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eBooks



THE ANTHROPOLOGY  
OF TURQUOISE

REFLECTIONS ON DESERT,  
SEA, STONE, AND SKY

**ELLEN MELOY**

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**THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF TURQUOISE**

## ***Winner of the Utah Book Award***

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“[Meloy] crafts potent meditations on the desert landscape.... *The Anthropology of Turquoise* explores Meloy's beloved Southwest—a region she knows intimately and describes with her trademark sharp wit.”

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“Amusing and intelligent ... the talented Meloy is a Southwestern voice to listen to.”

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“A book of great beauty under which lies a drumbeat of grief and passion for the desert. Meloy is a perfect, often hilarious guide. Trust her on any river. There are images in this book I will never forget.”

—Nora Gallagher, author of *Practicing Resurrection*

**THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF TURQUOISE**

Ellen Meloy received a Whiting Foundation Award in 1997. Her book *Raven's Exile: A Season on the Green River* won a 1995 Western Writers of America Spur Award for contemporary nonfiction. She is also the author of *The Last Cheater's Waltz: Beauty and Violence in the Desert Southwest*. Her essays have appeared in *Orion* and *Northern Lights*, among other publications, and have been widely anthologized. She lives in southern Utah.

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ALSO BY ELLEN MELOY

*Raven' Exile:*  
*A Season on the Green River*

*The Last Cheater's Waltz:*  
*Beauty and Violence in the Desert Southwest*

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THE  
ANTHROPOLOGY  
OF TURQUOISE

*Reflections on Desert,  
Sea, Stone, and Sky*



ELLEN MELOY

VINTAGE BOOKS  
*A Division of Random House, Inc.*  
*New York*

*For my parents*

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*For my brothers*

*For Mark*



~~I have always kept ducks, he said, even as a child, and the colours of the plumage, in particular the dark green and snow white, seemed to me the only possible answers to the questions that are on my mind.~~

W. G. SEBALD

*The Rings of Saturn*

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## *The Deeds and Sufferings of Light*

Words begin as description. They are prismatic, vehicles of hidden, deeper shades of thought. You can hold them up at different angles until the light bursts through in an unexpected color.

SUSAN BRIND MORRIS

*The Names of Things*

Winter on the Colorado Plateau has not been arduous, only a thin cold without storms, a lucid map of stillness. Caught in the abrupt instant of its rising, our faces take the tangerine of the sun, our backs dissolve to silhouette in the brilliant dazzle of its incandescent beam. The nights come less as a smooth pause than as a steep, enduring purity of eye-blind dark. The mesas creak and strain in the frigid air, audible only if I lay my ear to them. The colors on their flanks—terra cotta, blood-red, salmon, vermilion—bear the temperament of iron.

On these days of winter I climb to the top of a sky-raking spine of sandstone and sit beside a juniper tree.

The ridge runs from a crumpled mountain range in southern Utah to the Arizona desert, jumping a river along its way. It is an elongated, asymmetrical reef of Mesozoic sandstone with a face and a flank, two sides so different you think that you are somewhere else when you are in the same place. The face rises brick-red from a broad wash, nearly vertical but for a skirt of boulders along its talus. The flank is the crazy side: an abruptly sloped flexure of ancient rock beds tilted upward into a jagged crest. Most of the massive slab is Navajo Sandstone, the Colorado Plateau's famously voluptuous field of windblown sand dunes now consolidated into nearly pure quartz crystals. Against the steel-blue sky of a summer monsoon, the ridge bleaches to white. Moonlight blues it, and bright sun turns it pale cream or, if you are making love atop it, blush pink.

From afar the stone reef appears continuous, exfoliating here and there into flakes the size of small European countries. Look more closely and you will see that box canyons cut across its length, ending in deep alcoves. Smaller fissures run in unexpected directions, and narrow valleys hang high toward the crest, where faults have filled with sandy soil held stable by the living organism of a black cryptobiotic crust. Yucca, single-leaf ash, Mormon tea, black-brush, and other shrubs find purchase in pockets and cracks. However, most of the ridge is barren boned slickrock. When you hike it in midsummer, you are lightning bait. I climb it with markers, paints and crayons, breath hard, heart pounding, up the slope to the isolated juniper tree. It is the far edge of winter, no longer bone-cold, not yet spring's exhalation of green. The surface of the slickrock is neither icy nor warm, just touchable.

On my first winter days on the ridge, I bring watercolors and the hope that the hand of my brother, an artist who died outdoors with his paint box near him, will guide the tip of my brush across the paper, rendering effortlessly exquisite art on paper and a Zen-like serenity in my heart. Then I change my expectations and carry a box of crayons up the ridge to the

juniper tree. I blunt their tips with irresponsible yellow and the demands of green. I rub bold wild strokes. I shuck the Zen crap and try to obey Ezra Pound's advice to artists: "Make the world strange."

Finger paints will be next in the lineup of media and with their slurpy nonchalance release from the weight of a cerebral life—what remains of it, that is, for in recent years have suffered what neurologists call "a reduction in mental acuity." So far, it feels like a kind of carbonated brain fog, with perforations in memory that threaten to become air ducts. Because there is the possibility of an abrupt slide into chronic befuddlement, I thought it might be useful to acquire some basic motor and tactile skills, like pushing around gooey paint in mindless, repetitive motions, as preparation for that freshly vacated space that airy void between the ears.

