The Dead Man at Grandview Point

Somnolence—a heaviness in the air, a chill in the sunlight, an oppressive stillness in the atmosphere that hints of much but says nothing. The Balanced Rock and the pinnacles stand in petrified silence—waiting. The wildlife has withdrawn to the night, the flies and gnats have disappeared, a few birds sing, and the last of the flowers of summer—the globemallow—have died. What is it that's haunting me? At times I hear voices up the road, familiar voices. . . I look; and no one is there.

Even the tourists that creep in and creep out in their lumbering, dust-covered automobiles reveal a certain weariness with desert travel, a certain longing to be elsewhere, to be where it's high, cool, breezy, fresh—mountain or seashore. And they should. Why anyone with any sense would volunteer to spend August in the furnace of the desert is a mystery to me; they must be mad, these brave tourists, as I am mad.

Each day begins clean and promising in the sweet cool clear green light of dawn. And then the sun appears, its hydrogen cauldrons brimming with plasmic fires, and the tyranny of its day begins.

By noon the clouds are forming around the horizon and in the afternoon, predictable as sunrise and sunset, they gather in massed formations, colliding in jags of lightning and thunderous artillery, and pile higher and higher toward the summit of the sky in vaporish mountains, dazzling under the sunlight. Afterward, perhaps, comes a little

rain—that is, a violent cloudburst above some random site in the desert, flooding arroyos and washes with torrents of mud, gravel and water in equal parts, a dense mixture the color of tomato soup or blood which roars down the barren waterways to the river, leaving the land an hour later as dry as it was before. The clouds melt away, the thunder fades and the sun breaks through again, blazing with redoubled intensity upon sand and rock and scattered, introverted shrub and tree. Rainy season in the canyonlands.

These brief thundershowers are not entirely without effect: I can see these days a dull green fuzziness spreading like a mold across the distant swales of Salt Wash Valley. Near at hand are a few of the plants responsible for that coloration—the tumbleweed or Russian thistle, hairy and prickly, unpleasant both to touch and eye. At the same time the ground is being prepared for a more wholesome growth, the September resurgence of rabbitbrush, sunflower, aster, wild buckwheat and matchweed.

With evening come elaborate sunsets in every named and unnamed hue of gold, purple, crimson, green, orange and blue, spread out for fifty or a hundred miles among the floating ranks of clouds, with spokes of light radiating across the sky all the way from the western to the eastern horizon. Often the sunset is reflected not only on the mountain peaks, standing like islands in a sea of twilight, but also on ranges of clouds to the east, where the changing colors can be seen—along with flashes of silent sudden heat lightning—long after they have faded out completely in the west.

This is the time, in these semihumid August evenings after rain, when a few nighthawks will leave their daytime hiding places to climb and circle and dive through the air, feeding on high-flying insect life invisible from the ground. Of the genus *Chordeiles,* related to the nightjar and the goatsucker (most birds have fantastic names), the nighthawks resemble in size and conformation the swallow rather than the hawk, while in their style of flight, constantly swooping and darting, they are also like bats. Now and then a nighthawk, high in the air, will fold wings and plunge earthward; the noise of the wind rushing through its feathers when the bird extends wings and pulls out of the dive is like a distant roar, a bovine bellow. And so, among its many other names, the nighthawk *Chordeiles minor* is also called a bullbat, at least in the Southwest.

They feed in the twilight between evening and night and again in that similar twilight, unknown to most Americans, between dawn and sunrise, at which times aerial insects are most abundant. In my sack on the cot out back of the trailer I am awakened many a morning by the sound of their wild cries and thrilling plunges through the air. I open

my eyes and see the summer constellations, pale, dim, oddly misplaced in the sky—the Big Dipper, for example, half sunk beyond the northern horizon. At first I think it is still night but looking east I see a premonition of day in the greenish streaks of light spread out along the rim. False dawn? No, for I also see the nighthawks skating across the sky against the glow, a sure sign of the coming sunrise.

Another kind of music sometimes fills the early hours. Almost every morning for a week I have been honored by the serenade of a den of coyotes—a family perhaps—somewhere about a mile to the west of my camp. Weird, unearthly song—like the legendary wail of banshees, or more precisely, like the sounds produced by new electronic instruments such as the *cithare* and *Onde Martinote.*

Occult music is but a part of the coyotes' repertoire: they vary the program with more conventional howls, yelps and barks when it pleases them to do so. Usually they stop their singing and retire into the rocks, out of caution, soon after the sun comes up.

