



Dry bones.

Been through the desert on a heart with no name.



Sandhya, writer & musician

Nov 2 2 1



Desert is the only place I ever experience something like spiritual transcendence. I know, I know. This is so cliché as to be classic. Prophets, wanderers, and messiahs throughout history and legend have felt and said as much, many times. There's nothing new under the

sun--a glaring fact in places with no shade.

I have warily joined the gawkers at cathedrals, temples, and mosques around the world, sometimes impressed by the engineering and aesthetics, but never truly moved (except for just once, in the delicate, hidden, blue-and-white-tiled Paradesi Synagogue in Kochi, India--a testament, I think, to an endangered people's tenacious survival on earth more than to otherworldly concerns).

I have spent days and nights slightly unnerved and claustrophobic in damp brownish forests where I could only barely perceive the ground beneath the layers of plant decay, only barely see the sky above the tree cover; there I felt too inward and defensive to escape myself into the living/dying environment around me.

But in the Sonoran, the Chihuahuan, the Colorado Plateau, I become weirdly transparent. In these places that have been stripped down to an improbable and fragile survival, I feel cradled by the heat, as if by loving hands. I could easily join a nudist colony outside of Phoenix but never in upstate New York or a swampy Gulf of Mexico state. I was built to dissolve into sand and unobstructed sunlight.

Just about twenty-two years ago, we went on a weeklong Y2K river rafting trip in Big Bend National Park, shooting rapids down the Rio Grande in the daytime and sleeping in tents pitched in agave-strewn canyons along the way. Some nights the canyon walls were so high, we were plunged into near total blackness, save for a narrow sliver of star-engorged sky overhead. One night near dawn, a pack of wild horses thundered along the edge of camp, loud as heavy artillery, heard and felt but not seen, demigods who could have trampled us to death without breaking stride.

Our group's river guides had suggested a talent show for the night of our new millennium celebration. (The next day we would end our trip in Terlingua, Texas, and find ourselves slightly disappointed that the world hadn't ended overnight.) People pulled out guitars and sang soft-rock songs and Willie Nelson hits. Someone recited The Ballad of Casey Jones from memory. A disliked couple, know-it-all science professors from Knoxville, corralled some unenthusiastic others into a humorless improv game. My husband and a friend worked up a little juggling act using smooth river stones.

I had a moment watching this beloved man, thinking about our hard struggles just a few years into our marriage, and I knew, even then, that he was not the last love of my life, that we would succeed at caring for each other for a while, maybe even a long while, but then it would be time to move on. This premonition perched on my heart like a tiny sparrow and never left me, until decades later when it decided to take flight. That bird was a naked me hidden inside bourgeois normalcy and family stability, a me made of pure will and inchoate self-knowledge, briefly exposed in the desert and then hidden again until its time came.

This past summer and fall I have spent many weeks on the liminal edge of vast California deserts, driving to and from places like Loma Linda, Palm Springs, Temecula, Redlands. All these towns lie west of mountains and forest, but are dry, flat, hot, and sandy enough to hint at the Mojave waiting eastward, Joshua Tree to the southeast, Death Valley diagonally north. Cactuses and hibiscuses abound. Once you drive past the suburbanized little one-horse towns of this region, the entire month of August resembles a Mad Max set piece.

There in Loma Linda my task is to attend to my almost 85-year-old mother. She's on the liminal edge of death, her once overactive imagination drying out, her person shrinking rapidly, her needs reducing toward water alone. (Recently, though, she did eat an entire plateful of Swiss chard for the first time in her life and pronounced it delicious.) Her light brown face remains enflashed and almost unlined, but elsewhere I can sense the fragile nearness of her bones, even the ones she hides under five thick blankets while shivering in her recliner. In her youth she was an OB/GYN, and then for later decades a GYN only, with an intense mix of super-competence, imperiousness, kindness, and cracker-jack memory that made her patients adore her. The memory is going, as is the competence--she has begun to lose the use of her highly skilled surgeon's hands--and the imperiousness is hampered by dysphonia and mixed with just enough genuine gratitude that most people don't seem to notice it. The women and men who handle her health think of her as smart, tough, and demanding, but also sweet, and this is obviously a good thing.

She will not live to see the worst effects of climate change and increasing desertification of our globe, but then again, neither will I.

On my most recent trip out there, I had one night completely alone before the luxury of

spending several days with friends in nearby Palm Springs, shuttling back and forth between that living mirage and dullsville Loma Linda along the I-10 as if to a job. But that first night after a long day of flying and driving and *doing*--of hospitals and social workers and shockingly young physicians, of seeing my mother even frailer and more confused than she had been a month previously--I checked into a cheap motel room at 5pm and never left again, not even to get dinner. I stripped off my traveling clothes and got into the crisp bleached sheets, barely thinking or moving, ignoring the hunger pangs and letting a wave of pure desolation pass through me.

Life is very short. We are desert dwellers. The end of things is everywhere, better hidden in some places, but relentless and lurking. Don't get lost in the sands at high noon.

It took me four hours to fall asleep, and then I was out, dreamless, for ten hours. (Goodbye, East Coast time--I hardly knew ya.) By 7 in the morning it was already hot and sunny, and so dry the skin of my fingertips felt like paper. But the desolation had left me. I felt more present and alive than I had in a long while. Nothing mattered now except the practical, financial, medical, and emotional tasks required of me as I shepherded my mother into this last stage of her life. I put on my cheap sunglasses and narrowed my peripheral vision. I was on the liminal edge with a frightful and exhilarating awareness.



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Laura Lee Nov 2

Becoming a seer

in a sere land

so searing

soul shearing

blue clearing

true sharing

~Laura Lee

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