

Three Songs from Slickrock

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The Second Grace

All night long, the cold wind whistled through the nylon wall, and the sound of whapping cloth insinuated itself into our dreams. Before sleep, we had all sprawled on the cold ground, in one of the darkest spots on the continent, dazzled by the spatter of stars. Now we awoke to an uncertain smudge-pot sky. We were camped in the open desert, just beyond the soaring Circle Cliffs, at the point where the dirt road crumbled into nothing. Our day-long trip had ended four miles before planned, when we discovered the washed-out road in the dark. Now my co-leader Tim and I rub the sleep from our eyes as we briskly walk past the dissolved road, seeking landmarks to align the map and the real terrain.

Here we are: the head of Horse Canyon. That gives us three choices. We can try forcing our way through the rough spot—after all, we've got ten college students, theoretically all good van-pushers. But with the clouds bunching closer by the minute, we're concerned that we might never get back out. On the other hand, retracing the long drive out sounds very unappealing—repacking all our packs, then meticulously tying them all on the roof again, listening to the grumbles as we crowd back into the van. So we opt for the middle way: we'll hike right here, where fate deposited us—down Horse Canyon to the river. The only problem is, this is a much longer route, with no water for most of its dozen or more miles. It's time to rally the troops for a more challenging day than anticipated.

The moment we hoist packs, the rain begins. It is four days before fall equinox; this is no spring mist. A horizontal wind slaps wet against us, and the cold stings our faces. Other problems soon become apparent: crippling blisters, forgotten gear, lethargy. It's a long walk, much of it in loose sand. The group's mood is sullen as the sky. Concerned about water, I try to hurry them along, circling back with words of encouragement and offerings of dried fruit. They tolerate me—that's all.

Then comes our first grace: at midday the clouds blow off, like the unfurling of a curtain. We have descended deep within the canyon of burnished Wingate sandstone. The students get their first look at the lovely juxtaposition of red rock and Utah blue sky. Yet if they notice at all, it's to report that they're getting hot. But shedding layers of clothing isn't a real option. The air remains sweatshirt-cool, even though the sun is out. Several days of rain provide a damp chill to the air. Fast hikers get stiff muscles waiting for stragglers, while the slow ones get aggravated when everyone heads out just as they finally limp up.

It's now we receive the second grace of the day.

I round a bend to see one of the students running back toward me: "Tom! You've got to come here, quick!" She signals me forward and points at the wet clay in the wash bottom. Lying there, shivering on the cold mud, is a robin-sized slate-gray bird, with muscular black feet and a broad mouth. In all my years as a naturalist, I've never had an encounter like this—a bird on the ground, for the taking. Recalling handling techniques from banding birds two decades earlier, I carefully pick up the bird, nestle its back against my warm palm, and brace its head between my first two fingers. Its eyes glisten with vulnerability and attention, but it remains motionless in my hand.

For the first time all day, each of us is transported into the realm of something larger and more mysterious than our own emotions. Thoughts of hurt feet, dry mouths, and martyred leadership all evaporate as we gaze, silently, at the creature in my palm. Though I have studied birds for over twenty years, I am disoriented—who *is* this? The visceral connection between the bird's fluttering heartbeat and the nerve-tips in my fingers focuses me on this animal as an individual being, not a member of a species. This bird man or woman,

stunned by the cold, stares back at me. For five minutes we all watch wordlessly. Then I feel power returning to its long wings. I carefully curl back my fingers and level my hand. The gray bird sits still for a few seconds, then suddenly leaps off the ledge of skin, and flaps its tall wings—once, twice, three times.

The instant it's in flight I recognize it as one of my favorite canyon birds, a white-throated swift. It circles higher and higher above us. Then, from a nearby cliff, a second swift surges toward the first; they circle together, becoming smaller and smaller, and disappear against the red cliff. The individual being has disappeared completely back into the anonymity of the species. We humans look into each others' eyes, remaining silent for a few seconds, before the questions come tumbling out.

“What *was* it?”

“Why was it lying on the ground?”

“How did you know what to do?”

I answer as best I can. *It's a white-throated swift. I don't have any idea how it ended up on the ground, but once there, it was stuck—swifts are among the most aerial of all birds; they can take off only by launching from a ledge. How did I know what to do? I just followed my instincts, remembering the proper way to hold a bird, and watching its eyes very, very closely.*

We sling our heavy packs back on and resume our gradual movement down the canyon, toward water. But our eyes keep scanning the cliffs for the catapulting flight of swifts. The sky trembles with a new possibility. My fingertips still carry the lingering heartbeat of fear, and the joy of refound freedom.

