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Seeing Arizona

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WHISPERING WOODS

Joshua Mitchell

Actually, it is more a howl,
But through the double-paned, vinyl windows
It sounds as an impertinent child in church
Silently informing her friend that she
Is somewhere she doesn’t belong.
Her father is playing golf between the Scottie dog tees
At the base of a snow-capped volcano—
Has slept for a thousand or more years,
May yet awake in fury—
It demands the little girl and
Her father leave it alone
And stop all that infernal
Whispering.

SEEING ARIZONA

Jennifer Stanford

Dawn is just breaking as we bump down the dirt road in a rental car.
The lights of Mesa and Chandler are behind us now, and the craggy spires of
the Superstition Mountains loom ahead of us. The housing developments
bordering the urban sprawl have encroached further and further out into the
desert, until they cower in the shadow of the mountains; but there civilization
has come to a grinding halt. Some would say it is because of the Apache Indian
curses that blanket the Superstition Mountains, warning off all intruders who
would presume to enter there. Others, that the harsh, unforgiving wilderness
has averted further development. In minutes, we shall be swallowed up in the
mountains’ grasp like the houses, leaving technology and all the comforts of
civilization behind.

The desert has flattened out and now it is populated with low bushes,
still green in the early days of June. Saguaro cacti loom above the green haze,
their uneven spires stretching heavenward toward the faint purple sky. The
moon is a perfect pale disc to the southeast. Whoever said the desert was not
beautiful has never experienced it, I have decided. A roadrunner darts away
from the car and disappears into the bushes ahead of us. As Dad maneuvers the
white Chevy Cavalier through another washout, I wonder what the rental car
company would be thinking right now if they saw the road we were taking their
car down, straight into the heart of the mountains east of Phoenix, Arizona.

It is five o’clock a.m. when we pull into the gravel parking lot at the
base of the Peralta trailhead. There are no other cars here, and my friend’s
warning over the phone flits through my head. “Nobody goes hiking up there at
this time of year. This is when they pull bodies out with heatstroke. You guys
have forgotten what it is like here.” In the back of my mind I know she has
spoken the truth, and I wonder if the day will vindicate her words. It reaches
110 degrees Fahrenheit in the Phoenix valley in June. But Dad and I are not
dissuaded. Like nescient out-of-towners, we are taking our chances, entertaining
the illusion that we will somehow be immune from the consequences of
prolonged heat exposure and the possibilities of falling off a cliff face. I think
of others who have wandered into these mountains, some never to return alive.
Some dehydrated and others disappeared, swallowed up by this treacherous,
yet beautiful wilderness.

I have not been back here since I was thirteen, but I find the
mountains as vivid in reality as the picture I have retained in my imagination
during my eight-year-long absence. Our lives have gone on; we are different
people from the last time that we hiked this trail; but time has been suspended
in this wilderness. These mountains are the same as they were the day we left
them. I look over at Dad, sideburns speckled with gray, who is wrestling our
supplies into the army-green backpack. His life and career have taken marked
changes in these eight years; I wonder if I dare to ponder how much I have
changed. He is as excited as I to embark upon this adventure. We have ten
24oz. bottles of water in our pack, along with a first aid kit, and a twelve-inch
long butcher knife, with Dad’s insistence, to protect ourselves from the
unknown threats we might encounter from both man and beast, however unreal
or distant they may seem to me in the quiet peace of early dawn. The mountain
beckons and we answer its call.

The trail we should be following threads through a canyon with walls
of red rock rising on both sides of it. Very different from the wooded hills of
Washington, the jagged peaks surrounding it are solid rock and bare of
vegetation. However, we have decided to take a different trail that veers to the
right, and should take us to the same destination: the top of Fremont saddle.
We stop for a moment on the first rise to survey the view. In front of us is a
panorama of peaks and ridges running together in jumbled fashion. This is an
inhospitable land, more accustomed to the gentle tread of the coyote and the
slink of reptiles than the footprint of man. There is no sign of movement
around us except a hawk that is circling in an expansive sky, and I feel very
small. Silence pervades this place, and we can hear our own breathing. It is
cool now, and the first sunrays are coloring the tops of the ridges behind us.

