



Learning Oregon Desert Autobiography

1.

Far from the car near Harney Lake, I stood with my father to study a zigzag petroglyph tapered to a circle knob held high. "Is it lightning?" I asked. He pointed behind me where a rattlesnake slid slowly into a cleft. I pointed behind him where another unraveled its coil to sidle into shadow. By the prickle on the back of my neck, I was learning to read.

2.

As she wove willow sticks peeled pale into the dream-shade for a cradleboard, a desert grandmother told me how when an infant sheds its umbilical knot, that nub is sewn into a tiny pouch of smoke-tanned doeskin and tied to a juniper limb in the hills. "Then that child, growing," she said, "will always feel home, pulling." In the silence after her words, I was learning to listen.

3.

Far from the car I stood with my brother on a dirt track leading through sage toward Glass Butte. Something had stopped us, something in silence had spoken, and we turned, oblique to study the horizon. The whole circumference roved unencumbered by the human, and as I gazed around, stillness was so deep I could hear sinews in my neck crackle, as if we were already ghosts come back to learn this way of belonging.

4.

I have been told in the time before, in the time before, in the time before, in winter a desert band might gather turning around a piñon pine by starlight, woven into one ring by arms on each other's shoulders, and dance that circle round and round all night singing a one-line song: *Toward the tree with pine nut cone seeds in the mountains we move about. Toward the tree with pine nut cone seeds in the mountains we move about.* From that story I hungered to know my way to bless.

5.

Leaving the car, I walked out onto the bridge over the Crooked River, the bridge where my brother

stood a long time, looking down, the morning before
he put a pistol to his head and left us. I walked
onto the bridge to look down, to try to see what he
had seen, that hard welcome of killing shadow
far below, luring him, promising rest from pain.
A breath came up from the canyon, cold and blue,
his pain right there. I must keep learning how to live.

6.

They say among some desert people, the Milky Way
offers the dusty trail to the other world a spirit follows
after life. They say it is danger to look directly at a whirlwind,
which might be a human spirit traveling. They say it is not polite
to point at a rainbow, nor wise to follow a butterfly. They say
it is wrong to gesture toward lightning, not safe for young boys
to be seen by too many stars, who are women, and might
bring them illness, desiring them as husbands. They say thunder
is a kind of badger who, when lifting his chin to the sky, and
bringing it down, makes rain come. So to learn, I look closely
at little things, and bring my chin down.

7.

Far from the car one night, sleeping near Fort Rock,
waking over and over to bristling stars, a bird singing
tireless, thriving in the little Eden of its song, singing its
one line over and over as the desert people did,
dancing around the piñon pine. Small witness
in a big place: I was taught the sufficiency of the spare.

8.

They say among the desert people a woman could be
shaman as well as a man. Her calling came through
a spontaneous dream. She was taught to forget
her power between times that gift was needed,
and to lead an ordinary life. Like other desert beings—
whirlwind, raven, butterfly, coyote—such a dreamer
would travel in obscurity, until something required
the transformation to shaman, then the resonance
would come. By this I learned how from the ordinary
you must rise into helpful dreaming—as dry trees
reach up eager into the storm, as the whirlwind rises,
as coyote wails to the hard stars.

9.

One time far from the car, southwest from Brothers,
as I followed a track old cars had made before they rusted
into scrap and joined a heap to be forgotten up a ravine
behind a ranch that failed, I came upon a post leaning
with two arrowed signs, one aimed south and inscribed
in faded script: *San Francisco*, and the other reaching north:

The Dalles. I looked south and north along that highway of dust,
where dull green sage ached to close the seam.

10.

Some desert people would say
Don't chase your soul, meaning Don't go too fast.
Or they would say, *I will pay you when I die*, meaning
At my funeral you will receive gifts. Or sometimes
to warn against outside tricksters, they would say,
*When Coyote arrives at a place, he speaks the people's
language well.* Or, *When walking in the brush, don't speak
the name of rattlesnake.* Instead say, *Little Waving One.*
And *If you don't dance, the bear will bite you.*
You say such things where only the stones listen,
but they listen with great patience and skill.

11.

South from Lakeview, a badger facing me
from a burrow, grey eyes dim with dreaming, not needing
to be fierce, so utterly in command. We stared, I the upright
child, and he the old shaman shouldering earth, lifting his chin,
then bringing it down as he backed into darkness,
shoveling earth behind him to close the burrow door.
I stood alone, as sudden rain began.

12.

They say some foraging bands would range
over the land, radiating from a known landmark-hub
toward a shifting periphery. No boundaries, only a center—
a spring, a mountain, a place for ritual—under the Pleiades,
Coyote's Daughters, under the moon, *Your Father's Father.*
They brushed dew from sage tips with the wing of a duck
into a willow bottle sealed with pitch, then ran to feed the children
bundled in rabbit-skin blankets in a shelter of brush open to the south.

13.

One time driving the Ochocos with my brother,
a two-lane dusty track to descend the mountain,
a swale, a cabin sagging forgotten, we pry open the door:
tattered curtains, kerosene lamp dry on the table,
shreds of purple velvet peeling from walls.
“How would it be,” my brother says, “to live here always?”

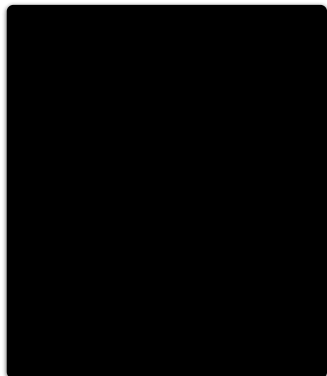
14.

They say when the people hunted, they hunted for spirit,
a matter of focus, of concentration on exact details
that include whole stories—a piñon pine that gives
everything, a circling hawk that sees everything, a river
in dry country that gathers all creatures into one living web,
rose hips beaded red and threaded on a stem of grass

around a child's neck for beauty at the dance.

15.

North from Grandview, far from the road when I was
seventeen, I sat all afternoon in the shade of an ancient juniper,
remembering the many-legged petroglyph old ones pecked
on that boulder near where the Crooked River slid into the Deschutes
before the dam buried that known center in deep darkness
and the sacred had to live in stories. Reaching arms around me,
the juniper was teaching me, with twisted limbs, contortions
I would suffer, reaching this way and that to obey the sun—
father gone, brother gone, night bird singing, badger
bringing rain, whirlwind walking a spirit home, and all of us,
all of us dancing around the pine tree chanting
desert words of blessing.



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