The Return of Laughter

A small child's laugh resonates throughout the canyon. The child is my son, just turned two; his playmates, a half-dozen of my college students, are pleased to have such an engaging distraction from their studies. The little boy runs, naked and swaying, through the slender stream that curves in front of this giant alcove, laughter vaulting from his compact body. Students chase him, running forward jerkily on their knees, their laughter and my son's amplified by the giant chamber, large as a lecture-hall, carved into the high wall of Wingate sandstone.

I've spent more days at this alcove than any other backpacking camp. I'm drawn back by the sensual sweep of the canyon around this bend, by the vibration of spring-green cottonwood leaves against the burnished rock, by the surprise of warblers' sudden appearance upon those leaves. What really sets this camp apart, though, is the way it seems made for *living*. At the lower corner of the alcove the smooth stone wall leans back from the sand floor at a comfortable angle a chiropractor would approve of. From here, one can look out for hours at the changing light. But the alcove's comfort doesn't end with backrests and posture. Its east-facing opening lets the sun in only briefly during the hot months, leaving the alcove in cool shade almost all day, and in winter the sun's lower angle strikes the same wall with welcome warmth for hours.

A ten-minute walk from here takes one from the deep shade of the alcove to the bright light of the broad terraces along the Escalante River. Midway from alcove to river a hundred-foot long panel of petroglyphs—images etched into the desert varnish—is hidden on the back side of a dry terrace. Earlier today I took my students to see those images—serpents, circles, and man-like forms with trapezoidal bodies—that activate strong emotional reactions in almost all who witness them. Who chiseled these petroglyphs? What were the artists trying to communicate? Who to? What was in their hearts and minds as they sat in this very spot so long ago? I know from considerable library work that these images were put here roughly a millennium ago by peoples we call "Fremont," and that this site was at the far reaches of their known world.

In an important sense this place is still at the far reaches of the world. I come here to find that which cannot be found elsewhere. Silence,

space, stillness, the sense that time is deep enough to heal all wounds. The profound feeling that this place offers me derives from many sources—clear air, the intensity of blue sky, the rock itself, the graceful way a young cottonwood tree leans out from under the overhanging lip of the canyon's rim. But certainly, I am reminded today, one of those sources of wonder is the strong sense of continuity with its departed peoples, and how palpably we feel their presence here.

Although I've spent some twenty-five nights in this spot over the course of a decade, this trip is different. For the first time, I've brought my own child. He traveled here on his mother's back, except for several crossings of the Escalante, where the swirling, silt-laden water surged waist-high, threatening to topple her. For those traverses our son transferred to the higher perch on my back. All told, this camp is not an easy place to get to: steep slopes, loose sand, confusing route-finding, high river crossings. So it suddenly hits me: given the challenging access, this may very well be the first time in close to a thousand years that this canyon has been graced by the sound of a toddler's laugh.

My family has found a nook on a high ricegrass terrace around the corner from the alcove, where the students are gathered. As I sit here, stirring our supper pot, I notice a smooth, curved stone poking out from the copper-colored sand. I brush the sand away and find a perfect metate—a hollowed-out grinding stone dropped at someone else's hearth in this very spot seven, eight, or ten centuries ago. The screech of my spoon's rasping against my steel cookpot suddenly seems brash, as I consider the softer tones of stone, wood, and clay. But the sound of my son's bright laughter tripping through the rock is a gift, the return of something precious.

We sit quietly now as the dusky shadows inch up the stone wall across from our camp. My wife and I eat Japanese noodles, while our son nestles into her lap and nurses.

As stars begin to spangle the clear night sky, I drift toward sleep, pondering the lives of the people who left these tools and etched these images. I try to imagine the play of children whose voices have been absent so long. Human to human, we arc our unspoken bond across the centuries.

From the Oxbow

The lowering sun tints stone the color of blood; a light seems to glow from within it. Along the stream channel, unseen birds chitter. The insistent down-canyon breeze of late afternoon tosses the limber tops of cottonwood trees. I sit below a gigantic arc of undercut sandstone, created by the scouring of a stream which has long since abandoned this channel in its search for a shorter route to the river. Around the bend, a rockwork granary reminds me that this alcove has granted shelter and shady respite to the humans of this neighborhood for at least a millennium.

Bees sip the nectar of orange globemallow, their droning amplified by the cloister of rock. Swallows dart and tuck, sudden death for flying insects, gone in a flash of violet grace. Tenacious grasses stitch together the once shifting dune.

