

# Kokopelli's Hornpipe



A novel by Jnana Hodson

Copyright 2015 by Jnana Hodson  
Published as a Thistle / Flinch edition  
Dover, New Hampshire USA

~\*~

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: An earlier version of "Where Space  
Upends" originally appeared in *Jack Magazine*.

JNANA HODSON



# KOKOPELLI'S HORNPIPE

## Contents

. . .

The Piper Sets Off  
A Desert and a Sea  
Where Space Upends  
Roots Through the Sky  
Multiple Mapping  
Liberty  
Ridges and Rivers  
Honeycomb Radiance  
Summons and Sorrow  
The Moodiest Features  
All Posted  
Updraft  
But to Know Otherwise  
Game Time  
Ancient Vibrations  
Invitation to Flight  
Stay for the Service  
Nomads  
Turning, Returning  
Of Sojourning and Exile  
The Space of Art  
Field Guide  
Places of Return

## The Piper Sets Off

. . .

ONCE, AND ONLY ONCE, a gang of adolescent girls heckled and chased Kokopelli, the supernatural humpbacked flute player of the Southwestern native peoples, far from his usual circles. They had their own good reasons, horny Trickster that he is, although the rest of their bands of extended families — parents, grandparents, and brothers, especially — soon regretted his absence.

"I'll be back," he vowed, or perhaps threatened, as he set off on a new adventure. And so he trotted off along the Pecos River and wandered up through the Painted Desert before crossing the Colorado and then, somewhere in that wilderness, hitching a ride in a battered pickup that dropped him off in the Mojave. As he looked about that open emptiness, he pondered where to head next. He thought about continuing west into California, maybe even trying his hand at Hollywood. But he was no fan of Westerns, where his kind always wound up losing the conflict. He might change the stereotype, but he sensed that would be an uphill battle. And then he thought about apples and peaches and pears to the north, which the driver had said grew in unimaginable quantities. And since Kokopelli was always hungry, that's where he aimed.

It was a long journey as he ventured along the eastern flanks of the Sierra Nevada and Cascade mountains, canoed the Columbia to the Yakima, which

he then followed all the way through its canyon and views of the still snowy summits. And it was there, where he chanced upon an Irishman playing fiddle, Kokopelli cocked his head and antennae, listened, and soon inserted his own line.

"Aye, I like that," said the fiddler.

"I'll swap you a tune," said the piper.

They could have talked about their instruments. The fiddler, after all, was a giant cricket with a horsehair wand and an imaginatively shaped thin wooden box. Not to be outdone, Kokopelli's pipes were created from a variety of materials, depending. Some were glazed clay and others, carved wood, while newer ones came in PVC and shiny metals, but his favorites remained the ones fashioned from bone — large animals and even human. Still, these two said nothing of that or even the music and dance biz. Instead, these two musicians set about playing together.

And so it went, a Procession for the Wise Women and then a Reel. A Fertility Song and then a Jig. A Dance for Young Warriors and a Hornpipe. Hour after hour, they filled the clear air with their tunes. And when they finally looked up, they saw they had attracted an audience, and then the word spread. They were invited to play at weddings and funerals and dances and feasts. And so, for an all too brief time, they toured together before departing for their homes, each by his own door.

I was the fiddler.

This is what we observed and a little more.

~\*~

## A Desert and a Sea

. . .

**A** HUNDRED MILES INLAND from the nearest port, we encountered a three-legged tree. Until looking closer after being told the house beside it was built a century earlier by a retired sea captain, you'd have no clue a whale jaw had been leaned against the young trunk, where they grew together.

Irrigated, of course, this being desert.

The question remained. Who was farther from true home?

~\*~

## Where Space Upends

. . .

**B**ECAUSE THIS IS desert, you appreciate shadows. Fear what might be lurking, too.  
Enter cautiously.

"Hello?"

~\*~

In my first day of solitude since moving to a new job and a new dwelling, no wonder I'm restless. At last, driving out beyond the irrigated orchards and fields of the valley, I follow a coworker's scribbled directions higher into the foothills and eventually park beside the weathered-gray walls of what was once a one-gas-pump country store. I hoist a daypack and stumble out along a rutted trace in a search for the backbone and spirit of my new surroundings. By itself, the peculiar sunlight of this place triggers a blinding headache — compounded by the abrupt release from the crushing and inflexible deadlines of my office.

There are many reasons for entering arid expanses, as well as many reasons to avoid them. In antiquity, I could have asked Desert Fathers for details. This time, I am no trader following a caravan route or a shepherd following goats, nor am I prospecting or dodging cattle. I'm not running contraband nor am I an illegal immigrant. In fact, I'm running from no one, unless maybe myself. In short, I'm a pilgrim, one who's been suffering long before this particular headache strikes. I

have no idea my journey solicits, above all, a healing my own, as well as the planet's. Outdoors, away from town, away from the familiar countryside of my past, I resist an intense thirst preceding the throbbing. The only shade I find is in the shell of a rusted Depression-era Plymouth, where I collapse in what had been the passenger's seat.

The relentless glare drills another hole in my skull for a spider to enter. Every seeker who relocates to desert requires new circuitry. The arachnid rewires my human brain and lungs. Maybe Swami has sent her. Maybe Murshid. Until now, I've had no inkling of Trickster, whatever its particular form.

It's hard to say, precisely, how long I remain out. It seems days, and perhaps is. Even so, in any wilderness, there's additional jeopardy in roaming after nightfall — especially without a flashlight or torch. In the cooling air of late afternoon, I walk back to my car and steer homeward.

If I could sustain this solitude in this terrain, I would mutate into a desert rat, perhaps crossing over into madness. Instead, I've chosen to live at its periphery, and will enter when my calendar allows. Such a pathway, I find, is also maddening.

Desert turns everything to bone. That, or to stone. Even the scattered tufts of cheat grass and the isolated clusters of flowers turn into straw skeletons. Social conventions, too, dry away. In pursuing clarity, which parched spreads possess abundantly, I also enter an

order of madness. Paradoxically, to preserve my sanity in dealing with people, it becomes periodically necessary for me to revisit this incomprehensible delirium. Settle back on this my bedrock, readjust to my own frame. Here, then, I return afresh to spaces within and without. Wait. Listen. In this place, wind is a clearing, spiraling on itself. Then, when this twisting reverses, screwing into bony alkaline soil, we give praise. At times, I even see my own heart clearly. As I come to know my way around more securely, I lift a cup of clear spring water and pour it on bleached parchment at my feet. Selah. The next day a bouquet of tiny flowers rises like fingers bent by wind. Always somewhere, wind. Listen.

I look closer and see in that runt garden herds of patient insects. Then I look across the wind to read what its elbows have written in large letters.

At last I sleep soundly, for she's returned. Selah.

~\*~

Perhaps you think it harsh, this description of the spider's work. "Rewire?" you say. "A human's not an electronic device!" But some ways, we are a tangle of neurological pathways that remain mysterious. Here, threads harden into wispy bone. Snare dreams in flight and hold them for inspection, for wrapping, for ingestion. Filter and stabilize the air we breathe. In desert, an outcome seldom materializes immediately. A procedure goes dormant — sometimes for years. What appears dead often is merely waiting.

Here a man will learn to pace himself more steadily. To watch for the rattlesnake, especially at river's edge. To recalibrate his vision to the American Far West, where natural beauty assumes such spectacular proportions few notice the thinness at hand. The spider will teach all this. Clarity, like the desert itself, strips away to essentials. Sweeps away clutter. In what appears sparse, the man will gaze for episodes of miniature grace. Even elegance.

After a rare downpour, wrinkled hills sprout terraced dwarf gardens. I recall glossy photographs of tenacious farmers working green steps above Mediterranean and Chinese shorelines. I think, too, of terraced heights in the Andes and Himalayas. Applications of timeless, universal wisdom.

Around my home, blades of extended orchards flutter in the bowl of the valley. From the tawny ridges I see this as green sandals on wrinkled feet. Science that makes this dusty soil incredibly fruitful also leaves the place comparatively lifeless; the variety of life forms diminishes, even in seemingly arid desert. It's simply a matter of maximizing profits.

My wife leaves on yet another trip, then phones to say she's depressed. She refuses to give a reason.

Why put up with it? I'm no patriarch, and no one would allow me such influence. We've promised to be equals. I have enough struggles without carrying hers. She should be helping me now, building a home and a family of our own rather than running after her parents

or friends. This, however, is one point where spider — and for that matter, desert rats — cannot advise me. What I do know is that when she's happiest, she's also faithfully practicing our religious disciplines. Too often, though, she prefers to hitchhike on my devotions.

In the midst of the next drizzle, when the clock demands I return to the office, I prefer to stay put, admiring beadwork on telephone line. Especially in desert, I examine points of rain. Zero in on one gleaming star, a coil of light as pure and functionless as mathematics. Center down wordlessly in this flyspeck and let whatever's binding me unfold slowly. In reality, I own more time than I realize, if I act in the holy now. That, the spider whispers, is the kernel of celebration. Give praise. Selah.

In other climates, you commonly overlook the element of space, unless looking into the heavens on a brittle night. You observe objects, and space becomes the measure of distance between an object and you, or else some arrangement of objects. In contrast, desert appears more as a vacuum — a juxtaposition of surfaces, of sky and earth extending outward not to some imaged convergence (such as the perspective point where the twin rails of a train track become one) but rather away from any focus, and thus outward around both of the observer's ears. Here, space itself becomes obvious, as if turned upright, like a wall in your face. So often in life, what should be most obvious is the hardest to see. The spider is on the window; the spider is on this page.

Despite my mission to expose the spirit of this landscape, I worship a portable deity. That is, I'm a follower of the Book. Or, according to my practice, the Spirit That Informed the Book. In a way, the Book follows me, even into the desert, not all that different from the desert where it was written.

The freedom to move about is essential to any mental discipline; I dare not get stuck in a single position. Three points are required for triangulation. How else can I determine where I am or where I'm going?

When I scan the desolation of geologic uplift and volcanic flow, I appreciate the prophetic Hebrew charge, "The gods of the nations are idols." Nothing humanity creates can equal such an outpouring. Work yourself free of all bondage, indeed. I'll identify idols crowding into my life, and what they demand. An old white-bearded man carried about in a box as hazardous as radioactive material? A television can be far more fatal. I'll consider the god Brahma, to some "the most stupendous idea the human mind has ever wrestled with." And then YHWH, the spinning Word of God, and whatever wrestled with Jacob. Some encounters go beyond human imagining. Try naming the greatest power that has wounded you. Do you rise in confrontation? Do you yield? Every road to liberation proves painful.

I return to dance and move with intellect, emotion, and muscle through the music. Or the prayer. I charge from night into dawn; from rain into full glare. Despite

bruises and even bleeding from my latest encounters, I leap within my Dedicated Laborious Quest. Even so, my heart silently rages. Sometimes I'm at peace; sometimes, worldly affairs beset me. When I concentrate on rhythmic cuckoo elisions, my wrath may yet generate voltage, if I own up to my personal forms of power, however frightening they appear. At the horizon, migrating birds coil like an aerial rattlesnake. If I could circle with them, I would face the new sun. Or I could walk in the expanse until my tracks freeze in a chattering alarm as I admit genuine terror, then raise the pistol and fire. Carefully, sever the tail's rattle for my dance shaker. Skin and tan a length of skin for my hat band. Thus prepared, stare through ghostly prairie grasses and through hardwood stretches beyond. I've known cornfields and soybeans, and much that has vanished. I could be the settler who leveled those forests and turned under the endless prairie; I may also be the holy visionary who will yet restore them.

Someday I will drop into a rattlesnake hole, my kiva, my own covered self. Find my private circle, my spirit hoop, a spiral turning me more completely into the sunrise. Behind me and before him are suburbs to unsettle. Wilderness, I perceive, is an illusion until mankind's true settling. In the meantime, whatever is conquered remains despised, like a common-knowledge harlot.

There are problems in every marriage. I'll delineate many distinctions. Selah!

And then, as I'm driving, I pull over for a hitchhiker. He introduces himself as Kokopelli.

~\*~

## Roots Through the Sky

. . .

**O**URS WAS NOT the journey of Ulysses. There had been no dramatic battle. No obvious defeat or shipwreck, either. We weren't accompanied by our own troops. I intended to make my home here, at the edge of wilderness, and venture into its realms, rather than circle back toward some faraway but faithful woman or goddess.

With the exception of my spouse, who also traveled with me, I was fleeing my own people and hoping that strangers would be better, or at least different. Crucially, I would continue to enter the back country to be reminded of some mystery, as if on this edge of the continent some faithful remnant was making a final stand in defense of Old Ways handed down through practice from antiquity. Still, you could look at the ground and be disgusted here, too, to find white fibrous butts, the thimbles of broken cylinders left behind wherever man goes, along with the larger, inescapable debris. Look up and see contrails of airliners and military aircraft. You could scoff that in vapor-lighted cities, where cancer is the predominate cause of dying, few inhabitants are aware of the flickering stars or the planets in their orbits; the populace is ignorant of the very lunar phases you will so closely follow here. Taunt them, arguing that Jesus is the only bum welcome on their streets and parking lots, and accepted in their midst only because he's conveniently dead. Maybe he's

not all that welcome, either, if you look closer. Meanwhile, vandals spray-paint his name on forest boulders alongside highways, as though a word alone can distribute clear-cut salvation. Ponder the contempt for both creation and creator. The Old Orders dismiss superficial religion. There's fasting, and then there's starvation. The soul knows a hunger, one that comes at the beginning of prayer. Some practitioners know this opens a furrow their horses help plow. For now, I would venture into high places to be reminded of the ancient interplay of dualities. Not just good and bad, but the overlapping harmonies as well. Make my rounds, however quickly at first, acknowledging the slower nomadic practice.

When I packed for this move, I preferred boxes over baskets. Something squared, for paper and recordings, especially. Typewriter. Electronics. We weren't transporting dried berries or salmon. Blankets cushioned furniture and china. The cardboard presented fewer overlapping harmonies. Learn to weave baskets and I might learn something of the Cross. Especially in its curving.

Handle with care, all the same. Let go of one, something shatters. Or the other, something bounces. Baskets stack differently than boxes. See which one fits a squared room better. Which one, a hogan, wickiup, tipi, or kiva.

Step outside. Turn to the four directions. Then name them.

MALE / SUN  
FEMALE / MOON.

Turn again.

AIR / FIRE  
EARTH / WATER.

Once more.

SPIRIT / LIGHT  
FLESH / SHADOW.

Draw out their colors according to tradition or your own intuition.

Soon the divisions break down, into Yin/Yang swirling.

