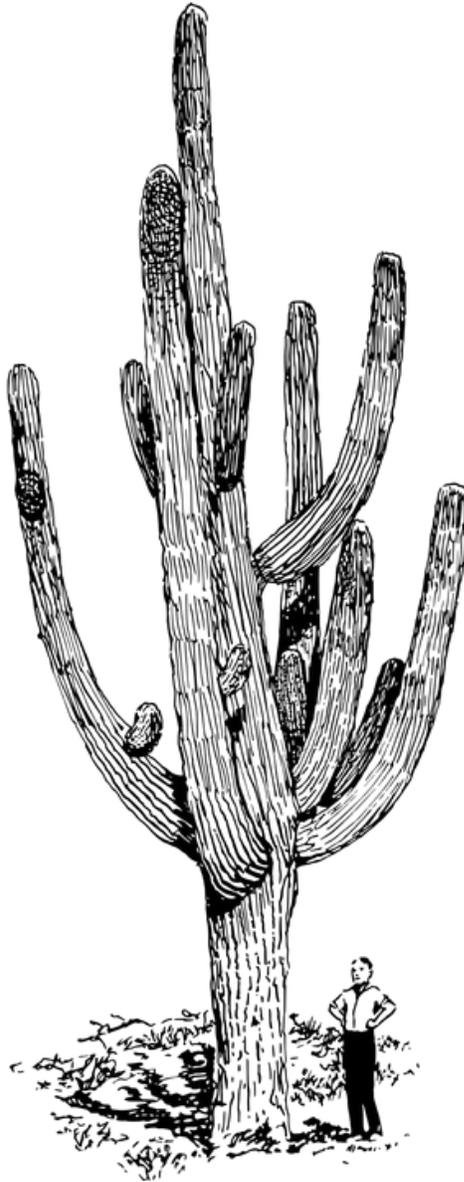


Notes of a Non-Native Son:
Narrative, Ecology, and Ethics in the
Arizona Desert



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Himdag

“Huntin’, fishin’, and lovin’ every day...” The lyrics of a Luke Bryan song broke the early morning stillness of the Rocky Mountains, Kyle’s alarm. Depending on the morning, one of us would wake while the other rolled over. Regardless of the order of operations, five minutes later we were both tightening the laces of our running shoes and padding down the stairs of our cabin loft.

Sometimes we knew where we were headed—a fast, five-mile grind to the mailboxes and back for mental toughness, or a specific hunting stand where Kyle expected to see elk. Other times, we just ran. We’d take a trail to Barry’s Cabin or the Bone Yard, and then cut hard into the woods. The obstacles of the forest formed our playground. We spun around pines, rolled under low branches, and leaped across sudden drops.

On trails we would settle into a steady pace, but in the woods we moved as fast as our bodies allowed, reveling in the sheer joy of motion. Then, in the middle of a sprint, Kyle would hear a rustle, and his body would freeze. I mirrored a second behind. His eyes and ears, trained from years of guiding elk hunts, always picked out movement quicker than mine. A herd of bachelor elk, a moose mama and her calf, a black bear.

Kyle and I were guiding for an outfitting service in Taylor Park, Colorado. The basecamp, a collection of pine-milled cabins at the foot of the Continental Divide, included hundreds of acres of wilderness that brushed up against Forest Service land in most directions. For us, that simply meant our feet could take us anywhere we wanted to go.

It was my second season at the camp, and Kyle's third or fourth year of guiding through the summers and into hunting season in the fall. The workday started with breakfast at eight and ended with dinner at six. In the fringe hours, we ran.

Several friends from college and I were training for our first ultra-marathon in October, so I came into the summer with a rigorous training schedule outlined. Kyle frequently jumped in, but his runs were dictated more by his desire to keep tabs on the movements of local elk herds than meeting training requirements. I logged my miles in the morning and evening, soaking up the sounds, sights, and smells of the Rockies—letting the steep mountain slopes shape my body with each stride.

I was looking forward to the race in the fall, but that wasn't what motivated me to leave my cabin each morning. Running these mountains had become a liturgy the previous summer, a ritual of physical prayer I was eager to reinstate. The sacrifice of sweat and spent muscles prepared my spirit to encounter the surrounding peaks and rivers in a way that even a backpacking trip did not.

My pounding pulse was the currency in which the mountains and I dealt. Each morning, I offered this small payment in exchange for access to sacred spaces. Like leaving a tobacco leaf in exchange for a medicinal plant, the mountains didn't need my silent suffering, but the gifts I received here, peace and beauty, challenge and humility, seemed to require an offering in exchange.

Weekday runs ranged from thirty to ninety minutes, enough, over the course of two summers, to thoroughly explore my surroundings. With each mile, I came to

know the groves of trees, muddy trails, and breathtaking views, not as objects, but as friends. I knew where the strawberries would come in thick in August because I had wandered among them in May. I discovered where I could hear the wind rustle through Aspen leaves as well as pine needles, and was saddened when these giants fell in a July thunderstorm. I learned where Illinois Creek eddied, creating a pool to soak my tired muscles, and traced hidden game trails through the woods. And I learned that all of these were alive.

In a group, Kyle tends to keep his thoughts to himself, but from time to time on our runs, he would tell me how a certain ray of sunlight striking a leaf the day before had spoken to him. When we drove into Gunnison for supplies he saw a family of foxes and wondered aloud as we fell asleep that night, what might they have been trying to communicate? For Kyle, a run or a hunt, was more than an activity. It was a conversation.

