

On Desert Time

By Max Owens

Grain by grain, the desert dismantles itself. Water scours the earth down to bedrock, and then gets to work on that, too. There is no singular moment of creation, nor destruction—but there is much of both. This is the desert's song. I think of the old question of a tree falling in the forest with no one around to hear. Does the desert still sing, if no one is listening? Oh, yes: The desert sings for itself, and no one else. A casual appraisal of this place—here an impressive arch, there an aesthetic slot, and the vastness in between an unbroken stretch of sagebrush, juniper, rock, and sand—may not impress. It may even offend, in all its apparent barrenness. But the desert does not bend its song in the direction of our tastes. For this you may call it indifferent. But indifferent is not the same as unashamed, and the desert is the latter. It is the body of the earth, disrobed, and concealing nothing. It is honest; it is raw.

So it seemed to me one evening deep in canyon country, surrounded by domes of pale sandstone reflecting autumnal late-day light. My friend Ben and I had traveled a long way to get here, riding over many miles of rugged terrain, and floating on the back of some of the desert's great rivers for many more. But we were still struggling with the concept of where, or what, exactly "here" was. All we knew was that at some point in the preceding weeks, we had crossed a line and entered a world that was different.

Like many others, Ben and I had both found an appreciation for the desert through rock climbing—mad weekends of driving six hours each way out to Indian Creek, climbing until our hands bled... and then climbing some more. As formative as those times were, we felt like we were barely scratching the surface. So, feeding off each other's energy, we made a plan to go all in, to essentially traverse the Colorado Plateau—the enormous high desert of the Four Corners region—by bike, packraft, and on foot.

We began our journey in Moab, drifting down the Colorado River. After leaving the river in the Maze (wonderland of Abbey-lore) we got on our bikes and started crisscrossing our way across Southern Utah. We found Halloween snow on Elk Ridge and shot the gap between the Bear's Ears. Taking our time, we pedaled down to Mexican Hat and put in on the San Juan River. When the waters went slack we continued overland to Lake Powell, crossed, and got ourselves up into Grand Staircase-Escalante. From there, racing snowstorms, we pedaled to the edge of the Kaibab Plateau, and descended—carrying our bikes on our backs—to the bottom of the Grand Canyon, reuniting with that mighty sculptor of the desert, the Colorado, the river on which we had started two months before.

What did we leave behind, when we crossed into this new world? Most notably, noise—and it took a surprisingly long time for that last distant, droning Jeep to disappear. As we settled into stillness we also discarded noise of a different kind: that internal, ceaseless stream of thoughts

that hums in the background, unnoticed like a quiet air conditioning system. That is, until it's shut off and you wonder how you functioned with such rumbling. We spoke softer. Spoke less. Here, in this new place, it seemed the earth had more to say. That, or we had gotten better at listening. It made me wonder how much of that language we had missed before, and were *still* missing, either misinterpreted or unheard altogether.

What did we hear? We heard the song of the desert, played out in the progress of time. We tuned into transitions: the slight rustle of a breeze through the grasses signaling the coming windstorm; the incoming clouds announcing a respite from the severe cold of night. We watched longer transitions, too. The leaves on the cottonwoods burned fierce yellow (all too briefly) and began to drop. The days grew shorter. We woke to a frost-coated tent fly. More and more often, the potholes where we looked for water were frozen over.

Grand, awe-inspiring landscapes are often described as places "where time stands still." The desert, as Ben and I perceived it, is powerful for exactly the opposite reason: It changed before our very eyes. As we traveled deeper, deeper into the desert, it became impossible to ignore the miracle of time. These canyons, carved out over millennia, were physical representations of time's machinations. But how could we reconcile mere moments (a leaf falls from the cottonwood tree; the wind picks up a handful of sand; gravity gently moves a drop of water down-gradient) with the enormity and grandeur of time's creations? How could we conceive that one day, in a not-so-distant future by some timescales, everything here will be gone, broken into sediment and carried off down the river?

These are the questions we grappled with, as we got closer to bedrock. But we felt from somewhere inside that we would never get there. As much as we craved to understand—to *know*—all of it, we could not. Greedily we lapped up what we could, but in humbler moments we were grateful for the mystery. That is why we were here, after all: to brush up against the rough edges of that mystery; to reach out and touch that undefined something, and end up grabbing something within ourselves; something similarly undefined.

Out here, there is rock, and sand, and stars in the sky. All of time is stretched out in a line before us, neither end visible, and our place is a meaningless little dot in the middle. We feel small. Against the unquantifiable mass of slickrock, the millions of stars flickering in the sky like so many streetlights overhead, how could we not? And yet... here we are. No matter how insignificant by comparison, the truth of belonging is unmistakable. There is stardust in our bones, and red dirt runs through our veins. We are a blip on that line of time, but we're standing at the only point where it is possible to look both ways. Rocks to sand to dust on the wind, and back again. Point by point, the stars will shudder and flicker off. But now, right now, they are as bright and as real as anything we've ever known. We feel connection—and with it, the fear of leaving, and the knowledge that we cannot stay.

The most challenging and reflective journey of mine or Ben's lives ended with a chance encounter on our final ascent out of the Grand Canyon. We met two Russian brothers who were backpacking across the Canyon. We talked about time. Both brothers were successful by any standard. They had fulfilling careers, loving families... and, like many others, a healthy dose of retrospective musing: Had they spent their limited time wisely? Though they joked and laughed the entire way up the trail, their advice to us was penetrating, as if our months of desert wandering and wondering had manifested these two men to shed some light on how to make meaning from what we had experienced. They encouraged us to keep challenging ourselves, and, in essence, to continue to seek the edge of mystery. Their parting words were shouted back to us as they walked out to the South Rim parking lot: "Your days are numbered!" And of course, they are right. But out "here," in this other world beyond a shadowy line, time stretches on, and the desert keeps up its song. It is ever-changing. Infinite. Circular. Our days may be numbered, but I take comfort in knowing that the desert, at least, is eternal.