This is where prayer begins its dancing, even without Kokopelli's piping.

In such turning I was brought to the edge of my intellect. Facing the expanse toward the horizon, my knowledge of geography, geology, botany, zoology, astronomy, and survival itself proved defective. The edge and depth of my emotions, too. Return to my religious texts and I'd find a different story. Not the one taught to children, but more sinister dimensions. Walk far enough away from the village or highway into open fear, admitting this experience might break me. This Dedicated Laborious Quest draws on all my ability — mental, physical, and psychic — until I'm forced to pull

strength from some kernel of infinity within myself. As you pull, roots come forth. Draw them from the emptiness within the basket. The emptiness waiting on the horizon's circle, as well. More roots, reaching out like cosmic rays through the sky, are visible only to the spider — these beads on a rickety filament.

~\*~

## Multiple Mapping

. . .

**K**NOWING HOW FAR to go — and when to turn back, to the best effect — are difficult matters. The wise traveler relies on those who have gone there already and returned. You hope they speak truthfully. Often your life will depend on their directions. Even knowing what to pack and what to omit may be based on their counsel. Mountains and rivers are only the beginning.

When there's too much to remember, a map begins forming. That or a guidebook. But the map presents more possibilities than the book, with its linear narrative confined to one route at a time — even maps with vast portions blank or missing. Take two points on a map and connect them, this way or that. Add a third. And then a fourth.

I never would have arrived in this desert without maps. The airliner's navigation charts, of course. And then the highway atlas. Many others, as well, become useful. Those that show back roads. Others, topography. Still others, property divisions — including the Indian reservation and Army artillery range, both declared off-limits. Maps of emotions, economies, explorations. Maps of oceans, weather, the heavens.

Disembark and you go to work filling in details and then connecting points like a spider. What's around that corner? What's over that ridge? Where will we stay, and what's the best way to get there? A single

map is only an blueprint. The particulars never quite fit. Especially in two dimensions. A breeze lifts the web. Coyote walks through it.

Each one distorts — some far more than others, and rarely by intention. Who made the map in your hands? And to what purpose? Some were mathematicians of few words. Others were empire builders or real estate developers. Some weave the directions into the stories they tell beside the campfire. Some ignore shadows. Fail to repent, ask forgiveness, extend blessing. Others know survival, as well as play, requires definition and decision. Obligates searching within, as well as around, in fullest candor. Some even deceptively point you away from your destination (why should they reveal their secrets?).

Those who were born and raised here know it in a different way from those who have migrated. Magpie will tell you one thing; a Canada goose, another. Same goes for where they're positioned. Jackrabbit and dragonfly take separate pathways, as does beaver. You simply log where they cross and hope to find meaning.

I had thought maps were the essence of geography. Now the definitions spill over into history, geology, meteorology, political science, psychology, and much more. Because many misunderstandings afflict each life, there are bound to be collisions. Sometimes you move into a thorn that pierces consciousness, but even that rarely brings clarity. You see there's endless discord among individuals, clans, tribes, nations, denominations — all to be traversed and mapped in the

search for ways out and back safely. In this knowledge, jobs, aspirations, faiths, possessions, social standing are merely reflections of fundamental conflicts between human consumption and the good earth itself. No one can dwell anywhere without disturbing the whole; individuals and collectivities distort and contort to their own ends, some more benignly than others. The lines on the page do not hold their place. Without a divinity as a guide knowing these connecting pathways, then, there's no return to full measure and health. The breath people exhale, fires they build, grains and flesh they devour are diverted to their chosen applications. "Tell us something better," I implore. "Teach us the highest way." Where anyone takes it from here is another matter.

Sadly, whether this transformation's harmonious and renewing, guiding individuals as merciful stewards and co-creators with the divine, or self-centered and destructive as thieves, is rarely considered. Just observe how communities rationalize, arguing that the welfare of their women and children comes first, even as they bankrupt the farm to support worldwide armies or strip timberlands in a rutting for coal and iron.

You could perceive many aspects of this in these orchards within desert. While the choice of irrigating and producing fruit sustains many more humans than the arid range would, also ponder the long-term impact of the poisons applied through each season. Kill harmful insects and molds, but what else? And how soon before it seeps into the groundwater and

household wells? It's all an interplay of good and evil, which I observed through a giant spider web. As a practice within my spiritual discipline, the Dedicated Laborious Quest, I place maps atop other maps and find they are drawn to different scales. Many of the words require translation, which introduces its own misunderstandings. Some of the maps are even of places far from here, landscapes in memory.

Too many details and the sheet becomes a scribble. Maybe that's why here, at an extremity of the continental United States, I now comprehend the American Midwest of my childhood and early adult years as something other than a uniformly Protestant corn belt. Even overlooking ecological differences between woodlands and prairies, or between the Great Lakes and the Missouri or Ohio river valleys, I reconsider its varied ethnic traditions and the hidden cost of the melting-pot focus. Speaking with other exiles like myself, I become aware of unique distinctions some of our ancestors resolutely upheld, at the cost of their own lives, if necessary. There were strains of Scandinavian Lutherans in the Dakotas, Russian Mennonites in Kansas, and Scottish Presbyterians in Iowa, whose distinct cultures were eroding like the topsoil itself. You would hear, too, why so many had fled. Some, desperately hoping to forget forever their terrors or shame, buried the evidence as best they could. Others, however, defiantly kept it aloft as a reminder of their liberation and a warning.

I had no knowledge of the streams of quiet rebels who experience divinity directly, thanks, in part, to the map of their heritage as they work with the soil and their own bodies. These days, they resist as best they can the manufactured desires beaming from satellites or television airwaves, even while they watch many of their children succumb to these temptations. They could tell us about Elijah or Jeremiah, the Babylonian captivity, or the Maccabees' war of independence, in addition to my own ancestors' sufferings recorded in *The Bloody Theater* or *Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians* or Joseph Besse's *A Collection of the Sufferings of the People Called Quakers, for the Testimony of a Good Conscience*. When, at last, I reclaim this legacy, piecemeal, I ask, "So whose story are you telling, anyhow? Which grandparents are yours?" Opening their maps, I follow their footsteps, even in a strange land. Well made cartography includes supplications and blessings, as well as warnings.

My own homeland once included many woodlands well into my grandfather's childhood. A balance of forest, with its firewood and construction timber, and farm fields and pastures. So much so, in fact, that people could travel dozens of miles on roads that never left forest between cities. By my own childhood, however, most of the trees had been leveled, and even the woodlot on an uncle's farm doubled as pasture for hogs and cattle. In winter, the countryside was a stubble wasteland.

Similarly, a prairie denuded of buffalo is impoverished. How much poorer is a suburban lot occupied by restless greed? Here I am, dwelling in desert I consider healthier and more vibrant than the construction I see overrunning the lands around cities and towns. "Rebuild at the core," I urge the wind. "Repent!" Turn about! Bring back the buffalo and the buffalo nickel, as well as amicable urban neighborhoods. There are all kinds of communities, and humans are only part of the equation. There is land, there is sky, there is water and flowing. To say nothing of what exists beneath them.

A person who comprehends maps will appreciate history as well. Perhaps even musical scores, as another kind of map with a dimension of time.

I listen to my wife and learn of the mental maps many women carry. The ones of kitchens or gardens. Others leading to childbirth and parenting, or even away.

I, meanwhile, come here for a taste of primeval wilderness — a hope to experience a timeless reality that holds humanity in a state of awe rather than arrogance. Just look to the mountains for salvation. Look as well to dreams, each one having one foot in your past and the other in your present.

Carried to an intelligence that daylight conceals, I sense that within many rapidly fading distinctions I've scorned are important markers; these ranged from where to harvest wild berries and their uses as food and

medicine to my own ancestors' hymns and religious teachings. To be creative means building on what's come before, rather than entering a new universe. The path on the map goes from one place to another. Respect is essential — another way of honoring one's fathers and mothers. There's still time to cultivate individuality and character in the field. Sometimes, even where homogeneity is perceived, a people can differ as sharply among themselves as they do from others. Ponder Polish Catholics in Chicago, Congregationalists in Ohio's once-Yankee Western Reserve, and fire-breathing Baptists and Pentecostals in Detroit and what they might do to enhance each other's heritage, rather than striving for some common denominator. That's another way of lifting up mountains, rather than leveling. Even on flat land, each body leaves a hidden stamp on its soil. Learn to read vibrations of an environment, and you identify communities dwelling therein, sometimes a century or two after their departure. Through the news and entertainment media, I grew up knowing more of Manhattan and Capitol Hill, though they were only incidentally closer geographically than Kansas City or Minneapolis, supposedly within my Midwestern realm. I knew more, too, of Hollywood back lots and Beverly Hills. Indeed, not until much later had I recognized the Midwest I'd considered so conservative and culturally backward was, at the beginning of the twentieth century, a hotbed of radical politics and organized labor. Many of its cities elected Socialist mayors only to replace them with Ku Klux Klan within the decade.

Talk about upheaval! In the front parlors of homes in many small towns across the Plains, the latest wave of European high culture was performed; three of the nation's oldest handful of symphony orchestras were organized (St. Louis, Chicago, Cincinnati). In the machine shops of isolated barns and backyard stables of small-town entrepreneurs, curious Midwestern farm boys tinkered perfecting the automobile and a thousand other industrial marvels. Kite-flying bicycle-building brothers put men in the air.

Much of this I did not understand or appreciate when dreaming only of escape. Only now did I come to see what remains of a once rich and varied heritage. In those days I looked off to the limits of a world; fixes like Boston and Seattle as strands of Utopia. What I encountered instead was a step beyond the anticipated. Of the neighborhoods I would come to call home, none quite fit what people expect of East Coast, Midwest, or Pacific Northwest, either.

When the Pacific Northwest is mentioned, most people envision lush evergreen rainforests amid glacial mountains; few consider the desert that occupies most of Washington State, Oregon, and Idaho. I now explore the western end of the largely treeless expanse beginning within the Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas, and Texas and extending almost to the Pacific Rim itself. Remember, a leafy tree requires thirty inches of rainfall a year to survive; an evergreen, somewhat less. My valley received an average of a little more than seven inches a year. Having grown up adjusting to muggy

summers, I find a desert can affect my spirit in more ways than I ever would have imagined.

But you can choose, too, not to call everything by the names on maps. As geographies are being transformed ever more rapidly, few outward specifics hold long. Seek instead the vibrations of a site, sense its unseen roots and unexpressed timeless potential. In that vein, another depth appears. Perhaps each human inhabitant will go beyond basic misunderstandings. As I still hope.

Some maps are even jigsaw puzzles. And you think they're for children?

Returning from that first trip to India, my spiritual mentor remarked that each village had felt different. "It's more than appearances. The difference is the distinct vibration of a site. Many of their deities belong to a specific locality. One village will worship one god; another will enshrine another." That's how they identified the unique quality of a spot, just as Westerners have chemical elements to define physical qualities of a substance.

Even though I wasn't quite certain of their origin or all of their psychic flavors, I sensed such subtleties. There are spiritual fingerprints certain people leave behind: a Quaker or Dunker neighborhood, for instance, may have a distinctive feel even a century after those worshipers depart. The same seems to be true for American Indian sites.

~\*~

We made a leap, heading off nearly stiff-necked to find ourselves, as some diners proclaim, "served where quality counts." Over steak dinners, this quaking closet monk is surprised by how much change can happen when I think nothing is moving. Just pass the salt, sugar, coffee, cream — thunder, please — in what they call the Brand Room surrounded by "Western art," supposedly realistic styling of cowboys, Indians, and wildlife in dramatized poses. People from all over the world come to a few tiny rodeo towns like this to collect such canvases. Examine the pieces closely, though, and you perceive the false notes. The clothing, poses, landscapes distort. The artists react against the very masters they wish to emulate. Much of it is cranked out without looking acutely at the things being portrayed. Some may be driven by a worship of a past that never was quite that way; some, by a retreat from current events. Most viewers merely acknowledge symbol and go on as though sleepwalking, an act that continues misunderstanding. The rifle, saddle, spurs, and cougar evoke no real emotion: they are foreign to the touch and nose. But I desire to perceive this territory afresh — no matter how startling my findings deviate from convention. When I meet a bear or a buffalo, it won't be like the dilated scoundrels in these paintings. My horse won't rear behind me. He'll simply center in his tracks — quiet, aware, efficient. He knows how it will be.

The Dedicated Laborious Quest begins with sustained exercise of a specific activity: a sport, an art, a science. Anything that requires years of individual

exertion, even solitude, drawing upon many facets of the practitioner's being — heart, mind, soul, and might.

Somehow, the novice begins dancing, if only in his head. Something simple, at first, until familiarity gains ground. Feet, legs, torso, arms, and hands eventually follow. A reel leads into a jig. Thought and emotions balance. Head and heart dialogue. With confidence comes freedom. More and more, the aspirant concentrates on partners or the group or motion itself, rather than his own next step or position. The music becomes more textured, until the hornpipe stands as the liveliest structure. So it's been in this landscape. This is not just any desert, for there's nothing generic about any detail encountered closely. With both people and places you come to know dearly, you find nuances and subtle contradictions will blur any sharp image. It's easier to describe someone or something you meet briefly than what you know intimately. To say desert is dry and sunny misses the point, especially if you arrive in winter. At first, like so many others, we didn't even consider this valley as desert, for it has no camel caravans or mounds of shifting sands with Great Pyramids on the horizon. One word or phrase can be misleading. Even the Evil Stepmother from folklore and fairy tales must have possessed some redeeming qualities. Could we be more specific than "evil"? Simply selfish? Or was she mean, jealous, domineering, afraid of whatever, from the wrong party? Suppose she was really a victim of some deep abuse? The portrait changes. Has anyone detailed how she dances? In the

end, it's either entertainment or worship, depending on the individual's orientation. An authentic spiritual discipline teaches, through experience, we are not gods. Choose, then, good or evil, flowing or hoarding, living or dying.

Matching maps to the landscape, I look vainly for towns that do not exist or discover attractions placed on the wrong side of the road. Admit that everything is moving and transitory, even the mountains. Mariners, too, will speak of shifting sandbars as only one hazard of sailing on charts. Pay attention, then, but never toss your maps overboard. Are they all that different from Holy Scripture?

In a multitude of ways, people fear religion will lead them not just into wilderness but a desert. Demand, in fact, they leave everything behind. The description will vary by tradition. Entering the Void or emptiness, becoming selfless or egoless, abandoning the Little Self for the Big Self, achieving annihilation and sacrifice, attaining renunciation (Sannyasa), taking up your own Cross — these are a few of its names. Marriage adds its own complications.

