

A photograph of a desert landscape. In the foreground, a large, smooth, light-brown rock formation with visible horizontal sedimentary layers dominates the lower half of the frame. The middle ground is a sloping hillside covered with sparse, low-lying green and grey shrubs. In the background, more rugged, eroded hills and mountains are visible under a clear, pale blue sky. The overall scene is arid and expansive.

Wild, Possibly

POEMS BY KATH ANDERSON

PHOTOGRAPHS BY WOODY PACKARD

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Poems
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On a clear October evening I am taking advantage of an unusually comfortable slab of smooth sandstone I've discovered on top of a gentle rise. As the air cools, I bury my hardened feet in the still warm sand. I'm sitting beside my little gas stove, heating water for soup and a cup of tea. The blue flame roars and quickly brings the pot to a boil. I twist the valve on the stove clockwise, seating it firmly, turning on fully the darkness of an autumn sky under a nearly new moon, the silence of a windless desert night. Quiet means something else here. It is absolute and not just relative. A few ticks from the cooling stove and what's left is the background noise inside my head, the faint ringing in my ears that I only hear at times like this. There is nothing else to hear, and nerves used constantly rebel against this idleness.

Above this spot there is nearly a mile less atmosphere between me and the stars than there is at home on the edge of Lake Ontario. A winking red beacon on the top of Navajo Mountain thirty five miles to the southeast is the only light anywhere on the horizon. The stars are intense. The Milky Way arcs directly overhead. Like an hour hand telling time backwards at half speed, the Big Dipper pivots around the pole star, dips below the horizon, to reappear in a few hours. I sit back and watch for shooters, nursing my cup of tea.

I don't know where the nearest people are. It is possible and likely that they whisper by six miles overhead, reading magazines, napping, or thinking about business. It is also possible that within that same distance there are people inside a nearby fold in the earth, where I have spent the past seven days. It's possible that they are asleep or looking at a small piece of the same sky I'm looking at, that they are wondering the same thing I am, and that they are enjoying the fact that they don't know either. We have come for the same reason and do not give ourselves away.

*T*his is a collection of thoughts and images from time spent in a single desert canyon in the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, gathered over a period of six years. We came to this part of southern Utah by accident, putting a finger in the middle of the largest patch of blank map we could find and deciding to see what was there. Although we are still in the process of finding out, this is what we've found so far, all of it within a stretch of ground that can be hiked in one day. It's a blend of cool detail and loose connection, a hybrid cross between what we bring with us when we visit and what we take with us when we leave. It is part dream and part memory and

part imagined history that can neither be entirely known nor denied, but simply absorbed from the evidence left for our eyes.

This is complicated land, with the same kind of raw beauty found in a biological specimen seen closely. Dissected by the effect of sporadic rain, its features are laid bare by age and preserved by drought. Its surface tells one barely imaginable story of time, while its volume hints at an unimaginable other, impossible to ignore as you descend through layer after layer of sedimentary deposits turned to stone. Here you can still stumble across the preserved record of man's history—his tools, art, stored food, and shelter—a delicately etched wisp upon the surface of the earth. An afterthought.

A blank spot on the map may seem like an odd destination, an unlikely reason for easterners to drive thousands of miles in an old truck for the opportunity of parking it and hiking off with most of its contents on their backs. Wilderness was our goal, and we thought we'd come to a place where no one else would be traveling. What we found was a place that attracted people like us, and plenty of them.

Our temptation was to keep moving, to look for a more remote spot. While we first felt cheated by the presence of others, we have come, with some difficulty, to adjust our view of things. Like many

others, we defined wilderness as land without people, nature minus our own species. By this definition, wilderness is lost in the act of traveling through it. We were quick to notice this act of trespass by other hikers, but not so quick to admit it about ourselves. In valuing the virgin nature of the land above the relationship we eventually had with it we were doomed to repeat the cycle of spoiling what we were looking for. Eventually, it became clear to us that in both practical and logical ways, we needed a new definition.