On watercolor days I carry a field kit that belonged to my brother, a faded olive-green canvas bag that he slung over his shoulder when he went out to sketch and paint on the northern California coast where he lived. Over the years since he died, I have kept its contents intact: a tin of paints and camel-hair brushes, colored pencils bunched together like chopsticks and bound with a rubber band. A prism. A miniature pencil sharpener made to look like a shark's mouth. A sumi inkstone in a slender box marked by a column of Japanese characters and a vial once filled with water from a stream in the Sierra Nevada, where he and I often joined company in the summers. A Swiss Army knife and three orange juggling balls. From wherever he is—a ghost in his favorite denim jacket, a vapor hovering above me cross-legged on a cloud like a cotton puff, a mere slip of memory and thought—I want him to teach me to juggle, but mostly I want him to teach me to paint, to inform the movement of my brush across the rough blank of paper. I end up thinking more about him than about art, which is, after all, what I am supposed to do.

On crayon days I try to explode my hand, my eye, my past. For a number of years, in my previous life, I made a living in technical illustration, churning out laboriously stippled pen-and-ink drawings of bones, feathers, fish, and wolves; the orchid's calyx and the ear's canal and vestibules, which are the organs of balance; profiles of geological strata; maps of rivers and mountains; maps of islands known and islands imagined; diagrams of subatomic structure; meticulous renderings of leaves and seedpods, pebbles and aetites, stones with small clay cores that emerge when you break open their ironstone shells. By drawing these things I learned that sand dunes and the bends of rivers migrate and that stones could give birth. For relief from detail I drew cartoons, but they were not relief enough, so I painted barns. The idea of paints now, and of barns back then, is to leave behind those black-on-white, uptight stabs of a pinpoint pen and open my hand to a looser muscle of expression. I hope to make pictures like I walk in the desert—under a spell, an instinct of motion, a kind of knowing that is essentially indirect and sideways.

On crayon days I remember that burnt sienna and magenta pleased my mother because she loved Italy. Reluctantly, she bought us coloring books to go with our crayons. She was convinced that staying between the lines of factory-issue images only went so far before her children should think up lines of their own, on the blank white tablets she provided, and draw what stormed out of our little heads with the innocence of trickster stories. Crayon days on the ridge bring back the waxy taste of these bright sticks of paraffin and pigment. M

brothers and I ate them, even when we were old enough to know better—bit off a chunk of carmine or blue-violet or cadmium yellow, choosing gem colors over pastels.

“Orange is like a man, convinced of his own powers,” wrote Russian painter Vasily Kandinsky in his 1912 meditation, *On the Spiritual in Art*. On crayon days I have trouble with orange for its highway-cone authority, its Cheez Whiz intrusion. I am nervous about yellow, the preferred color of mental patients who regress to infantile levels. Raw umber seems overly shadowy, dutiful verging on paranoia. As a child I never liked raw umber. One of my brothers said it was poop, but we needed it to color the underside of Daffy Duck's feet. In today's box there are still those vain pinks, hungry greens, and crayons as blue as devotion. The power of profound meaning is blue, said Kandinsky, blue is concentric motion. Of red he wrote, “Red rings inwardly with a determined and powerful intensity. It glows in itself maturely, and does not distribute its vigor aimlessly.” The red I choose is the closest in color to the eyes of a goshawk.

The slender crayons and the round pans of paint in the watercolor tin scatter unlikely chips of pigment on the cream-colored sandstone. The ridge bears the palette of a numb moon. The winter sun's low arc casts ebony shadows of me and the juniper tree, whose shaggy silver bark holds up a rough-needled canopy of brassy green. I place a scarlet crayon on a patch of aquamarine lichen on the slickrock.

Not far from my post a large pothole cups a catchment of autumn rains. The pool of water is emerald in the shade, a lapis sky mirror in the sun. In it grow blond spears of dried cattails and, on its rim, a spiky cluster of prickly pear cactus—odd marsh and desert bedfellows in a miniature garden. Do not think of a cactus acting like a cactus, with its apple-green paddles and white spines. In winter the prickly pear hallucinates. Its spines glow red-gold in the angled sun, like an electrocuted aura. The paddles are nearly the color of burgundy wine.

You would think that these rich colors reside in the thing itself, that the cactus, the crayons, the lichen *have* their colors. But colors are not possessions; they are the intimate revelations of an energy field. “Colours are the deeds and sufferings of light,” wrote German poet and dramatist Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. They are light waves with mathematical precise lengths, and they are deep, resonant mysteries with boundless subjectivity.

Colors challenge language to encompass them. (It cannot; there are more sensations than words for them. Our eyes are far ahead of our tongues.) Colors bear the metaphors of entire cultures. They convey every sensation from lust to distress. They glow fluorescent on the flanks of a fish out of the water, then flee at its death. They mark the land of a woman deity who controls the soft desert rain. Flowers use colors ruthlessly for sex. Moths steal their colors from their surroundings and disappear. An octopus communicates by color; an octopus blue is language. Humans imbibe colors as antidotes to emotional monotony. Our lives, when we pay attention to light, compel us to empathy with color.