Beyond the canyon wall—a world apart from the sweet cool dusk of this green canyon corridor—towering sandstone domes still blaze in full sunlight. This stone land formed two hundred million years ago when the dunes of an immense desert congealed. Later, buried below younger worlds, the dunes spun across time and latitude. Today, these rocks yield to the relentless force of erosion, returning grain by sandgrain to the freedom of the wind. Dismantled by stream, lichen, and gravity, old dunes become new dunes.

The story of any place involves interaction between three realms: physical landscape, biological communities, and human cultures. The story of *this* place—the Escalante River canyon country of the Colorado Plateau—features a colorful cast of characters and a fascinating plot. Ancient sand dunes, frozen in time. One of the richest biological communities on the continent. Hunter-gatherers whose lifeway persisted sustainably for ten thousand years. A human religious community, seeking freedom from persecution. Small yellow birds that migrate thousands of miles to nest here. A shallow sea that alternately dries up and reemerges. Hikers, mountain bikers. The patience of rock. A mother's concern for her child. Fear of a lean winter.

There are many wonderful places in the world, but this river, these canyons, I *love*.

I first came here in my twenties, seeking a country as different as I could find from my adopted homeland along the Pacific Northwest coast. From a wet world of greens and blues, I came to a bone-dry land of browns and reds. No country I'd ever explored so excited the explorer, the discoverer, in me. Always one more side canyon. Did it hold water? A rare flower? A conifer at an unusual elevation? What shape would the canyon floor take below our feet? Always, there was the off chance of stumbling upon an ancient petroglyph. Always the jarring beauty of fire-red rock against lapis-blue sky.

Entranced, I kept coming. For a dozen years, I led small groups of undergraduate students on backpacking explorations of this country. All told, I spent some six hundred nights in the backcountry of the Colorado Plateau. Now in my forties, I'm still returning, still a beguiled and eager novice to the ways of the canyons.

For most of these fifteen years I was part of a relatively small cadre of visitors to the Escalante canyons. Information and excitement was transferred by word of mouth. But the Escalante region abruptly became front page news on September 18, 1996, when President Clinton signed an executive proclamation creating the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, pronouncing, "God's handiwork is everywhere in the natural beauty of the Escalante Canyons."

The flourish of his pen provoked strong reactions. While accolades were heard in the capital—"visionary and bold"—and a national newsmagazine declared "President Clinton chose the pristine over the profitable," schoolchildren near the new monument sported black arm bands. The town of Kanab shut down to grieve. Black balloons were released and neighbors ate "Clinton burgers: one hundred per cent chicken." A local real estate developer expressed the general disgust: "It's not even second-class scenery—it's third or fourth class. It's such marginal ground that part of it was used in the motion picture 'Planet of the Apes.'"

Since it became part of the name of a national monument, however, the word "Escalante" arouses fewer puzzled looks when I mention my passion. Photographs of the canyons and the monument appear more frequently in the media, and, doubtless, more and more people will be drawn to explore the once secret charms they portray. As a conservation

biologist and former wilderness ranger, I am all too aware that popularity can be a curse for wildlands, and that guidebooks often quicken the pace of the degradation. What you hold in your hands, however, will not lead you to any trailhead, nor tell you where to camp. This is a guide to understanding, not travel.



I believe that people are what they pay attention to. These words are an invitation to pay close attention to a particular watershed, a stunning world of stone, leaf, and stream. Here, where giant ribs of earth are laid bare, we can feel the actual form of our planet. And here, too, is a world of delicate detail and infinite nuance: hands marvel at the smoothness of sandstone, made of particles once touched by the toes of dinosaurs; penstemon unfurls its tubular blossom, the tongue by which it speaks to hummingbird; a green leaf undulates above copper sand; in the dim light of a nameless alcove, box elders sprout on trackless sand; ash-throated flycatchers flute from deep among the cottonwoods; clay polygons curl up as desert sun dries the storm-wet mud.

Emerging from the river, our bodies glisten, then dry in a breath, leaving the faintest trace of silt like a benediction upon our skin.



My hope for these words is that they help deepen your sense of relationship with this place. Environmental consciousness in the new millennium must grow from stories of passion for particular landscapes. Stories that are informed by advances in theory and abstraction, but that are not limited by them. Stories that tell of a world beyond specialization. Stories that encompass both humans and a world larger than humanity. I hope you feel what it is like to walk within the Escalante canyons, and be stimulated to act on their behalf.

There is no substitute for time spent *in* the canyons, *on* the slickrock. Listening to the ringing we call silence, or the shifting song we call a river. If these words prove to be a worthy companion for your own Escalante wanderings, they will have been a success. May you step softly and hear fully. These canyons have more to teach than we can learn. The most we can do is enter with respect, be ready to receive, and—perhaps—emerge in love.