

Bedrock and Paradox

The tourists have gone home. Most of them. A few still rumble in and ramble around in their sand-pitted dust-choked iron dinosaurs but the great majority, answering a mystical summons, have returned to the smoky jungles and swamps of what we call, in wistful hope, American civilization. I can see them now in all their millions jamming the freeways, glutting the streets, horns bellowing like wounded steers, hunting for a place to park. They have left me alone here in the wilderness, at the center of things, where all that is most significant takes place. (Sunset and moonrise, moaning winds and stillness, cloud transformations, the metamorphosis of sunlight, yellowing leaf and the indolent, soaring vulture. . . .)

Who am I to pity the degradation and misery of my fellow citizens? I, too, must leave the canyon country, if only for a season, and rejoin for the winter that miscegenated mesalliance of human and rodent called the rat race (*Rattus urbanus*). Today is my last day at the Arches; tonight I take a plane for Denver and from there a jet flight to New York. Of course I have my reasons which reason knows nothing about; reason is and ought to be, as Hume said, the slave of the passions. He foresaw the whole thing.

The old pickup truck will stay here. I've already jacked it up on blocks in a friend's backyard, drained the radiator and engine block and

covered the hood with a tarp to keep out the rain and dust.

Everything is packed, all my camping gear stored away, even my whiskers shaved off. Bald-faced as a bank clerk, I stood in front of a mirror this morning and tried on my only white shirt, recently starched. Like putting on chain mail. I even knotted a tie around my neck and tightened it in the proper style—adjusting the garrote for fit. A grim business, returning to civilization. But duty calls. Yes, I hate it so much that I'm spending the best part of a paycheck on airplane tickets.

Balance, that's the secret. Moderate extremism. The best of both worlds. Unlike Thoreau who insisted on one world at a time I am attempting to make the best of two. After six months in the desert I am volunteering for a winter of front-line combat duty—caseworker, public warfare department—in the howling streets of Megalomania, U.S.A. Mostly for the sake of private and selfish concerns, truly, but also for reasons of a more general nature. After twenty-six weeks of sunlight and stars, wind and sky and golden sand, I want to hear once more the crackle of clamshells on the floor of the bar in the Clam Broth House in Hoboken. I long for a view of the jolly, rosy faces on 42nd Street and the cheerful throngs on the sidewalks of Atlantic Avenue. Enough of Land's End, Dead Horse Point, Tukuhtnikivats and other high resolves; I want to see somebody jump out of a window or off a roof. I grow weary of nobody's company but my own—let me hear the wit and wisdom of the subway crowds again, the cabdriver's shrewd aphorisms, the genial chuckle of a Jersey City cop, the happy laughter of Greater New York's one million illegitimate children.

If I'm serious, and I am, the desert has driven me crazy. Not that I mind. We get some strange ones out here. Last night for example came a fellow in suspenders and short leather britches who spoke English with a Bavarian accent. A toolmaker in a Porsche on vacation from Munich, he carried a case of Lowenbrau under the hood of his car where the motor should have been. He spotted my campfire burning out back of the housetrailer and invited himself over, along with his beer. I was glad enough to see him. He turned out to be a typical comical Nazi, his feelings still wounded by the fact that the United States had fought against instead of with Hitler; Americans, he said, are very much like Germans and should with them the dirty Russians together fight. Courteously I declined the intended honor of the comparison: not yet, I said, not quite. We argued all night long. I defended the Americans—no one else was available—while he explained to me the positive aspects of anti-Semitism. Thus two monologues converged, near dawn, upon a murder. I could have opened his skull with a bottle of his own Lowenbrau, and was powerfully tempted. Maybe I would have done it, too, but fatigue set in, and besides I didn't have the heart—after all he hadn't

seen the Arches yet or even the Grand Canyon. When he finally departed my best wishes went with him: may his fan belt snap, his tires develop blisters, his fuel pump succumb to chronic vapor lock—may he never come back.

October. Rabbitbrush in full bloom. The tumbleweeds on the move (that longing to be elsewhere, elsewhere), thousands of them rolling across the plains before the wind. Something like a yellow rash has broken out upon the mountainsides—the aspen forests in their autumn splendor. Sunsets each evening that test a man's credulity—great gory improvisations in scarlet and gold that remind me of nothing so much as God's own celestial pizza pies. Followed inevitably by the night with its razzle-dazzle of stars in silver, emerald and sapphire blue, the same old routine.

For tonight I prophesy a snowstorm. I feel it in the cold stillness of the air, the strange uncertainty of the sun, the unbroken mass of aluminum-gray clouds that hang all day above the north and east, an enormous lid soon to be shoved into place above the canyons and plateaus. The *immanence* of snow.

In the government truck I make a final tour of the park. East past the Balanced Rock to Double Arch and the Windows; back again and north and east to Turnbow Cabin and up the trail to Delicate Arch; back again and northwest beyond the Fiery Furnace into the Devil's Garden, where I walk for the last time this year out the trail past Tunnel Arch, Pine Tree Arch, Landscape Arch, Partition Arch, Navajo Arch, and Wall Arch, all the way to Double-O Arch at the end of the path. My own, my children, mine by right of possession, possession by right of love, by divine right, I now surrender them all to the winds of winter and the snow and the starving deer and the pinyon jays and the emptiness and the silence unbroken by even a thought.