Dad and I stand on the edge of a cliff, looking far down on a small tan
tape line that snakes through the bottom of the valley. If we had not decided to try a
new trail, and taken a wrong turn over an hour ago, we might have been down
there on that trail right now, on our way to Weaver’s Needle. But instead the
cairns we have followed have taken us up a deer path that was obliterated
on this ridge. The sun is gaining altitude fast, and we don’t have time to turn back and retrace our steps.

“That’s okay,” Dad says. “We’ll just cut across country and see if we
can’t match up with the trail.”

We are confident in our sense of direction, and so we head off into the
brush, blazing our own trail through the rocky terrain fraught with the chollas
and little cacti that look like they could grace a clay pot in someone’s living
room back home. The many-jointed leaves of the prickly pear sprawl among
the single-stalked barrel cacti that are in the last stages of their bloom. There
are saguaros too; the icon of Arizona and the substance of postcards. But these
wild giants surrounding us, some over one-hundred-years old, bear unsightly
gray scars in their waxy grey-green flesh, and their frames are riddled with bird
holes. The century plants are in bloom, parading their showy yellow flowers on
a single stalk taller than my head. Their base of succulent tapered leaves with
spikes up both sides look like overgrown aloe plants.

By mid-morning we sight the tip of the Weaver’s Needle. Its sharp peak
sticks up above the flat ridges, signaling that we are finally nearing our
destination.

“One more ridge to get around, and then we’ll be there,” Dad says as I
cling to a rock face that is covered in dry fungus. He has said this twice before,
and each time, when we had finally reached the ridge, another loomed up in front
of us, holding the Needle tauntingly just beyond our reach.

“You wait here, while I go ahead and see if we can get around this.” The
fungus looks slippery to me as Dad climbs ahead. I am only too happy to do
what he says. I watch the pack on his back flop back and forth as he teeters
precariously on his perch. Below us, a rutted canyon plunges hundreds of feet,
and one mistake will send him careening to his death.

“Oh God, protect him,” I breathe. For the first time in my life that I can
remember, my dad suddenly seems old. I realize that he’s not thirty anymore;
that magical age at which he used to seem always to remain—invincible—to my
child’s eyes then. He’s nearly fifty; what makes him think he can crawl around
on those rocks like he is twenty? I don’t trust his balance as much as he does.

“Watch out for those,” Dad says, pointing to one of the bases that is not
in bloom. “If you fall on that, one of those spikes could go right through your
chest and kill you.” I shudder and we move one.

We had been told the day before by a park ranger that the scorpions
were all underground at this time of year to escape the heat. The rattlesnakes
were all in their dens, and we wouldn’t see any gila monsters, we were assured.
I had seen a stuffed gila monster yesterday at a museum. The poisonous, bumpy-skinned orange and blue-black lizards can grow to two feet long, but are usually
nighturnal. Still, I keep a keen lookout where I put my feet anyway. I can just
imagine, as we wade through knee-high dried grasses, that a diamondback coils
there, ready to sink its fangs into my unprotected calf. I had almost worn pants,
but then decided shorts and a thick layer of sun block would be better. Now, I
wish I had chosen the pants as I survey my scratched legs. Cheat grass has found
its way into my socks and pokes my feet with every step. We stop to empty out
our shoes and I pull cactus spines out of my sole.

I can feel the sweat rolling down my body now, making little trails in
the dirt that clings to my skin. The taste of dust is in my mouth. Dad takes off his
pack so we can replace the empty water bottles in our hands with full ones from
our supply, and I realize that the whole back of his shirt is wet. This water is our
most precious commodity; without it, we would quickly be reduced to
hallucinating wanderers slowly forfeiting our moisture to the merciless sun. The
heat is becoming stifling. We have lost all sight of the trail now. The path ahead
of us is impossible, but we have gone too far to turn back now; neither of us
wants to waste back through the country we just came from to join back up
with a trail, and we are convinced that the shortest way back to the trail is
forward.