Longer weekend runs drew me even further into the wilderness, and as my body adjusted to the altitude and exertion, the familiar rhythm of my steps became background noise. My ears were opening to this conversation. For three or four hours at a time, I eagerly searched the banks of Texas Creek for those articulate glints of water. I finished each run, exhausted, but invigorated. Next week I would return and press two miles further. What might I hear, see, experience then?

Unlike the ATVs and dirt bikes that sometimes passed me on these trails, I felt I was not seeking nature; I was taking part in it. The cost of my movement was not externalized. I knew it and earned it with each step. Like the elk and pika that called these hills home, I was not a visitor. The rhythm of my daily life, a spiritual

and physical need that found fulfillment in this liturgy of flesh and bone, situated me here, and whatever was happening, unfolding in this space, involved me.

Each run drew new voices into the conversation. Soon, I was not repeating Texas Creek alone, another guide, Ben, was sketching a route that would trade the one hour drive to Crested Butte for an ascent of Mount Jenkins followed by a 16-mile run into town along Cement Creek. An hour before we left, our friend Grace borrowed a mountain bike, threw it in the truck bed and joined us for the journey. By the time we arrived in town, the sun had long since set, and every storefront was closed. We bummed a ride back to camp without disappointment. We hadn't come for food or entertainment. We came for the conversation—the dialogue of open eyes and exhalation.

Two weeks later, Kyle, Ben, and I set our sights on Buena Vista. We exchanged the familiar roads of Cottonwood Pass for a trek up and over Mount Ann. Over the course of the summer, we had run Ann three or four times, and a friendly competition ensued to see who could cover the thirteen-mile trip fastest after dinner. This time we ran together, pausing once we crossed the summit to walk the banks of Lake Ann, a hidden pool surrounded by wildflowers. We had glimpsed it from the peak before, but now we experienced it, tired and satisfied pilgrims.

Wendell Berry writes, “Our bodies are not distinct from the bodies of other people, on which they depend in a complexity of ways from biological to spiritual.”ⁱ We felt this, as we prodded one another through the mountains, energy transferring between each other without words. “They are not distinct from the bodies of plants and animals,” he continues, “with which we are involved in the cycles of feeding and

in the intricate companionships of ecological systems of the spirit.” We knew this was true when a low-flying hawk gave new life to our legs, or our bodies craved the energy of the dried mango we passed between us. “They are not distinct from the earth, the sun and the moon, and the heavenly bodies.” We celebrated this with every footfall, the wind accepting the sweat from our limbs, and our skin soaking up the moisture of the cold waters we submerged in. We did not simply run through wild places, we participated in them, with them, body and soul.

In all our runs, we never made it up Mount Ann without stopping. Every time, her strength bested ours, and we were glad for it. Her immensity and fortitude is part of what drew us to her, and with every drop of sweat, we celebrated the humility of “accurate insight.”

The runs drew us to beautiful places, but it was the sacrifice of the journey that allowed us to truly experience them. Berry explains “with the rise of industry, we began to romanticize the wilderness . . . to institutionalize it within the concept of the ‘scenic.’”ⁱⁱ Wild places no longer filled our nostrils, lungs, and sweat glands, only our camera lenses. We became “viewers of ‘views’” and in so doing, forgot that we daily depend on “natural forces . . . that have never in any meaningful sense been controlled and conquered.”ⁱⁱⁱ Racing up the side of these mountains was not about competition; it was a rite—a rebirth.

“Until modern times,” Berry recalls, “we focused a great deal of the best of our thought upon such rituals of return to the human condition.”^{iv} Now, it seems our rituals strive to protect us from such acts of humility. We control the angle of our

beds, the speed of our cars, the amount and color of light we allow in our homes. Everything is customizable. Everything is controllable. Not here.

On these mountain runs, we reclaimed the other half of our relationship to the world around us. We were not only consumers; we were also members, participants and co-creators in the natural beauty of life and movement.

This may seem like high-minded language for a simple act of transportation. But I have learned that to run in this manner is anything but. It requires I submit my body to the unmanageable demands of the world around. Every breath becomes hungry. I feel muscles I cannot name and do not understand yearning for life, and in that moment, I know air is a gift. Every step has a cost, and that conscious act of devotion is driven, not by necessity, but by the knowledge that my movement might allow me to experience something sacred. That it is that thing. Covered in sweat and snot, I am not humiliated. I am reminded of what it means to be free.

The Tohono O'odham call these rites, *Himdag*, the way of life of the Desert People. *Himdag* encapsulates what it means to be O'odham. As one elder woman said, "All of these things . . . they are all a part of who we are. Our language is us, our ceremonies is us, our values is us."

Former director of Tucson's Native Seed:SEARCH, Angelo Joaquin Jr., described *Himdag* as "the crucial balance between the mental, physical, and spiritual health of an individual."^v Like Berry's writing, *Himdag* acknowledges that that mind body and spirit are inseparable. To be fully human, means pursuing health in each of these ways.

-----REMAINDER OF DOCUMENT OMITTED FROM PREVIEW-----

ⁱ Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America* (San Francisco, CA, Sierra Club Books, 1996), 103.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 100.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 100.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 99.

^v Ed Severson, "Modern Diet Wounds O'odham," *The Arizona Daily Star*, July 1, 1996, 2C.