

CIENEGA

A NIGHT ALONE AT THE CREEK



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I made this book with deep respect for the Tohono O'odham, Apache and Yaqui on whose land we live today. Only through their collective knowlege, perspective, and collaboration can we move forward in these beautiful lands.

Leaving my teaching job after fourteen years felt a little like dying. I started by giving away my belongings. Lamps, shelves, cushy chair. Everything must go! When I told my coworkers, some were sad, some were indifferent, but it was clear that soon my cluttered art room and my memory would fade like an echo in an empty hall. As they should. All things must pass—turn, turn, turn—but not all changes are noticeable or even perceivable. On the quantum level, an electron leaps from one energy level to another in 320 attoseconds. An attosecond is to a second as a second is to 31.71 billion years—which, by the way, is well over twice the estimated age of the universe. In contrast, The Santa Catalina Mountains just outside my window first lifted out of the Earth’s crust about 50 million years ago and have been sliding and crumbling back ever since. Over another fifty million winters and fifty million monsoons, will the granite fingers and serrated ridges soften until they resemble the mammary domes of the elderly Appalachian Mountains? We tiny apes have difficulty conceiving change in those extreme scales. We like ideas like change packaged nicely in bite-sized bits, painted bright red, dangled in front of us like a ripe berry. Impossible to miss.

Unlike most big changes in my life before, where I had tally-ho’d into the next chapter without a backward glance, I wanted to slow down and honor this moment, taste both the bitter and the sweet. It felt like a time for ceremony but, having little experience with formal religion, the idea that most attracted me was simply to be alone in the wilderness. And I knew that part of this ritual needed to be a cleanse: a spiritual and physical scrubbing followed by a rebirth. In her spiritually-packed memoir *The Fruitful Darkness*, Joan Halifax writes that “by emptying myself when I fast, emptying myself in solitude, I might discover myself full—of history, wilderness, and society.” I decided on a thirty-six hour fast and a solo overnight in the desert.



Gone Down to the Crossroad

My ceremony would take place in Cienega Creek—the eastern end, far enough out to feel truly alone, but not inaccessible. Cienega means wetlands in Spanish, and the annual presence of water here has given rise to towering cottonwoods offering protection from the interminable desert sun. It tugs at me like a blinking neon sign, a verdant tattoo disappearing into the waistline of the Sonoran Desert.

Cienega Creek has been used as a rest stop for humans for over ten thousand years and wildlife for even longer. Clovis hunters stalked mammoth here. Centuries later, the Hohokam established villages in the ciénega, using the creek waters to irrigate their fields. One of the main advantages of this small, isolated oasis is its location in between Tucson and the agriculturally superior San Pedro River Valley. As early as 1810, when Anglo soldiers swarmed over the Western landscape, troops from the Tucson Presidio along with “pacified” Apache would make frequent trips to the farming community of Tres Alamos just north of present-day Benson. Cienega Creek provided a brief respite along the hot, dusty journey. In 1846, Captain Phillip St. George Cooke led his Mormon Battalion from Santa Fe through Cienega Creek on their way to California. They scraped a rough wagon road through the landscape as they rattled West. This trail eventually became the Butterfield Stagecoach line linking the small pueblo of Tucson to the outside world. There were numerous half-hearted attempts to establish permanent stations in the creek, but nothing stuck—either the seasonal floods flushed them out or Apache raiders burned them out. Faster and faster sped the wheels of progress until the locomotive replaced the coach, steel tracks replaced the bumpy wagon roads, and Cienega Creek faded to little more than a dot on a map. A place to refill your canteen and not much more.

Just wandering along beneath the cottonwoods, you can see the remains of all these passersby. The smooth bowls of grinding holes lay buried beneath the duff as if patiently waiting for the next harvest of mesquite beans. Incongruous mounds hump up from the desert floor like the backs of whales with yucca blow spouts. Skeletal wooden beams and twisted metal lie abandoned for time to

dismantle. Yawning concrete culverts, cathedral portals stamped with the year 1906—before Arizona was even a state—still hold up the ever-present tracks of the Southern Pacific Railroad. Walking through the creek you can't help but stumble and trip upon human history. But despite all these intrusions, Cienega Creek has always been a liminal space, a momentary stop along a journey to somewhere else. My own stay there would also be that of a traveler. I would set down my pack at the oasis, wash my dusty face, and rest.