I'm not going to look for their lair, for that might frighten them away, and we need coyotes, need them badly, in Arches National Monument. As does the nation as a whole, for that matter. We need coyotes more than we need, let us say, more people, of whom we have already an extravagant surplus, or more domesticated dogs, which in all fairness could and should be ground up into hamburger and used as emergency coyote food, to raise their spirits and perhaps improve the tenor of their predawn howling.

This morning I am requested via the shortwave radio to join a manhunt. Not for some suspected criminal or escaped convict but for a lost tourist whose car was found abandoned two days ago in the vicinity of Grandview Point, about fifty miles by road from my station in the Arches.

Grateful for the diversion, I throw canteens and rucksack into the government pickup and take off. I go west to the highway, south for three miles, and turn off on another dirt road leading southwest across Dead Horse Mesa toward the rendezvous. There I find the other members of the search party holding a consultation: Bates and Lloyd from park headquarters, the county sheriff and one of his deputies, a relative of the missing man, and my brother Johnny who is also working for the Park Service this summer. At the side of the road is a locked and empty automobile, first noted two days earlier.

Most of the surface of this high mesa on which our man has disappeared is bare rock—there are few trails, and little sand or soft earth on which he might have left footprints. There are, however, many washes, giant potholes, basins, fissures and canyons in which a man

could lose himself, or a body be hidden, for days or years.

There is also the abyss. A mile from where we stand is the mesa's edge and a twelve-hundred-foot drop straight down to what is called the White Rim Bench. From there the land falls away for another fifteen hundred feet or more to the Colorado River. If he went that way there won't be much left worth looking for. You could put it all in a bushel sack.

Learning from the relative—a nephew—that the missing man is about sixty years old, an amateur photographer with heart trouble who had never been in the Southwest before, we assume first of all that the object of the search is dead and that the body will be found somewhere along the more than twenty miles of highly indented rimrock that winds northwest and northeast from Grandview Point.

The assumption of death is made on the grounds that an airplane search by the sheriff failed to find any sign of the man, and that at least two days and possibly more spent in the desert in the heat of August with only what water (if any) he could carry is too much for a man of sixty, unfamiliar with the terrain and the climate.

We begin the search by dividing as evenly as we can the area to be investigated. Assigned the southernmost sector, my brother and I drive down the road another five miles to where it dead-ends close to the farthest reach of the mesa—Grandview Point itself. Here we share our water supply and split up, Johnny hiking along the rim to the northwest and I taking the opposite way.

All morning long, for the next few hours, I tramp along the rim looking for the lost tourist. Looking for his body, I should say—there seems little chance of finding him still alive. I look in the shade of every juniper and overhanging ledge, likely places to find a man beseiged by thirst and sun. I look in the gullies and fissures and in the enormous potholes drilled by wind and sand in the solid rock—holes like wells, with perpendicular sides—mantraps.

At times I step to the brink of the mesa and peer down through that awful, dizzying vacancy to the broken slabs piled along the foot of the wall, so far—so terribly far—below. It is not impossible that our man might have stumbled off the edge in the dark, or even—spellbound by that fulfillment of nothingness—eased himself over, deliberately, in broad daylight, drawn into the void by the beauty and power of his own terror . . .

"Gaze not too long into the abyss, lest the abyss gaze into thee." Nietzche said that. He knew.

I watch for a gathering of vultures in the air, which would be a helpful clue. Not for *him*, of course, now perhaps beyond such cares, but for us, his hunters.

The sun burns in a lovely, perfect sky; the day is very hot. I pause when necessary beneath pinyon pine or juniper for rest and shade and for a precious drink of water. Also, I will admit, for recreation: to admire the splendor of the landscape, the perfection of the silence.

The shade is sweet and desirable, the heat very bad and early in the afternoon, out of water, I give up and return to my pickup. My brother is waiting for me and by the lost expression on his face I understand at once that he has found our man.

Johnny has radioed the rest of the party. We wait in the shade of the truck. They arrive; we all wait another hour until the undertaker, who is also county coroner, comes from Moab with his white ambulance, his aluminum stretcher and his seven-foot-long black rubber bag. Then Johnny leads us to the body.

The route is rough and long, across rocky gulches and sandstone terraces impassable to a motor vehicle. We walk it out. About a mile from the road we come to a ledge rising toward the rim of the mesa. Near the top of the rise is a juniper, rooted in the rock and twisted toward the sky in the classic pose of its kind in the canyon country. Beneath the little tree, in the shade, is the dead man.

