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Down the Highway with Edward Abbey

I'm driving Ed Abbey's Cadillac to Denver. It has moldered away in a dirt alley off Tucson's venerable main drag, and now it's going to reside in a pricey Republican enclave on the compromised high plains outside the mile-high city. Of course, if I told you which 'burb it was, I'd have to kill you.

A fire-engine red '75 Eldorado, it has been parked for a year behind Ed's pal Buffalo Medicine's house, accumulating a thick coat of dust and a calligraphy of cat and raccoon tracks across its massive hood. The cables have fallen loose in the engine compartment, the generator's shot, weeds have choked the wheels, and the ragtop's in sad shape. Local writers cruise by occasionally, tip their gimme caps, raise a can of Coors, and drive away. Their wheels churn up the alley dirt, adding another layer of dust to the Caddie. Just like Ed's memory.

Buffalo Medicine has possibly rooked El Piloto, a devotee of the Abbeyite Order, by selling him the car for money which might or might not be too much. Opinions vary. It all depends on where you're positioned in the continuing Ed debate. In Tucson, the debate is quite personal, since locals trade Ed-sightings like baseball cards.

Ed Abbey—Sasquatch.

Along with the Ed-sightings, we are confronted with the most peculiar facet of the Dead-Ed Industry, the I-Was-Ed-Abbey's-Best-Friend Industry. Outside of Tucson, it's moderated a bit by distance into the I-Was-Ed-Abbey's-Biggest-Fan Industry. Shady dudes who may have tipped back a Dos Equis with Ed at a barbecue will now offer you insights into his soul, and a few of these Best Friends will offer to take Biggest Fans to Ed's "secret" gravesite where more Dos Equis can be consumed. Of course, East Coast tenderfoots could be led to my back yard and told the mulch pile is Ed's grave, and they'd go home happy. I wonder how many people have stared at a thoroughly empty pile of dirt in Saguaro National Monument and said perfectly lovely things—into thin air. Nobody seems to find this behavior creepy.

It is a telling measure of the man, and all he accomplished, that so many are willing to define themselves by proximity—real or imagined—to his being.

How much would you pay for a piece of Ed Abbey? We are in a dicey period here, where shit-heads Ed wouldn't have spit on if they were burning buy his books and seven Earth First! T-shirts and claim to be his soul mates. But El Piloto, possibly as thorny and ultimately as sentimental a man as Ed, has bought the car for Love. I wonder what he'll do when the Dead-Ed Industry washes a bibliophile to his door with a limp check for \$28,000, dying to drive a piece of the myth.

What can I say? I stole Ed's pencil out of the car and am hiding it in my office. That's a writer for you: happy hypocrites.

One thing's for sure: Rudolfo A. Anaya won't be offering anybody money for Ed's chariot. When he heard El Piloto and I were motoring cross-country with it, he put a curse on

us. My cherished friend, Mr. *Bless Me, Ultima*, said: “I hope you have four flat tires in the desert. I hope the car catches fire. I hope it burns to the ground.”

Way to go, Ed!

Making friends.

But I too am mad at Ed. I don't know why anybody else is mad at him, and plenty of people are—which, of course, in the post-Abbeyan universe, is all the more reason to love Ed. That's part of the seductiveness of Edward Abbey, isn't it? The world's full of bastards, and Ed will cuss them out for us, tilt at them with his sharpened war lance, be inspected by the FBI, and occasionally blow up a bridge or sodomize a tractor into submission, all the while throwing cleverly hidden poems into his paragraphs and, for no extra charge, making us laugh.

We, in turn, get to feel like we have done battle with wicked forces while hiding behind a dead man. We feel like Ed's pals. Ed speaks for us, we compliment ourselves by thinking. We say Ed is our voice, expressing our deep feelings, after Ed himself often set the agenda we now claim for our own in one of his books that we bought out of a “used” box for \$1.45.

Chicano readers, too, could be seduced. Like many people with a cause, we can be essentially pathetic, eager to side with anybody who sounds halfway sympathetic. Our weariness with the struggle, our exhaustion, is what makes us vulnerable. Our exhaustion makes us latch on to a strong voice for justice. And Ed, with his championing of lizards and watersheds, seemed to be championing us, too. Ed made some of us hope. And we fell over like puppies, wagging and peeing at his feet.

This is proof enough for me that Ed was a great writer.

He angers the effete, and he utterly seduces his readers into absorbing his pith as if we were amoebas. And, sometimes, he hurts us.

Edward Abbey once stuck a knife in my heart.

I didn't know him outside of his books, and although I ponder swiping the car now and then, I'm not going to claim any special connection to the man. Or the ghost. Connecting with the books was quite enough. *Desert Solitaire*, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, *Black Sun*, *The Journey Home* all had a massive, perhaps catastrophic, effect on me. I went mad for Ed, but more important, and a major reason others fell in love with him too, was the aching love he ignited in me for the land. The world. The *tierra*.

Ed Abbey—shaman.