The hike into the back end of Cienega Creek is maybe a mile from where I park, but it's a bit of a bushwhack. Depending on which branching wash you follow, there are at least four or five barbed wire crossings, several tunnels, plenty of thorny mesquite and acacia, and a couple of rock scrambles to navigate. On an earlier day trip, when the vernal sun was just warming the south-facing walls, I came upon one such geological obstacle course. Boulders and the concrete ruins of some once-essential-now-forgotten railroad project blocked the wash. Straight ahead was an eight-foot drop. On each side, a jumbly staircase formed from chunks of rock the size of kitchen appliances. Normally I'd scramble eagerly down the boulders like Brighty of the Grand Canyon, but as I burro-stepped forward that day, the entire slope electrified. It was like a switch had been flipped and a current now pulsed through the solid rock. I stood there for long moments, dumbly trying to puzzle out the origin of the alien sound. And then I spotted them, wrapped and coiled on the boulders: rattlesnakes! Their eyes locked on me like tractor beams. The only way past was the eight-foot leap, so I quickly took to the air, praying the snakes wouldn't target me like surface-to-air missiles.

All this to say, carrying a fully loaded pack to the creek is less than ideal. But I also wanted to challenge myself. I wasn't going out to the desert alone to be comfortable, to recreate a semblance of home in an exotic landscape. I wanted to inch just a little bit closer to that knife edge of survival, to scrape away the modernity until I got down to that very first layer of simian skin, raw and thin. What did I really need to survive one night at the creek? Not much.

So this is what I brought: three quarts of water, a wool blanket, a tarp, a lighter, a knife, some paracord, a metal pot, and my

journal. For warmth, I brought some long johns, a long-sleeved cotton shirt, wool socks, and a beanie. Since I was planning on doing a whole lot of sitting, to be kind to a previous lower-back injury, I allowed myself my folding bamboo meditation stool.

I also brought two plant helpers with me. I was walking onto ancient land, an important waypoint used by the Hohokam, the Tohono O'odham and the Apache. It seemed disrespectful to come empty-handed. So the first plant helper I brought was pipe tobacco. I also brought a bag of looseleaf tea. Both plants would help keep me alert during meditation.



Take Me to the River

The walk down to Cienega Creek starts at ground level—dry, crackling Sonoran Desert—and quite literally descends into the earth. Storm after storm has cut deep trenches through the clay-rich soil leaving vertical banks sometimes looming as high as twenty feet. Deeper and deeper I descend, a katabasis like that of Dante, of Orpheus, of Quetzalcoatl, down to the underworld. More shadow than sun in this place. The exposed roots of mesquite trees above reach out like twisted, arthritic fingers, and the air fills with the fetid smell of rotting leaves. I half expect to find Luke Skywalker dueling his Darth Vader doppelganger. This is a place of life and death. This is a place you go to face your darkness. Mythic shit.

Through the bones of mesquites, I part the curtain of Spanish Cane and the dark arroyo suddenly opens into the wide riparian ballroom of the creek. Cottonwoods rise like ribbed vaulting, gracefully holding aloft domes and vaults of foliage flashing and flickering in the breeze. Running water stained orange with tannins winds serpentine through a sand and gravel stream bed. Every time I come to Cienega Creek, I am surprised by how different it looks. In the winter, the bare branches resemble a silver lattice inlaid with lapis sky. Today, the creek is almost hidden under a soft blanket of Rabbitsfoot grass, a name derived from its fluffy seed head. The non-native grass is beautiful, but decidedly not lucky unless of course you are a cow.

Annie Dillard writes, “Fecundity is an ugly word for an ugly subject. It is ugly, at least, in the eggy animal world. I don’t think it is for plants.” She goes on to state that she “never met a man who was shaken by a field of identical blades of grass.” It appears that I am Ms. Dillard’s outlier, because the amount of grass in the creek stuns me. I struggle, pushing aside mats of tangled biomass just to find the pools of water. This is a plague of plant. An invasion of organisms so adaptable they have spread across the globe like a green army, flowering, fruiting, seeding, and rooting.

