

Into the Desert

Image by Theodore Van Alst

Annie Lampman

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I am enfeebled by this torrent of light...Hammered by the sun, mapless in country but vaguely known, I am like a desiccated pit lying in a sand wash. Hope has become a bird's feather, glissading from the evening sky...Collapsing from heat and thirst onto the cobble plain through the blood shimmer of air, I was as overwhelmed by my own foolishness, as struck down by the arrogance in my determination, as I was overcome by thirst. Falling, I knew the depth of my stupidity, but not as any humiliation. I felt unshackled. Released. — Barry Lopez, "Within Birds' Hearing"

I came to the desert to see something new, something I have never seen before, something I would never likely see on my own.

I found it in the form of a desiccated frog—juniper-bark brown, long-toed feet arranged underneath it in repose, small snout of a nose, bony-ridged back, eyes dried shiny black—resting on the Mud Flats Guard Station floor. It—the frog—says everything about this place, a land of contradiction: a place baked harsh enough to suck all your bodily fluids dry, leave you husked and drifting, as insubstantial as air. A place that tears everything down until all that remains is its essence. Life in sharp relief. A deadly kind of preservation. A deadly kind of living. A drought-struck desert inhabited by frogs. A desert we will hike with pack rafts and paddles until we are subsumed with water.

I found it in the canyon walls reaching skyward in flesh-colored hoodoos streaked electric-green. In the heat-rolling plateaus of shale and sage, drought-shrunken trees spread like an African plain—sky and sun and bleeding rock veins, pink arterial flows.

I found it in the aromatic bushes of coyote mint, the fresh earth tang of sage, the newborn sweet of willow scrub, the yellow blooms of rabbit brush, and the red scatter of rosehips. In the rattler's black diamonds, the eagles' cliff-side nest, the six crows' whistling wing-beats, the lone canyon wren's grace-note, and the croaking of desert frogs above the slime-green pools we drank from—stagnant water rife with minnows and suckers, algae skins left boulder-bound, like frog hides stretched to cure.

I came to the desert to see if I could believe in it.

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Accustomed to northern Idaho's alpine landscape, the desert is nothing I've ever wanted to know before, nothing I've ever wanted to see. My husband and I always drive through at high speed, finding no redemption in dirt and sagebrush, saying: Who would live here? Who could love this? But I've been awarded a wilderness artists' residency through the Bureau of Land Management on the 50th year anniversary of the Wilderness Act, which means I'll spend over a week in Idaho's Owyhee Canyonlands Wilderness, writing and backpacking in a remote slot canyon with two BLM rangers and a landscape photographer. A week in the desert wilderness with three stranger-men.

"You're going where, to do what?" my husband asks, incredulous. Even though I grew up backpacking and have spent my life in the wilds, this trip feels different—the familiar suddenly unfamiliar, each consideration new. But I am eager to challenge myself, to see what Annie Dillard said "the Lover sees" in a land I have never thought of loving. Like me, many people think of wilderness as the beautiful wilds—mountains and azure-blue lakes surrounded by trees and dramatic skylines. Philosopher Denis Dutton explores this idea of landscape preference in his TED Talk, *A Darwinian Theory of Beauty*.

Consider briefly an important source of aesthetic pleasure, the magnetic pull of beautiful landscapes. People in very different cultures all over the world tend to like a particular kind of landscape, a landscape that just happens to be similar to the pleistocene savannas where we evolved...featuring open spaces of low grasses interspersed with copses of trees...the presence of water directly in view, or evidence of water in a bluish distance, indications of animal or bird life as well as diverse greenery...This landscape type is regarded as beautiful, even by people in countries that don't have it...

It's a provocative idea—that perhaps we find a particular kind of landscape beautiful because we are hard-wired to do so. Because we flourished as a species within these areas and therefore they became a matter of evolutionary preference. Survival instincts. The same influences that shape our deep fear of snakes and cliffs shapes our wariness of the desert's aridity and barrenness.

