ENCOUNTERING OPENNESS

THOMAS LOWE FLEISCHNER

Far too often, deserts are described by alluding to what they *aren't*, by a shortage of water, a modicum of rain, animals that are rarely seen because they hide out in burrows and await the arrival of darkness, plants that must adhere to the strictest rules of hydro-economy, the biophysical comforts—soil, moisture, nutrients, shade—these plants must endure without.

But a desert *is*. It *is* a landscape of invitation and accessibility, where one can walk in any direction without thrashing through branches. It *is* a place where birds perch in the open, at heights humans can easily see. We must carry weighty water and wear a broad-brimmed hat, yes, but naturalists flock here for very good reasons: An opening of light. Expansiveness and possibility. The ability to place one foot in front of the other and move in any direction. To see new birds perched on new shrubs, in clear view.

I penetrated deeper and deeper into the land of seeming nothing, the land without verticality. Wendell Berry once described the sea as "immensity on the loose"; this open country presented an immensity of stillness. In quickening succession, a series of new romances ensued: Malheur, in the Great Basin; Death Valley; the Channeled Scablands of the Columbia Plateau; and then, my great and lasting loves, the Sonoran Desert and the slickrock country of the Colorado Plateau.

I often encounter such a simple set of stark options in the openness of these deserts: I could walk in any direction I wished; I could see the entire plant community, since I was as close to tall as, or taller than, the largest organisms; I could sit and feel the sun on my face.

These shocking simplicities presented the *invitation* of a lifetime, and I accepted. These simplicities encouraged me, ultimately, to consider complexity, with freshly honed perception.

Each of these landscapes with its own seductive charms, its own textures and tastes. The unpredictable scent of sagebrush, slightly dampened by overnight chill. The remarkably smooth walls of Wingate and Navajo sandstone rising above desert streams in which I walk.

White-throated swifts vaulting out of alcoves; ravens croaking high above canyons; the rasping call of a cactus wren, from dense cholla thickets; canyon tree frogs clustered above slickrock pools; toad songs echoing a half mile along Grand Gulch.

Camping with my wife and son, just turned two, in the even coppery sand next to a canyon alcove and finding pot sherds, left by another family a millennium earlier. Landing on the remote island in the Gulf of California with an elder who sang the island's songs on the cobble beach, then walking up the central arroyo—new plants, plants that live only here, giant lizards, this island with its own language.

A friend once mentioned that when he was preparing to move to Arizona from New England that his expectation was of "five thousand square miles of kitty litter." But what I first encountered was the sensuality of these places. Only later did I learn biogeographic descriptors and field marks: bajada, alluvial fan, soil crust, terrace, alcove; Arizona upland and Central Gulf Coast subdivisions; slickrock, desert varnish, and desert pavement.

I began to learn about *time* in all new ways. Sandstone walls built particle by particle and then eroded in the same way. Sitting in silent solitude for two days and nights, how very little "happens"—perhaps a grain or two of sand is plucked away; a raven flaps in, perches, and is gone. And deep time of assemblages moving more or less in sync.

I was astonished to learn that the Sonoran Desert is one of the world's newest kinds of places, just a few thousand years in existence. And yet its ironwood trees and cardón can live as long as conifers in the ancient forests of the Pacific Northwest.

The desert can lull us into pleasant lethargy and can slam us into alertness. After two weeks' immersion in sandstone canyons, lounging by the rarity of a desert pool, ringed by skin-smooth slickrock, like cats in comfort, stretching our paws in the warmth. Then, during the night, rain started raking our camp, soaking gear.

At first light, temperatures plunged, and the rain quickly turned to snow. Whereas a half day earlier we had been seeking shade, some of us now found ourselves with soaked gear, wet shoes and sleeping bags, standing in snow, and with an urgent need to *move*, to get *out*. Yet the canyon we would need to follow for ten miles required numerous crossings of a small stream channel—a channel that had been transformed overnight into a torrent, knee deep, snow cold, and opaque with sediment. The previous afternoon, it had been in the eighties; by tonight, air temperature would sink to single digits.

The desert cannot be taken for granted.

But walk out this morning, golden light haloing the saguaros, the ratcheting raspy song of cactus wrens, and the slurred whistles of thrashers. Or inhale the scent of dawn-damp sagebrush on a terrace below an alcove of smooth, coppery sandstone, where humans have sat for more than a millennium. Watch ice crystals sparkle colors in winter light of the Great Basin.

We love this, all this—not for what it isn't but for what it *is*. And for what it enables in us: a sense of open possibility, of capacity to wander and wonder in almost any direction, of our enhanced drive to *explore* this world. We give thanks for this moment, in this precious desert.