IMAGINE THAT you have no eyes and this is how you must organize your perceptual life: by physical contact. You sneak or crawl or ooze over objects in your path, perhaps crash into them or knock them over. You stick out an advance appendage to fondle your terrain, hoping to come across something edible or matable or both. You might slip your appendage up and

over the face of a cold, flat, steel plain and only seconds after severing that limb with bloody spurt think “razor blade.”

If you and your kind survive bruised foreheads, amputation, and impalement, particular cells may grow somewhere on your body surface, cells that become sensitive to light. Rather than form an image, the cells merely discern brightness from dimness. If, where these cells gather, your skin cups slightly, in a sort of lenslike curve, and if the cells form layers of rudimentary pigments, the cells will capture some of the light. Your nerves may translate the trapped light into information, perhaps distinguishing between something bright versus shadow, say the shadow of a giant killer hyena, and with your sensory awareness by remote rather than physical contact, you might have a few seconds to flee before the hyena eats you. At this point the pigments, photoreceptive cells, cups, and nerve impulses, already vast complex millions of years before they become eyes, are moving along the dense evolutionary path toward vision—toward color vision—as we know it.

When someone says they *feel* color, the serene caress of jade or the acidic bite of yellow do not accuse them of using illegal drugs. In primitive life forms the eye began as a light sensitive depression in the skin; the sense of sight likely evolved from the sense of *touch*.

The complex human eye harvests light. It perceives seven to ten million colors through synaptic flash: one-tenth of a second from retina to brain. *Homo sapiens* gangs up 70 percent of its sense receptors solely for vision, to anticipate danger and recognize reward, but also—more so—for beauty. We have eyes refined by the evolution of predation. We use a predator's eyes to marvel at the work of Titian or the Grand Canyon bathed in the copper light of a summer sunset.

The eye spreads light softly in the retina, across blood and long-stemmed nerves that resemble frilled balloons or leggy trees of bladder kelp. These nerves, called ganglion and bipolar cells, fled the cranium; they are actually parts of the brain that now live in the eye. Toward the back of the retina, light reaches intricately sensitive photoreceptors that sort out, for example, a red sensation from a blue one. One set of receptors, the cones, functions for color and daylight, or *photopic* vision. The other set, the rods, operates in shades of gray for dim light, or *scotopic* vision. *Eye and Brain*, a classic by neuropsychologist Richard L. Gregory, notes an accidentally metaphorical middle world. “Between the brightness of sunlight and the dim light of the stars is the intermediate light from the moon, giving uneasy *mesopic* vision which should not be trusted.”

Throughout time, without words, nature and the artist have best explained the interaction of light, color, and mind. I can look at a canyon shadow or a Byzantine mosaic and understand blue better than I understand a dissertation on the comparatively stubby quantum of electromagnetic radiation measured as  $4 \times 10^{-7}$  meters (blue light).

How does vision, this tyrant of the senses, draw someone to a piece of earth? What do the eyes rest upon—mind disengaged, heart not—that combines senses and affection into a homeland? Do the eyes conspire with other senses in a kind of synesthetic faculty, an ability to respond to the colors of place as if they were taste and scent, sound and touch? On walls in my desert home a yellow cottonwood leaf stings my tongue like lemon, the indigo and copper margins of the river in shadow inflict the bruise of a frail wind on my skin. Somehow in the day's prismatic clarity, even in the untrustworthy moonlight, these orbs of blood and

nerves understand that light is the language of the desert.

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For astronomers in India color was the domain of the deity Surya, the sun and single ruler of light. Surya controlled eight celestial bodies, each emitting a pure color to the earth. With each color came a person's destiny. Over two thousand years ago the Greeks believed that rays of light shot out from our eyes to the object beheld; our inner fire, conspiring with daylight, illuminated an external world. Another Greek emanation theory sent the rays in the opposite direction—tiny husks, or replicas, of the object entered the eyes through a “visual spirit” that flowed back and forth between object and beholder. Proof of the husks, called *simulacra*, could be seen in someone else's dark, glassy pupil, an eye that reflected the image of a mountain or passing clouds or your own face.

In the late seventeenth century Isaac Newton set up his prism and bent a beam of light into a fan of colors, launching the earliest scientific studies of color optics. Three hundred years later, science still seeks a full understanding of light's dual properties as waves and particles in conversation with a brain that devotes so much of itself to them.

In 1810, Goethe published his *Theory of Colours*, an exhaustive observation of how we see light, how we process a chaotic influx of sensory stimuli into perception. Goethe was enamored of the illusions and anomalies of color. His disciplined inquiry did not diminish his belief that the world read by our senses was in itself a revelation. Absolute knowledge, an explanation of everything, was not vital for joy or contentment, he wrote. “The highest goal that man can achieve is amazement.”

One of my great-uncles was colorblind. Eight percent of men have some deficiency in color vision, usually a difficulty in seeing red or green or both, compared to its rare occurrence in women. I worried about my great-uncle running traffic lights or confusing ketchup for jam. I wondered how he ate a gray banana or black tomatoes.