Yet over the centuries desert and wilderness have often been linked; even now the synonyms for "wasteland" are "desert" and "wilderness." Both are seen in terms of dualities: as places of spiritual threat, and places of spiritual protection. Places to tame by force, and places to conserve. Places of no use, and places of deep transcendental value. The language of the Wilderness Act gives this definition: "A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where

man himself is a visitor who does not remain." And perhaps this is the defining link—these wild, untamed places where nature remains intact, reminding us of our survival, of what we depend on, beautiful or not.

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After a seven-hour drive, I convene with the crew: Evan, a 43-year-old Wilderness Ranger; Dave, a 42-year-old Outdoor Recreation Planner; and Scott, a 65-year-old retired engineer and nature photographer. I sign a 20-page waiver form outlining all the trip's possible hazards, but really there are only two things I'm worried about: 1) being the only woman, and 2) water. It is September in the high desert and drought is a new western norm. Also, in not wanting to have to rely on the men for anything, I have come completely self-sufficient except for bringing a water filter—my one concession to gear consolidation. Only after I'm sure the BLM men have packed a filter do I relax a little and head for the warehouse restrooms but hesitate outside the doors when I find the women's restroom sign flipped over, its backside a scrawl declaring, *"In use by a male."* Seeing me, a male employee hurries over to right the sign, knocking on the door and sheepishly explaining that no women work here. *No kidding*, I think. I feel conspicuous even when I'm locked inside the women's bathroom stall, a bin of guy-magazines next to the toilet.

I'm thankful when the four of us drive separately the remaining two-and-a-half hours to the guard station that will serve as base camp. In between the men in their white, government-issued pickups, I speed over the flat, dry expanses, singing along to loud music, pumping up my bravado. I am alone with three men in the desert. The journey has begun.

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Despite the implication of its name, Mud Flats Guard Station is a dusty compound housing two isolated buildings surrounded by a high barb-wired-topped chain-link fence and rolling desert dotted with juniper and mountain mahogany. When the four of us park and get out, I'm struck by the crisp, lemon scent of sagebrush. It is the first thing I learn: the desert smells good—clean fragrances blunted by the earthiness of baked dust and the mineral smell of heated scree.

After we all unload our non-backpacking items, Evan drives me and Dave drives Scott the final leg of the journey—several more hours of empty dust-throwing desert roads spanning public lands and private ranches, roads that eventually turn into boulder-strewn paths that dead-end in a bunch-grass wilderness on the outskirts of Dickshooter Creek's slot canyon.

Riding shotgun with Evan in the lead BLM truck, I see firsthand the negotiations that are a daily part of this place. Evan stops to talk to two of three brothers who own an expansive cattle ranch that abuts the wilderness area. The first sunburned, wind-chapped brother drives an old red tractor down their road, dust boiling up around the shoulder-high tires. The older brother comes behind in an old flatbed pickup, two rifles resting in the back window, and stops to talk to us through his handlebar mustache in an offhand country twang that belies the serious nature of the interaction. He wants to know why we're here. Why it was necessary to take his road. Will that be the new choice for the BLM, for wilderness recreationalists, for everybody?

By "everybody" I know he means people like me—people who don't belong here. I cringe at being a woman "artist" from the University of Idaho in Moscow—an infamously liberal college town in a solidly red state, especially in hardscrabble regions such as the Owyhee. The rancher wants to know why we

didn't take the tribe's road instead since it provides access to our destination as well. But I already know the answer to that question. Besides the rougher condition of the alternate road and the longer drive, the tribe doesn't want us here either.

The Shoshoni-Paiute Tribe of the Duck Valley Reservation is one of very few tribes who still maintain aboriginal land rights within the US. Involved in the Bannock War of 1878, the Shoshonis and Paiutes took sanctuary in the Owyhee's inaccessible canyons. Because of the extreme nature of the terrain, the US military hunting them couldn't flush them out, and the tribe was able to survive. Because of this, the Owyhee Canyonlands are considered sacred to the tribe—a poignant reminder of the nature of their survival.