Having come to the desert, we now know the fuller value of water. Something simple, essential. No one can live without it. The list of necessities is a short one; the possibilities of embellishment, endless.

There are rivers on every map you rely on. Sometimes when I walk out into the expanse, I

encounter one. Sometimes, one deep enough to block my way. And then I turn to the page for a bridge.

Or, better yet, call out for my buddy, Kokopelli.

~\*~

## Liberty

. . .

**F**EW PEOPLE MOVE to desert out of any desire for its peculiar landscape. True, there are those who hope its dry air will alleviate some health problem, yet even they typically install green lawns and shrubs requiring frequent irrigation. There is the prospector expecting to strike riches to squander elsewhere, or the cowboy or shepherd accompanying the herd or the flock, or a refugee or smuggler moving across the opening as a place of the least likelihood of detection or the least resistance in the border. Admittedly, some come to a particular job or to retire. Some come for opportunities of outdoors recreation — proximity to forested mountains or snow-fed rivers rather than the tawny dry ground itself. Almost all, however, have taken flight from something back there — whatever their birthplace or last residence — more than any deep conviction that this horizon embraces their Promised Land. They arrive with boxes and garments, with reminders of conflict or distance. Moreover, they cling to the desert fringe — settling in oasis towns or cities where irrigation water rushes along cement ditches — rather than miles beyond their next neighbor, with only buff surroundings.

My wife and I are no exception.

At the office, I'm asked, Where were you born? What brought you here? Where are your parents? I calculate: few children live within a day's drive of

grandparents, aunts, or uncles. Compared to my birthplace, cemeteries are rare. Nobody admits fleeing family, which is a fact of life. The trout fishing, they say, is unsurpassed. There is salmon. If you have water, you can garden nearly anything to perfection. You can hunt elk in the mountains or various quail in the foothills. You can raft on the river. There's no rain to speak of, and overcast days are infrequent, excepting the winter.

I explain my reasons were professional. I'm establishing a career and am something of a specialist whose last job was eliminated by sharp, painful budget cutbacks. Here, at least, I have opportunities to advance as a manager, working under a progressive-minded mentor. I accept this move as a shortcut before moving on, to bigger things beyond that horizon. Besides, I've promised my wife that somehow we'd relocate to this corner of the nation, a place she fondly remembers from four years of childhood. Following me in this move, she's distraught to find desert where she anticipated rainforest. In short, both of us suffer dislocation.

Here, then, a rewiring begins. Some of it connects the person to the place. Some of it, the two people to each other. Some of it, the individuals to their dreams.

Horses preserve a way of desert life. Consider rodeo. Agriculture is spelled rancher, not farmer: Even fifteen acres becomes a ranch. There's great distance nearly anywhere you'd want to go. Religion polarizes into New Age, on one hand, and fundamentalist, on the

other, with little in between; this condition is as true within denominations as across the diverse range of religions themselves. There's a different spectrum of ethnicity to contend with, too — Native-American, Hispanic, and Asian. More, too, than the Eurocentric nationalities and African consciousness he had seen Back East — to say nothing of rearranged economic strata. Within and without. The bum on the corner turns out to be a multi-millionaire who owns a thousand acres. Here cattle are not cows; it's beef rather than dairy. Federal government agencies are omnipresent: the Bureau of Reclamation manages hydroelectric generation and irrigation; beyond, there are military bases, national forests, tribal reservations, high country meadows, famed parks, Corps of Engineers reservoirs, state-owned sporting grounds, horticultural boards, Extension Service projects. People apply to the Feds when they file for grazing rights or mineral mining stakes supposedly there for the taking. You'll observe unspoken contradictions, beginning with the right-wing rhetoric common within these federally subsidized communities. As for the Bureau of Reclamation: how dare we say we're reclaiming when we're merely putting our human stamp on a piece of soil by diverting water and planting? Maybe we're declaiming or proclaiming instead. The Bureau of Indian Affairs appeared even more unsettling. Chiefly ...

I am learning. There's good reason the rattlesnake-infested, corrugated humps encircling the orchard

valley are pale brown: they receive none of the snowmelt impounded from late March into July in the high mountains. Agencies release and distribute that water through blazing summer into October. Green agriculture parallels the river and irrigation canals, defying the tough, roasted inclines above, where sagebrush and bunchgrass stroke tawny eternity. In this compass, wind rarely precedes rain. Beyond lucrative strips of orchards, the principal agriculture involves herds or hay; because of irrigation and unfettered sunlight, five mowings a year are common; bales are trucked to dairy cows and pleasure horses on the rainy side of the tall mountains. Desert has few chickens — and no pigs to speak of. Somewhere out there, Basque shepherds elude the heat. Forests begin at the top of high ridges observed fifty miles distant.

In the Far West, most men hunt and fish. Their goal is big game: deer and elk, especially. Big trout and salmon, too. Everything else remains "Back East" or target practice. Its vastness hammers the imagination.

On our journey westward, we notice that Custer National Forest flanks the barren holdings of the Crow and Northern Cheyenne reservations. Somehow that summarizes a Far West polity in what I thought would be a classless society.

~\*~

As I listen, I realize the locals don't consider the surrounding ridges to be mountains. Although these "foothills" or just plain "hills" are as tall as Pennsylvania's Alleghenies, shorn of trees, to speak of

"mountains" signifies that one must drive away into forest. The time comes to hike in unfamiliar high country.

I drive west, into a mountain pass, and park at the trailhead.

Climbing through clouds on Sheep Lake Trail, I identify snow lilies, phlox, two whistling marmots I mistake for groundhogs, and a ptarmigan. In these topless mountains, snow and rocks glimmer atop jagged white threads that twist, plunge, and roar over miles. In this clarity I recount a friend's determination to perceive the important task to perform each day — a focus she achieved in the sunset of her young death. Go on.

The next outing, I follow another friend's favorite trail. My valley of orchards and meadows stretches behind in a twilight of small-city lights and barren blue ridges. In golden splay dusk, I learn to fear glaciers atop volcanic spines and in their grooved depths, too. So much depends on which way you turn. Clouds, one moment pink, shift into slate-blue. Think of a great-uncle's farm in Ohio flatlands when green-wood ringed the fields and autos were novelties; and how, when the United Brethren in Christ build their new sanctuary, one tree furnishes enough lumber for all the pews. Such timber is long gone from most of the Midwest, and nearly gone here, as well.

Strangely, adjusting to such disorientation can allow one to see more than the landscape with fresh

eyes. I begin reckoning my birthplace afresh, too. I perceive a native poetry now vanished: in flat terrain they coined Sweet Potato Ridge Road when they became sensitive to what had been called Nigger Pike, after work crews that came out from the workhouse jail in the city; Diamond Mill Road was made of limestone gravel flecked with quartz or mica, but named for the distillery beside the rails. What could be in those rural lanes I had sped along on the way to the farm to cause their ghosts to arise out here? I think, too, of the hayloft I had delighted climbing in, even though the old folks feared I'd fall through and be trampled by cattle; more ominously, some shed rafters I walked like a high-wire artist had hogs rummaging below, with razor snouts and teeth and a latent taste for blood. That farm acreage is scarcely like these Western orchards or open ranges, yet something echoes. It's earth and air. Sunshine and clouds. My days in the mountains are airy conifers. I could be a pioneer, in spirit, at least. My ancestors settled those Ohio tracts. Another line, a bit earlier, settled North Carolina Piedmont. Here, I find unspoiled corners.

Perhaps bears do drink beer. Rocks, leap from mountaintops into oceans. Naked breasts, swell from snowmelt pool to sky.

Against this wall, between his desert and the frigid sea current, I declare my vast ignorance: left to myself, I'd likely starve, soon sicken of berries, and have never caught fish properly or gutted a rabbit. Somehow, I wait to be fed. Thus, one point of my Dedicated

Laborious Quest involves learning to be wholly myself — embracing flaws as well as talents, as I search out my own boundaries.

Away from the office and encircled by an ever-renewing earth — even an apparently lifeless desert that restores his sanity and a brand of insanity, too — you may find that every trail you follow brings you closer to your own attainment, your emerging sense of place and mission within the universe. As for looniness — ah, loco! — you soon appreciate how all are in some way at least un poco, indeed.

~\*~

For whatever reasons, I acknowledge a peculiar inward hunger, one that cannot be satisfied by societal conformity or physical comfort. To ease this hunger means appeasing its source: that the very exercise of repeated preparation, of a consecration to an appropriate discipline, and of a self-denial in deferred gratification that leads also to abrupt spans of maximal awareness and rightly balanced action. This state provides the only ambrosia that quenches such hunger. Anything else, by contrast, feels muddled or sickly. Activities and thoughts that interfere with its practice become annoyances or pitfalls. Although many varied systems exist to teach this truth, its realization requires the participation of a person's body, emotions, and soul, as well as one's mind; ultimately, this knowledge is not of the intellect alone. Sometimes it is found through athletics or a fine art; sometimes in the pursuit of science or religion; sometimes within craft

labor or the steps of an ancient tradition. Even so, many who receive the teaching remain unaware of its underlying hunger, of the spider's web linking this particular activity or setting with humanity's timeless potential of wisdom in the universe.

I could speak of the importance of finding a teacher who is qualified to guide the aspirant into this practice. I could have addressed this teacher as Swami, Roshi, or Murshid, a reflection of the roots of the particular practices I was traversing. Critics may argue whether the teaching retains its purity only within its own lineage and language, on one hand, or gains its authenticity in terms of vitality and application, on the other. Some Teachers replied that in bringing this teaching to America, certain adaptations have been essential. I've referred to this discipline simply — or perhaps elusively — as the Dedicated Laborious Quest.

In relocating to the Pacific Northwest, I was also unintentionally fleeing my own Teacher, who, in fact, had instigated the break, sensing that the time had come for me to apply the lessons fully, no longer the student but now the journeyman.

The Far West, like many of these teachings, remains simultaneously fossilized and virgin. I needed to discern the strands. For instance, I encountered petroglyphs in ethnology books before finding them on a riverside cliff here. Returning to my journals, I find a notation: "According to Newcombe, 1907: 'It seems impossible to decipher these inscriptions satisfactorily as it is not likely anyone except the makers and those

living at the time the work was done could tell what was meant by them.' Oh really? Has he seen a fancy menu?"

From book to the field back to the book again.

As I contemplate the prevalence of "you" in contemporary American writing, I jot: "It seems to be 'other-than-myself' reaching out to the almighty 'I-thou,' to another intimate self-aware being."

I look up and wonder: could these paintings and carvings be attempting the same?

"Oh, waiter! Garcon! Where are we?"

In desert, the wind's invisible presence is like the divine spirit itself. Gusts give sound to unseen natural power. Whatever Voice ripples Tibetan prayer flags — the ones a friend gave me — now make this energy visible, too. "Those banners," I record, "remind us how cut off from wind and often from Spirit, as well, we are." The friend jokingly refers to me as a "cunning office rat with a job that includes the self-serving hazards of political survival." Pay attention! Open a window! The flags remind me of the divine, the wind, and my friend all at once. As for the prayers themselves, I refer to the translation, voicing a the desire for universal peace.

I might speak of a personal need to renew divine energies. My Teacher would remind me the divine has been present all along — my awareness, however, is another matter.

Sometimes my Teacher would speak of dancing with an unnamed lover. "My Dance Partner" may be the best name for the unseen divinity when dancing. For one's beloved human companion, as well — when the union of melody, rhythm, motion, and affection overpowers all else. So what is this dance, this lifetime of recovering the angels' music? In the end, the only way of learning to dance is by dancing. Preferably, with a skilled partner. At first, staying at the edge of the room. There will be mistakes, naturally.

My Teacher taught that even when dancing solo, you're not alone. There's also taught the joy of dancing arm-in-arm in a circling chain. The dance, then, moves along the horizon between spirit and flesh. Having danced solo, I would now also dance with others, teaching them steps I've mastered (or at least seen mastered; some of the best teachers, you'll find, are those who have come to the brink and gained insight through failure, seeing a promise they cannot enter). Expressing common inward experience builds a kind of family, one that speaks to friends, associates, and a kind of tribe with words of both gratitude and recognition. I long yearned for a magic circle of an especially aware community, itself existing within a tenderly defined locale and time, which I'd found, however fleetingly, in the cloister. Now it's my turn, as if only I could bring it together somehow. The desert, with familiar landmarks stripped away, is where I come to find direction.

It's appropriate to refer to those who've accepted a Dedicated Laborious Quest as monks, even if they have — like me — married. As my Teacher counseled, approached wisely, marriage and parenting rise to full disciplines in this order.

When monks (whatever their particular exercises or traditions) discuss the living practitioners they most admire, they pass a point where they typically cease mentioning celebrities. Beyond that, they say nothing of classic masters or even living talents already in the curriculum and news reports. Rather, these monks are likely to be most impressed by unknowns who turn unfamiliar ground or who send back fascinating postcards from frontiers much like their own. Yes, I appreciate most those who work in similar ways or places to my own. That, too, is natural. Yet those who are most like yourself are also the ones you'll criticize most intensely. It's the flip side of the same coin. In some ways, every monk seeks a Dedicated Laborious Quest free of words, even while constructing your own set of personal Assays and Histories or the accompanying maps.

I fondle a strand of Rudrakshi beads, "Shiva's eyes," presented by another friend Back East. Think of the Bhagavad Gita, where the name of a central character, Arjuna, literally represents "white" or "bright"; why does that strike me afresh as I gaze up at parched grass the irrigation canals don't reach? Those inclines are too steep for orchard ladders or tractors to work safely. Below the water trench, fruit ranches quiver with fat

fruit ripening. Caucasian orchard owners are surrounded by darker-skinned Hispanics, Indians, and Asians. The character Krishna, it seems, depicts "black." So who's the Guide through all these centuries? The sun simultaneously devours and sustains all. Much that's been hidden comes to light.

I once expected old people to hold out a future for humanity rather than debunk everything as rotten. A lifetime of wounds, however, can fester.

~\*~

Any workplace holds confidences you can never reveal. Not that you don't want to expose company secrets. Then, considering the office computers, fax machines, and photocopiers, you realize they're incapable of guilt. They simply do their job — and you might find that unsettling.

Whenever I do manage to tap genuine emotions regarding this employment, no one's more shocked than myself. Take something as simple as a pane of glass between my desk and the trees outdoors. Even on my job in Appalachian mountains, I wanted a window. One the size of a book would suffice, although a picture view would be preferred. I've always appreciated a panorama, a sense of precisely where I fit into the weather of a particular day. Instead, I feel trapped underground, half-buried in regulations and routine. Only a band of natural light at the far end of the fluorescent-and-steel expanse hints of sun, moon, sky, or clouds — and even that aperture is tinted. Why are my hours on the job so cut off from the rest of life? "We

may as well be coal miners in carbonized veins or muscular razorbacks sweltering in midnight foundries. Is it only the sun we miss? Examine the calendar. Check on the moon's phase."