We've had to face the hard fact that the uncharted wilderness of our dreams is gone. With satellite and seismic charge, this land has been mapped and evaluated by those with different dreams. What remains of wilderness survives within fragile boundaries that maintain an equilibrium between constant positive pressure and the thorny grasp of commerce. More than any other notion of it we might still hold, wilderness is a political entity whose existence depends on the support of those of us who value it. Wilderness is no longer our refuge of last resort. We, its visitors and supporters, are the last resort of wilderness.

Fortunately we stayed, and then returned year after year as our time and budgets permitted. In doing so we have adopted an attitude that is consistent with our presence and with the evidence we find here. This is a place where man has been a part of the landscape for centuries, and although

the litter of the long-dead is more interesting to us than the wad of toilet paper left by last month's traveler, both remind us of the longevity of our actions. What matters is not just where we travel, but how we travel and what kind of care we take as visitors. The record of how well we do will be visible for centuries.

This part of the west is a big place, and there's more here to see than anyone could hope to cover in several lifetimes. We admit that the urge to explore new ground is still strong, but so is the desire to understand one place well. In deciding to come back to look at the same fifteen mile stretch of desert watershed, we have tried to learn more about it, to see it in its seasons. We've discovered the luxury of traveling this way. There are no signs telling you what you are looking at, where to stay, or how fast you should travel. Light changes with the season, with the time of day, and things look unfamiliar within minutes of passing them. Traveling slowly by foot there is time to see fractal detail hidden in massive scale. There is time to make connections, to digest what you see. And by returning over a period of years, there is time to see change.

The wilderness we've found here is a personal one, inspired by the land, tempered by the political reality of our time, and forged by our needs and desires. What we really came for was to travel by foot, to walk away from

the car, the radio, and the credit card for a week at a time; to pay attention to what is real without the distraction of what is merely important; to think without the influence of others. We came to look, to travel slowly, to see with both leisure and precision. It is because of the many others who have shared these desires that nothing prevents us from doing that here.





Travel

Distance

There on the bared uplands we pull in tight, three of us small ones under the great bowl, nightblanket, bats, tent flung up against sand, scorpions, how flimsy. Later raindrops smack nylon and in morning's brazen light we count each pock in sand, all missing one tiny dicot, its lifetime chance.

Coffee in particular mugs pitches against hazards. Over the mauve curves three stained crescents, over slickrock distance—how should we get there, how could one get there, cross this fabulous distance, admit, down down down traveling until foot can't cross?

Oh the soft soft shapes lips curve moon bowl ridge curve lip line. Mauve. Dry. Heat lightning. Outcrops, eyelids. From hesitant dawn night forwarding, staining. Progress. We're going, yes, we're moving now. All that hides in the cups and lips, the stone thrusts:

up coming dusk: We walk a little tight line towards noonsweat and suddenly here. Canyon. Enormous dry heat. This is the edge, the edge.



Above

What shocks is not the fact of silence but its discovery in the recognition of one small sound— flybuzz or bootscape. Not a cricket. Or a bird.
In sizes nothing between cloud-shadow and creosote.

My feet on clearcut slickrock follow windsweep of black lichen-marked lines—
Details slur into a walking distance unknown and complicated by sudden
verticals and searches for ways down

to a heard distance— the stream's trickle or raven wings over an updraft—
almost just the rockthrow of a strong arm
to an other side two day's trial and error away,

so I take the intimate foot by foot connection with each blue rise
and rose fall of slickrock, down the curves, gently, down
the curves and rounds until suddenly

below me air, and a hollow roundness in which there is secret air and light:
a walker is a stick on a gradual current.





Across

Seeing how we don't get there, even when we do, we look
up to find what limits, the hard edge between rock and sky
no doubting that. Come, come along, eyes trace, print, etch
edge. Upswoop of cliff swallow— what's to stand on? Whose
perspective? Lines crisscross the creosote terrace, wandering cows,
the rancher's cut branded here in sand for years and years

in the frail and living cryptogamic soils, while rock o solid
fragile flaking concoidal fracturous stained with manganese oxides
trace patterns of millions of years of falling water here
where rain so delicately falls in thin space you can see it, could
walk exactly around the few acres dampened almost before the damp
evaporates, one good flood in ten years. Enormous cloud with rainsweeps

whole mesas and canyons under cloudshadow, rain's cool ghost.
Water cuts rock down, down, to darkness, to dark lines, to water.

