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# DESERT SOLITAIRE

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Give me silence, water, hope  
Give me struggle, iron, volcanoes . . .

—PABLO NERUDA

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# Preface

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This book was begun in the summer of 1956—thirty-one years ago. Hard to believe but true. For me that time seems like a different age, almost a different world, a pattern of events archaic in antiquity. I was working that summer as a ranger at a little national park in southeast Utah called Arches. The place was remote then, the roads rough and rocky, the tourist travel sparse. I worked and lived alone, twenty miles from Moab, the nearest town, and my duties were light. I spent much of my time watching cloud formations, praying for flash floods, exploring the canyons for new and undiscovered natural wonders. With much free time on my hands I kept a diary, or more exactly a journal, since I did not make entries every day. I recorded my observations of life, wildlife, books, flowers, ideas, birds, emotions and sensations—particularly those feelings that come with prolonged solitude.

Hired back for a second season, in the spring of 1957, I resumed and continued the journal. By October of that same year I had accumulated four volumes of densely scribbled notes, sketches, drawings, reflections. I stored them away. I was a writer by then, or thought I was, and had acquired already the writer's squirrely instincts. Nothing is less reliable than memory alone or imagination untethered to actual, concrete, empiric fact; all serious writers keep a record. Thoreau, for example, with the seventeen volumes of his *Journal*. And Emerson. And

Virginia Woolf, Mark Twain, André Gide, Edmund Wilson, Michel de Montaigne, Robert Burton, James Boswell. Even Dostoyevsky. Even Tolstoy—a man with a mind like a computerized data storage center.

You never know when those old notebooks may be required.

I did not return to the Arches for a third season, not immediately, because I was displeased with and displaced by the industrializing “improvements” taking place there. The smell of asphalt, slathered in hot steaming tons upon the living earth, annoys me. Also the park superintendent, a genial but ambitious fellow, did not approve of me or beards; his chief interest lay in promoting industrial tourism in southeast Utah: whiskey park rangers did not fit well into such schemes.

So I drifted for years, from Utah to California to New York to Florida to Nevada, from one marriage to another, from one part-time temporary job to another, as millions of other young men and women were doing in those optimistic, irresponsible, carefree days. In the years from 1957 until 1965 I wrote three novels, two of which were spurned by the New York City publishers. That was discouraging. One editor suggested that I try my hand at shoe repair or the mechanical arts.

I found a job as a schoolbus driver in Death Valley. This job took up four hours of my day five days a week—two in the morning, two in the afternoon. During the middle of the day I sat in my parked bus in the shade of a giant cottonwood at Ash Meadows, Nevada, near a popular public whorehouse of the same name, waiting for the return of my twenty-two children from Shoshone High. The hours passed in luxurious idleness but after a time I began to scratch my head, pondering what my hero Charles Ives called *The Unanswered Question*. What am I doing with my life? Nothing. What is the significance of existence? Who knows. Where do we come from and where are we going? Who cares.

That night I rummaged through my trunk, dug out my old notebooks and journals, and transcribed by typewriter the entries I had made during those two seamless perfect seasons in the Arches, among the hoodoo rocks and voodoo silence of the Utah wilderness. A sexual therapist named Alicia helped me with some of the big words and did most of the typing. We mailed the manuscript, *Book Rate*, to my agent in New York and in January 1968, on a dark night in the dead of winter, *Desert Solitaire* was published. I resigned my position as a Death Valley schoolbus driver and waited for fame and fortune to descend upon me like manna from Heaven.

Nothing happened. The book received a friendly review in the *New York Times*, a few brief but not hostile notices elsewhere, and that was it. No Book-of-the-Month-Club selection, no Pulitzer Prize or National Book award, no appearance on any best-seller lists but those of Moab, Utah, and Home, Pennsylvania (where I was once born). The publishers

allowed the first edition of 10,000 copies to go out of print. Within a year my little book had died a natural death, vanishing down the slick tube of oblivion. A premature baby: ten or fifteen years later things might have turned out better.

Disappointed but not surprised, I returned to my career as a seasonal ranger, fire fighter and fire lookout, and continued writing fiction, not in hope of gain or glory but for the hell of it, because I enjoyed it, and because nobody else would or ever will write exactly the kind of stories that I find most interesting. In 1971 my novel *Black Sun* was published and four years later *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. They too received the silent treatment from the eastern press (my books are never reviewed on NPR or in *Time*, *Newsweek*, *New York*, *New Yorker*, *Esquire*, *Ms.*, *Atlantic*, *Harper's*, *Wall Street Journal*, *New Republic*, *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, *Village Voice*, or indeed in any national publication except *Playboy*) but they survived anyhow, thrived and flourished and have stayed in print and available ever since. I have not had to turn my hand to honest work since 1975. After centuries of dogged striving, at least one member of the Abbey clan (Allegheny Mountains branch) achieved membership—however transiently—in the bottom bracket of the lower middle class. Or highest bracket of the lower class. Without institutional help.