Coming close we see that he lies on his back, limbs extended rigidly from a body bloated like a balloon. A large stain discolors the crotch of his trousers. The smell of decay is rich and sickening. Although the buzzards for some reason have not discovered him two other scavengers, ravens, rise heavily and awkwardly from the corpse as we approach. No canteen or water bag in sight.

The nephew makes a positive identification. The coroner-undertaker nods, the sheriff is satisfied, and together with the deputy the three of them begin the delicate, difficult task of easing the swollen cadaver into the unzippered rubber bag.

Johnny and I retrace what we can of the dead man's course. There is no discernible trail on the slickrock but by walking around his final resting place in a big half-circle we cut sign—intersect his tracks—in a ravine a hundred yards away. There on the sandy floor we find his footprints: where he had entered the ravine, where he became panicky and retraced his way not once but twice, and where he had struggled up an alluvial bank to the ledge. From that point he could see the juniper with its promise of shade. Somehow he made his way to it, laid himself down and never got up again. A failure of heart.

We return to where the others are waiting, gathered about the black bag on the stretcher, which the undertaker is in the act of zipping shut. The sheriff and the deputy are scrubbing their hands with sand; the undertaker wears rubber gloves.

We are not far from Grandview Point and the view from near the

juniper is equally spectacular. The big jump-off is only a few steps south and beyond that edge lies another world, far away. Down below is the White Rim; deeper still is the gorge of the Colorado; off to the right is the defile of the Green River; looking past Junction Butte we can see the barren point where the two rivers join to begin the wild race through Cataract Canyon; beyond the confluence lies the wilderness of the Needles country, known only to a few cowboys and uranium prospectors; on the west side of the junction is another labyrinth of canyons, pinnacles and fins of naked stone known to even fewer, closer than anything else in the forty-eight United States to being genuine *terra incognita*—The Maze.

Far beyond these hundreds of square miles of desiccated tableland rise the sheer walls of further great mesas comparable in size and elevation to the one we stand on; and beyond the mesas are the mountains—the Abajos and Elk Ridge forty miles south, the La Sals and Tukuhnikivats thirty miles east, the Henrys fifty miles and Navajo Mountain ninety miles southwest—by line of sight. Twice that far by road.

Except for the town of Moab, east of us, and the village of Hanksville near the Henry Mountains, and a single occupied ranch on this side of the Abajo Mountains, the area which we overlook contains no permanent human habitation. From the point of view of political geography we are standing on one of the frontiers of human culture; for the man inside the rubber sack it was land's end, the shore of the world.

Looking out on this panorama of light, space, rock and silence I am inclined to congratulate the dead man on his choice of jumping-off place; he had good taste. He had good luck—I envy him the manner of his going: to die alone, on a rock under sun at the brink of the unknown, like a wolf, like a great bird, seems to me very good fortune indeed. To die in the open, under the sky, far from the insolent interference of leech and priest, before this desert vastness opening like a window onto eternity—that surely was an overwhelming stroke of rare good luck.

It would be unforgivably presumptuous to pretend to speak *for* the dead man on these matters; he may not have agreed with a word of it, not at all. On the other hand, except for those minutes of panic in the ravine when he realized that he was lost, it seems possible that in the end he yielded with good grace. We see him staggering through the fearful heat and glare, across the tilted ledge toward the juniper, the only tree in sight. We see him reach it, at great cost, and there, on the brink of nothing and everything, he lies down in the shade to rest. He would not have suffered much after that; he may have died in his sleep, dreaming of the edge of things, of flight into space, of soaring.

We are ready to go. A few flies are already circling above the dark shape on the stretcher. A few dark birds are floating on the thermals far out over the chasm of the Colorado, somewhat below the level of the mesa. It is possible from here to gaze down on the backs of soaring birds. I would like to stay for a while and watch the birds but the others are ready to go, the sun is very hot, the corpse is stinking, there is not enough shade for us all under the one small tree, and the world—the human world—is waiting for us, calling us back. For the time being.

There are eight men here, alive. More or less alive. Four pick up the stretcher and begin the march back to the road and the ambulance. The other four walk alongside to relieve when needed. We soon need relief, for the weight is greater than it looks, and the rock, sand, brush and cactus make walking with a load difficult. The sun is pitiless, the smell is worse, and the flies are worst of all, buzzing in swarms around the putrid mass in the rubber sack.

The dead man's nephew, excused from this duty, walks far ahead out of earshot. We are free as we go stumbling and sweating along to say exactly what we please, without fear of offending.

"Heavy son of a bitch. . . ."

"All blown up like he is, you'd think he'd float like a balloon."