Cactus

Navajo sand-
Stone, Aeo-
Lian dunes, cross-bedded
Ledges, exfo-

Liation,
Calcium carbonate,
(Soft sun)
Sand caught,

Mass
Broken,
Rice grass,
Barrel cactus:

Claret cup.
Spine light.





Arch

Have we come to the opening which focuses
and closes shock light that spikes our very marrow
have we reached somewhere here a four-sided no way out—
Incredible heaviness pulled down earth's core sucking
one tiny wind-sorted grain against another the inexorable press
pull inward rock unwieldy sea round center deadweight pulling moon
Thin tensile powers of one unrelenting stream
have slowly counteracted that weight unsprung the curve
of dune unbelievable dreamweight gravity let go one side
of the ellipse swung down to rest the arc like a wing over
air caught in its massive curve delicate
as a napping child's lung sifted sunlight breathed out

Aged crabbed rock folded and folded again always offers
another ending— that one cloud I saw the prayer I didn't say



Surface

Years
after the cold
furnace
of compression

sculpted
cliff-face
embodies the
forces that shaped

old old wind
lies cross-
wise and
water holes
up in oval
shadows

Slip

Heron-blue, and burnt—
water and stone, intimate but

opposite. Each
shaped by the other, each,

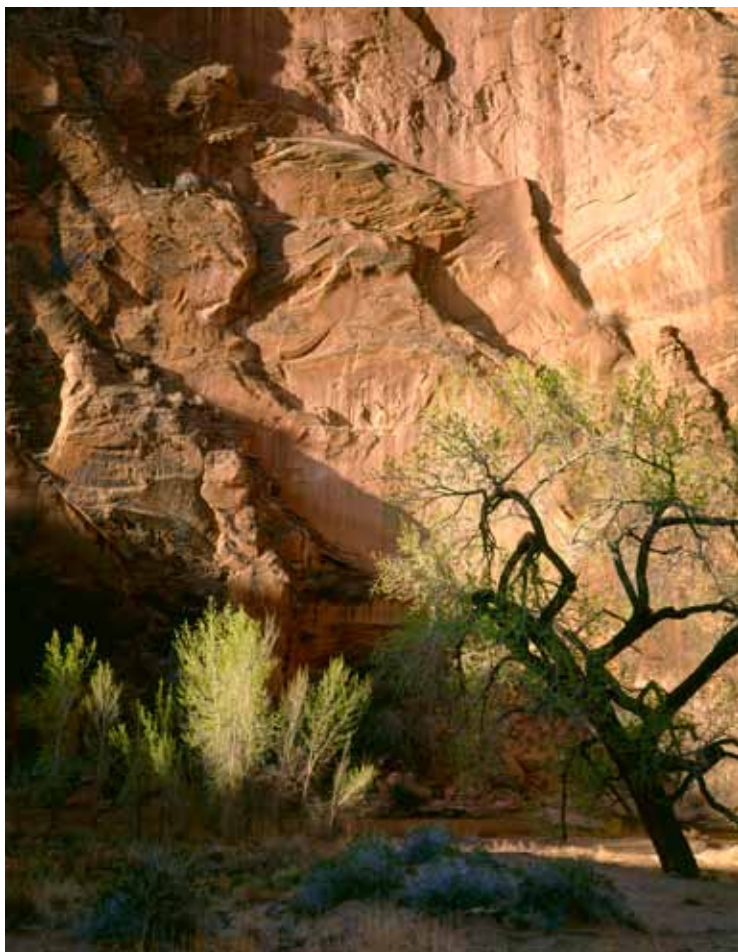
deepening. Rock vessel,
water whorl.

Hand slips in to hold smooth
contours, can't stay. Cool

morning bears unsteady the gift
of body lonely and okay with it.