Meantime, *Desert Solitaire* itself was revived in paperback in 1971, first as a trade paperback from Simon & Schuster, then as a mass market paperback by Ballantine Books. Both editions continue to burrow along like seditious moles a few feet underground, hidden but alive, the first now in its twelfth printing, the second in its sixteenth. I am impressed by the book's obstinate tenacity and proud of the fact, as any father must be, that I once played a small part—long ago—in the conception of this literary creature. The connection becomes ever more flimsy, distant, irrelevant, as every author knows, with each passing year. Did I write those books? Yes, I guess so. But I can scarcely remember the purpose. The only book that matters now, as every author also knows, is the book-in-progress.

*Desert Solitaire*, first published over nineteen years ago, typed up twenty-one years ago, was based on personal experiences of thirty and thirty-one years ago. America in 1956 was, by comparison with the present, a playful jolly sunny land. Or so it seemed to me, enjoying my rural idylls in the mountains and great deserts of Utah and Arizona.

So much has changed since then and rarely for the better. Everyone says this and everyone is correct.

One obvious victim of such change and progress was my beloved Arches National Park. When I worked there in 1956 and 1957, it was a wilderness habitat for native animals (not the cow), a primitive back-country for adventurous humans, a preserve of space and stillness and

virgin air for all things. Soon after I left, the park was developed, as they say—improved, modernized, brought into the web of commerce and industrial tourism and scientific stewardship. The chief park ranger is now called a “unit manager”; park rangers are “park technicians.” The former dirt roads have been replaced by paved highways, the quaint old campgrounds by officially designated camping areas complete with electricity, flush toilets, numbered parking spaces, acres of asphalt and, of course, as always, by the usual administrative spiderwebbing of rules, regulations, limits, permits, fees and penalties, enforced by motorized police patrols.

No need to enlarge on the theme here. I treat it fully enough in the chapter called “Industrial Tourism” that protrudes, like an enflamed member, in the midst of an otherwise simple pastorate. What happened to the Arches, in any case, is merely a microcosmic symptom, a symbol, a synecdoche, of what has happened and of what continues to happen to the American West as a whole, to the nation, to the planet.

The persistent life of the book *Desert Solitaire* trapped me, to some extent, in the box labeled “nature writer.” This is a title I have not earned, never wanted, do not enjoy. Yet booksellers, librarians and reviewers persist in lumping my books with those of such serious and wholly admirable naturalists as Annie Dillard, Barry Lopez, John McPhee, Edward Hoagland, Rachel Carson, Ann Zwinger, John Mitchell, John Muir, John Burroughs, John Hay, Robert Finch, Jim Harrison, and others good and bad too numerous to mention. (Even my novels are sometimes classified as nature writing!) Now I confess to being a nature *lover*. Of course I am a nature lover—only a fool could not be—nature being our mother, our father, our bride, our wife, our source of life, sustenance of all well-being, final repository of our bones. But I did not mean to be mistaken for a nature *writer*. I never wanted to be anything but a writer, period. An author. A creator of fictions and essays, sometimes poems. Like any such scrivener, I take all of life, all of society, all of civilization, for my proper realm of discourse, as any honest reader can discover by the simple device of actually looking into, actually reading, actually reflecting on, what I have written. Judging by the mail I get, most of my readers understand what I am up to perfectly well; it is only the professionals, the specialists, the literary people—other writers, other critics—who find difficulty in granting a man the right to be what he is.

Not that it matters. Every book these days begins its life, like an infant sea turtle, by running down the beach and into the surf through a gauntlet of hungry ghost crabs, screeching seagulls, swarming and greedy stonefish, hagfish, devilfish, lampreys, manta rays, giant clams, and eggheaded walleyed eight-armed ink-spreading octopodes. Those

that survive this initial run for the open sea live to become adult sea turtles, armored and invulnerable giants—literature.

And what is literature? Literature consists of those books that make a bid for literary immortality, a length of time that Mark Twain defined as “about thirty to thirty-five years.” I’ll settle for that. Any book that lives longer is in danger of becoming a classic, that is, a book which everyone praises and nobody reads, kept alive, in a fashion, like figures in a wax museum, by the heroic efforts of professors of literature. Whom we pay and pay well—it’s demanding work—to read and to read about, talk about, write about, those leatherbound works which most of us keep only on the bedside table. For sleepless nights. What better soporific than—*Pickwick Papers?* *The Scarlet Letter?* *More Floss on the Mill?*

“Books are like bananas,” said Jean-Paul Sartre; “best when fresh.”

