miles and miles of desert. Clan settlements of the tribe dotted the area but weren’t visible from the two-lane highway ribboning the plains.

At about the same time each afternoon in the two days I had been at the lodge, a carload of reservation kids pulled up to the unit a couple doors from me to watch TV in an air-conditioned room. They liked watching a cooking program at full volume featuring a British oaf who ran around fawning over his out-of-work actor guests. I guessed that I wasn’t the only one in this desert with some time on my hands.

I had driven from Denver to the Arizona Strip, a narrow stretch of desert between the north rim of the Grand Canyon and Lake Powell, because I wanted a few days of vacation removed from my usual visits to the mountains of the Front Range of Colorado. And because I felt the urge to get back to Indian country, having lived and attended college in the Four Corners area for six years surrounded by reservations. But except for writing on my laptop, I hadn’t given much thought to what I’d do in the desert. My tent was on loan to someone, so I couldn’t camp. The nearby Colorado River was still churning with run-off, so fishing without a boat would be pointless. And since it was the time of year when snakes were active and mating, I was going to be selective about whatever hikes I took.

Landscapes change both gradually and rapidly on the descent into the desert from the Colorado plateau, smoothing out to the horizons in tan strips of cloud that often solidify as beds of raised sandstone when you push closer; or, suddenly opening around corners into deep chasms where the pastels of the canyon walls in the distance detach into the air as mirages. Teetering horizons and chameleon shapes shifted against the hard-rocked certainty of these corridors.

If the desert were a woman, she’d be wrinkled and wise, and while she would have fewer callers than her sisters of the forests and mountains, those that came would be drawn to her; she would not be ungenerous, but she would have few possessions, and so would be known as sparing and reclusive. And, she would say nothing.

I’ve found it’s the silence as much as the heat that presses against you here. I had been sitting with this silence since I arrived and it had been unchanging, save for the midday burst of the cooking show and the passing howl of an occasional wind. This is the quiet I’d been looking for; and also the quiet I wished broken, given substance, at some point in my stay.

I wrote for a good amount of time the first day, taking in the new environment and soaking in this silence. The next day

was more of a struggle. I nodded “hello” to the kids and, typical of teenagers, they ignored me. I sat on my little cement patio smoking cigarettes, watching for them to come out again on their little cement patio, but no luck.

That night things were different at dinner. Another girl served me, not as friendly as the girl the night before who appeared to be her sister. And there was a general inclination in her, and the busboys, to get me out the door. But then, I was one of the last diners in the restaurant.

Outside, the late spring air of a desert evening lifted scents of lilac and catalpa. Outlines of the canyon walls loomed a shade blacker than the night and seemed oddly receded from their daytime stations. I made a couple of lazy circuits of the buildings and almost startled an old man smoking a cigar in the courtyard. He muttered softly. I was amazed no one else saw the evening fit for visiting, the family of workers having gone straight home up the dirt road behind the buildings and the few guests either asleep or silhouetted against the tin-blue flicker of their TV sets.

I walked to the convenience store to check on maps for a possible hike the next day. The middle-aged Navajo man behind the counter continued reading while I circled the aisles. Soon, five or six college kids, probably passing through from California on spring break to visit either lakes Powell or Havasu, pulled in to fill up on gas and buy cigarettes, and the store was suddenly abuzz. They were a little drunk and were shouting across the store to each other. I used the time to check out maps while the clerk was occupied with them. I looked at different maps for about 15-20 minutes before realizing the kids had finally left. None of the maps were what I wanted so I took my other items to the counter.

“Did you find out where you were at?” said the clerk. I laughed uncertainly, trying to weigh the irony and intent of the man’s comment. I was certainly not a new face to him, as I visited the store twice the previous day.

“Yeah,” I said. “Guess so.”

“You know,” he said, darkening his tone, “those maps are for sale.”

“Oh,” I said, realizing now he had not been joking. “I’m sorry, I should’ve asked. Would you like me to buy one?” Maybe he hadn’t expected this immediate conciliatoriness, or maybe he just felt he’d gone as far as he needed with this line of questions, but he immediately relented.