Unending prayer: water rill
over whittled rock—cinnamon prickle,

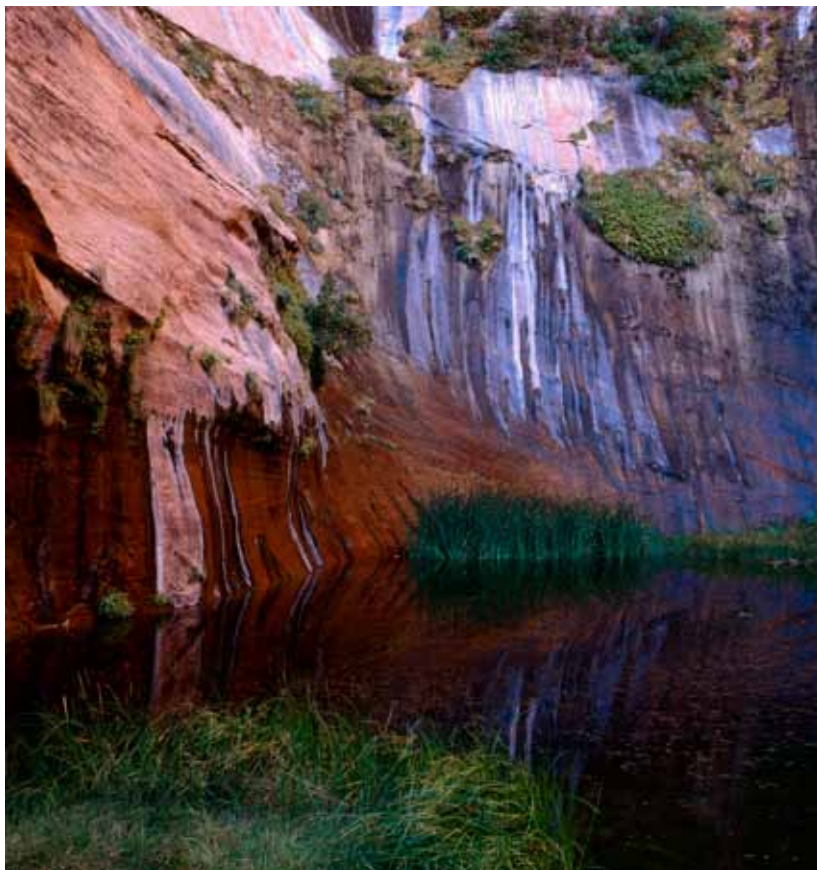
nude surface.
Sapphire thirst.



In

Down under the cliff at seeming various bottom
water on surface is fresh stain Light spatter of spring green
leaves against softness which softness both bent
(light wind water bend) in orange light swim difficult
shadows rock so raw so new
Stream down rock second light
The backdrop leans
Straight lines sweep down and beyond is over
over you above you somehow and where are
you if up is not end or sides around swept only
the softly green stops and below roots erode
from and form the small ridge of built-up sand both
opportunity and reason To live here is possible
and erratic Where Under the spinning









Footholds



Fourth Canyon, Second Bend

All day the body moves step by step
into dream until what's left
is the plush transcript of footprints
on the velvet dune

softening in an absolute wind that whisks
everything equally except where the land
has shaped itself to hide itself:

geography is where the wind is and where it is not.

Soon we will arrive at the top of the dune, sweat
trickling the rifts of bent elbows
and skinhills of spine and rib.

The surface
of things is everywhere innuendo, all color–
light refracted many times, condensed there by our boots:

sky-blue stick on orange sand, tiny, perfectly aqua
leaves of locoweed beading the ground.

Confluence

The dream is this:

after long travels
you will finally arrive in a place
wild enough to be quiet,

this the nightmare:

wild is evil
which must be exorcised. Both
are made into fairytales and told to children:

witch, tinderbox, and bad bird,
wishbone, beast, western wind.

One crushes the lifted wing, the other
rises like air under it.

Stone sacrum
mid-river of sand is neither dream:

concave and convex holy bone of obsolete wilderness.
Each curve taking its one earthly turn.





Western Rim

Overhead clouds
packed the gap of the sky
but we did not rush, no—
we did not rush:

evening set in with its attendant fears.

Thunder blessed large spaces, gave
us a dream we hankered for:

lost ferocity,
a way in the labyrinth. Then the black

line of the canyon
rim rose hard against
pink dusk, reeled up

on the pale chert hook of the moon.