I wonder now at the luminous equatorial clouds, the ultramarine and turquoise sea, and the riotous colors of tropical flowers and greenery on the Micronesian island where few can see them, where true color is nearly missing from an entire culture. Oliver Sacks describes the concentration of congenital achromatopsia, a hereditary color blindness, in *The Island of the Colorblind*. The islander achromatopes live in a colorless but by no means impoverished world, Sacks tells us. They see variations in tones, textures, and brightness, a heightened sensation of what the rest of us call “gray.” Lacking functional cones, they find bright daylight overwhelming. For them light is pain. They move gracefully in scotopic times (dawn and dusk), trust the uneasy mesopic (moonlight), and night-fish and navigate by the stars with the keen practice of Pacific natives.

One of Sacks's colorblind companions in Micronesia, a European, describes how other children teased him because he could not name the colors on scarves, hats, shirts, and other pieces of clothing. To avoid teasing he memorized the colors of his clothes. He learned the “most probable colours of various things.”

Under normal vision the most probable colors of things do not necessarily match up with their names. Physically, eyes see the colors of the spectrum the same, but when we utter a term for a color, it is not the color's immutable property; it is the name of a *perception*. In the hands of language and culture, simple chromatic sensations acquire a kaleidoscope of reference and meaning. As writer Alexander Theroux suggests, color is fictive space.

When a name for a color is absent from a language, it is usually blue. When a name for a color is indefinite, it is usually green. Ancient Hebrew, Welsh, Vietnamese, and, until recently, Japanese, lack a word for blue. To name the color blue the Assyrians turned *uknu*, the noun for lapis lazuli, into an adjective. The Icelandic word for blue and black is the same one word that fits sea, lava, and raven. Goethe's blue is the color of "enchanting nothingness."

It has been shown that the words for colors enter evolving languages in this order, nearly universally: black, white, and red, then yellow and green (in either order), with green covering blue until blue comes into itself. Once blue is acquired, it eclipses green. Once named, blue pushes green into a less definite version. Green confusion is manifest in turquoise, the is-it-blue-or-is-it-green color. Despite the complexities of color names even in the same language, we somehow make sense of another person's references. We know color as a perceptual "truth" that we imply and share without its direct experience, like feeling pain in a phantom limb or in another person's body.

Within every color lies a story, and stories are the binding agent of culture. The color name *ochre* comes from a word that Homer used with *chloros* (a greenish tinge) to express the pallor of men's faces in the fear of battle. Amethyst comes from the Greek *amethystos*, "not drunk," topaz from *topazein*, "to conjecture," because the Greeks believed the gem's source was an island hidden by clouds and fog. I dip my brush into a pan of lacustrine blue. Five centuries ago lapis lazuli came from the Sinai or across the sky-raking Hindu Kush to Europe there to be ground into powder for painters of the Madonna's robes. The Maya mixed clay and indigo in a complex chemistry to find a blue that a person could take to the afterlife.

Until synthetic chemistry reproduced it, purple was among the rarest of dyes, a liquid squeezed from the veins of a small mollusk. One mollusk yielded one drop; extracting a single ounce of the dye sacrificed 250,000 mollusks. In Mexico the shellfish dye was pressed onto the cloth of the Aztecs. Mediterranean species of the shellfish produced Tyrian purple, a color coveted by Roman nobility. In the first century, Roman naturalist Pliny the Elder noted that from the sea nature yielded its most precious resource in the form of the shellfish with purple in its veins; from land, the silkworm and the cochineal insect, whose scarlet fluids were extracted for dye and in later times for cosmetics that tinted the lips of women red, a color that quickens the hearts of men.

ON A STRING of warm days I climb the sandstone ridge every afternoon. I am less in need of the crayons and more comfortable with the watercolors. I paint nonsense, but I paint. I dip my brush in water from a slickrock pothole and swirl it in a blue or purple cup of pigment in the watercolor tin. I think of my two living brothers, superbly talented artists who can teach me a thing or two about painting. One of them, once a juggler in a street circus, could show me how to send the orange balls into the air. I feel reckless and give the balls a toss, the balls foolishly chase two of them as they roll down the incline a quarter of a mile.

Atop the sandstone spine one afternoon the desert's calm is broken by a thick bass thud surging through the bedrock so abruptly that the juggling balls shake, the paint box clatters, the juniper tree shivers. An explosion of brown dust rises from a terrace about five miles distant, on the rim of the canyon that embraces the river. The dynamite calves a massive fragment from the terrace so that a gravel company can crush it into pieces, haul it off.



trucks, and unload it on a low-level radioactive waste dump far to the north, the legacy of Cold War uranium milling in the region. The gravel operations have taken an enormous bite out of an ancient seabed. They are mining the oceanic memories of limestone, the calcified remains of millions of marine organisms, to cap the toxic heat of bomb-making detritus. At the gravel pit the silvery-blue limestone, when quarried, exposes a flesh-colored rawness that is unsettling.