I could just plot my escape. I am surrounded by desert. Trek there alone. Right to the heart.

He recall the words of another friend who spoke of the paradox of Zen Buddhist freedom: the very limitations the practice imposes also lead to an extraordinary freedom. An individual who's free in the Spirit can be placed in prison and yet not be captive — persecuted and yet unbowed — denounced and still spotless.

The Dedicated Laborious Quest, as my Teacher taught, is a truly free way.

Free, yes, with the labor.

I pick up the phone and hear Kokopelli's whistle. He wants us to get going. Then tells me of the dance where we'll be playing.

~\*~

## Ridges and Rivers

. . .

**S**OMEDAY I'LL LEARN the identities of clouds. Buy the chart, memorize their qualities and forms, and then watch the flowing sky afresh. This is, after all, yet another strand of mapping.

From childhood, I've absorbed maps. Mind travel. Concepts augmented by photographs and writings, which have often furnished a sense a such familiarity that when I arrive in a new place, strangers stop me to ask directions, even on my inaugural visit. Foliage, waters, buildings, and people fill in the lines of his maps as they stretch toward some new border. But this move, with its desert, has been an exception. Nothing's been predictable or particularly comforting. Besides, I experience a vague agitation when venturing to the edge of my known universe. If possible, when visiting new locale, I push out a few miles further, to determine what's over the next ridge or river — or at least down the road — as if to anchor myself within some context, rather than remain at its periphery. Curiously, I feel more secure when placing that border at some shoreline or rise — countryside, at the least — rather than within seemingly endless tracts of housing, factories, stores, and pavement. Even a round earth has places where monsters may lurk. Gaps exist in any map. Consider the clouds. Everything is, after all, changing. Even that rock, where Kokopelli is sitting.

~\*~

## Honeycomb Radiance

. . .

**F**AITHFUL AS A DOG, a refrain keeps recurring in my head: "I lift my eyes to the hills, where cometh my strength," hills that encircle. This Biblical-sticking phrase, a misquotation of a mistranslation, as it turns out, nevertheless clears the static from my thoughts. As I drive home from the office just after dark, I concede this is not a topography man masters: he can destroy it, mutilate it, build highways upon it, bomb it, graze it, irrigate it, but not master it, not like Kansas where a man can stand in his cornfields, stand above everything except trees he plants for shade, a windscreen, and firewood. This forlorn wasteland has its own ways: a multitude of mammal life, insect, and rattlesnake, as well as sagebrush (though tumbleweed's an import, a weed rolling through downtown).

Measureless, desolate starkness is a wild bride;  
human strategies of survival remain a layer of dust.

It's not just the desert that holds treachery. Rainier, "Old Rainy," could blow anytime, shooting lava on hundred-mile-an-hour air cushions into Tacoma and Seattle. A heavy spring rain could also slam snow, ice, and mud into those cities and their suburbs, sweeping away highways, houses, forests, and rivers — as St. Helens demonstrates when it explodes a few years hence. The most previous example was in '47 with Kautz Glacier. Twenty-six volcano heads in the Cascade

Range all manifest dangerous potential; the last time Rainier blew, five thousand years ago, Alberta, Canada, was ashed; smoking was still reported in the nineteenth century; this giant honeycomb radiates heat under all that ice, emits sulfur fumes on top, remains so fragile a good explosion could level it all. Just examine the Native-American legends and you'll find reports of such explosions elaborated by witnesses.

Still, there are days when the mountains are camouflaged — days when you can step out on the clouds, if you desire, the way Kokopelli does.

Already, my maps no longer point only north-south/east-west, but up/down and past/future as well.

~\*~

## Summons and Sorrow

. . .

**O**N SCATTERED RESERVATIONS, a few elders rise before dawn each day and summon the sun to return. Don't scoff. When I, too, get up in the dark and meditate, I feel my own self-confidence rising. Watch the world awaken. Light a wood fire, something I sit beside and watch for hours, its flames more imaginative than television. Bask in the radiant warmth.

Kokopelli, night owl that he is, still slumbers.

My wife, in another room, rolls toward the wall and finally rises to join me.

There's a science, and then there's an art. In the pyre, paper first chars, then shrinks, and finally explodes. Only then do flames engulf it. "Consider the bomb a ream would create," I grin at her.

"Now who would you want to bomb, Buzzard?"

But I also know how difficult igniting that ream would be, and how difficult to keep it burning. Watch carefully and misconceptions turn to ash.

In the continuing drought of that fall and winter, I explore national forest well into February. Areas that should be buried in a half-dozen feet of snow are instead bare. Atop one mountain, I look over a cliff. "I think it's dolomite." Maybe it isn't. Maybe the identification isn't earth-shaking important, but

learning the names of places and their minerals, fauna, and flora adds dimensions to a place. Improves your chances of survival, too, if put to the test. For now, I scramble on the scree and realize that white painted stones at the cliff's edge marked out a heliport. Far below my feet, a table of forest spreads into basins that are invisible from my vantage, and other places I've already been. I trace Forest Service roads, such as they are — 1707 from Raganunda to the top or 601 down to Willy Dick's. "Keep elk gate closed," the sign reads when I came out, passing a few back country ranches to the highway's rush and debris. Far above all that, I sing out: "God bless a bloody rib cage above gray fuzz. Perhaps we'll have rain in the morning! We shouldn't be kicking this dust."

In a zero-degree fog, the sun rises as white as the moon.

"Let our liquid flow again despite this desiccation!" I cry in my dreams. "Why is it so difficult to recall the thoughts rainstorms instilled?"

"You put too much value on sorrow," Kokopelli tells me. Even in my sleep, that old guide's still at work.

~\*~

## The Moodiest Feature

. . .

**I**NITIAALLY, I REGARD the mountain as another slumber-induced fantasy. Its climax appears pristine, boundless, haughty, mesmerizing, even eerie. Over time I behold its hideousness and terror as well. Such beauty may suddenly turn fatal. Timberlands netted with trails and campsites, plus unfettered wildlife, extend from its ivory helix. These opportunities are my primary rationale for migrating to this corner of the nation. But these woodlands border desert, and none of my maps alert me to the consequences. Not even Georgia O'Keeffe's brilliant renderings of New Mexico, artwork I long admired, hint at its harsh thirst. Rather, the paintings emerge as another kind of dream to be savored, confined to a gallery or oversized pages. Besides, my definition of desert would have required camels, or at least organ barrel cactus, neither of them found in the cheat grass and sagebrush foothills surrounding my new home and workplace.

A glacier-glad mountain resembles a foaming waterfall. It is, after all, an endlessly frozen cataract. Below it, in late spring or early summer, breastworks are laced with plummeting streams racing toward September irrigation in desert to the east. On the clearest days, Rainier's ice sparkles; its beacon flashes sixty miles to the orchard where we dwelled. At sunset the inactive volcano's shadow is a finger reaching

toward the rising full moon. It points as well to places we've abandoned.

The predominant mountain is also the moodiest feature of the vista. Everything's arrayed in reference to this pillar. To observe it over time is akin to regarding one's beloved. Neither the zenith nor one's honey is as immovable as one presumes. They are not the divinity. They're more accurately repeated dreams, where some episodes fade out over the years while others intensify. Sleep visions of the soul, having one foot in the dreamer's past and the other in the present, dance on water. Sometimes they drown. Even a mountain.

You should see the way Kokopelli makes it dance before sunrise.

~\*~

## All Posted

. . .

ON THE LATE-NIGHT SWING at the office — the one my coworkers call the "presidential death watch," standing by just in case something major develops — I wait for the product to churn. When it does, I hear once more the locomotives rolling into Union Station overhead, their rumbling through concrete walls as my grandmother returns from Detroit or Fort Wayne. It's the same rolling thunder I hear later in Manhattan, in the pavement of Lexington Avenue, under the taxis and human footsteps. Tonight these trains roll along spider webbing.

Although I now live in desert, my office resembles offices everywhere. In the morning, chubby wheeler-dealers strut into the room and bark orders. In this case, they're Texans clad in polyester and strings ties. More gyrating rolls spit out headlines under the ceaseless deadline.

At times I long for an appointment as serene as a winter pond. Make an offer. The owners want more. They grin and demand, boy. Watch the shit.

I ask Kokopelli, "Why do people avoid bare truth? What virtue is found in complication? Why can't I simply stick to the steps of the Way? How much opportunity slips away when entanglements dim my view of my Guide? What will be my first big break? Or three?"

"How the hell should I know," he grins.

He knows, all right. No doubt about it.

~\*~

When I arrive home, she greets me with a mischievous grin: "I've only lied once or twice in my life and this is the third time. Welcome to the split-pea patch of my existence."

~\*~

Approaching thirty years of Aquarius, I consider what happens when the office finally hushes. Despite the line bells and the whine of an engraving machine in adjoining rooms, I'm the only one at a keyboard while the police dispatcher mumbles about deranged prowlers, unwanted guests, a prostitute overdosing with the hypo still in her arm (though she later claims she never uses the stuff, as they all say). Sometimes, pretending I no longer care, I sit and read as blue smoke swirls toward fluorescent tubes.

I wish Kokopelli were here, even with one of his stinky cigars. Or the pipe, the one he plays for music or the one he fills with leaf, either one.

Instead, I ponder ways this place differs from Long Pond and its Mafia hit men out of New York and Philadelphia visit to drop a corpse in icy brambles. A nearby restaurant serves poached venison year-around. Another hit happens near a stone mason's hunting cabin above Devil's Hole, on mountainside still fire-scarred where his father had built it like a dock. I've been both places. Two hits in one place out of many.

When I step outside for my dinner break, I observe a doll holding a cigarette at nose level, as if waiting for some night bird to perch. While she stares through smoke as if she desires me, I wondered how many have fallen for her tricks. I scan her hand and fingers and spot the glittering emblem. I buy a cheap cigar — for later, whether Kokopelli shows up or skips.

At heart, though, I sing for a restoration of America. A healing of fields, of fish, of human integrity, of Eden's ideal. I want to live free in the Holy Spirit. "May we turn it," I pray silently. Be it so! Genuine repentance. Turning. Always turning toward what's holy.

At breakfast, I begin: "Praise the hunger that brings us together."

Kokopelli takes a second helping.

I meditate as befits a stone sitting in water.

I gain bearings in addition to the mountain. Some are also barriers. Nuclear reactors, to the southeast. To the north, Army maneuvers. To our west, the Indian reservation. All posted: DO NOT ENTER.

~\*~

Our landlord explains his own decision to relocate in the valley: "Cities embody man's attempt to be supreme over all. You tire of the power games, the competition rather than harmony. The back country I love emphasizes what's greater than man. There I'll endure avalanches, sliding roadways in mountain

passes, storms, grizzlies, even cougars. The city relies on institutional religion, second-hand versions of Great Spirit codified to support the System. No, that's not for me. My back country upholds individual revelation. Wilderness raises fresh opposition against everything that binds artificially. The back country leads me closer to basic understanding. You need to accept whatever Absolute there is, whatever portion of the Mystery you can chew off at the moment. It makes me recognize how much more there always is. The city's linear, controlled. But back country is circular, like wave motions. It's feminine, robust and soft all at once. Its give-and-take reminds me of Emma."

And, as I also knew, the land can be as hard and unforgiving as rock.

~\*~

His wife, meanwhile, has her own perspective. "Many people think this valley can prosper in isolation, but let me tell you, the local museum indicates otherwise. It's filled with Pennsylvania long rifles, Ohio flint, a New Hampshire stagecoach, antique cars from Michigan, pianos made in Indiana, Connecticut pistols, even Illinois farm implements. Everybody came from somewhere." In her case, South Carolina.

Taking her up on the invitation to tour the exhibits, my wife paid special attention to local Indian basketry and beadwork. "Over time, their artistry was pathetically stripped down to resemble coloring books," she told me afterward. "The gift shop sells greeting

cards from Iowa and crafts from what the sales clerk said was 'Berea, Virginia.'

"Virginia? I replied."

"The college there."

"Oh, you mean Kentucky!"

"Kentucky, then,' she said, as if it's all the same."

I understand the scowl. "I notice, around here 'Easterners' seem to come from such 'seaboard' states as landlocked Nebraska, Kansas, and Illinois."

"That'll be news to them," she grins. "Bet they never thought of themselves as Easterners, either!"

Infinite misunderstandings continue, tit for tat.

"Even so," I say, "this is big sky and cowboy spreads. Even these treeless foothills ignite something in my airy nature. I hope this elation never ends."

An elation, at least, when I'm out of the office.

I look forward to tonight's gig with Kokopelli.

~\*~

## Updraft

. . .

**T**HIS IS DESERT. And logging country, too, where the best place to find loggers is in a bar, any bar. Just listen.

"When I'm real loose, I like t'dance t'country-westron music. Out seven nights a week, then a month without any. Can't work anyplace but woods. Done everything but hemlock. Started skidding horses in Colorado. Now driving a diesel Ford. Not much time for thinking. Slick roads, sharp corners, dumb ladies in the way."

Here's how it works, as Kokopelli and I play along.

"Aim a load down logging roads and then highway t' the mills. A thirty-, fifty-mile stretch each way, four to six times a day while the CB chatters.

"Every spring when the ground's too wet, the Forest Circus shuts ya down, the heavy equipment breaks the roads.

"That's our vacation, three months off, taking unemployment.

"Head for Hawaii, Reno, or Vegas. There's no money in mud. So ya take care of yard work, fix the house, prune the orchards.

"Successful loggers have expensive hobbies like race cars or airplanes. Mechanics, anyway.

"The drought will cut our pay in half. They'll keep us out. Fire hazard."

As they say.

Kokopelli tells me doors define a room, more than walls and roofs. Tells me to see their potential. An opportunity to spy or exit at will. Or interrupt. Doors with keys invoke power. Ownership. Think of all the doors in Versailles.

For me, the greatest freedom comes outdoors or while playing a dance with Kokopelli. Now the cat wants out.

Decisions are doors, too. Take style and size. Standardization leads toward smallness. Once, they were French-doubled or twelve-foot tall. Bronze portals to cathedrals. Red doors and oak doors. Lacy castings for an office. Frosted glass at the bank. Now they're internationally uniform. The small millwright goes under, as well as local characteristics.

When the cat went out, my wife came in. Everybody seems to like her. But I see her other side, when she's really destructive. I want to scream.