The first home my wife and I purchased was a tiny Tucson house built in 1949 when suburban subdivisions were all the rage. The lawns then were seeded with tropical bermuda grass. More than fifty years later, views of watering the desert have evolved but the

devil grass remains, crawling crab-like in a rhizomatic frenzy. Time and time again, we would stand horrified at a wan shoot forcing its way through our concrete foundation, awestruck at the little emerald flags waving in the breeze under the eaves of our house after growing, undeterred, right through the walls. Fecund indeed.

I walk barefoot through the cool water, pushing aside the grass, and in doing so unavoidably launch thousands of tiny, pale seeds like armadas of Spanish caravels downstream to conquer the next bend. Cows and conquistadors. Rabbitsfoot grass and freight trains. Spanish Cane. The inevitable playing out of a rotten hand from a rigged deck.

Leaving a pinch of tobacco at the bank, I wash, pouring water over my body from an old camping pot. Gila Topminnow—or maybe Gila Chub—careen and crash into my ankles like teenage boys at a roller-skating rink. Smack! Zoom! And like teenagers they have not a care in the world for the grasses about to choke them out. The cool water brings me back into my pale body, sunlit by the creek. Today I am like them. Just a fumbling ape under a canopy of trees.

For my next cleanse, I was hoping to go a bit deeper: a home-made sweat tent rigged from a tarp, a cottonwood branch, and a couple of lengths of paracord. On the ragged edges of the arroyo I had gathered creosote, and now inside the tent I respectfully arrange the fragrant bundle into a small nest by my feet. This would hold the fire-heated rocks. Creosote is colloquially referred to as the “medicine cabinet of the desert” for its antibacterial, antifungal, antioxidant properties. Fuzzy-eyed and scraggly, Old Auntie Anti. It is an ancient plant, reproducing clonally outward from the original plant like a gnarled ripple on the desert floor. In the Mojave Desert, one creosote clonal colony was radiocarbon dated at 11,700 years old, making it one of the oldest living organisms in the world, born at the end of the last Ice Age. There is wisdom in this plant.

If the creosote Auntie was watching me, she would have had quite a chuckle at what shortly unfolded in front of her—although folded would more accurately describe the scene. In order to fit all 6'3" of me in the tent, I have to awkwardly bend and pretzel. The tarp, woefully and now obviously too small, barely covers my hulking form. Instead of a cocoon of blue heaven, the curtain languidly

flaps around me like the cloak of an old-timey photographer. I bang my head on the tree branch, burn my toe on a hot rock, and the precious, desert-scented steam quickly escapes out the gaps at the corners and edges. My abs seize up like a fist from the hunching and I self-eject out of the tent and onto the sand, gasping in pain. On my second attempt, I am able to conjure a slight gleam of moisture on my skin, but certainly not the weeping-pores, spiritual exodus I had hoped for. Wisdom indeed. I hobble, humbled, to the creek for a second bath.



Speaking with Trees

Sky full of cottonwoods swaying, shushing—are you listening?
Arms spread like a network of capillaries, breathing in waves.
Looking up, no land in sight. A sailor adrift on a sea of leaves.
Arms and legs outstretched like Prometheus.

Take me apart.
Take Me apart.
Take
me
a
part,
so that I may grow.

It isn't difficult to learn the song of the cottonwoods, as theirs is a loud voice and they sing in unison with all the plants and animals of the ciénega. The chorus is one long and sonorous cry:

Water!

I think about the mines sucking up our aquifers and pissing out contaminants. Like the mine planned for the Santa Rita Mountains just south of the creek.

Mines for copper. Copper for Stuff. Stuff for us. I think about the endless freight cars clattering through the preserve, regular like clockwork, pulling metal boxes through the desert, threading cities like beads on a steel wire. And the trains keep on rolling and singing,

RUMBLE RUMBLE STUFF STUFF

What's in those freight cars? Sheetrock, cell phones, cell phone cases, aluminum foil, shampoo.

