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## A Eulogy for Edward Abbey

*Arches National Park*

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We are a family, a tribe, a clan, flocked together at a full moon in May, on slickrock. We have made a pilgrimage to the center of the universe, Abbey's country. Things are different now. Edward Abbey is gone. We know the physical fact of these words and we grieve. We know the spiritual truth of the words and we smile. Ed is here and will always be. His words reverberate on canyon walls, his voice being carried by desert winds on the open skies of the American West. He is Coyote, a dance upon the desert.

Edward Abbey didn't have to die to find paradise. He understood and lived it here and now. His words:

When I write paradise, I mean not apple trees and only golden women, but also scorpions and tarantulas and flies, rattlesnakes and gila monsters, sandstone, volcanos, and earthquakes, bacteria, bear, cactus, yucca, bladderweed, ocotillo and mesquite, flash floods and quicksand, and yes, disease and death and the rotting of flesh. Paradise is the here and now, the actual, tangible dogmatically real Earth on which we stand. Yes, God bless America, the Earth upon which we stand.

Abbey knew we had it all right here, right now, we need not look farther, we need not go further. Ed's death lay on surfaces. His words:

For my own part, I am pleased enough with surfaces. In fact, they alone seem to be of much importance. Such things for example as the grasp of a child's hand in your own, the flavor of an apple, the embrace of a friend or lover, the silk of a girl's thigh, the sunlight on rock and leaves, the feel of music, the bark of a tree, the abrasion of granite and sand, the plunge of clear water into a pool, the face of the wind, what else is there, what else do we need?

Perhaps there is one thing—I believe Ed knew and understood the art, the practice, of keeping in touch. The simple act of correspondence. Familiar? One white, generic postcard from Wolf's Hole, from Oracle, from Moab, Utah. Signed always, "Love, Ed." Think about the thousands of postcards with Abbey's words, his scribblings that have crossed these lands, these sacred lands like a blizzard, like migrating birds, like shooting stars, U.S. Mail, Abbey's courier, keeping in touch.

I first received mine in October 1979. It read simply: "Nice meeting you in Salt Lake City, Tempest. Come to Tucson. I would like to show you around the desert. Love, Ed." The cards kept coming over the years, not often, but consistently. Small exchanges back and forth, simple jottings, a dialogue of news as well as ideas, keeping in touch.

A couple of autumns ago, September 1987, to be exact, Ed did show me the desert. Not in Tucson, but in Utah. His heartland, my homeland. We met in Moab; we spent the day in Millcreek Canyon. A simple meander through slickrock. I hear his voice ahead of me as we descend into the canyon,

dropping from ledge to ledge: "What most humans really desire is really something quite different from industrial gimmickry—liberty, spontaneity, nakedness, mystery, wildness, wilderness." A Coors six-pack carton had lodged itself behind a bitterbrush. Abbey kicked it, bent down, set it on fire, kept walking. I hear his words: "What we need now are heroes and heroines, about a million of them, one brave deed is worth a thousand books. Sentiment without action is the ruin of the soul." We descend further into the canyon, jump a few more ledges. My confidence had been lost a few months earlier in a fall in Blacksteer Canyon, now called "Bumsteer Canyon." Eighty stitches running down the center of my forehead like a river. "So I hear you're trying to etch the Colorado Plateau on your face, Tempest," he kidded me. "Better make sure your words are as tough as your skin." I have not forgotten that. His words, tough as skin, are loyal to the earth, the earth that bore us and sustains us, the only home we shall ever know.

The rest of the day was spent sitting in pools, climbing in and out of alcoves, simply walking across desert meadows of prickly pears, globe mallows and cow pies. The same cow pies that fueled the *Moab Times Independent* with letters to the editors after his call for "no more cows, period!"

Abbey's humor solicited mine. We told stories. We walked in silence, just walked sharing the small wonders of the day in gentle conversation, in spirited debate. His gifts of listening, of asking the poignant questions, the barbs, the generousities . . . this strong, tall desert of a man, both shy and fierce, reflective and combative, in love with his public and in revolt against them. This human being of complex paradox and passion who lured us out of complacency again and again. I hear his voice:

Delicate arch, a fragile ring of stone. If it holds any significance, it lay in the power of the odd and unexpected to startle the senses and surprise the mind out of their ruts of habit, to compel us into a reawakened sense of the wonderful.

Ed could have been talking about himself. With Abbey, anything was possible, hence his seduction. His broad smile, his big, old hands, his unforgettable voice and cadence—that was the last time I walked with him. The postcards kept coming, like a blizzard, like migrating birds, like shooting stars, keeping in touch.

Last week, I went back through Millcreek Canyon, retraced our steps through slickrock, recalled the potholes that brought us to our knees, the light dancing on redrock walls, the soft sand, that beloved pink sand under boot, and the turkey vultures that always seemed to circle him with fondness, with preference—who could blame them for their possessive eye?

Things are different now. That's why we're here. Change is growth, growth is life, and life is death. We are here to honor Ed, to honor Clarke, Becky and Ben, Suzy, Aaron and Josh, the Cartwrights, Howard and Nancy Abbey; to acknowledge family, tribe, and clan. And it has everything to do with love: loving each other, loving the land. This is a re-dedication of purpose and place.

The canyons of southern Utah are giving birth to the Coyote Clan—hundreds, maybe even thousands of individuals who are quietly subversive on behalf of the land. And they are infiltrating our neighborhoods in the most respectable ways, with their long, bushy tails tucked discreetly inside their pants or beneath their skirts.

Members of the Clan are not easily identified, but there

are clues. You can see it in their eyes. They are joyful and they are fierce. They can cry louder and laugh harder than anyone on the planet. And they have enormous range.

The Coyote Clan is a raucous bunch: they have drunk from desert potholes and belched forth toads. They tell stories with such virtuosity that you'll swear you have been in the presence of preachers.

The Coyote Clan is also serene. They can float on their backs down the length of any river or lose entire afternoons in the contemplation of stone.

Members of the Clan court risk and will dance on slickrock as flash floods erode the ground beneath their feet. It doesn't matter. They understand the earth re-creates itself day after day. . . .

One last promise, Ed: we shall go forth with a vengeance.

A full moon is rising. Howl and wait for his echo. Abbey's voice. I hear it. "Feet on earth, knock on wood, touch stone, good luck to all."

And may I add, keep in touch—with Ed, with each other, and with the earth.

Love always, the Earth.