When the BLM told the tribe the first location they planned to take us as artists-in-residence, there was a small skirmish. That particular canyon was a sacred area full of spiritual and cultural significance, and as such understandably the tribe wasn't keen on it being used for our purposes. The BLM decided on an alternate location, but the tribe objected to it as well, arguing it too was full of cultural significance and they didn't want us there either. Finally the two parties reached an uneasy compromise, adding a new clause to the artist-in-residence paperwork, stating that as artists-in-residence, we would not take photographs, write about, or identify in any way any Native American sites that were a part of our trip.

Before we drive on, the rancher informs us there are sheep hunters in the vicinity, which is more cause for concern. It's the first day of opening season and hunters won't look favorably on artists-in-residence tromping around their hunting space, scaring their prey. I offer to hide if we run into anyone else, but that won't solve the real problem: nobody seems to want us here.

We crawl through shale in low gear watching for hunters, the tension high not only because of the ranchers or the tribe or the worry about clashing with hunters, but also because Evan realizes he's forgotten the radio battery at the guard station, plugged in to charge. We are on our own in this contentious territory. In terrain that seems like it's the antithesis of supporting life. Miles and miles of emptiness. So dry, to look at it I get thirsty. I wonder how they made it—those tribal members who took refuge in the depths of this inhospitable earth.

We spot what looks like some kind of structure in the midst of all the emptiness and eye it with a monocular, worried it's a sheep-hunting blind or a hunting camp, cautious until we can identify it as an incongruous five-foot-high rock cairn, strange in this otherwise featureless expanse. Perhaps the reason someone labored so hard to leave a distinguishing mark.

The cairn serves as a physical marker for the end of our drive and the start of our backpacking. After twelve hours of driving, I am finally in the middle of this desert wilderness. It's a sunny afternoon with white cumulous clouds and bright blue sky over blonde hills dotted dusty green with rabbit brush and sagebrush. You can see the imprint of summer's intense heat, of three years of drought—everything dead or so parched it seems as if the land hasn't seen water for decades.

Our entry point is one of only a few places that allow access down into the steep-walled slot canyons, access known by only a few people familiar with this remote wilderness. The pink-shale draw leads us into the canyon's arid depths where we make our way along Dickshooter Creek's dry-baked boulder bed. The line of past water is a ghost cut against rock walls—a white mark, a sluice of stones swept banking, a deep wash once filled torrent-high. Pools deep enough you could sink out of sight. A dream of water that once was. Mineral-whitened boulders shift and clank under our feet like bones. You dare not look up for more than a fraction of a second for fear of falling face-first into the creek's memory.

The canyon's dramatic basalt and chocolate rhyolite formations make castle walls reaching hundreds of feet high staggered by pink and brown hoodoos that rise like drunken cobras on either side of the narrow

canyon. I feel as though I am locked in the coiling entryway of a harsh and dry-heated underworld. There is no doubt—this is a land of intense spiritual impact. Wrapped in the heavy silence of stone, you feel the force of it, this otherworldly place winding somewhere below the things we know. I can imagine hiding within its depths—finding sustenance in its austerity, in its harsh, unforgiving nature.

It's big country—this Owyhee high desert of southwestern Idaho, southeastern Oregon, and northwestern Nevada. A vast place of open space a friend described as "naked and bragging with stars." A place full of contradiction and controversy. Even its name, "Owyhee"—an early spelling of "Hawaii"—is a contradiction: a drought-ridden desert coupled in name with lush tropical islands inundated with water.