“No. No. That’ll be \$2.68, sir.” Sir? Where did that come from, I thought. I walked out still trying to digest the man’s comments, the first direct words I had exchanged with any of the family that worked there since I’d arrived. It had all been terse and functional language up till now: “Rooms are \$50.69 per night.” “What would you like to drink?” “Soup or salad?” “Can I get you anything else?”

Was this man simply unveiling what everyone who worked at the lodge was thinking: that I was not welcomed here, merely a visitor who would be tolerated?

With the aid of a few irrationally linked thoughts, I set myself on the defensive: Couldn’t they see I was different from the others — a loner of few words — couldn’t they see I had an Indian heart? Moreover, I was a writer, damnit! I wasn’t one of

these gullible Winnebago-sailors from California, or a fisherman back from drinking brewskis in a houseboat on Lake Powell; I wasn't on some spring break blowout, I had come here to be in the desert, to sit still like the desert. In the desert!

Although I tried to make light of it with these thoughts, I couldn't deny the man's words had broken the calm of my visit. But I didn't know exactly why. And that bothered me more.

The next day I didn't have an appetite for breakfast. I wrote a few lines on the laptop and then smoked cigarettes. Occasionally, I'd go out to the patio with some ice water and look at the canyon, but mostly I sat in my room and watched it from the table. I wrote about being alone, or what feels like being alone. I wrote about what that feels like regardless of where you are, but that where you are during these moments is often where you find nature waiting. Waiting, but not for you. Never just for you.

Finally, in the settling heat of 4 p.m. I decided I'd hike down to the water and drove to one of the dry washbeds leading to the Colorado River. From my parking spot on the side of the road I could see sunlight glinting dust and cobwebs in the rocky crevices of the washbed's descent — it wasn't a well-traveled route. The first mile was a gentle decline of softened, moist crust. My feet sank in the loose topsoil and spilled rocks as I sloped down gradually, and pebbles chased geckos to the bottom.

Each successive ridge dropped deeper into the blank tributary and the chasm cinched closer every eighth of a mile or so. I jumped the four- or five-foot drops easily at first by scooting to the lowest perch. The wash bed narrowed as it deepened, and the sun divided the whitewash of the walls, one side in light, the other in shadow.

I avoided obstacles for another mile or so. Then the drops became seven or eight feet and the sheers of rock made them difficult to skirt around. The most passable route usually required scrambling along the dugouts of the rock overhangs, which seemed like ideal dens for snakes, but there wasn't any other choice.

Pools of black, mosquito-infested water sat below each drop and were outlined with deep mud, the first ground water I'd seen in this dusty spread of vanished runoffs and stony crests. I began to measure the time more closely so that I'd be sure to leave myself enough daylight for the more difficult climb back out. Even with the heat, I felt more comfortable out of the shadows and traveling along the sunny side of the rock walls. Though my line of sight to the sky narrowed, it streamed overhead in a cobalt blue current that contrasted sharply against the wash bed's shadowed wall.

It was about this time I jumped from a ledge and wrenched my ankle as I landed. It wasn't as serious as I first thought once I put some weight on it, but I definitely had to make a decision: whether to continue on, or limp back to my room literally and metaphorically. I could hear the river's distant whir now. I decided to follow it.

Finally the bottleneck leveled into an open patch of land where I could hear the river even more forcefully and see the coffee-and-cream-streaked sediments of the canyon's massive far wall facing me. I hobbled through the last of the bramble and tall grass and suddenly I was before a sweeping, roaring mass, the river that overcame all this rock, flowing now like dark blue

plasma in the shade of the cliffs. I had expected a tall oak-scrubbed bank to curb the water flow, or a cuesta of rock and mud sloping to the shore, instead of this hollow of sand where I could wade as quietly as a deer in the slack of the current. A cool touch of the water and the pain in my ankle faded.