RUMBLE RUMBLE STUFF STUFF

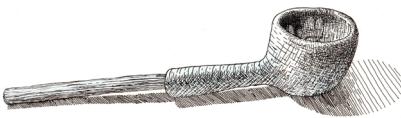
Wall clocks shaped like kittens, wall clocks shaped like wall clocks, leggings, bubble gum.

RUMBLE RUMBLE STUFF STUFF

The steel rails flex and vibrate for a good twenty minutes before and after a freight train passes. I shout back, my dry throat crackling like dead leaves.

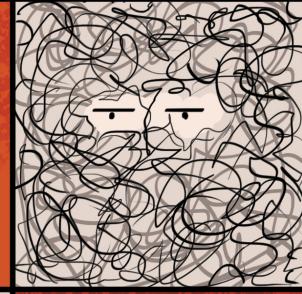
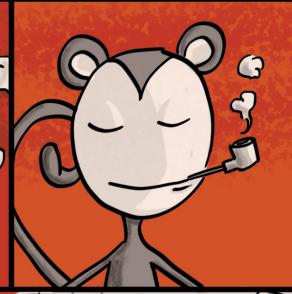
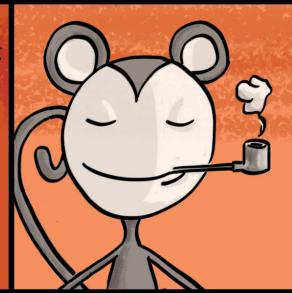
“Go mine the landfills and get your claws out of our mountains!”

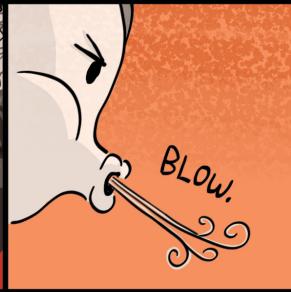
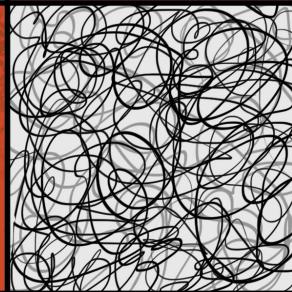
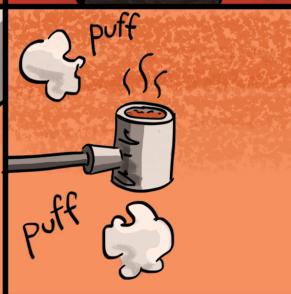
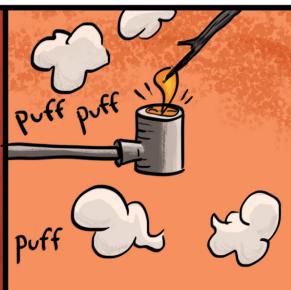
The sound of my voice surprises me.