Until 2009 when the Owyhee Canyonlands Wilderness was officially designated by President Obama—six desert areas totaling 517,000 acres and 325 miles of wild and scenic rivers—three decades had passed without any new wilderness areas added to Idaho even though it had more wilderness-candidate wildlands than any other state outside of Alaska. This new wilderness was a remarkable achievement because Idaho land-use issues are always highly controversial and public opinion is most often "wilderness, land of no use."

It took over ten years of negotiations between all the historic blood enemies—hunters, environmentalists, ranchers, "the tribe," the "government," power companies, recreationalists (split by motorized and non-motorized use), and the US military—before the wilderness was agreed upon and passed, but the unprecedented cooperation set new standards in wilderness designation, especially the collective preservation of "open spaces."

Defined by the cooperative maintenance of recreational zones, hunting lands, respected tribal grounds, wilderness areas, and large working ranches with grazing privileges, the goal of "open spaces" is for every entity to work in tandem with one another, benefitting everyone—at least on the cheeriest day of navigating the complicated quagmire of western land use, which is never simple or straightforward. Idaho's Owyhee Canyonlands Wilderness as a model of modern wilderness, of successful bi-partisan cooperation and effective compromise? You'd be hard-pressed to find a more unlikely candidate in a more unlikely state.

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We walk miles in the dry creek bed, boulder-clatter marking our passage. As anomalous as it seems, Evan and Dave each carry inflatable pack-rafts and paddles they use like walking sticks, yellow blades thumping down against crusted creek boulders in irony. I wait for the water to appear, but other than one slimy pool in the canyon start, everything is as dry as baked bone.

Evan, the man in charge, lays down one rule: *No jumping. For any reason, ever.* We laugh, but the safety logic behind the command makes sense. Scott's professional camera gear makes an unwieldy sixty-five-pound pack. Dave's backpack also weighs in heavy and the loose-rounded creek-bed boulders make for very treacherous footing no matter what load you're carrying. Earlier in the year, a female BLM employee made it in only a few miles before turning her ankle on the boulders and badly breaking her foot. A bad fall seems a distinct possibility but it's not the footing I'm worried about.

The day has been quite warm and it's already early evening; we need to hydrate ourselves and our freeze-dried food but there's been no water anywhere in sight. When I ask Evan what we'll do if we don't find water before dark, he says in a casual tone, "We'll just have to conserve." I'm taken aback. Conserve? I don't have enough to conserve, which means I will be dehydrated and hungry—no dinner

or breakfast other than some dry crackers that make my mouth ache with thirst. As we hike, I drink only two ounces of my thirty-two, preparing for the possibility of not finding water tomorrow either. I've experienced it before backpacking with my husband and three sons, ending up dangerously lost and dehydrated. I realize leaving my filter at home wasn't my mistake—the mistake was not packing more water.

Only the newness of this place distracts me from my worry—two dark-striped lizards scurrying over shale, a scrawny desert chipmunk and lone sage grouse, a scatter of miniature rosehips. Whenever I hazard a look up, I'm stunned by the lichen-streaked canyon walls, the flesh-faced rawness of stone, the heavy permanency of this brown world edged electric green.

Finally, in the day's last gloaming, we come upon a stagnant, scummy, thick green pool nestled into a curve of the canyon's wall. It's the worst looking water I've ever considered drinking. Only after I scoop it into my pot to boil and find it reassuringly cold, and Evan starts filtering it into our bottles, do I stop worrying.

In the dark, we settle into soft gravel above the pool, drinking boxed wine Evan surprises us with. Bats swoop overhead and a lone sucker touches the pool's surface over and over. Perhaps because the canyon this first night is strikingly beautiful and spiritual, perhaps because the boxed wine is surprisingly good, perhaps because we have the security of a scummy pool to drink from, I relax into this canyon's stark mutability, into the company of these men.