Instead, I blurt out, "To hell with the dark stupidity of their Christian indoctrination! Bring on wild goats! Pan pipes! My roaring conch will shake the walls of this slumber!" I have no idea what prompts that thought. Why Christian, other than the fact it's the predominant religion in this country? Just where would a person start without any teaching? Most likely, I meant

dogma, which I see repeated with only a superficial understanding. But that could apply to any faith tradition, couldn't it? So just what am I fleeing? And what do I really hope to find?

Maybe it's a door. Or a corridor. A cavern. A current of water. A trail. A strait gate with a narrow way.

Choose one. And then enter.

I want full awareness. Experience, rather than theory. Ecstasy, especially. For whatever reasons, I veer away from the Judeo-Christian prophetic stream and toward the shamanic traditions, wondering whether the Siberian word shaman arises from the Pali samana, for holy man. I accept the argument that meditation grew out of primitive hunting, the waiting for the game, the belief that game is supernatural, requiring supernatural aid. I must remember to thank the trapped bear, if the time comes. "Boy, do the local elk hunters have a lot to learn," I whistle — me, who's never gone hunting.

Kokopelli raises one arm as if he's holding a rifle. Then, with his other hand, he pulls a trigger. I think he felled what he wanted.

"Yes, hunting antedates farming," I whisper to no one but him. "See that, Cain and Abel!"

Maybe that's why I've come so far west, just to see the sunrise.

But just as there's light, there's also darkness. Trust and distrust.

List the names of deities. As for a supernatural trickster, Mara or Maya seems to relate to Satan, who in turn relates to Coyote. Now for Pan!

Arcane teachings. I consider delving into palmistry, followed by astrology, Tibetan texts, more deeply into Tantra, and back through meditation. If only my paying job didn't require more and more of my time, I might pick up the thread from hunting, tracking holiness through food traditions. The balance of feasting and fasting. The importance of prohibitions as strengthening the ability to say NO as well as reinforcing a group identity. "So what kind of vegetarian are you?"

Kokopelli reminds them this is desert. If it weren't for irrigation or berry-picking trips to the high mountains, you'd starve.

When you find a guide, follow.

This time, on what snowpack there is, the Old Man leads me away from the highway, past Thunder Creek, and upward past spiraling andesite columns that spilled far below. Over a spine to jut along the Wildcat, a streambed snaking through snow and a soft mud paste, ponderosa, lodge pine, sagebrush and shoots of dried flowers, freshly chewed trunks beside beaver ponds, thousands of elk drippings until the Old Man, Kokopelli, and I open out on the organ pipes of Ironstone itself, where dark clouds gyrate about and spill snow somewhere below us to the west. From the pinnacle, we view a circle of ridges and peaks dissolving

in racing clouds: Goose Egg. Pinegrass. Shellrock. McNeil. Russell Ridge. Bear Mountain. Roundtop. Or was that Round Mountain? Aix, pronounced "aches," Greek for "goat" rather than French for "peace," as the Old Man informs us. Goat Rocks. Rainier. Adams. St. Helens hides her glacial face. And then it's down through an April snow shower between sunbursts as Kokopelli laughs at the Old Man's Zurich accent from his long-ago youth and as migrant flocks whirl in flight. The Old Man names flowers that should rise here in a week a two with an early spring, when the Wildcat rages.

A snow shower chases the mountain's low sun.

Two weeks later, in rain on Mount Cleman, sage and conifers become cloud wisps treading updrafts. Black talus glistens. The mountain's so quiet that what seemed important hardly matters any more. Boulders float past the relics of the lookout, elevation 4,884. Step away. Over the edge, where black scree cascades, the carbon rods and oxidizing metal loops and plates of electrical batteries from some previous decade are now scattered among elk and deer scats. On downed trees and furry branches, too. A battered coyote skull stares up between shellrock. The mountains gasp repeatedly in their wrinkled embrace of limbs stretching out from the forest. Cupping vistas of orchards and rivers, the desert yawns.

~\*~

## But to Know Otherwise

. . .

**I**N THIS ENVIRONMENT I encounter many birds I can't yet identify: stellar and Clark jays in addition to magpies, much less the common raven I'd thought a crow. Meanwhile, the cardinals, warblers, and finches I knew back east are memories. Even this landscape contradicts my usual referents.

The mailman delivers a long letter from a friend who confesses that sometimes an hour passes before he puts his first word down on paper — something I'd never guess, for his lines flow so naturally. I assumed they originated effortlessly. But to know otherwise?

Don't force it, as Kokopelli cautions. Wait for the energy to gather.

Keep the pathway clear.

~\*~

## Game Time

. . .

LATE EACH AUTUMN, hunters sip Wild Turkey. Stovepipes stick out through canvas walls. Cardboard surrounds their campfires. Nearly sullen, they hunker down in numbing wind. So much has been protected for their harvest. It's crazy, this unreleased male desire to sing deep and loud. Call for your honey. Bellow again. With a measure of self-despair, the men admire the bulls they stalk.

In these parts, elk management thrives. Bureaucratic neckwear is a moth collection worn in a smoky room. With books resembling bear traps, Fish and Game as well as Forest Service authorities gather in what appears to be a poker party; it could as easily be city council or a gathering of the Committee of Economic Development, maybe even the Federal Reserve Board. Nobody speaks directly of the field or on behalf of its inhabitants. Each player represents a particular constituency, even though nobody represents the elk themselves. Everybody, it seems, wants a piece of action, connoting elk harvest.

Kokopelli's prescription: Around the office, snort loudly. If there are windows, pop 'em, even when snow falls.

Better yet, leave the room. Go to the site, meet the subjects on their own ground. If they trek off too soon, it's the regulations need adjustment.

Take note. In open country a snow-driven bull breaks trail to lead clusters of cows and calves single-file through winter range. Elsewhere a train of two hundred passes before I lose count. From these huffing creatures come vapor trails — some float parallel to a freeway that avalanche will soon block. Truck hoods and beds await them in hunting season. Through deep winter, though, elk come down to the canyon station. Feeding time's 1 p.m.

I wonder which grandparents or great-great-grandparents witnessed the disappearance of elk across the continent, save for a few spots. I meet old-timers who recall the elks' return in two boxcars sent from Montana, the ones that repopulated Washington State. That's how close they skirted extinction.

Bulls, cows, and calves graze between conifer species. In any journey a name may encompass far more than anyone suspects.

Winning the state's autumn lottery comes down to two hunters for every elk. Victors' identities are repeated on the airwaves. Encampments arise between snowy boulders. Not every elk license winner succeeds in bagging his prey, though an elk tag will exempt him from jury duty. Any judge understands how a man on a ledge feels unexpectedly face-to-face with a stag. What thunder breaks heart and horns! Hallowed be tumbling water, on the homeward trek.

"You never forget the bull's song," Kokopelli says. "It curdles your blood."

Men relate time-honored tricks of the trade. It's the Fall of Cards. Cut the Deck. Deal Me In.

Imagine joining the Elks lodge. When buzzed in through the door, follow a red carpet hallway to the bar where barley-skinned salesmen compared their ex-wives. If a herd of real elk prances past, scouts the room, and bellies up to red vinyl barstools, take a dive. Wait for the blowhards to readjust themselves in front of the mirrored collection of liquor bottles resembling a carnival shooting gallery. Here and at Eagles and Moose dances, as well, there's too much drunken groping for Beaver, as Kokopelli and I have observed. The game takes revenge. A shot's a shot. Glasses and reflections shatter. Under glazed eyes, unfit individuals collapse. Their blood reaches out across the carpet. Red on red. Real animals unmask and sniff a fallen Jack of Diamonds. They paw an expiring Queen of Clubs.

When individuals participate in governing themselves, the whole business returns to the right track. All elk ask is a fair shake. Kokopelli knows many by name.

First, he says, ban all guns, motor transport, and steel traps. To be wild's hardly enough. Before going afield, hunters must fast and enter a sacred sweat lodge. They must flake their own sharp tips and cross range on hoof.

Back at the bar, the ex-wives and widows gather. Who knows where their children are. When they

understand the new rules, there's NO BULL. The whole tribe and herd are in this together.

Simultaneously in Iowa, a man sheepishly hugs his rifle and emerges from woods with a gray pelt the size of a rat hanging at his waist. He could have been shooting beer bottles. A macho urge is not the same as hunting, my boss repeats after taking his adopted seven-year-old hunting the first time.

"Daddy, that man just said fuck."

"That's all right, son, that's all right," comes the reply. Their dove-hunting companion sips McNaughton's; the son, a soda. The boy sticks close, raising the same questions they, too, asked as lads. The cycle repeats.

Later, the game soaks in onion before roasting in garlic or being sauteed in wine. This terrain demands many rituals.

Where desert and timberland interlace, foothills run braided above your hat brim. Tufts of grass punch through light snow. Like red mites on paper, elk advance through fog-wisps overhead. Standing beside half-iced rapids, I raise my binoculars and lose count again.

On the eve of the season's premiere, cities of tents, camping trailers, and vans crowd into wild wood. In a state of sixty thousand elk and one hundred and twenty thousand licensed elk hunters, expect free-fire.

Opening day, an office pool bets on the quarter hour the first hunter will be hit. 9:15 it's BINGO.

Look out. Glazed heads festoon truck prows. Multi-sail frigates careen through mountains with skinned carcasses stretched across their decks. Give the victors their trophy, even as a hood ornament.

"Many of these guys get so plastered, if anything moves, it's open-fire," Kokopelli says. "In the shootout, each heatedly claims the kill. Then the fun begins."

That is, there are more intriguing animals than elk to hunt. Other armed hunters move in.

By evening, poker-faced herds pressed my rear-view mirror. They steer vans, pickups, and sedans. Slow down, and you discover their horns.

I vow never to dwell where I can't see premonitions of seasons advancing clearly in dawn. "Watch the Milky Way turn through silence, you assume a point within millions of years of light," as Kokopelli says. Even hunting can be timeless. Eventually, I see the Dedicated Laborious Quest as a specialized form of hunting.

In a slow drizzle across back roads in the valley, shacks and sheds occasionally relocate themselves to Wisconsin or Maryland. The green growth, scudded sky, lush shrubs, and running fields send memories tearfully home. Was I really, completely Out West?

~\*~

True hunters in this country live on what they track, Kokopelli explains.

Articulating this precinct means drawing on three language stocks: Sahaptian, spoken by Klickitat, Yakama, Kittitas, Wanapam, Palus, Nez Pierce, Cayuse, and Umatilla; Salishan, by Wenatchi and Columbia; and Chinook, by Clackamas and Wishram.

Nine thousand years ago the climate resembled today's. Around seven thousand years ago, Mount Mazama lost its head and Crater Lake emerged. Did the ash fall reduce the game? Kokopelli assumes so. About that time, Olivella shell beads show up in archeological sites, revealing coastal trade, in addition to a new kind of projectile point. About 6,500 years ago the roost became drier and warmer. Rivers ran significantly lower. Adz blades of nephrite and serpentine, about 4,500 years ago, permitted heavy woodworking and expose trade relations with what is now British Columbia. "That's when I got this pipe," Kokopelli says, allowing me to stroke the instrument. As winter temperatures became warmer, sizable winter villages gathered in river valleys for fuel, fresh drinking water, and greater protection from bitter winds. Such clustering required food storage capabilities and also permitted greater social and ceremonial activity, perhaps a result of more efficient food gathering. Most likely this involved salmon fishing, properly dried and preserved, caught in great numbers; fish traps and weirs were much more efficient than spears, lines, dip nets, or bows and arrows.

From this came pit houses, some of them earth-covered for insulation, others covered with mats and grass or brush. The mats swelled and froze in winter to keep wind and rain out; as spring temperatures rose, thawing provided ventilation. Such housing required well-drained soil, such as that of desert.

The tipi was introduced much later, from the Great Plains.

A-frame mat houses developed from the pit design. Their emergence especially reflected the introduction of horse culture, which added to trade possibilities and also brought saddles, bridles, quirts, dress, and ornamentation such as feathered headdresses, but above all else, ideas about tribal organization. Appaloosa were on the way. Whalebone clubs, as well as fishing nets and harpoons, were acquired through expanded trade networks.

Horses allowed more food to be brought back from summer sojourns in the mountains. Soon bowl-shaped mortars and elongated pestles were used to prepare food. "Let me tell you about real progress," Kokopelli insists.

Each local group assumed stewardship over the economic resources of its locale. Leadership arose out of respect, not law. Ritual purification occurred in sweat houses. Three-day workouts weren't uncommon. I wonder whether voters and candidates alike should do the same before Election Day. There is, after all, a kinship to hunting and fishing.

Kokopelli agrees.

The major run of king salmon and oil-rich sock-eye salmon comes in late May or early June, when most of the year's food supply is caught. The best spot for dip netting is where rivers bear down through narrow channels or over low falls. Wooden platforms tied precariously to basaltic cliffs hang over whirlpools and eddies. Such stations are inherited and highly prized. Permission must be sought before fishing there.

Fish head pulverized in a mortar, then carefully packed in baskets and stored for winter, provides a highly concentrated protein food. Even a few ounces serves as a full meal.

Bears caught in a dead-fall were hunted mostly for claws and teeth — ceremonial ornaments.

Wapato was a type of wild potato, perhaps like camas.

Cooperative hunting and salmon harvests were common. Women's berry picking parties, too, even though some tribes were basically river folk. Excepting the Wishram band, the Yakamas believed in individual rights. They differed from coastal tribes, which possessed slaves who might fall to a cannibal ceremony.

Much the way rabbit skins are cut in a spiral to produce long strips, I keep learning. Once you acknowledge the importance of certain foods in a given turf, you discern zone-specific energies. In ecologically aware feasting, hamburger and hot dogs are thoroughly

inappropriate for many reasons. They have no authentic geographic home.

~\*~

A wolf is powerful because it eats powerful food, Kokopelli warns me.

As for the girl-chasing man who's always hungry, it's "hair-pie," he grins.

Although I've never hunted, I see points at which ancient traditions lurk within modern religious practices. Meditation, high among them, has roots in hunting and gathering. Then, too, there's the role organized sportsmen have performed in restoring populations of wildlife, and you can learn much from hunters eminently adept at reading animals' ways in the field. Keep an eye open.

Natures change slowly. The hunt on land and the water has barely begun.

There's great game beyond food. Much of it, Kokopelli sings, runs through your brain.

~\*~

## Ancient Vibrations

. . .