Imagine my shock, and the shock of all of Ed's other Chicano, Mexican, Hispanic readers when we picked up *One Life at a Time, Please* and read the now infamous screed about ourselves, “Immigration and Liberal Taboos.” In it, Ed sets down his official policies regarding Mexicans: “They come to stay and they stay to multiply.” Or how about this *bon mot* from “egalitarian” Ed: “it might be wise for us as American citizens to consider calling a halt to the mass influx of even more millions of hungry, ignorant, unskilled, and culturally-morally-genetically impoverished people.” Morally, Ed? Culturally? *Genetically*? This from a redneck hillbilly from Home, Pennsylvania. About people who had *culture* when his ancestors were dog-styling sheep and digging turnips and cow turds out of the sad mud in their serf villages. Of course, Ed also informed his readers that Latin American societies were societies of “squalor, cruelty, and corruption,” while the American vista was one that was “open, spacious, uncrowded, and beautiful—yes, beautiful!”

Ed Abbey—Aryan.

Oh my, Ed, you lying bastard. After writing countless books in which you decry America as just the opposite of free and open—after doing that very thing in the same book—after seducing us with battle cries based on the very spoiling of this land by overcrowded gringo swine, you fall for Pete Wilsonesque scapegoating. The very prospect of teeming brown cockroach-people (to swipe the Brown Buffalo's term) drives you into a hideous U-turn. The thought, apparently, of my people. The thought of me.

Did I remember to mention that writers are hypocrites?

Sitting in Ed's boat, Safeway parking blot, Broadway & Campbell—Tucson. The journey's about to begin. Two blueberry muffins and some styrofoam coffee for breakfast. My candidate for Miss Universe loads groceries into her whining little Coke-can imported car. Ed's Eldorado says AMURCA FURST, BUDDEH! However, Ed's Eldorado does not say "Earth First!" If anything, it probably says "Ed First." Hell yes. Ed's Eldorado remembers Pearl Harbor. The plates say HAYDUKE.

Ed's ghost sits in the back seat. He holds up his letter to the editor, *Arizona Daily Star*, dated Jan. 7, 1982: "I was not talking about 'cultural influences' but about the social and economic effects of unchecked mass immigration from the impoverished nations to our south, particularly Mexico. Certainly Mexico has contributed much to the Southwestern heritage; I like tacos, tequila, and *ranchero* music about as much as anybody else does." Tacos? Tequila? The thing about ghosts is, they don't have to stop at putting their feet in their mouths. They can go ahead and gobble the whole leg, jam it in there all the way down till they've maneuvered their heads up their own asses.

By the way, Ed says, in the introduction to *One Life at a Time, Please*, that "Immigration and Liberal Taboos" is his favorite essay in the book.

Did Ed Abbey hate Mexicans? Or was he really setting out to tweak liberals? I'm trying hard not to do backflips here just to defend my favorite writer. Consider: where many writers have a pitiable need to be loved, Ed seemed to have a puzzling need to be reviled. Puzzling, that is, if one considers Ed Abbey to be merely a *writer*. We all know he was an anarchist, a trickster, an agitator, and an "eco-warrior," whatever that means. In his "A Writer's Credo" (same book), the very first sentence says: "It is my belief that the writer . . . should be and must be a critic of the society in which he lives." Not a word about fame, love, beauty, or literary awards.

Ed Abbey, by his own words, saw himself as a critic, a gadfly. In McGuane's words, "The original fly in the ointment." And nobody was spared. After all, *One Life at a Time, Please* contains his even more infamous assault on "The Cowboy and his Cow."

Perhaps it should not surprise me, then, when in the middle of my outrage over this awful essay, I stumble on a sentiment that I absolutely agree with. Ed suddenly says: "The conservatives love their cheap labor; the liberals love their cheap cause. (Neither group, you will notice, ever invites the immigrants to move into their *homes*. Not into *their* homes!)"

Right on, homey! El Vato Loco Cactus Eddie Y Que Abbey, Barrio Desierto Rifa Con Safos Cabrones, lays down some righteous chingazos for la causa, Ese!

Oh, well.

Some of us are social misfits; we spend vast periods of time locked in rooms banging at typewriters and comput-

ers. Those of us who like to write “outdoors” stuff spend even more hours stumbling over rocks and backing into cacti. Alone. Of all the things one could say about Ed, I suspect that nobody would accuse him of being a schmooze-meister. Worse if a writer has a cause. We will burrow through bystanders as if they were dirt clods and we were rabid moles.

Indelicacy follows us through our tunnels. Chicanos, we must admit, have said scabrous and wounding things about *gabachos* in publication after publication. Mexicans say foul things about both *gringos* and Chicanos. The whole lot of us cast a suspicious eye toward Central America and points south.

And, of course, writers carry the baggage of their times, their origins, and their own spiritual and intellectual laziness.

I admire Edward Abbey. I enjoy his books. And I love his bad-taste car—all the way down to its honky-tonk red carpet on the dash. This car is twenty steel feet of Ed’s laughter.

I also decry his ignorance and his duplicity.

Guess what: Ed Abbey had feet of clay.

Just like me.

Still, he managed to throw in a closing that resonated with me all down the years. I knew, in a terribly clear way, that he was right. “Stop every *campesino* at our southern border, give him a handgun, a good rifle, and a case of ammunition, and send him home. He will know what to do with our gifts and good wishes. The people know who their enemies are.”

Ed’s ghost lights a cigar and puts its feet up on the seat back. I ponder this last paragraph as we cross the Luna County Line. A million acres of open desert accrues paper cups and Payday wrappers around us. Flat as a griddle for a

few miles, then truculent upheavals of bare naked mountains. To the north, grape-juice rainclouds color the horizon.

Indians and Chicanos, who know a good thing when they see it, catch up to the car and give us the big thumbs-up.

Ed Abbey—lowrider.