Nature writing: I seldom read it myself. I have never looked inside a book by Muir or Burroughs and don’t intend to. The few such writers whom I wholly admire are those, like Thoreau, who went far beyond simple nature writing to become critics of society, of the state, of our modern industrial culture. We have many nature writers at work these days, some of them quite famous and successful, but the few I respect are those who not only describe the world of nature but attempt, in their writing and in their lives, to defend it. (It is not enough to understand nature; the point is to save it.) Such writers are few today and they are mostly ageing or dead: Wallace Stegner, A. B. Guthrie, Farley Mowat, Gary Snyder, the late Joseph Wood Krutch. Such men have not limited themselves to what I am labeling, no doubt loosely, as “nature writing.” They are novelists, poets, essayists as well, and good ones, and this I think is part of what makes their work more interesting by far than that of specialists. Sometimes they seem to overextend their art, even risk making fools of themselves (in the eyes of respectable literati) by plunging openly, brazenly into environmentalist battles, taking up causes, speaking out boldly for their notion of the good and against the bad. If so, it’s because too many American writers prefer to play safe, to avoid controversy, to stay out of trouble. But how far can you go in temporizing and trimming and equivocating before such conduct becomes plain moral cowardice?

Nobody particularly enjoys the role of troublemaker. But when most writers are unwilling to take chances, afraid to stick their necks out on any issue, then a few have to take on the burden of all and do more than their share.

Perhaps I should conclude by returning to this book, *Desert Solitaire*, and its significance to me. First, I am delighted to have had this opportunity to prepare what I regard as the final and definitive edition. Nothing essential has been changed but I have made many slight ad-

ditions and deletions. The more egregious solecisms now are gone, forever I hope, and certain infelicities of phrase have been corrected. Nothing in this book approaches perfection but I have done the best that I can do.

*Desert Solitaire*, I'm happy to add, contains no hidden meanings, no secret messages. It is no more than it appears to be, the plain and simple account of a long sweet season lived in one of the world's most splendid places. If some might object that the book deals too much with mere appearances, with the surface of things, and fails to engage and reveal the patterns of unifying relationships that many believe form the true and underlying reality of existence, I can only reply that I am content with surfaces, with appearances. I know nothing about *underlying reality*, having never encountered any. I've looked and I've looked, tried fasting, drugs, meditation, religious experience, even self-mortification, but never seem to get any closer to basic reality than the lizard on a rock, a hawk in the sky, a dead pig in the sunshine. Beneath each stone I find more stone; under the skirts of beauty I find only her delicious thighs; peeling an onion to the core I end up with nothing but the perfect complement to my hot skillet of fried eggs, diced chiles and hashbrown turnips. Appearance *is* reality, I say, and more than most of us deserve. You whine and whimper after immortality beyond space-time? Come home, for God's sake, and enjoy this gracious Earth of ours while you can. You tell me that that pretty girl yonder, lifting her dress to wade into the stream of love, is really nothing but a transient vortex of organic energy? You can sit there and tell me that? Okay, you contemplate the underlying relationships; I'll take the girl.

Throw metaphysic to the dogs. I never heard a mountain lion bawling over the fate of his soul.

What else? Only this.

Dear readers, I thank you. For nineteen years you have kept this little book alive. And the others for almost as long. "Your books," some of you write to me, "have changed my life." For the better, I hope, bless your generous hearts. No writer could ask for a finer reward. Dear friends, your kind and thoughtful letters have changed *my* life. Whether for better or worse remains to be seen but I appreciate the good intentions. Therefore I dedicate this new and revised and absolutely terminal edition of *Desert Solitaire* to my readers, to those thousands of friends whom, in this brief interlude between acts I shall probably never meet in person, face to face. (No need for regret there on either side.) Once more and finally I dedicate the book as well to all who take part in the effort to save what remains of the free wild spacious America that we love.

*Benedictio*: May your trails be crooked, winding, lonesome, dangerous, leading to the most amazing view. May your mountains rise

into and above the clouds. May your rivers flow without end, meandering through pastoral valleys tinkling with bells, past temples and castles and poets' towers into a dark primeval forest where tigers belch and monkeys howl, through miasmal and mysterious swamps and down into a desert of red rock, blue mesas, domes and pinnacles and grottos of endless stone, and down again into a deep vast ancient unknown chasm where bars of sunlight blaze on profiled cliffs, where deer walk across the white sand beaches, where storms come and go as lightning clangs upon the high crags, where something strange and more beautiful and more full of wonder than your deepest dreams waits for you—beyond that next turning of the canyon walls.

So long.

E. A.  
Oracle, Arizona  
June 1987