**I**NSTEAD, I LOOK in another direction and discovered that the Yakama people once occupied 17,000 square miles and had three distinct language stocks. So, even back then one tongue was insufficient to articulate the vibrations of this place, even as an open desert. To try relating the qualities of a simple thing, a pane of hundred-year-old glass, perhaps; the interaction of clouds and sun, alkali and volcanic ash is far more complex. You start by learning the names of flora and fauna. Watch, listen, wait. I open a window and consider the current research, which places the first people here about 14,000 years before my arrival. These nomads made tools from bone and mineral. Hunted large and small game. Fished salmon. Collected river mussels. Gathered wild food plants. Given a guide and sufficient time, maybe I could learn to do these things. (Don't look at me, Kokopelli shrugs. I'm not from around here.) Maybe I shouldn't feel so strange about being here, either, even though such long perspective makes me feel incredibly insignificant. The Anglo civilization embodied here is only veneer concealing much deeper systems. The ancient climate was cooler and moister. The land was dotted by many lakes and small streams. Grasslands scattered with pine stands and willow flourished where there's only sagebrush now. Food sources included bison, antelope, deer, foxes, muskrats, rabbits, ducks and geese (their eggs, too), and turtles.

I want to leap through time to join them, dressing the hides of their game, or making rattles and tools. These people used red and yellow pigments, and valued birds for their feathers as well as their flesh — cormorants, geese, condors, turkey vultures, and eagles all had clothing functions. Maybe I need some ceremonial garb. (Come, now! Kokopelli is hooting with laughter. He loves to taunt and mock me.) Tiny bone needles were used as far back as 10,000 years. I have enough trouble with steel needles today. So what do I make of their earliest burials, cremations that send the body back into spirit?

It's obvious my own difficulties won't end overnight.

This is a time of sparrows.

~\*~

## Invitation to Flight

. . .

**O**N ONE OF MY solitary walks with Kokopelli, I admire the fullness of purple-tipped grasses along the canal bank. Some offer bunched, short seeds in clusters. Others have long-shafted seeds in plumes. Or oblong, spiked seeds suspended like bells. "There must be a thousand golden variations," I tell him. Oats. Wheat. Barley. Bread and beer. Silk-enshrouded ears of corn for sweet butter. Fat tender steaks. Sour whiskey mash. Like some people I knew. The many named needles and strands of whips and brushes reach skyward, flaying the wind, inviting birds to flight.

~\*~

## Stay for the Service

. . .

I'M INVITED TO PHOTOGRAPH an Indian funeral for a 109-year-old woman. It's a traditional affair, with a Pendleton trapper's blanket on a casket lowered by hand. Even so, young punks surround me: "Don't you think you're crazy," they ask, implying?

I look around for Kokopelli, who might intercede on my behalf. He's nowhere in sight.

Later, with a Styrofoam cross and dozens of American flags, the casket rides the back of a pickup, viewed by faces in Cool-Ray sunglasses — ancient traditions side-by-side with the cheapest, most honky-tonk trinkets of the New American Way.

I wasn't permitted to enter the house, either.

~\*~

When you drive, details pile up.

Where mat-house villages once stood, Highway 21 now runs along a large irrigation canal. Because the roadway goes nearly straight, a few subtle curves become especially treacherous.

Illegal aliens buy cars but have no driver's license or training. No insurance, either. There's a headlamp out, few repairs, or brakes gone bad. Talk about trouble.

In the dark, a big white furry wing sweeps in front of my windshield. An owl. An omen, nearly colliding. It's hard to say who's more startled.

It might have told me the Pom Pom or feather religion, Washat, remains the most practiced old religion on the reservation.

Kokopelli was a member.

Twenty cars park in a hollow point toward what appears to be a white frame meetinghouse. Inside is a congregation of dove hunters.

There isn't a cloud in the sky, only one jet contrail as crows circle some relentless screeching. As they flap up, slaughter moves out of the shadows and coyote pursue the only antelope in these parts, the ones on the Army reservation.

On the bright side, the State Fair is a three-hundred-pound pumpkin multiplied. Its doe-goats are judged by measuring and weighing their teats in a beauty pageant stripped to essentials.

Back home, her moodiness could be impossible.

Downtown, about nine at night, a wino-cowboy walks into the office. "Where's the city desk?" He has no place to stay. "It's a long story." A quarter in his pocket, stub of a cigarette, and scabies — mites that are highly contagious. "I don't want to spread them the way some bastard did to me." So he went to the hospital from the Gospel Mission, received medicine (how'd he know to do all this?). Didn't get back in. ("He refused to stay for the

service," they explained.) Angry, turns to ask: "Where does a stranger go for help in this town?"

How should I know? I'm just filling in for somebody else.

"Well, if anybody whizzes you," the stranger says, "it was a matter of amphetamines. Maybe you heard about 'The Duke' in Traders? The trial dismissed on procedural grounds?"

He buried \$67,000, but when he returned, the money was gone. So he says, far too articulate for the typical migrant.

Later, Kokopelli tells me that guy's trouble.

Details pile up as I stay downtown at night and taste the psychic toll of economic theories in wasted, untapped talents. The stench stirs tears. Lonely men at counters stretch cups. Icy evenings of waitresses, cowboys, GIs, prostitutes drive from many towns, a migrant worker family whose car broke down, out-of-work loggers, midnight mechanics and nurses. Add to them an assortment of skinny wannabe rich bitches or real estate and insurance brokers. Clerks trying to live on earnings from clothing stores. A few lumpy bag ladies. Walk in, and all look up from their coffee with vacant eyes. It could be Dickens.

I see another hunger, but my own faith isn't strong enough — I'd yield to despair.

Later, I sing to Kokopelli, "All of man's good resolutions turn sang froid in the seasons of samsara."

Noticing his quizzed expression, I translate: "Our good intentions turn cold-blooded in the web of life's illusions."

It's the spider again. Coyote's cousin. Their damned net.

"Sometimes, Bozo, I wonder about you," Kokopelli says, exhaling blue curlicues.

"There's no Dedicated Laborious Quest, no magic without the strength of sitting or dancing."

I dare not be entrapped in any desire to move freely through the vertical and horizontal dimensions of wherever I simply am. So far I've surveyed past and present. The future must wait. First, I need to map the emotional and sensual planes of this realm. Every dance has distinctive rhythms and expressions, as Kokopelli reminds me.

~\*~

## Nomads

. . .

**S**OME CULTURES BELIEVE a man's spirit exists in the soil of one's ancestors. My grandmother's ground furnished my own, with her muddled knowledge extended in part through Grandpa. But I never knew Mom's parents, who had been born in other states. Here, though, apart from the Indians, we are all nomads. Many of us, spiritless nomads.

~\*~

In this Census round I ponder multiple categories of Hispanics: Mexican, Mexican-American, Chicano, Puerto Rican, Cuban, other Spanish, Hispanic. Also, some of the other categories I keep encountering in the Valley: Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, Korean, Vietnamese, Asian Indian, Hawaiian, Guamanian, Samoan, Eskimo, Aleut, other (specify). Indian (Amer.) print tribe.

I have no idea what I am other than a homogenous WASP. English? German? Norwegian? Czech? Not a clue.

Kokopelli, for his part, is offended there are no distinctions between Hopi and Navajo, even if he'd checkmark both and a few more.

~\*~

## Turning, Returning

. . .

**M**Y CULTIVATED EXERCISE of substance and spirit, my Dedicated Laborious Quest, is an interplay of natures — my own character and communities and varied ecosystems as they ultimately feed into our universe. As they harmonize, intuition leaps and skips; intellect dances with the heart. Emotions and each individual's senses potentially humanize a fertile terrain rather than snagging within wildness. Wilderness, meanwhile, represents another order. In its sacred opportunities, the field of endeavor itself, whatever its name or specific form, becomes secondary to the abundance being disclosed around and within each practitioner. Indeed, many who participate and even excel in some activity where the D.L.Q. begins to appear — be it a gymnasium or playing field, a studio or stage, a laboratory or workshop — remain oblivious to the gateway my spiritual brothers and sisters and I have entered. When I meet a celebrated mountaineer who perceives icy heights, it turns out, the way a trucker regards a highway, I'm disappointed he failed to become a mystic seeking cosmic oneness. Accomplishment that's solely technical remains devoid of unity. No, I've already learned that birds along the way are not just birds; my Teacher's gardens nourish more than a stomach. In a circle of heavenly order as well as disintegrating debris, Kokopelli and I prepare a clearing and settle for the night. Observe planetary and lunar motions. Greet the sunrise. All natural

phenomena give birth in an opening, should you find it. Likewise, locating a personal opening, an enclosed space within a universe, can bring recovery, renewal, healing, and salvation. To sit at the center of one's birthright repeats an ancient journey made only on foot. There have always been charlatans who gain large followings by pandering to appetites for instant gratification, these days offering the comforts of jetliner or Interstate automobile. In reality, the aspirant must abandon even camel or mule along the way — eventually jettison everything, including his own backpack and affection for the very form he practices. In time, even his intentions. Step by rocky step follows a pathway that regresses through that origin. Perhaps the aspirant's teacher has been there; perhaps he's lost. At last, with his very life is at stake, if he turns back, he bears a haunted look in his eyes forever. I've come far, answering a call in the night, goaded by some deep wound and an overwhelming loneliness. In this exploration, dreams and mythologies correspond to trail markers. Once you discern how paradox differs from contradiction, you embrace its place in the teaching. To climb a higher ridge requires first descending to a valley.

Kokopelli, of course, knows all this and much.

He knows you may have taken any of a number of pathways to the holy garden. One may have played high school football — likely on the offensive line. One may have been an Eagle Scout, backpacking through winter forest. One may have built theater sets or

lighting. Analyzed interstellar noise or constructed parquet flooring. One may have repeated violin scales, like me, or cared for younger siblings. The stories Kokopelli's heard are endless. The common thread through all is this: the commonplace is never good enough. The spider's thread climbs higher.

It's no accident I came to dwell in desert, the timeless opening for religious surrender and ecstasy. By good fortune I also encounter great mountains, summer snowfields, crystalline air, unrelenting winds, a circle of fascinating comrades, and a new fullness of myself, no matter how briefly. From those heights, my art and intellect extract an essence, an inspiration to share with brothers and sisters who remain in suburbs and cities, often by necessity or by the duties of urban economy and civic obligation. My goal as poet, priest, artist, philosopher, naturalist, explorer, teacher, or prince — whatever that call — is somehow to preserve a sense of this supernatural potential and cosmic harmony.

Kokopelli says we can do all this when we play a dance. "They can feel it, and that's enough," he explains.

To be authentic, such an extended sojourn must somehow reflect other facets of existence as well: violence, savage revolt, a wide ranging lack of dignity or purposeful employment — at least, a recognition that socially valuable work seldom offers adequate compensation. In this preparation, the pilgrim may be propelled backward through history as well as forward

into science fiction and interplanetary speculation. How curious that desert is so often perceived as a place of escape: gazing into its vast inhospitable space, you'll detect nowhere to hide. Such terrain strips and confronts. No other environment, excepting surfaces of large water, is as mirrored with brilliant sunlight. All reflections turn back on the very thing you might most desperately seek to escape: yourself, especially.

If you hide behind a boulder, it evaporates. If you raise your hand to block glare, a Greyhound bus hisses past in a cloud of dust and thunder. If wearied by this torment, you retreat to the house, you'll find that boulder waiting in the bedroom. A note on the kitchen table will divulge your beloved has taken that bus to the seacoast. You cannot sleep in her absence.

~\*~

Throughout history, people have turned to pilgrimages, monastic retreats, or fasting as pauses in their daily customs — opportunities to reflect fully on immortal objectives before returning to everyday demands. Modern versions include vacations, travel, and outdoor pursuits such as camping — typically without the dimension of worship. Whatever the form, people return home with renewed appreciation. Maybe my wife's trip on the bus held an element of this; perhaps it was just an escape.

The desert is similar. It's made me recognize fundamental, even primitive, life requirements clearly, as though chiseled by flint instruments. Like the multitude of crickets chirping in the garden, much we

take for granted — rain, clouds, family, especially — now magnify in consciousness. I could lay out some generalized principles and then form a big picture.

Tell me, then, Kokopelli insists. So I do.

Begin, for instance, with a line found on few maps, one that nevertheless defines the United States as much as the Appalachian mountains, Mississippi River, or Mason-Dixon Line do: to its west, less than thirty inches of rain falls in an average year. Because they require at least thirty inches of rainfall a year, leafy trees never extended across the Great Plains or Far West, except along streams or in pockets settlers planted and irrigate. The line drops across the map like a spider's exploratory filament, a perpendicular sheen from a ceiling. The Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas are cleaved. Further west, forests return near mountains, which generate their own weather patterns. Snowfall and rain, in part, explain the conifers of Western forest. Explain, too, the smell of open air, crackle of fire, proliferation of wrinkles in neighbors' cheeks and foreheads. More lines can be drawn, leading to some web: the treeless expanse, for instance, between the Rockies and the Cascade or Sierra Nevada ranges.

Within the treeless expanse are other circles, other webs. Take center-pivot irrigation, patented in 1952, and count how many mile-wide green circles it's spun across the Western landscape, each one requiring the electrical power of a city of ten thousand and a reliable source of water, generally fossilized or snowmelt. Back

east I had rarely considered such matters. A drought meant no rain in several weeks. Dew was dependable. I knew about farmers, not cowboys. Grass was thick and green rather than sparse and dun. Summer air heavy with humidity made the sky milky rather than this piercing blue. On the westward journey, I barely noticed how loam is a table tilting to sky until we ran up against the forbidding wall of the Rocky Mountains. Now I measure summer nights that plunge fifty degrees, yet desert thermometer readings don't compare with the comfort and discomfort known elsewhere. Thirty or sixty days without clouds oppress me as much as continuous rain would. I need new prayers. New magic, too.

~\*~

To step into desert far enough you no longer see cars or houses brings a break with convention. Returning from one exploration with Kokopelli, I view the town as a mound of pea pods. Next, it becomes peanuts (which aren't raised in these parts). Eventually, as packages of Grape-Nut Flakes — each building containing bodies, nothing more. Entire cities appear as collections of books identical to a room of cardboard boxes. Every abode duplicates a television set. I know this isn't how people should be living. This isn't freedom. This isn't personality. We have our work cut out, don't we? If Kokopelli hadn't come this way earlier, I might have feared for my sanity. Instead, I know the brain's a weird instrument and let it go at that.

Imagine undertaking a trip where there are no road signs, no maps, no pages of text. You have no way of knowing how far to the next town, gas station, restaurant, motel, or campground. Ask people and hope they know. With utter sincerity, half of them give bogus information. The other half lie. Without a guide, all the books you've read can't possibly help find the marker, **YOU ARE HERE**. Your teacher embodies map, compass, path, and highway. If you have the genuine article, it's better than an Interstate speedway. If it's false, watch out. I wished my own were closer. I was running on memories. As my Teacher said, "When you think I-I-I, you're a smoky fire blowing every which way. No I, no me, no my attachment means there's no smoke, just a good hot flame burning clearly." For me, this meant breaking out of my own shell. Would I have wings or claws? I hadn't considered the spider.