The weather turns cold for a few days, and I walk without stopping to paint. One day it snows. The next day the snow melts quickly off the exposed slickrock, swells the pools and potholes, and lingers on the north side of every bush and juniper tree, leaving a patch of white lace in each shadow. The wine-red of the prickly pear cactus reaches such intensity that I wonder how the plants will ever find green again. Late winter's sharpness still wraps the ridge in vibrant, clear air. Any day spring will catch me off guard, not as a slow enfolding borne atop the ebony carapace of a thawed-out beetle or riding a warm breeze, the gift from the depths of the Sonoran and Mojave Deserts to the southwest.

Some days, high on the ridge, with a seventy-mile view in all directions, I feel compelled to strike up an existential query and a lotus pose, forming profoundly spiritual questions and throwing them out into the ethos.

What do I know?

What is my place in the universe?

How little do I need to have everything?

What are the obligations of living a certain geography, of narrowing the distance between eye and beauty, of making the visible world an instinct?

Then—thank the river gods!—my feet fall asleep and I am wickedly distracted by potholes stair-stepping down the slope in pools of light, sometimes silver, sometimes turquoise or cerulean, like a necklace strung with luminous beads. One pool in the strand lies in a deep, cold fold of shade.

In this fold in the inert slickrock, water collects. Close up, too hidden to reflect the sky, the pool is emerald-green and as clear as a mirror, coated at its rims with a veil of hoary white frozen solid in a sunless place. Encased in the emerald ice are the bodies of toads.

One toad squats in a clenched fist of dusky, mottled skin. The ice paralyzes the tension of its coiled muscles. Another toad is suspended mid-leap, a slender athlete of olive green and tenderly pale limbs and flanks that are so white they are blue. The leaper stretches its slender legs, it holds its toes with a ballerina's grace, casting behind it a wake of air bubbles stilled by the cold into bright diamonds. Eyefolds hide its black, glassy orbs. Somehow the ice does not seem like a prison. The toads are charged with an intensity of purpose, the too-late leap made without regard for time or the quickened, raw tongue of winter that caught them. If the toads died, I think, they died knowing something.

On some days my paintings are as small as postage stamps. Others grow hugely into the size of Persian miniatures—steady progress toward wall murals, I hope. I load up the sun inkstone and write a story on a scroll of paper, making up my own characters: toads in ice, their colors then warmed and suffused with blood, finishing their leap when the spring thaw comes.

It seems as if the right words can come only out of the perfect space of a place you love. In canyon country they would begin with three colors: blue, terra-cotta, green. Sky, stone, life. Then some feather or pelt or lizard's back, the throat of a flower or ripple of sunlit river would enter the script, and I would have to leap from three colors to uncountable thousands all in some exquisite combination of Place, possessed by this one and no other. Between the senses and reason lies perception. At home or afield, that is where amazement resides, shunning explanation. Certain places, writes Jorge Luis Borges, "try to tell us something, or have said something we should not have missed, or are about to say something; the imminence of a revelation which does not occur is, perhaps, the aesthetic phenomenon."

I am not that presumptuous to think I could speak or paint or write the natural history of my home colors. I know only that they are to blame for intent and motion, for an asymmetrical journey of wonder and of trouble. Light can run a person's time and moods; it can explain everything. There is more to this bond than a cosmic flakiness, the experts say. The draw to certain kinds of landscapes is also biological. In *Consilience*, ecologist Edward O. Wilson writes: "People do not merely select roles suited to their native talents and personalities. They also gravitate to environments that reward their hereditary inclinations."

Neurobiologists suggest that a keen human sensitivity to color begins when we are infants. An aesthetic sense, an intuitive link between a chromatic band and emotion, can then grow as strong as a fingerprint, defying logic and inviting the helpless surrender of a love affair. Intoxication with color, sometimes subliminal, often fierce, may express itself as a profound attachment to landscape. It has been rightly said: Color is the first principle of Place.

On one trip to the ridge I stay until sunset. When the sun is low on the horizon, I set up my brother's prism on the rock and try to bend a beam of light. A precarious spectrum shivers on the pale quartz. I realize that I am looking at the universe backward. The rainbow must also pass back through the prism, recomposing itself as pure white light.

Beyond the ridge the river carves its profound canyon. My house sits a few miles upstream on a bench above the floodplain. I know a distant cliff to be the home of bighorn sheep that wear the color of the desert, making themselves nearly invisible against it. In the hundreds of square miles of wrinkles and folds of land around me, on mineral-varnished faces of sandstone, ancient farmers chiseled spirals and horned flute players, handprints, the tears of women in childbirth, and the figure of a man, three feet tall, whose giant penis hangs down to a body-width hole in a massive wall. If you crawl through the hole beneath that imposing phallus you swear you have had some sort of sexual experience.

In the sunset light mesas and buttes slip toward Arizona in painful crimson and faithless mauve. Colorado's brow lies on the eastern horizon, Prussian blue capped with lavender alpenglow. Aridity rules the air, weathering rules the rock, the shadows are as deep as time. This land was born at the center of old.

I put the prism in the faded canvas bag, slip the bag into the daypack with my water bottle and sweater, and hike downslope, off the spine.

For a homebody surrounded by the familiar or a traveler exploring the strange, there can be no better guide to a place than the weight of its air, the behavior of its light, the shape of its water, the textures of rock and feather, leaf and fur, and the ways that humans bless or mark, or obliterate them. Each of us possesses five fundamental, enthralling maps to the

natural world: sight, touch, taste, hearing, smell. As we unravel the threads that bind us to nature, as denizens of data and artifice, amid crowds and clutter, we become miserly with these loyal and exquisite guides, we numb our sensory intelligence. This failure of attention will make orphans of us all.