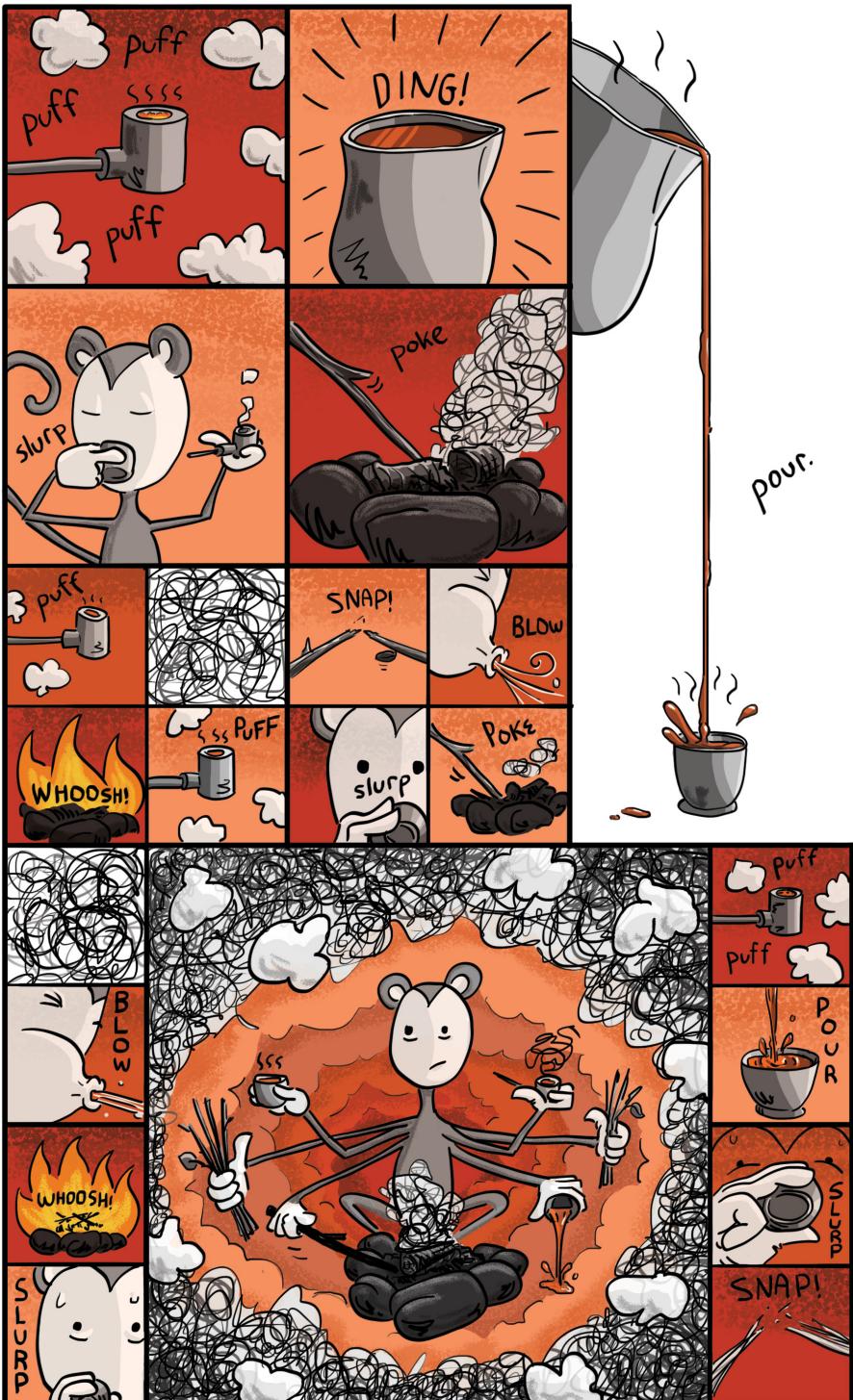


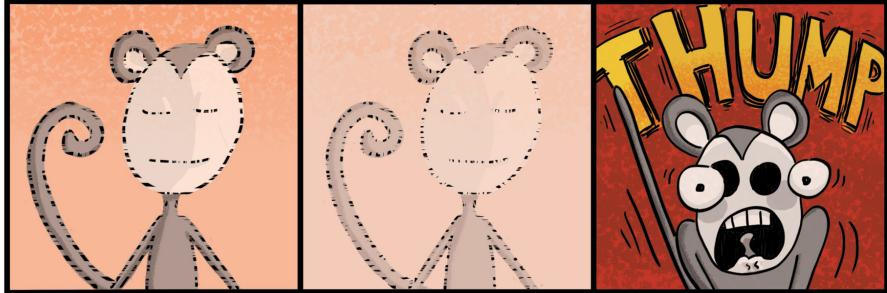
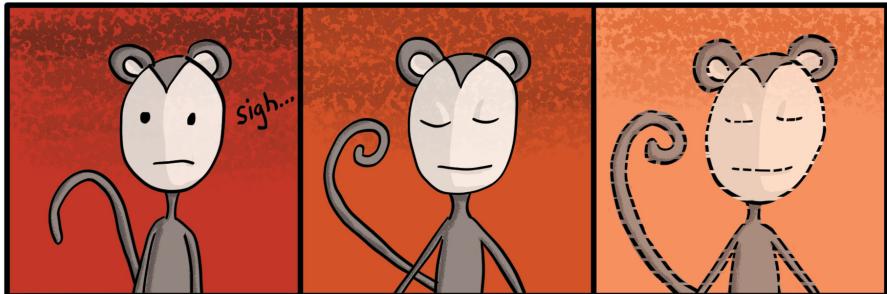
Most of my time at Cienega Creek is spent just sitting. Or, more accurately, just! sitting. In Soto Zen practice, shikantanza is the practice of just sitting, but in translation, the “just” is emphasized like a slap. To just sit is to meditate with no specified object of focus such as the breath. It is a heightened awareness (just sitting and nothing else) in which, as thoughts dissolve, so does the thinker. Through concentration and alertness, the self is dismantled and an awareness of non-duality, of connection arises. Of course the mind, like a herd of curious goats, inevitably wanders away, nibbling and tasting thoughts as they drift by. The goal then is to gently bring your goats back, and then let them go. Bringing them back, letting them go, until there are no goats.