At least I have Kokopelli, on occasion. Most of the time.

In this desert, I seek to unearth the hidden meanings of place. I return to a chart of Aboriginal names and translations, and substituted these for the Geological Survey's designations. The mountain once known as Komo Kulshan is **STEEP**. That's how it is when **GOING FOR CLIMAX** in the spiritual quest. You must keep asking, "What can I do **WHERE I AM**?" The answer? "Take another step dancing with your beloved."

~\*~

I awaken with indigo skin. Sparrows hop about on my mattress. I vaguely recall a plunging star followed by blindness. In that sleep, a voice spoke in primary colors and related a saga oozing blood between brown feathers. I followed her in a procession toward the origin. She pointed out a killer whale, a shaman's folded robes, a raven's halo, a falcon spitting fog, a cluster of warthogs, a gathering of peacocks and white llamas, the roots of a great-grandfather's moustache. As we ascended from a swampy trail of frogs, birds, cobwebs, sunning turtles, and lizards, we skirted the foot of a smoldering volcano. Off in the other direction in emerald water, an island burned. She, however, had other plans. Wild goats ran from our approach. Soon we braved auto glare, road owls, iron bridges. Spinning me back to my Midwestern sources, she demonstrated how thin the thread of perception remains. Spider-thin, in fact. She showed me I'm one animal at one time and in one location, but when those factors change, I become another. Only the soul is constant. When she held a mirror before me, there was no reflection. When I asked her name, she smiled coyly. "You'll find it written in the desert."

Each time you acknowledge the distractions that keep you from dancing freely, turn back toward the melody and the rhythm. Turning, I knew, was repenting. Turning and returning, in the music I danced and played. My partner there has always been faithful.

~\*~

## Of Sojourning and Exile

. . .

**K**OKOPELLI IS NOT QUITE of this place, but he will stand in for the local hunchbacked flute players. As will Krishna, in tunes that begin slowly and build to ecstatic climax. Maybe they will be joined by a wandering sailor, looking for water. Maybe by fiddlers like me. Our melodies haunt and echo. This music demands dancing. The drummers appear.

You might ask what the Native American flute is made of. As well as Krishna's pipe. What kind of bone or horn the sailor has carved. What opens as a simple, plaintive cry gains complexity and liveliness. Spider, in fact, weaves their intricate counterpoint.

The sailor knows sees their progression running from reel to jig to, ultimately, hornpipe. Who knows what the Hopi or Hindu call it — the effect is the same. Just look at a cow skulls and see where the horns were. Look at elk antlers. Look in his Bible, where horns are an image of power. Some who venture out into solitude return with their own power song. Begin wailing. Begin reeling.

I reflect. Suppose my children are born here? Is this really an arrival or a failed promise? What about the long exile ahead? The decades of trying to understand precisely what I've encountered in this desert and at its rim. Perhaps I will face a desert in my profession, as well. Perhaps I'll find the sea is another kind of desert — one giving rise to the fishermen who were Christ's

first apostles. I already know of salmon returning to the desert.

I had believed this would be his Canaan — my place of milk and honey. I could spend the rest of this life pondering exactly what I experienced. Attempting, as well, to recover something of the encounter. The tune ends, but I remember its sound and its place on my maps. No matter that I might have even found this Canaan in a large city of orchestras and quartets, stages and screens, galleries and architecture, lectures and bookstores.

Maybe I'm merely sojourning here all along. In exile here as much as anywhere. And maybe it wasn't the desert as much as the promise itself I explore.

At the end, a door closes. Maybe a gate. Like Eden, with its reality that I'll never return. This desert is not a land that many visit. It reveals its true nature slowly, if you're patient. If you're reverent.

Actually, this might be just one more gate locked behind me. Even if I could return, I'd find everyone scattered. Or at least older. Here I haven't even collected an antique basket or beaded moccasins or a piece of turquoise and silver jewelry to carry with me. Wherever I'm going.

Those were the days when I could read a totem pole and anticipate the stories. Maybe even name the children and their grandparents.

I should have known traveling with Kokopelli comes with risk. There'd be a price, eventually. Maybe it was while I was at the office or those other times when I turned, and he wasn't there with me.

Now I come home and both Kokopelli and my wife are missing. I should have been suspicious all along.

It's time for me to leave, then. I'm free.

In town, the side of one building has a ghostly paint on black brick. With difficulty I decipher

COMMERCIAL SALOON

T. MALLET PROP.

CIGARS NOW 5 c

across from the train depot and next to the OPERA HOUSE. Railroads, cigars, saloon, and opera all fit together in a remarkable calculation. Just where were women, besides up on stage?

What, precisely, mad the Far West so different? No family roots? It was all male: cowboys, loggers, miners, fishermen, soldiers, trappers. Even an orchard's considered a ranch. You need only a few acres, Buckaroo. Where is my wife at this moment? Like Maya of Sanskrit lore, she's a weaver. Like Maya, she had spun a web of entrapment. Maybe these open spaces aren't really so open.

~\*~

## The Space of Art

. . .

**T**HIS TIME, FLIPPING THROUGH a glossy magazine, I confess to myself a sensation I've often experienced in the realm of the fine arts. It's a consciousness I first associated with the hush of large museums, a rarified atmosphere that could well be pressurized. There's a degree of trespass, moving from the everyday world into this temple, and an expectation of awe.

The museum itself could be dedicated to history or natural science or even military technology. We speak softly, walk slowly, reflect and absorb impressions.

There would appear to be similarities to religion in the expectation of awe or the ephemeral. These are holy places, consecrated and set apart. They are cathedrals built to preserve sacred relics — not just any bones or works, then, but all those who have advanced the cause. There are rituals, as well, in the progression through exhibit spaces or the celebratory openings. There's also a sense of the departed, as though wandering through a cemetery; here the memorial names are included as donors of objects, rooms and wings, or endowments, in addition to the artists or high priests themselves. But there are differences, as well: where religion has at its core what is eternal, timeless, and righteous in the eyes of God, art often strives for a sense of progression, which fosters curiosity, novelty, play, even a touch of shock or scandal. Where religion imposes ethical

behavior, art frequently excuses or even encourages the practitioner in indiscretions. In both, though, there's an expansion of one's field of awareness, however brief, and a moment of personal renewal and refreshment before resuming one's usual activities.

These spaces are not just those for visual reflection. A concert hall, playhouse, or theater has similar dimensions. We settle in, become quiet, and the house lights go down as the stage lights brighten. We show reverence and appreciation by applauding at appropriate moments. Newcomers are initiated in the customs.

Layers of wealth and breeding also appear. The institutions typically originate in noblesse oblige. The patrons reserve box seating or receive invitations to openings, private showings, or galas. Members and subscribers enjoy their own privileges. Smaller spaces, such as art galleries, chamber music settings, or poetry readings extend the experience. Libraries, as well, can be seen in this light. The sensation often recurs when I'm handling a thick, refined, costly literary quarterly — one printed on carefully selected paper and published with an eye for expert, balanced typography. (Sometimes the work presented becomes secondary to the presentation.)

We might speak of the thoughts and emotions that arise in these encounters. The space of art can be acknowledged in one's own life, then. We observe, but don't touch. We listen, but don't speak. We're voyeurs who do not taste what's on a plate before us. Here, in

public places, we visit our own private musings. There is an outward uselessness in it, ultimately. Time in these spaces does not add to our wealth, our table, or the usefulness of our apparel. It does not transport us physically from one place to another, although it may do that in our imaginations. What does happen is our moving from our animal roots into uniquely human possibilities.

The space of art also works in other dimensions. The artists themselves are rarely of the same social class as their benefactors or audience. We repeat the cliché of starving artist, even when some become comfortably wealthy and dwell in chic locales. Still, they're employed in ethereal fields — actors, musicians, painters, the stagehands and gallery owners, box office managers, and a host of others. They work different schedules from the general populace. Many sleep late or stay up through the night.

There are even the spaces as a work moves away from its creator into other locations. A painting, for example, appears one way in the studio, another way on one's walls, and still another way in a gallery — none of them resembling what happens when the same piece is hung in a major museum. Musicians and actors know the difference between the intensity and argument of rehearsal and the propriety of performance itself. An author can observe how different a piece appears in manuscript, in galley-proof, in a magazine or literary review, or in a bound book. A poet or a poetry supporter becomes aware of the differences between viewing a

piece on the page, voicing it on the lips (either in a public occasion or for one's own private pleasure), or performing it in a formal reading.

We can move outward, of course. Into ballparks or arenas. The loud crowds. But those are other spaces, in some ways overlapping fine arts and religion.

We might consider as well the ways the fine arts have been acceptable as civic religion. An Oscar or a Grammy is more valued than a Crucifix in our society. A comedian is a better master of ceremonies than a preacher or priest. We're nervous about civic events held in houses of worship. A wedding or funeral, perhaps, though it carries a sense of crossing into something private.

On the other hand, as religion has retreated largely from public awareness, or perhaps simply to the suburbs and better parking, it has abandoned earlier houses of worship, especially those downtown or in the inner city. Some have been converted to arts spaces — galleries, concert halls, night clubs, theaters, restaurants. I regard these as being somehow different from structures designed and built for arts uses. It's more than recycling, I'd say.

~\*~

## Field Guide

. . .

**W**HEN YOU WALK into the expanse, keep going. Maybe you'll meet a dwarf at creekside. Maybe a bear. If you do, you must speak respectfully and listen closely to the reply. Even if they call you a yokel, as Kokopelli did.

~\*~

A dust storm — sandstorm — and they close the highway.

You must wait. Cover your mouth and eyes.

~\*~

On high ridges, bachelor Basque shepherds follow their flocks all summer. Each one and his dogs rarely encounter anyone who speaks Human.

~\*~

Wilderness is about clouds, too.

Now what were you dreaming?

~\*~

Guides do appear. Sometimes among fellow practitioners. Maybe even your landlord. Or Kokopelli.

~\*~

"Who's standing on my head?" a totem pole figure wonders.

Just like a typical office.

~\*~

Blinking in my field of karma, the reminder:

PENDULUM  
swinging  
back  
winter  
NIGHTFALL

It's not the first time.

Be faithful and wait.

~\*~

Sometimes a lover becomes a place you want to enter.

Sometimes one's the space the other envelops.

~\*~

Where would I have been without her in that desolate expanse?

~\*~

Master intricate knots. Trout flies, for example. Especially in your dreams.

Be astounded by what any feather can do.

~\*~

Mice, even snakes, leave their tracks in the dust.

Follow them, to their hideaway.

Knock at the entrance and enter.

Come home, explaining, "Last night my mind blossomed."

~\*~

Pulling into the barnyard, I find another paradox of spiritual discipline: the practitioner becomes simultaneously rooted in flight.

~\*~

By now, I've been away so long I no longer feel the memory.

How large was that spider?

If we had looked at each other, I would have seen. I was free to go home, even if it took another forty years to get here. March straight into that horizon? And then?

~\*~

In cloud wisps two soaring ravens turn about.

They wheel from great land in the sky.

The black rings under my eyes are gone.

~\*~

## Places of Return

. . .

**Y**EARS LATER, A FRIEND relates an incident of telling his wife his intention of spending the day in a favorite place in the mountains, countered by her question of what makes him return there. Even though he's a photographer, he replies by acknowledging that many of his writer friends have answered the question simply, saying it's the surprises that draw them back.

Somehow, as one of his writer friends, I find the word "surprise" in this context jarring. For surprises, one would be better served by trips to new locations, rather than returning to an old favorite. Novelty, rather than familiarity. Upheaval or intoxication, rather than purity or sobriety. Even so, as I consider my own places of return, her question becomes increasingly kaleidoscopic.

First, there's the very demand of naming a favorite place. In this context, he invokes wilderness, where return is a kind of pilgrimage. Here, return may be once or twice a year, if that frequent. I could counter that with an evening stroll, as I used to do along the canal bank at the back of the desert orchard, or sitting at the café downtown in the small New England city where I now dwell — activities that could take place daily. We could add to that an opera house or concert hall, museum gallery, or even places of dedicated labor: a studio, cabinetry shop, garden, kitchen, or laboratory.

Even, though rarely for me, shopping destinations: a boutique or farmers' market, perchance. A fair or festival.

So the question soon turns to a matter of one's intention. What is one attempting to escape or encounter? What is one leaving behind and what does one face instead?

For him, to speak of mountains means foremost the Cascade Range of Washington state, with many places we once shared. For most of us, entering wilderness means leaving a crowd of people behind, along with the human congestion of traffic and buildings; for me, it's often meant turning away from the office or endless tasks at home. In its place are rocks and water, wild animals, trees or desert plants and, if we're attentive, a sharpened sense of ourselves on this planet. This, of course, assumes we're entering wilderness in pilgrim mode, and not as an invading speeder on an ATM or motorcycle.

In this regard, a favorite place demands a degree of mental or physical preparation. One gets in shape to set out on the trail; one learns the music and story of the opera beforehand, hoping for an ideal cast to manifest its potential; one studies the history of art or learns to identify weeds from the seedlings just planted. One ponders maps or charts. Makes calculations. Checks the weather forecast. The surprises, then, emerge within patterns of expectation. A certain phrase emerges in a Beethoven symphony; it's been there all along, but this is the first performance to free it, at least for my ears.

One fresh tomato tastes different from the variety next to it. The world is rich and varied, indeed. In the wild, one strawberry tastes glorious, while one picked right beside it is bland. Who can predict? We go, open to discovery.

Go far enough into these places, and you're finally alone. Even at the opera or symphony, the experience is personal and engrossing. Going far enough also means a journey in time — five or ten minutes are insufficient; a stretch of boredom or inattention may be essential to experience what lies ahead. One crosses rough terrain or mud or mundane patches before the interest begins. And then, somewhere in the process, you're released. A epiphany occurs, or you finally come face to face with yourself. Either way, it's in this spot. In Biblical days, a stone would be erected to mark the occasion — and this, historically, is an origin of worship.

The table at the café presents its own variation on this theme — a time for observing other humans or delving into a range of pleasurable reading momentarily free of household or workplace distractions or duties. Telling of her days at a Quaker boarding school and mentioning its Collection Room, a young Friend was interrupted. "Collection? Like taking up an offering?" Or, for that matter, a room filled with exhibit cases? "No, a place to collect yourself. From all of the daily clutter."