When I am nearly off the ridge, I see what I must paint. I will beg for the guidance of my brothers' hands. If help does not come, I will brave it on my own. On the desert horizon at dusk, where red rock meets lapis sky, at the seam of the union, runs a band of turquoise recumbent upon the land's great darkness. This color is transient. Before night falls, blue-green is the last quantum of visible light to pass through the atmosphere without scattering. It can draw a person right down to the skin of the world. The tidal pull of light can shape an entire life. Every heart-warmed pulse of blood and breath.

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## *Swimming the Mojave*

I used to wonder why the sea was blue at a distance and green close up and colorless for that matter in your hands. A lot of life is like that. A lot of life is just a matter of learning to like blue.

MIRIAM POLLAK

*The Listening Game*

When I was a little girl, I thought I was a boy. I thought I was stuck in a messy but minor anatomical complication that would eventually sort itself into a more certain gender. I did not think of specifics, like a penis, nor did I envy a male life. Rather, I wanted freedom from the horrifying prospect of Tupperware, voile, and a complexly wired bra with cone-shaped cups that made one's breasts “pert,” a term I associated with cheerleaders' noses.

I thought I was a temporary girl until I was nearly fifteen, though more or less hypothetically toward the end. I thought about my three brothers. I thought about being one of them. I thought we should be like a fraternal clump of bananas, even and alike, oldest to youngest, no bump (me) in the middle. When I was a girl-boy, I preferred stuffed animals, maps, and geography books to dolls, and I thought my teddy bear and I would never get to places like Arabia or the Seychelles fast enough. I thought I would never survive my own imagination. I thought about all of this, but here is what I spent a great deal of time thinking about: swimming pools.

Californians, of course, are born with swimming pools. When you are born, if your family does not already have a pool, one shall be dug while the obstetrician snips thy umbilicus. The High Sierra and cooler north notwithstanding, in the popular mind a swimming pool is Golden State furniture. From a jetliner flying over the platter of human paella that is Greater Los Angeles, if the glare bouncing off four hundred square miles of chrome and metal has not blinded you, you can see these birthrights behind nearly every house. The rectangles of bright turquoise swallow up backyard lawn space and send the palm trees to the front, along the avenues and boulevards. From the air the palms look like toothpicks with dreadlocks. All of this looks especially good if it is January and you are flying in from Bismarck, North Dakota. When the airplane banks a turn, the sun's radiant ball illuminates the glistening pools, changing them from Bulgari sapphires to opaque opals with a quickening surface of aquamarine moiré.

In neighborhoods built in the fifties and sixties, when pools were serious California totems, the lot-house-pool pattern follows the grid lines of street blocks, with everything squared off at their corners. The newer suburbs are loopier, with curving streets, ovoid cul-de-sacs, and houses with pools shaped like L's or kidneys or Stealth bombers. From the air you do not see the pools of the filthy rich— too much greenery hides them, or (I'm guessing here) commercial air traffic penetrates only the airspace of the trailer parks and methadone clinics. In gated suburbs under construction in the outer L.A. Basin and Mojave hinterlands and in h

boom cities like Las Vegas and Phoenix, the new houses rise up, the pools are filled and chlorinated as the Sheetrock dust settles, and the desert is scraped away in a naked shriek until time and trees soften it. On the gray-beige scars sit pink fiberboard haciendas, ribbons of ebony asphalt, and small islands of turquoise.

My father was born and raised in Los Angeles, my mother in the San Joaquin Valley. The first two of four children, my oldest brother and I, were born in Pasadena. My mother's family went back so many generations in California, I once believed that we descended from Aztecs—Aztecs cross-pollinated with Raymond Chandler, bloodletting Mesoamerican gods and kings with manic socialites—for a Chandler novel was how I pictured my father's boyhood in the City of Angels in the twenties and thirties. Never mind that he grew up on a fruit farm in a predominantly Quaker neighborhood.

In our family were women adept with diamondback rattlesnakes. When the snakes endangered their children, they put down their bridge hands, rose from the porch, and sliced the rattlers in two with a shovel. They skinned them with embroidery scissors, freeing from the flesh a prayer-thin membrane marked from neck to tail with vivid brown diamonds. We had uncles in the family tree who, legend said, were captured by Indians but freed when they gave the Masonic sign. We had great-grandparents who, between world wars, visited California from England and brought their cook. Somewhere in the ancestral gaggle, among the flax-wearing, mead-swilling rabble on the mother isle, we had (I hoped) a forebear named Clovis the Riparian.