I kept expecting rafters or a fishing party to appear around the bend of the canyon, but none came. Looking at the eons of layered rock on the facing wall, I felt absent any referents for the lifespan I inhabited. The longer I viewed the river canyon, the more I began to question how it was I had learned to look at what I saw as a result of a progression separate from my own. Could reason pluck me out of the river of the natural world? Weren't we both cut from the same raw elements, from "such stuff as dreams are made on," and so inextricably bound together forever? How could I still feel myself an outsider in a land that now lay before me so hotly welcoming?

I thought of the words of a chief I had read. The first night in the lodge, while browsing the Internet, I discovered a version of Chief Seattle's speech different from the one popularized in the 1970s and found on many calendars and New Age posters. Chief Seattle was from the Suquamish tribe in the Pacific Northwest, a different land from this river canyon and surrounding desert of the Hopi, Navajo and their ancestors. This particular version was recorded by an eyewitness, Dr. Henry Smith, and appeared in the Seattle Times years later in 1887. An excerpt reads:

"Why should I mourn at the untimely fate of my people? Tribe follows tribe, and nation follows nation, like the waves of the sea. It is the order of nature, and regret is useless. Your time of decay may be distant, but it will surely come, for even the White Man whose God walked and talked with him as friend to friend cannot be exempt from the common destiny. We may be brothers after all. We will see.

"We will ponder your proposition (to purchase our land)... But should we accept it, I here and now make this condition that we will not be denied the privilege of visiting at any time the tombs of our ancestors, friends and children. Every part of this soil is sacred in the estimation of my people. Every hillside, every valley, every plain and grove has been hallowed by some sad or happy event in the days long vanished. Even the rocks, which seem to be dumb and dead as they swelter in the sun along the silent shore, thrill with the memories of stirring events connected with the lives of my people, and the very dust upon which you now stand responds more lovingly to their footsteps than yours, because it is rich with the blood of our ancestors, and our bare feet are conscious of the sympathetic touch. Our departed braves, fond mothers, glad, happy-hearted maidens, even the little children who lived here and rejoiced here for a brief season, will love these somber solitudes, and at eventide they greet shadowy returning spirits.

"And when the last Red Man shall have perished, and the memory of my tribe shall have become a myth among the White Men, these shores will swarm with the invisible dead of my tribe; and when your children's children think themselves alone in the field, the store ... or in the silence of the pathless woods, they will not be alone... At night, when the streets of your cities and villages are silent and you think them deserted, they will throng with the returning hosts that once filled them and still love this beautiful land. The White Man will never be alone. Let him be just and deal kindly with my people, for the dead are not powerless. Dead, did I say? There is no death, only a change of worlds."

If I had been born here, would I feel the same way about this desert? If I were to answer “no,” there seemed much more evidence to support my response than if I said “yes.” Since I was a small child I had been taught that all I could see, the thick water in this canyon, the patches of scrub oak and long grasses, the creatures finding their home amid these giant red rocks, would all expire someday; because only a non-material world, which we claim entry to with the ticket stubs of our souls, can possibly be permanent. In my cultural tradition, death was a promise of much greener pastures than this bony desert. But no one I knew had ever seen them.

With the breeze stilled and the cooling sun charming the river toward ease, I felt like I had fallen into a sleeve of time where the fizzle of this afternoon could drip forever without hitting bottom. I wasn't ready to begin my return to the world I lived in and its constant grasping at the future. The divide from all of that stretched as wide and invisible as the space in a canyon.

But, it is going to be getting dark soon, I finally convince myself. I take one last look at the valley, one last listen to the river. If I focus my mind, I can almost sense the dead drifting through these canyons with the multiplicity of grains of sand freed from rock, resting and moving on their carriage of wind, seeing but not seen.

I feel the warmth fading from the stone I touch; the afternoon vanishing in a long and untraced exhalation. I hear the river dragging the evening along in a haunting voice, but one I can vaguely recognize all the same, murmuring against the great rock and over the tree roots, through the scattering sand and the spread of tall grass before me; until I am so captured, I can imagine no other place than where I stand — about to turn back.