Her question also asks, indirectly, just what makes a favorite place. To be a favorite, of course, means someplace we've already been, and thus a destination

for return. (To have an imagined favorite place — say, my new wife's perception of Tuscany, which she's visited only in descriptions and photographs and dreaming — requires journeys in the imagination; the reality of going in person may actually demolish all that's been cherished.) I find myself repeating a phrase, "the solace of favorite spaces," which he soon realize turns on a title by Gretel Ehrlich, *The Solace of Open Spaces*. That is, there is something comforting and healing within a favorite place. This, in turn, perceives this as a place of renewal. At this point, of course, definitions of favorite place diverge sharply. For some, it might be a plush recliner in front of a large plasma-screen plasma HDTV or a seat behind home plate at Fenway Park. This, of course, stands in sharp contrasts to our return to wilderness, a context in which the word "favorite" becomes inadequate. "Seductive" might be closer, or even "engaging," though neither quite hits the mark, either. Perhaps "transformational" comes closest.

In this sense, my friend speaks of those intensely personal spaces where we have found ourselves in a state of heightened or intensified awareness. Such a place is open, then — cleared of daily debris so that we might observe more clearly something each of us holds precious, within ourselves as well as without. That is, as the old Quaker hymn relates, "It sounds an echo in my soul."

As I've been insisting, "surprise" doesn't quite fit the experience. In returning, after all, we expect certain

conditions to be familiar. The trailhead is here, the cataract is just ahead, timberline will come at the end of the switchbacks. What defines these places has to do more, I suspect, with depth or richness, a recognition that we are always finding something new here. This is a matter of discovery and perception, or growth and renewal. It's a confession we don't have it right, and we'll never have it right, as far as seeing and hearing and understanding go. I'm missing something that's right in front of me; I'm always missing something. In the repetition of such a place, however, I arrive at a greater comprehension and completeness within the complexity of existence as it's defined in this particular context. Out of that may even come an embrace of responsibility. In this sense, the experience is more like a relationship with one's spouse or family than a one-night stand. (And yet, the temptations to stray also linger. Do we stick to the path where we're going, or venture off and possibly even get disoriented and lost?)

For a photographer, of course, the perception is essentially visual. Both of us are struck by the ways our work has becoming more streamlined and centered over the years; the more we return, the more we discern and appreciate. One telling detail expresses the unity of many others. You can finally say, "This is the essence" in one deceptively simple composition. Of course, we can listen or smell or taste along the way, as well.

As a mystic and writer, I find the act of revision is also a place of return, though I hesitate to call it a favorite place — too often, it's simply agonizing or

difficult. The surprises, though, come in the original drafting — the twists as the plot or logical argument develops, the words that appear in a character's dialogue or a narrative description, the structure that evolves to meet the demands of the essay or poem. The compression of two sentences into two words, or a more accurate or more active word in place of another. In the revisions, though, coming back to this place in the pages, the deepening perception arises. As they say, a writer's talent appears in the draft; his genius, in the revisions.

I would also argue that a favorite place of return unites what is timeless and fleeting. For me, at least, having a good trail available is essential to my mental health. The long walk to and from high school, when I was a teen, or through suburban developments later may have reconnected my body to motion — somewhat along the lines of a yoga session, for that matter — but the dimension of natural surroundings was largely missing: the timeless range of forest or running water or inquisitive wildlife, especially. (How lifeless so much of America becomes within its blocks of neatly trimmed rectangular lots and houses! Perhaps someone inside is watching television, as if trapped by programs confined to their own grid of scheduling and commercials.) In contrast, in the wild, having my feet on a pathway grounds me from the static buzz of the office or shopping mall or highway, roots me within the swirling flood of information of modern life, directs him back on my greater path, keeps me on course again. In my

work, as an editor and a writer, I've lived so much in a heady world of ideas or thoughts I find it good to get back to substance; turning the compost bin as my part of assisting with my wife's garden or trekking up the wooded hillside to the observation tower a few blocks from his house both serve this purpose. In contemporary society, it is so easy to be overwhelmed by so much — the noise, unending news, cell phone or pager. Without clearing your head (and your emotions), how do you know just where you stand in all this confusion? Your convictions and faith and underlying structure return.

Such a place has depth, even when it opens out into a vista revealing mountains a hundred miles away. This rock covered with moss or that fox that just flashed into the underbrush are a living contrast to cars parked along a city street or even the foreboding of some night roads in the country. There are clouds, wind, natural change. The creek overflows where last time it was rocky.

A place of return is also a place of expectation. We will encounter some of the conditions we desire, rather than searching futilely. We get there faster than trial-and-error would likely provide. Maybe we were even directed here the first time in confidence by a friend or colleague.

These places of return are also places of particular activity, and letting this happen is balanced by making it happen. In the wilderness, one cannot force a raven or an eagle appear, but one can make the effort of being

in place to observe it. The asparagus heads appear when and where they want in the raised bed where crowns were planted years earlier. Deep snow arrives, and one sets out on cross-country skis through the meadow.

To this list I now add Quaker meetinghouses. Though the act of worshipping in silent waiting is always remarkable, and often done in small "parlor" gatherings in family homes, the unadorned meetinghouses have become favorite places of return for him. What happens in the hour of worship is both timeless and fleeting, deeply personal and yet shared, and always unpredictable, even within the disciplined sitting. The act of stopping all motion — simply doing nothing — can become remarkably difficult. Close your eyes and look inward. Open them, and see how often the lines and proportions of the building are classically right; the clear windows admitting a portion of the surrounding environment. (I've come to savor the changing seasons in the leaves and branches outside, joking that my circle has the prettiest stained glass windows in town.) Gaze around the room at the unmasked faces. Here we are, in the stilled moment. Sometimes gathered around a small wood-stove fire. Sometimes listening to squirming children. Sometimes followed by a stroll through the neighboring burial ground, with its own reminders of nature and renewal.

~\*~

My awareness of the importance of forested trails of my own sanity and balance has evolved slowly. I see two parts at work here.

First is the aspect of locomotion. I could begin with the fact I've never been an athlete. As a youth, I delighted in speed — as in running or riding a bicycle — or in swimming, with its parallel of flying suspended in space. But I've never enjoyed the repetition of exercise for its own sake, gym class was a bore, and team sports have largely eluded me. Since I existed largely within mental activities, such as science or the arts, the idea of doing something that involved a mindfulness to my own body in motion did not register with me, at least until I took up yoga after college. I could add to this a recognition that I've also been filled with nervous energy and general restlessness. Sitting still — and focused — is something I've had to learn in the course of practicing meditation and attending Quaker meeting for worship.

Second is an encounter with natural history. Somehow, at an early age, I was introduced to geology, birding, tree identification and the like. I've also been interested in maps and map-making. Human history, too, which often turns up as discards in places returning to the wild.

What I've come to appreciate, though, is largely an esthetic response in walking through places of repose. If forest trails are the symbolic ideal here, I must admit they are not the only examples. Walking miles along the Atlantic on the outer Cape Cod shoreline, for

example, serves well (although walking on sand always presents an effort) or trekking above treeline or through wild meadow can be heavenly. Even a stroll through a wooded cemetery or a city park can be recommended. But I speak of forest because of its timeless nature, in both senses of the phrase; this is what this land would remain at climax, forever. Everything is in balance or harmony. There are, of course, seasonal changes, but these are within a rhythm or cycle of returning, much like the movements of a symphony played over and over. Somehow, this begins to merge with the rhythm of walking, which itself begins to pace my own thoughts and emotions. Nothing too rushed, too overwhelming: everything, one step at a time. Uphill or down, all within reach. Walking along a city street or even a country highway can induce some of the step-by-step rhythm, but the balance is off: traffic rushes past, always as a threat, especially at intersections; there's too much commotion or stimulation; my soul's not at rest. Look around and notice all the trash and discard, all the waste as a social illness. The wilderness, in contrast, is continually healing. "Come to the woods for here is rest," John Muir counseled. "There is no repose like that of the deep green woods."

~\*~

For me, the act of walking is a way of slowing down, to live at a more manageable pace. I've had good friends who have used running as their way of release from daily tensions, but I felt myself already speeding over too many details. I forget too much; exactly what did

she say, much less mean? Write me a note so I'll remember. Walking, then, becomes a time for observing and recollection. (So I often carry a small notebook when I go. Stop, scribble a word or phrase, and move on.)

How much of this grows out of my Boy Scout experiences? I was a member of a troop that prided itself in monthly long hikes and primitive camping. Looking back, I realize how many of those hikes began at their church in the city and wound out along railroad tracks or river levees; how many, too, wound up at the end of city bus lines. Not exactly high wilderness, but enough to instill a flavor, even close to home. Today, though, none of those hikes would get beyond suburban sprawl. I could contrast it, of course, against the week of backpacking on the Appalachian Trail or compass courses through the forest around Lake Vesuvius or in the bluegrass country of Daniel Boone settlement. Our scoutmaster, a toolmaker of mangled grammar and childlike sentimentality, conveyed his love of birds and trees and the land. How could one forget the outing that began with a field trip where a coal company proudly demonstrated how it leveled forest for strip mining and how its Big Bertha shovel filled a truck with each bite into the earth, only to be countered later in the day by time planting seedling pine in the pavement-like clay left behind, hoping that in another century, true forest might reappear, though never in a state approaching what had been destroyed. I carry that lesson whenever I enter forest.

Through high school and college, the forest largely receded from my awareness, although I now recall a few times of trying to recapture some of that experience in the woods surrounding Wright State University. Curiously, that was unsuccessful, in part because that woodlot was in its own way a kind of debris at the edge of development. More satisfying were the occasional outings to Clifton Gorge and Glen Ellen and John Bryan State Park nearby.

After college, I began to recover the experience in repeated walks along a strip of the Susquehanna River, partitioned off from downtown by a freeway; an old bridge, closed off to traffic, provided a pedestrian vantage over the water. A year later, I moved to a farmhouse, with a wooded gorge at the back of the property and weekend jaunts to mountain lakes.

My next move, to the ashram in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania, gave me a close exposure to forest. Frequent walks along an abandoned road we called the Deer Trail or along their own unpaved road, to the waters running from the neighboring lake, were seen as part of a larger spiritual experience.

My next move, to a small industrial city in Ohio, left me searching for corners of natural repose. If a stretch of railroad track was all I could find, I took it.

The next several moves, however, carried me closer to the wilds. In Indiana, our house sat against woods and meadows — and over caverns. In Washington State, although living in desert, I was soon dwelling in

an orchard and not far from the Cascade Range. Here, at last, I was truly hooked.

Only to be thrust back into a period I've come to call my Lost Years — in part because of their isolation from wilderness. I couldn't really find a suitable space along the Mississippi River or in the collapsing steel industry cities of the Midwest or even Baltimore, though a few reservoirs came close. Only during my sabbatical year of writing in a suburb, when I found the pine barren and a corner of the Gunpowder Falls to explore, did I recover. (What do I make of the littered wooded row along expressway construction to Reistertown or similar pockets?)

The past twenty-five years in New Hampshire reshaped my forest trails outlook. Initially, I made long drives to trailheads in the White Mountains, anticipating something along the lines of what I'd experienced in the Cascades. Over time, however, the focus shifted. Walks along railroad tracks beside the Merrimack River could be satisfying, or trails to the ledges overlooking Lake Massabesic at the edge of the city presented loons and beavers or even a possible moose. Why go further? Small spaces of wild close to home provide frequent reference to the greater unity. I even detect paths in the air the birds use to arrive at our feeders, as these experiences weave together.

~\*~

Another factor is that I've never even returned to Washington State

Or other situations I've loved too much

It's not that I haven't had familiar places of return, but rather that they are now rooted in my heart, more than my eye. In how many intense experiences, maybe she, too, confesses of some desire to return to familiar spaces — especially those we shared before parting? Whoever she is anymore. My quest for the spirit or soul leads, indeed, to somewhere in the mud or dust.

~\*~

I, who am usually quite restless, now admit, somewhat reluctantly, to having entered a settling. What happened to the desire to travel and explore? Now, come the weekend or a vacation, I prefer to stay close to home. Perhaps some of this can be attributed to the long daily commute, or even to those two years spent largely on the road covering fourteen states as a sales representative. Perhaps some of this also reflects the fact that I've had twenty-four addresses in eight states over the course of my life. Once, in the span of a single year, there were four addresses in three states. Maybe I simply want to feel rooted.

Even if I had the time and the money to travel, I feel a greater need to write or to work on projects around the house. Being a homeowner, after so many years of renting, also shifts my focus: a tour around the garden, observing its detailed changes, rather than a trek up a mountain.

I think of places I've dwelled in and experienced intensely, though it's now unlikely I'll ever return,

except in memory. From satellite photos, I find that many, including the ashram, no longer exist.

Other places I've visited intensely, if only once or twice, like the Olympics or cross-country spurts in a rented truck, may be savored a lifetime.

I live in a rich environment, one many consider a travel destination. I reside within a half hour of Maine beaches, sparkling lakes or forest trails, and slightly more than an hour from Boston. Even in my own small city, I sometimes catch a glimpse of the fantasy — a movie on a screen or a postcard. What am I doing driving or even singing in a chorus along the Charles River or the Public Garden of Boston? What am I doing beside a waterfall in the mountains? How is it that I am worshipping in a Colonial-era meetinghouse? To be in places of dreams, then, or the pages of a travel magazine. How seldom do I find a moment to enjoy this or to explore a bit more? Obligations press. Even so, maybe I've arrived in my destination.

Time, then, becomes part of the journey. And who can reenter time once it's passed?

###

## About the Author and More

. . .



**A** VETERAN OF four decades in the newspaper industry, Jnana now lives and works in a former seaport in New Hampshire. The four years spent in the Yakima Valley of Washington state all too long ago now provide the impetus and inspiration for *Kokopelli's Hornpipe*.

The name Jnana, reflecting his developing gifts of spiritual intellect and discernment, was bestowed a few years earlier while living in a yoga ashram in the Pocono mountains of Pennsylvania. In America, it is usually pronounced "jah-na."

If you liked this book, please tell your friends.

Friend me on [Facebook](#).

Favorite me on [Smashwords](#). My other Smashwords editions include the novels [Hometown News](#), [Promise](#), [Ashram](#), [Daffodil Sunrise](#), [Hippie Drum](#), [Hippie Love](#), and [Subway Hitchhikers](#).

Follow me on my blogs, [Jnana's Red Barn](#) and [Chicken Farmer I Still Love You](#), where you are definitely free to stop by and leave comments.

And keep up with my volumes here at [Thistle/Flinch](#). I promise each one will be unique.

~\*~

Thistle / Finch Editions



Dover, New Hampshire USA