We had a branch in the family tree with a trait known as Vague About Details and an entire category that should have existed by default—or so I imagined because no one would speak about them. To myself I called them the Unsavories. From parents intent on holding up models of virtue, I could never learn anything about any Unsavories, largely because they may not have existed or because no one knew much, so selective was memory against closing skeletons in favor of an uninterrupted lineage of accomplished beings fed from the civilized shores of Scotland and England to California, where as soon as they disembarked from the first-class cabins on the HMS *Crouton*, they began goodly lives of impeccable behavior. However, a child's radar for rebelliousness may elbow past a less romantic truth. Too often the lives of my relatives seemed to come as résumés. Stories described what they did, not who they were, and in this record they did university, business, ranching, and unselfish deeds and mildly eccentric acts. Unless they were distant in the ancestral murk, they did not divorce, drink alcohol, or suffer mental illness, or, as I would learn later in life, own slaves on a sun-drenched island astride the Tropic of Cancer.

One side of the California family lost walnut and orange groves in the Great Depression. The other side lost their ranch to an Army Corps of Engineers dam and reservoir. Before the Depression, in prosperous times, the Los Angeles family partook in a local tradition of Iowa Picnics, outdoor meals held all over southern California by the hundreds of Iowans who had migrated there in the early decades of the century. Long Beach and Pasadena hosted the most famous Iowa Picnics, but my father's favorite was one in the suburb of Ontario, where, he said, tables laden with plump midwestern food ran from the foothills to the town's center along the parkway in the middle of Euclid Avenue.

“Euclid was the main thoroughfare, a long, straight street with orange groves on either

side,” my father once recalled. “A lawn-covered parkway ran down the middle, shaded by pepper trees. The picnic tables ran single file down the parkway for a mile or more.”

Imagine such a fête on this avenue today: skid marks across the lemon meringue, pot roast with a glaze of carbon monoxide, drive-by, lip-synching toasts, crosswalk suicides that simply cannot be avoided. And no one knowing the precise location of Iowa.

The yards of my relatives grew gardenias as thick as hedges and tomatoes as big as your face. We had china teacups melted by the heat of the fires of San Francisco's 1906 earthquake—survived by my maternal grandmother and her family—and a basket made by a Yuki Indian woman before her tribe was diminished to near-extinction by what anthropologists called “factors of most unfortunate potency.”

Although during temporary girlhood my grasp of history was imperfect, I sensed that somewhere in the smog with Chandler's *Big Sleep* and the defense industry boom—perhaps the Governor Reagan, let-them-eat-cake years—lay California dreamland gone awry. To many eager lungs had consumed the ether of promise but not the careening hunger. There was no oxygen left. Instead of the geographical distinctions of southern, northern, or central California, there were what writer and Fresno native Gerald Haslam called “personal Californias.” Each generation, my parents' and my own, called its California the best California, and, according to the more cynical mantra of cultural decline, what has followed is “Place transformed into space,” urban generica with warm winters and endemic gridlock.

My family knew freeways but not turnpikes, red ceramic roof tiles better than shingle eucalyptus trees better than maples. We actually saw the Hollywood Hills, San Gabriel Mountains, and Catalina Island in the ultramarine ocean beyond the city, clear-sky views that reminded every presmog Californian why they lived there. Convertibles induced yawning rather than notice, and words like *palo verde* and *ciénaga* rolled off our lips. We ate artichokes back when everyone not from California thought of them as thistles.

Although we spent the preponderance of my childhood years living elsewhere, we always had a great deal of California about us. But there was one California thing we never had: swimming pool.

AS I DROVE OUT of Los Angeles on the Ventura and then the Foothill and San Bernardino freeways, I sought the appropriate metaphor of departure. The loud, separating, kissing suction of a cosmic suction cup. White noise at high treble, no bass, excruciatingly slow fade. The ping-pinging trajectory of one humanoid subparticle turboaccelerating through 15 million other subparticles *and* their possessions. The bone-jarring *whumph* of the wimp flung out of the swinging saloon doors into the dust on his butt. None of these images was very flattering, but I was not, after all, at an Iowa Picnic or nibbling watercress stems in some nonchalant blond bistro shaded by jacaranda trees. I was driving down a freeway.

Twice on this stretch a dense swell of moving vehicles pushed me right off the freeway onto an exit ramp not of my own choosing. I was trapped in one of the fourteen exit-only lanes, unable to move into any of the thirty-six through-traffic lanes because everyone was doing seventy with twenty-three centimeters between them, barely enough room for a well-oiled ferret to slip through without sliming the bumpers with grease marks.

Down unfamiliar streets I struggled back to the freeway, remembering the fellow who

entered an exit ramp that he mistook for an on-ramp and ended up facing all fifty lanes of oncoming traffic that stops for nothing. He crashed. He died. He was from Montana. I live in a tiny southern Utah town in the middle of an enormous, empty desert. You can fly from L.A. to Phoenix in the time it takes me to drive from my house to the nearest chain hardware store. In land mass my county is one of the largest in the United States, larger than a few California counties combined, and just this year it had installed its first traffic light. Out here, staring at the nether parts of a UPS truck, I was unpracticed, I was vulnerable.

Heading out of Los Angeles for the Mojave Desert, lacking the locals' sizable volume of cool, I did my best to concentrate. I did not wish to arouse the ire of people who can drive, wave, jeer, shave, shoot whomever they perceive to be idiots, talk on their cell phones, check their teeth in the rearview mirror, groom their poodles, and smash Montanans, all at the same time. A sea-green, fur-lined, patent-leather sport utility Bentley, as sleek as wet kelp, passed me one lane over. The expression on the driver's face told me to add blow job to the list.