In the last couple of hours of sunlight, I light a small fire to prepare my plant helpers: tea and tobacco. I set a pot of creek water on the fire to boil, press a few pinches of tobacco into a homemade clay pipe, and settle in to just! sit.











Night

In the creek, I am watching the last rays of sunlight guild the rabbitsfoot grass. Blades so thin they would disappear if not for the delicate embrace of dragonflies, shards of ruby and lapis in the fading sun. Insects are everywhere, the air thick as soup as thousands of insect wings are set aflame. And then, with a contented sigh, the earth turns to the east, pulling dusk over her clay shoulder. As the birds pack up, crickets and frogs replace them. Shift change. The night crew plucks and tunes their instruments, and I return to my blanket and stool, ready for the show.

In a lifetime of camping, I'd only spent one night truly alone in the wilderness. I was maybe a sophomore in high school, and the solo was not exactly intentional. My best friend, a few years older than me, was visiting home from boarding school. We had made plans to meet at our favorite spot out in the Connecticut woods and camp together. I would set up camp and he would join me later that evening. He never showed. Already committed, I spread out on a tarp and watched the night as it slithered in, slowly subsuming the highest hickory branches, squeezing around the cedars like a rat snake. Soon my world squeezed down to a 4x8' rectangle of plastic. And even though I had grown up camping on this land, despite having ingrained every hill and gully, every knob and cave, I felt fear bubble up from my belly. What was really out there when the sun went down? I wished for a shell, a carapace. I'd settle for a thick hide instead of this soft pink membrane between my mortal soul and the talons, fangs, claws, pinchers of the night.

So I did what any boy alone in the woods would do. I peed on everything, creating a mighty perimeter electrified with the scent of human. Then I did what any theater kid alone in the woods would do. I pulled out a penny whistle and began to play. The impromptu song was lonesome and legato. It wound around me and my tiny camp. It filled the empty spaces between the trees and within my chest. It rose high above the branches and into the sky and I looked down at myself in the darkness, a solitary teen with a tin whistle. And then, out of the fathomless black, came a reply. The weathered call of a barred owl.

“WHO-COOKS-FOR-YOUUU?
WHO-COOKS-FOR-YOU-ALL?”

I blew into the penny whistle—a call—and then thirty seconds later, a response! We continued our back and forth, the owl coming closer and closer each round until...nothing. I waited. Had it grown bored of me already? Then, against what I had thought an impossibly black sky, an even darker form passed silently over me, not fifteen feet away, and lighted on a low branch. We stared at each other in the darkness until,

“WHO-COOKS-FOR-YOUUU?”

The owl and I played our duet until, without a whisper of feather or rustle of foliage, it was gone. Off to catch a mouse or a squirrel. The darkness once again wrapped around me, but this time I drifted off to sleep, knowing that nothing in these Connecticut woods would harm me.