The air is cold, the canyon offering a lovely stretch of black-walled sky view. *Naked and bragging with stars indeed.* I lie awake in my sleeping bag reading Barry Lopez's *Within Birds' Hearing* late into the night, listening as crickets rasp and sagebrush and bunch grass scrape against my tent walls. The breeze sluices up canyon like a ghost echo of the creek, lapping against canyon walls, rushing on into the dark, and I too feel unshackled. Released.

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Despite the aridity of this desert land, despite the years of drought, despite all my previous worries, days two and three in the canyon start and end with water—and fish: isolated algae pools drifting thick with minnow clouds. I stop and watch them in wonder. In the withering heat and dryness, the pools shrinking to puddles and then shrinking to nothing, will the minnows eat each other in desperation, holding tail to mouth in a line of devouring, shimmering hunger?

We come to pool after pool, some so deep we would have to swim if it weren't for the rafts—these unlikely vehicles of desert travel. With captured air as a pump, we inflate them and drag them across stretches of hot, dry rock until we come to the next pool to ford. It is a delicate balance, these crossings. The rafts small, our backpacks heavy and unwieldy. Dave paddles Scott across, then goes back for all his equipment, making two trips each fording. With less gear, Evan and I make it in one trip, him kneeling in back of the raft, holding steady as I sit backwards in the front, backpack on, feet cartoonishly extended out in front of me. He paddles while I try to deflect our drift into the canyon walls. When the pools aren't deep enough to require the rafts, we wade through them, sometimes with water up to our waists, lapping at our backpacks. We try to find footing on rounded slime-covered rocks, try not to fall in and drown ourselves.

Scott and I are not successful in keeping upright. The treacherous footing—not the lack of water—proves the most dangerous thing after all. On day two Scott falls hard, once, twice, three times, pinned down by

his sixty-five-pound backpack, shaken from the impact of falling on rock. He is sixty-five and the going has been rough. I worry about him. I worry about me.

Midday, while attempting to help load our raft, Evan already balanced in it, I try to hand him his backpack, but instead stumble on the loose boulders, lose my balance, and with hands tangled in the pack's straps, do a slow-motion face-plant into a stinging nettle bush, whacking my head hard enough on a rock that a knot rises immediately.

The canyon's stinging nettle is like nothing I've ever seen before. Potent and jungle thick in thigh-high spiky bushes, it has already served as an irritant to Dave and me both hiking in shorts. We've learned to go out of our way to avoid contact with our bare legs, but this contact—all over my face and eye and neck and arms—is well beyond anything I've experienced before. I welt and swell, the small muscles of my eye fasciculating enough I can't see through the twitching. It feels as if I've been slapped hard across the side of my face—a numb deadness coupled with surprisingly intense pins and needles, like carbonation underneath my skin. My eye twitches shut and my head throbs. Stinging-nettle anaphylactic shock? As unlikely as that is, Evan is excited that he may finally get to employ the EpiPen he's been trained to use. As my face swells, the men eye me with concern, but tucked as we are into the canyon's steep trench there's no good place to stop, no place even to pitch a tent. So we continue on. I don't tell the guys I feel woozy and shaken, prickly and numb. I'm too embarrassed that I fell at all.

Finally, desperate for some kind of relief, along a particularly deep section of pooled water, I scale a rock outcropping and jump in. The water soothes my agitated skin and cools my pounding head, although the painful effects of the stinging-nettle face-plant last days afterward. I won't be able to sleep on that side of my face for several nights and a week later my face will still feel numb and leathery, the knot on my head tenderly sore.

As if the stinging nettle, loose boulders, slime-covered rocks, and steep cliffs don't offer enough danger, along one of the dry sections we walk upon a rattlesnake stretched long and dark against the whitewashed rocks. We see and hear others in the thick willow scrub we push our way through, branches whipping us in the face and tangling in our hair, impeding our snake-evasion abilities. This canyon is a place full of humanity's deeply instinctive fears: snakes and steep cliffs, dry land often without water or greenery, and confined spaces that don't allow escape. There is no way out of the canyon except straight up the impossible cliff sides. Perhaps why the most common animals we see are birds.