In deep stillness, in a somber solemn light, these beings stand, these fins of sandstone hollowed out by time, the juniper trees so shaggy, tough and beautiful, the dead or dying pinyon pines, the little shrubs of rabbitbrush and blackbrush, the dried-up stalks of asters and sunflowers gone to seed, the black-rooted silver-blue sage. How difficult to imagine this place without a human presence; how necessary. I am almost prepared to believe that this sweet virginal primitive land will be grateful for my departure and the absence of the tourists, will breathe metaphorically a collective sigh of relief—like a whisper of wind—when we are all and finally gone and the place and its creations can return to their ancient procedures unobserved and undisturbed by the busy, anxious, brooding consciousness of man.

Grateful for our departure? One more expression of human vanity. The finest quality of this stone, these plants and animals, this desert landscape is the indifference manifest to our presence, our absence, our coming, our staying or our going. Whether we live or die is a matter of absolutely no concern whatsoever to the desert. Let men in their madness blast every city on earth into black rubble and envelope the entire planet in a cloud of lethal gas—the canyons and hills, the springs and rocks will still be here, the sunlight will filter through, water will form and warmth shall be upon the land and after sufficient time, no matter how long, somewhere, living things will emerge and join and stand once again, this time perhaps to take a different and better course. I have seen the place called Trinity, in New Mexico, where our wise men exploded the first atomic bomb and the heat of the blast fused sand into a greenish glass—already the grass has returned, and the cactus and the mesquite. On this bedrock of animal faith I take my stand, close by the old road that leads eventually out of the valley of paradox.

Yes. Feet on earth. Knock on wood. Touch stone. Good luck to all.

Throughout the afternoon the mountains are wrapped in a storm of clouds, a furious battleground. Tukuñkivats has gone under, drowning in wild vapors, and a blue light covers the desert. In coat and hat and scarf and gloves and long underwear, freezing, I linger on my terrace near the ramada, which is now being unroofed branch by branch in the winds, the red flag whipped to shreds, the windbells jangling like a Chinese fire alarm. All of my old cedar posts and juniper logs have gone into one last magnificent bonfire, flaring like a transparent rose on the open rock, my signal to the world—unheeded. No matter, it's okay by me and the red dust of Utah. Five hundred and sixty tumbleweeds roll toward the horizon, herded by the wind; may they, too, never come back. All things are in motion, all is in process, nothing abides, nothing will ever change in this eternal moment. I'll be back before I'm fairly out of sight. Time to go.

The trailerhouse is cleaned out, locked up, water lines drained, gas disconnected, windows shut tight, power plant under canvas. My own belongings are packed in the truck. The red bandana, the bells? I'll leave them here in place to wave and jingle all through the winter, unseen and unheard, more power to the both of them.

All is ready for departure and I see by my watch I've already put in ten minutes of free overtime for the government. I had hoped to see the mountains in full glory, all covered with fresh snow, before leaving, but it looks as if the storm will last all night. I had wished also to see

the red rock of our 33,000-acre garden, the arches and buttes and pinnacles and balanced boulders, all lit up in evening light but the sun too is buried in clouds.

The fire is dying, the sparks scattering over the sand and stone—there is nothing to do but go. Now that all is finally ready I am overtaken by the insane compulsion to be gone, to be elsewhere, to go, to go. Abruptly I cancel plans for a ceremonial farewell to the hoodoo rocks and the lone juniper with its dead claw snagging the wind—I had planned a frivolous music—and turn away and hurry to the truck, get in, slam the door, drive off.

When I reach park headquarters in Moab I telephone the airport and learn that nobody is flying from here to Denver tonight; the storm has ruled out all flights in the area. A new ranger, Bob Ferris, offers to drive me up to the town of Thompson where I can catch a Western & Rio Grande night train to Denver. I accept and following a good dinner by his gracious wife, we load my baggage into his car and drive to the railway, thirty miles north.

No end of blessings from heaven and earth. As we climb up out of the Moab valley and reach the high tableland stretching northward, traces of snow flying across the road, the sun emerges clear of the overcast, burning free on the very edge of the horizon. For a few minutes the whole region from the canyon of the Colorado to the Book Cliffs—crag, mesa, turret, dome, canyon wall, plain, swale and dune—glows with a vivid amber light against the darkness on the east. At the same time I see a mountain peak rising clear of the clouds, old Tukuñkivats fierce as the Matterhorn, snowy as Everest, invincible.

“Ferris, stop this car. Let’s go back.”

But he only steps harder on the gas. “No,” he says, “you’ve got a train to catch.” He sees me craning my neck to stare backward. “Don’t worry,” he adds, “it’ll all still be here next spring.”

The sun goes down, I face the road again, we light up our after-dinner cigars. Keeping the flame alive. The car races forward through a world dissolving into snow and night.

Yes, I agree, that’s a good thought and it better be so. Or by God there might be trouble. The desert will still be here in the spring. And then comes another thought. When I return will it be the same? Will I be the same? Will anything ever be quite the same again? If I return.