"Let's just hope he don't explode."

"He won't. We let the gas out."

"What about lunch?" somebody asks; "I'm hungry."

"Eat this."

"Why'd the bastard have to go so far from the road?"

"There's something leaking out that zipper."

"Never mind, let's try to get in step here," the sheriff says. "God-damnit, Lloyd, you got big feet."

"Are we going in the right direction?"

"I wonder if the old fart would walk part way if we let him out of that bag?"

"He won't even say thank you for the ride."

"Well I hope this learned him a lesson, goddamn him. I guess he'll stay put after this. . . ."

Thus we meditate upon the stranger's death. Since he was unknown to any of us we joke about his fate, as is only natural and wholesome under the circumstances. If he'd meant anything to us maybe we could mourn. If we had loved him we would sing, dance, drink, build a stupendous bonfire, find women, make love—for under the shadow of death what can be wiser than love, to make love, to make children?—and celebrate his transfiguration from flesh to fantasy in a style proper and fitting, with fun for all at the funeral.

But—we knew thee not, old man. And there is, I suspect, another feeling alive in each of us as we lug these rotting guts across the desert: satisfaction.

Each man's death diminishes me? Not necessarily. Given this man's age, the inevitability and suitability of his death, and the essential nature of life on earth, there is in each of us the unspeakable conviction that we are well rid of him. His departure makes room for the living. Away with the old, in with the new. He is gone—we remain, others come. The plow of mortality drives through the stubble, turns over rocks and sod and weeds to cover the old, the worn-out, the husks, shells, empty seedpods and sapless roots, clearing the field for the next crop. A ruthless, brutal process—but clean and beautiful.

A part of our nature rebels against this truth and against that other part which would accept it. A second truth of equal weight contradicts the first, proclaiming through art, religion, philosophy, science and even war that human life, in some way not easily definable, is significant and unique and supreme beyond all the limits of reason and nature. And this second truth we can deny only at the cost of denying our humanity.

We finally reach the road, which I had begun to fear we would never see—the death march seemed everlasting—and shove stretcher and burden into the undertaker's ambulance, a white Cadillac glittering with chrome and powdered with the red dust of Utah. He slams shut the doors, the undertaker does, shakes a few hands and drives off, followed by the nephew driving the dead man's car.

The air is clean and sweet again. We can breathe. We rest for a while in the shade of the other cars, passing around water bags, smoking, talking a little. Someone tells a bad joke, and the party breaks up. We all go back the thirty-five miles to the highway and from there by separate ways to separate places, my brother south to Blanding, myself to the Arches.

Evening now, a later day. How much later? I'm not quite sure, I can't say, I've been out here in the heart of light and silence for so long that the numbers on a calendar have lost their meaning for me. All that I can be certain of at this moment is that the sun is down, for there is Venus again, planet of beauty and joy, glowing bright and clear in the western sky, low on the horizon, brilliant and steady and serene.

The season is late—late summer on the high desert. The thunderstorms have been less frequent lately, the tumbleweeds are taking on the reddish tinge of their maturity, and the various grasses—bluestem, fescue, Indian ricegrass, grama grass—which flourished after the summer rains have ripened to a tawny brown; in the slanting light of morning

and evening the far-off fields in Salt Valley, where these grasses are most abundant, shine like golden velvet.

The nighthawks, sparse in numbers earlier, have gone away completely. I haven't seen one for a week. But not all the birds have left me.

Southwest, toward Grandview Point and The Maze, I can see V-shaped black wings in the lonely sky, soaring higher and higher against a yellow sunset. I think of the dead man under the juniper on the edge of the world, seeing him as the vulture would have seen him, far below and from a great distance. And I see myself through those cruel eyes.

I feel myself sinking into the landscape, fixed in place like a stone, like a tree, a small motionless shape of vague outline, desert-colored, and with the wings of imagination look down at myself through the eyes of the bird, watching a human figure that becomes smaller, smaller in the receding landscape as the bird rises into the evening—a man at a table near a twinkling campfire, surrounded by a rolling wasteland of stone and dune and sandstone monuments, the wasteland surrounded by dark canyons and the course of rivers and mountain ranges on a vast plateau stretching across Colorado, Utah, New Mexico and Arizona, and beyond this plateau more deserts and greater mountains, the Rockies in dusk, the Sierra Nevadas shining in their late afternoon, and farther and farther yet, the darkened East, the gleaming Pacific, the curving margins of the great earth itself, and beyond earth that ultimate world of sun and stars whose bounds we cannot discover.