The watery trill of a canyon wren wakes me on the third morning. Later, a magpie and flickers fly over the high rim—no wood other than scrub brush for miles and miles. On the third day a murder of crows rustles by, cawing their dry-feather calls. And from the monocular, hundreds of feet up the canyon walls, we eye vees of white underneath dark openings—eagle or falcon cave nests. Then on the face of a lower wall, we spot the smoke-dark maw of a large cave we can access by scrambling up a scree wash leading to it.

Dave, Evan, and I go to explore. We hope the cave's darkness is from past fires, but when we get there, we discover it is only a covering of black lichen. Inside, on the powdered dirt floor, downy feathers left from a spring hatching drift from our disturbance. We can't find any feathers distinguishable enough to identify, but I imagine an eagle and her chicks recently peering out the rim as we do, taking in the incredible canyon view, looking for prey. Below us, Scott and our backpacks are small colorful specks on the whitened creek-bed boulders, dark canyon walls rising perpendicularly behind him. We sit in silence, taking it in, this place of mystery. I wonder if I could live this way. I think perhaps I could. At least for a while.

That night, as the four of us talk late into the canyon's dark, sharing in the intimacy of our life stories, frogs croak from the steep walls around us—frogs, at home in this drought-ridden desert land. One of the

species Dillard wrote about in her Tinker Creek pilgrimage. And how appropriate that they are here with us—their absence an indication of things gone terribly wrong, their presence an indication of landscape healing and health. Once a biblical pestilence, now a sign of renewal, a hope of recovery, bonding us together—these men and me.

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We hike quietly into the afternoon of the last day, making our way to the end of Dickshooter Creek's slot canyon, scouting for a good place to serve as our "up and out," but the canyon remains as steep-walled as ever. Finally, with no better option, we head straight up a scree slope so sheer I use my hands to climb, grabbing rock shelves above my head, worrying about snakes sheltering in their depths. In the midday heat with the climb's exertion and my backpack throwing my balance off in the slippery scree footing, I worry that I might stumble again, this time tumbling hundreds of feet down to the creek-bed below. I worry the same about Scott. One tiny misstep and the outcome would be deadly. I grow lightheaded as I scramble, cursing the scree skidding out from underneath my feet, cursing the hot, sharp rocks that bloody my knees.

Finally at the top, I join Dave, shucking off my sweaty backpack, breathing hard. We sit on top of a high shale plateau, everything so dry that the water hidden in the canyon below seems impossible. Anything living seems impossible. But the desert has proven itself to be full of life—even if it's a limited kind of life. Animals you can count on one hand. The same ten plant and tree species repeated over and over again. A land of surprises and contradictions. A journey in understanding—both external and internal. Open spaces we indeed share together—whatever encompasses our concerns, our aesthetics, our beliefs.

Perhaps more than any other landscape, the desert has proven a stalwart opponent to the destructive forces wielded against it, remaining untamed and wild, remaining a place *untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain* these fifty years after the Wilderness Act was created. Perhaps because the desert isn't beautiful, perhaps because it is so harsh, it has been able to remain the truest wilderness of all, pushing back against us until we retreat, skirting its boundaries, shying from it as a whipped dog cowers from its master. But it has fostered us and kept us alive just as it has left us beaten and blinded, gasping for breath. It nurtures us as it whittles us down until we submit to it—a force so much bigger than ourselves, so much more patient. It seems it can last forever, this wilderness. It seems it can outlast us all.

At least we hope so.

I see it with a lover's eyes now: this desert's deep, stark beauty. The way it allows for both death and survival, offering no apology for either. Taking as well as it gives. I feel privileged to have felt it, tasted it, smelled it, heard it, saw it. To have known it as it should be known—untrammelled by man. To leave it as it was. A memory of land. A memory of water. The surviving silence of stone.

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