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“Dad, this isn’t worth it. Let’s go back,” I plead with him. But he has disappeared from my view, and I am left crouching on a hollow in the rock only big enough to rest my feet on, and I am wondering if any minute, with my legs falling asleep, I am going to plunge into that canyon myself. This mountain has dwarfed us; and we are left to its mercy. I crane my neck but the rock bulges out and I cannot see above it to where he has gone. I am left to ponder what I would do if he fell.

The maneuver over the rock face has shaken me, and I am still thinking of it as we crouch down to clear the smooth rock over our heads. I trail one hand across the white sand-papery rock streaked red and orange. I think of the pool ringed with palms back at the hotel, and for a second I wonder why we aren’t spending our time lazing in lounges around it. But that thought is quickly superseded with another: What handful of people in the world has ever had the privilege of seeing this raw, unadulterated desert that I am in the middle of right now?

We emerge from the rock shelf and we are in flat desert now. We still have the plant-life to contend with, but the cliffs are behind us. Birds are singing in the hot still air; I think they are Cactus Wrens. Another knoll, and we can see the saddle. Our pace quickens in anticipation of the long-awaited view. We see the lone pine first, just as it has always stood, gnarled by drought on the rock outcrop that juts into the canyon spreading out at our feet. Then Weaver’s Needle is in front of us, and all else becomes peripheral. From a small hill, in the base of the canyon, that narrow rock spire rises hundreds of feet into the air, towering above the long chains of ridges that stretch to the eye’s limit. From our vantage, it is like a needle; though viewed from the West, its spire turns into a half-buried heart. Named after Pauline Weaver, a famous mountain man who led prospectors into the area in the nineteenth century, it has long been the object of gold lore and legend.

A mountain ridge runs on the west of the needle, covered with delicate rock spires rising above the valley. I think of the Apache Indians who roamed these mountains in the 1800’s, finding this land’s brutality their safeguard from the U.S. military in the final days of the Old West. They have a legend that those rock spires are their ancestors, turned to stone during the waters of a flood in ancient times.

There is a breeze on the ridge, and thin clouds temporarily veil the sun. Our own voices are strange to us, in the great wide expanse of nothingness. We start to descend into the valley, still racing the sun. Now our water is too hot too drink—it almost burns my tongue—and we are counting bottles. It doesn’t matter, though, because we are almost there. This time we have a trail to follow, and our trudging feet kick up clouds of dust. All around us in the vegetation, the cicadas are droning. Bushes light off into frenzied buzzing as we approach them; the perpetrators are the size of my thumb to the first knuckle, staring at us unabashed with their bulbous eyes. They refuse to move, though we brush against the bushes where they cling. They are stubborn enough to persist through long summers in this land. We walk for another hour, until we have seen the sharp Needle spire transformed into a heart before our eyes. Then it is time to turn around. We didn’t get as far as we had hoped; the sun won the battle, but Dad and I both turn our feet toward home satisfied.

We are descending the Peralta trail, with its delightful familiarity under my feet. We are hot and sticky, feet aching and muscles sore. We fantasize the relief the pool would afford to us right now. The danger is behind us; nothing can happen to us now that we are on the road home, I think. We are carrying our last two bottles; the pack, now light, bulges with the bottles we’ve emptied today. The water sloshes in our bottles to the pounding rhythm of our feet. We cross rocky washes that are inundated with water in the springtime during flash floods, and little brown lizards dart from their sunning rocks into the bushes for safety.

As we approach a little valley filled with low trees, a stench reaches our nostrils. “Something died,” Dad, ahead of me, says. I don’t answer because my breath is caught in my throat. I breathe as shallowly as I can to prevent the contaminated air to enter my lungs. We walk another ten yards, and now the trail is wet in spots.

“Somebody must have been down the trail this morning ahead of us,” I reason.


“Ugh! From what?” My breath catches in my throat a second time and I’m preoccupied now with keeping my feet out of it. It stains the ground and the rocks black for yards ahead of us. All we can do is continue.

“I bet a mountain lion dragged a deer down here. It must have been still alive, or it wouldn’t have bled this long.”

“Today?” I wish he wouldn’t be so graphic.