I spent several days in southern California, and now I was driving home to Utah with a mission. My route between the West Coast and the Colorado Plateau would retrace familiar road trips in the early sixties. My trip would be a vindication, vindication of what I consider to have been a dire childhood deprivation.

We hurled down the highway in a station wagon as big as a cocktail lounge, my parents, my brothers, and I, propelled by the all-American notion that the pleasure of travel is a direct function of miles covered. The family was entirely willing and eager to camp every night—under a national park, in the backyard of a roadside reptile garden, in the middle of the desert with coyotes howling and the moon on our little faces—but we were overruled by my mother, who was not. A different edict came from my father: This family shall not stay at a motel without a swimming pool.

My father's Depression-era upbringing and economic sense made a motel with a swimming pool seem like an extravagance. No matter that rates for a motel with a pool differed little, if at all, from one without, or that frugality would never relegate us to the seediest dives. Instead, the Depression's ethos of fiscal restraint smashed head-on with the I-want-everything generation. Doing Without, especially anything considered frivolous, built character.

The full gamut of reasons—a tight budget, the hairshirt of Calvinism, a family story that has since been burnished to myth—is a declaration of memory, not fact. Day's end would come. We four kids unstuck our shorts from the seat vinyl and ricocheted off the windows, anticipating liberation from hours and hours of Balkans-style interaction inside the station wagon. We cruised past motels with happy children splashing in sunny blue pools until we found the only motel in town without one. And there we stopped.

The family budget and my status as a poolless Californian exacerbated my longing for those cool polygons of turquoise. I loved to swim. I loved swimming pools. Some four decades later, liberated from paternal principle and family dole, I plot my vindication. I will choose my stops like a road-trip version of John Cheever's story "The Swimmer," in which the main character swims home across the backyard pools of his suburban neighbors. I shall swim across the Mojave. I shall be a Californian with a pool all the way from Santa Monica to Monument Valley.

MY SOJOURN IN Los Angeles was not hell, as one might think it would be for a book-smart but street-dumb denizen of the outback, not at all a Tarzan Does Westminster sort of thing. My strategy was to adapt, to assume the laid-back L.A. pace. The L.A. pace made my laid-back home pace look like rigor mortis, so I had to speed things up a bit. I did not mind. In fact, I kind of got into just about every cool L.A. thing short of breast implants.

I went to a swank mall, where every thread-count-obsessed shopper in the place held me hostage to their cell-phone conversations. The mall's underground parking lot burrowed five levels into purgatory and I lost my truck in one of them. I oamed the cement catacombs for more than an hour trying to find it, convinced I would never again see the light of day. People who lose their cars here simply buy new ones, I thought. They have cell phones to keep in constant audio contact with their auto dealers.

In California, I found a hole in a chain-link fence and walked a piece of the Los Angeles River, a river sheathed in fifty-one miles of concrete, and the focus of "restoration" by a courageous citizens group that must convince people to love a river that looks nothing like a river. On a beach near Santa Barbara I swam in feisty surf and took walks on the beach. Treading water a hundred yards from shore, I stared back at the face of the continent, splendid and bold. On the sand, with my back to the continent, staring out to sea, I felt vast content to watch the sun set over the Pacific, as if all my life, no matter where I was, this ocean over this ocean was my Greenwich Meridian, everything set to its singular reliability.

With birthday money from my mother, who loves elegant things, I bought a set of blank books with handmade covers of a swirling cerulean peacock design and thick ivory pages that bore a watermark in the shape of an iris. *Papiro fiorentino*, paper from Florence, which I carry with me all over the desert and fill with notes, sketches, sand grains, cliffrose blossoms, smashed bugs, and salsa stains. I already had a shelf full of these Gospels of Wrath, the battered spines and corners reinforced with duct tape. The pages of each book were fat with scrawl about weather and personal anguish and quotes like this one from Ezra Pound: "At 7 I realized that instead of being a lunatic, I was a moron." I wonder how you say "duct tape" in Italian, I thought as I slipped into a freeway lane in front of a self-bailing Suburban stuffed with totally buffed rock stars. I was getting the hang of this.

During my California visit I enjoyed the company of fine friends whose grace and lack of complaint in their surroundings made me feel awkward and cynical and even envious. I envied their state's lack of an overbearing theocracy. I envied their libraries. They move through life in eager states of spiritual delamination, not just happy, but kava-kava happy. I knew that the self-righteousness of my wilderness, escapist life set against the urban crush was actually quite thin. "I could live here," I said to my friends. "I could live in California again." No one believed me. At meals they spoke intelligently of early Burgundian oenological monographs. I explained drip irrigation. Sea air and the presence of many, many succulent green leaves beautifully hydrated their skin. I looked like a desert lizard. I ate my organic arugula with my fingers, dopey and slow like one of those Jurassic leaf-eaters with the pin head and body the size of a truckstop.

I dined in a restaurant perched on a rocky ledge of coast north of Malibu. Squeezed into the quarter-mile-wide sliver of available land between surf and the precipitous rise of the Coast Range were railroad tracks, a six-lane freeway, a convoy of RVs and campers parked nose-to-



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