

Suspended In Light

David Dabney

Going “Away” feels like being in a great movie. Time seems to slow down, lines sharpen and colors become richer. My eyes are opened, guided as if by a director. Here is a tabby sunning itself on the roof of a sun-bleached car; here is a man with a cigarette, chatting quietly with his neighbor on an adjacent balcony. Here is a quiet moment in an old hotel room, a mote of dust suspended in a beam of light. The world is beautiful; my sight is restored. Of course, if I stay long enough, “Away” becomes “Here” and I stop seeing. I know “Away” and “Here” are the same, but until I learn to keep my eyes open, I must keep going “Away”, like a man turning around to see the back of his head.

The first time I went “Away” was to New Mexico after a college breakup. After a short visit with family, I borrowed my grandma’s Ford station wagon and headed North alone, bringing only camping gear and an atlas. Heartsick and hungry for meaning, I was another romantic looking to lose myself in the Great American West.

I remember Albuquerque being open, flat and tan. Contrasted against the robin’s egg sky, it was like God came to New Mexico and laid down an enormous pair of khakis and an oxford shirt. I hung my arm out the window and drove past the Sandias Mountains, with a sense of freedom that can only be felt by college-age road-trippers. I watched with delight as the landscape changed; the rocks turned red and the brush multiplied and darkened as I wound through the hills.

A few days later I found myself in a town called Gothic, 12 miles Southwest of Aspen. I headed into the mountains on a wide, even dirt road, surrounded by silent birch. I pulled into my campsite as the sun set, and was invited to a fire by my camp neighbor, a gregarious, athletic man in his late sixties. Joining him were two Oklahomans: a broad chested man with an easy

laugh, and a tall man with a steady gaze, slim, sturdy, with a strong nose and dark mustache. He reminded me so much of Daniel Day Lewis, I suspect I've superimposed the actor's face onto all my memories of him. As the light waned, we ate together and I learned about their lives. The older man and his wife were retirees living out of their RV, bouncing around national parks. The Oklahoman with the moustache had an even more interesting story.

The Oklahoman had been coming to Gothic since he was a kid, camping with family and exploring the shuttered mines in the area. When the land was being sold to the government for preservation in the 70s, he managed to purchase one of the mines. I think he paid a thousand dollars for it. "The wagon track leading up to the mines are from the 1800s," he said. "And because I own that mine, I'm the only person allowed to drive on it." He gestured to his Jeep, a 50s era vintage painted an immaculate cherry red. "My friend and I are headed up to the mine in the morning. You're welcome to join if you like."

I wasn't sure what to do. It was just the kind of experience I was looking for, but who were these guys, really? To make matters worse, I noticed the passenger side floor of the Jeep was littered with beer cans. I said a prayer, and against my better judgment I told them I'd come along.

The next morning, I hopped in the Jeep and we rumbled out of the campsite headed North. Not long afterwards, we reached the wagon trail and a locked gate. The man with the moustache pulled a key out of his pocket and unlocked it, and his companion held it open as we drove through. After that, he purred along slowly, waving at scandalized hikers as we went. Along the wagon trail, the hills were jubilant with wildflowers: red, yellow, white and lavender. He told me about his mine- a silver mine. Today, we'd shovel out loose rock that had slid down into it over the years. We continued upward, the smell of flowers mingling with the unfiltered exhaust.

Over boulders and ditches, up and up. We entered a half circle of mounts- a cul-de-sac of sorts- and he cut the engine. To the left of the Jeep was the mine, up a steep hill littered with loose rock. It was a slow climb, and by the time we reached the top I was sweating and breathing hard. I stepped out of the sun and into the cool of the mineshaft, giving my eyes a moment to adjust. The man with the mustache showed me around proudly, pointing to where miners placed charges, and fishing around on the ground until he found me a piece of silver ore and a hand-forged nail. The three of us spent the next half hour or so shoveling loose stone and tossing it down the hill as clouds gathered. A few hailstones fell, and soon we were being battered with dime sized pellets. I followed the men into the mine for cover. When I was safely inside, I turned around and looked out. The man with the mustache stood at the entrance, looking stoically out at the land, his rugged face silhouetted by the sun, with hail raining down around him. Time slowed down, and the picture sharpened. The image etched in my mind like a piece of film.

I stood there, transfixed by the scene and a sense of significance. *Someone is directing this spectacle, and I am peering behind the curtain.* In a moment like this, the plot of my life story is eclipsed by beauty. I am buoyed up and up by the goodness of Being, until I too am suspended in light.