According to Arizona Game and Fish, there are currently 2,500-3,000 mountain lions in the Grand Canyon State. Connecticut doesn't have mountain lions. They are considered extinct, hunted out centuries ago. They are not even endangered in Arizona. Back at the creek, in the flickering light of my campfire, I am facing down night once again, and all I can think of is the thin skin on the back of my neck, the wide cracks between my cervical vertebrae, the buzzing electric Self lighting up my spinal column. Mountain lions are ambush hunters. They attack their prey from behind—a swift bite to the back of the neck, a thin tooth slipped between bone to extinguish the light.

In my ongoing story of Cienega Creek, I had been guiltily ignoring red flags, skimming over footnote references. But now, the sun sunk, I have reached the bottom of the page where Night crouched all along, her haunches wiggling, her golden eyes locked on my naked nape. What was I thinking? I had purposefully set up camp in one of the most popular desert watering holes in a thirty-mile radius. I had done this on purpose, and now I was scared that the townies would show? Silly monkey.

I find myself periodically whirling about as if I could catch a puma in the act of stalking me. HA! At which point the cat would chuckle and grin. “Shucks, you got me,” before shuffling off into the shadows for another go.

I used to say—partly serious, partly kidding—that being eaten by a mountain lion or a jaguar would be a good way to go. The idea of my death helping an apex predator was appealing to ponder from a barstool, but in the cool night air, with all that empty space behind me...I'm not ready to go, and certainly not in a claw-n-jaw melee! And where is that big stick I brought with me?

I sit. I tend the fire. Every now and then, I cautiously venture away from the fire and along the beach to collect firewood, white branches discarded like bones after a giant's feast. I return to my stool and I sit. Occasionally, a snap or rustle in the black breaks my vigil and I respond by breaking a branch of my own. Periodically, when the phantom feline gaze is especially persistent, I whack the whole pile of firewood with my big stick. And so, the night passes. I, a recalcitrant little monkey on the beach, while the fauna of the cienaga keep a respectful distance. Eventually I roll myself up in the blanket and tarp and, next to the fire, continue my night watch supine—more of a body dump than a bivouac. Aside from the occasional eviction of meaty spiders and Doberman-sized crickets, I am warm and content watching the shooting stars and the moon climb into the Eastern sky.

When I open my eyes, I'm spinning.

“Where am I?” I call out to the night.

No response.

Where am I? I call to myself.

I am floating beneath Indra's jeweled net, each gem reflecting my face and each point reflecting each point into infinity. A beauty too impossibly immense to be perceived. The universe undressed. Manet's Luncheon in the Firmament. Suddenly ashamed, I turn to the embered ruins of my campfire, the rumble of train, the surf-crash of Interstate, the song of cricket—each a vestment pulled over the infinite until I am back on the skin of the earth, on the bank of a little creek in the middle of the desert.

The night goes on until it doesn't. When dawn arrives, it is not at all like the flip of a light switch, but the gradual fading up of bird song and blue light. I don't believe it at first. I had tempered myself for a long, grueling night, a grapple with fear and fatigue,

but instead I find an embrace. I stay in my hobo cocoon, placing fire-warmed stones on my chest and feet. The tops of the trees glow, then ignite yellow gold with the morning sun. I made it through the night. I sing as I make my tea.



The walk back, up and out of the creek is quiet but joyful. I sleepily track my footprints back through the maze of washes, a story printed into the sand like the letters printed on this page marking passage. Who was this flat-soled, duck-footed man who came traipsing down through the desert? Here he slid beneath a barbed-wire fence. Here he stopped to empty the sand from his shoe. Here, under this tree, he stopped walking and stood facing west. This hole in the sand here was made from a walking stick. And the further out I walk, the more I realize that I will never be that man again. The prints just behind me, those aren't me either. The Me had been taken apart.

Finally, the sun glinting on my car windshield pierces the scrub and prickly pear. Dropping my pack, I turn back to my doubled set of tracks and to the emerald crowns of the cottonwoods barely visible over the cracked, dun hills. Down there, the creek still trickles, the fish still dart and the impossibly blue dragonflies still cling to invisibly thin blades of grass. And now the creek is in me too. Like the notes of a player piano, the song of the trees is printed into the very cells of my body, a message for me to deliver to anyone who has the time to just sit and listen.