“Yesterday or the day before. This is fresh,” Dad answers. Every step I take is in fear of running into the carcass. The boulders littering the sides of the trail turn into a crouching cougar at every turn. I know Dad is thinking of the butcher knife in the backpack, still wrapped in the plastic we bought it in. Mountain lions are supposed to avoid humans unless cornered or very hungry; still, we are wary. We follow the trail of blood until it veers off a steep place into the bushes, and is gone; and it remains one more potential casualty that we have sidestepped today in this brutal land.

Now every step we take forward carries us further from the wilderness that has been ours today. Tomorrow we will board a plane that will take us home to the Pacific Northwest, with only a camera full of pictures for proof of the country through which we have walked. Those pictures will attest the truth, because months from now, I know I will not believe what we have done. I can’t
decide if we should be heralded for our accomplishment or disparaged as fools. Probably, we won’t tell Mom about the rock face we clung to, or the eight-foot cliff we inched down on our backsides, or she just might not ever let us come back. Through the bushes, I can see the car, still alone in the empty lot. The sun glints off the windshield, welcoming us out of the 108 degree weather to its air-conditioned interior. So 8 hours and 240 ounces of water later, we take our leave of this mountain, wondering if we will ever set foot in it again, but knowing that we will find it just the same if we should ever again venture in its direction; a symbol of freedom and untamable nature. The wilderness has become ours today, but we have also left a part of ourselves here, to add to the long legacy of those before us. We have confronted nature and emerged unscathed this time, but we carry away with us a sense of how small and finite we really are.

Works Consulted


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**Donut Boy**

*Tabitha Jensen*

Donutboy17@aol.com. It was one of those mass mailings to everyone on your list. I could identify everyone in the “To” line: Sara, Jamie, me, Josh, Jessie, at@hotmail.com...? Oh, that must be that boyfriend of hers, Andy Taylor. But donutboy17@aol.com. For the life of me, I could not figure out who on Earth that could be. And it was enough to nearly cut my ties with sanity.

Google couldn’t find it, and neither could the Yahoo! directory. I wanted so badly to reply and say “hey Lydia, thx 4 the letter... btw who is donutboy17?” But for some reason, some invisible yet poignant reason, I knew I couldn’t do it. It wasn’t my place to pry into Lydia and find out the stories behind new friends, new adventures, and new loves. My fingers itched to graze across the keyboard, click send, and be content; but it was in that moment I realized not only did I not know Donut Boy. I no longer knew Lydia.

Like a Hollywood paparazzi-stalked power couple, we were best friend extraordinaires. We did almost everything together, and if we hadn’t we could still recount it in perfect detail as if we had. We lived each other’s joys and triumphs, sharing them as if our lives were meshed into one grand adventure. We shared the hurt, the breakups, carrying together the utter angst that was adolescence. Hours we logged into our phone sets, gossiping about our petty enemies and the scandals enveloping the student body. Partners in crime, shopping confidants, small town liberationists. Lydia and Ellie.

High school ended. We tossed our hats, drank to the moon, and vowed never to change. It was in our yearbooks, after all. Best friends 4-eva!!! It had to be true.

After I moved away, I discovered all kinds of new things to relay back to Lydia. To keep her in my world. The great tree falling of 2003. The scary cafeteria vegetarian alternatives. The 1 a.m. fire drills. I’d call and be cut off short, she was always about to be picked up by the boyfriend I’d never met or the friends I didn’t know she’d made. She’d call back though, sometime, yeah. Oops, forgot. Sorry. Maybe some other time.

It was as if cutting me out was easier than pasting me back in. Distance was too hard. I’d become inconvenient. Now I couldn’t imagine what she saw every day, or who she talked to, or what she learned. I know became I’d known.

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Closing my eyes for one brief second I hit delete, not out of spite, but because there was no reason to keep it. Ambivalence was a tough teacher, but if Lydia and Ellie were broken, I couldn’t let Ellie be shattered along with them. I could still meet brand new people and go to exciting places and do great things without her. And maybe someday, when she’d inevitably become nostalgic and curious, I could give her a little taste of them. Perhaps at that