Fork

Snake. The muscled meat of it
huddled in careless curves against the water-
scythed rock that held us near it,

still in its sleep. We imagined it
quickshot across the sand at
us imagined it “he,” imagined
intent rather than instinct, imagined us
privy to the rage of its reptilian dreams–

it was we who shot
out of there on our four
unimaginable feet, climbed out of the slot
into toplands to look down over the secret

and somewhat deadly insides of the earth,
ourselves utterly visible up there.

Slot Canyon

If not rock but light that water wrought,
shell shape on shell and each a way out,

slim curves inside the insides
so gently lit each turn might glow
like a pearl:

if a pearl, fluid shellac-rounded
grit, dropped slowtime into the bowed
palm of a sexual being for one
second, that second fluted,
so thin its keeping is both

forgotten and longed for,
if a dream
of the sex of the sexual being
were kept sandstone,
this would be so carved,
the entrance
kept secret from Precambrian to Pleistocene.



Narrows, Tenth Bend

So potent is our presence
 wedged between walls
we can barely dream anyone else
who has been here before—

but surely,
 alone, sandal-footed,
stricken by a slow pace and in a daze
of circling impulses into which a voice
was a paw batting a butterfly,
 someone came:
until fifty years ago,
a human here was as rare as a meteor
falling exactly into a clay pot of water.

Now, ourselves, we are the quick intrusion.

Cottonwood Bench

Light burns
across instead of down—
the canyon is

all shadow: our legs beat
every beat of the uneven rhythm of walking
miles where there is no path, through
stream water,

lush around our ankles,
sodden in our socks on
the opposite bank:

odd, in each tired
thighpull up over boulders is the easy
muscling of the mountain lion
we aren't—

we get to a level bench we call camp,
we lie on the ground by the roots of a cottonwood looking up:

this is a dream at the bottom of the well of the deepest consolation





Walking Song

Blackbrush sage.

Blackbrush sage.

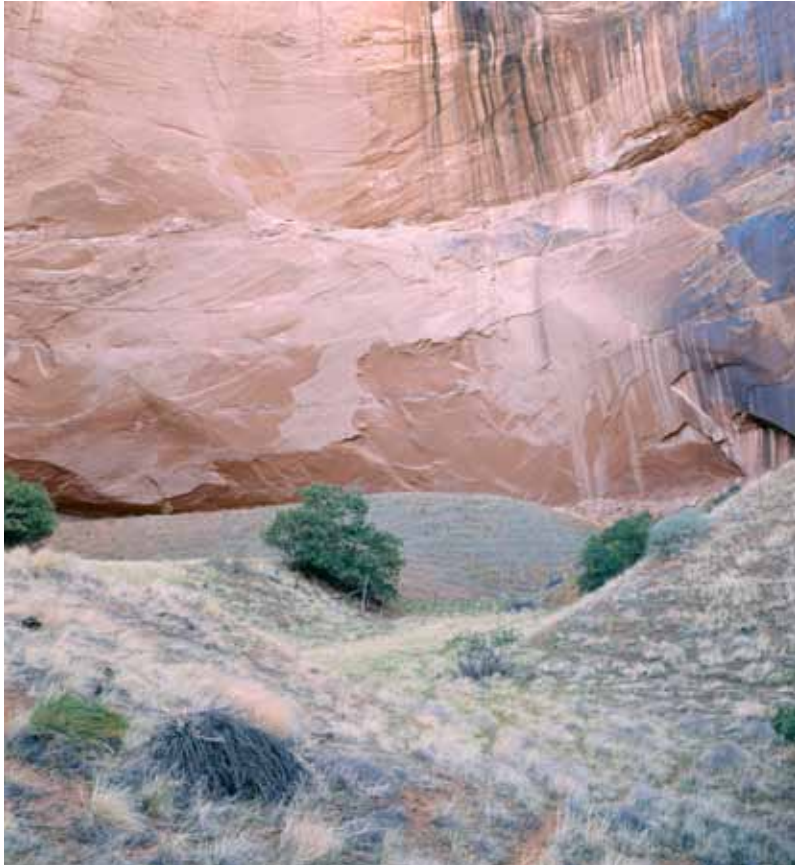
Jimmy_weed,
burro_weed,
buck_wheat,
rice_gass,
wheat_gass
cotton_wood,
four_wing
salt_bush—

blackbrush sage.

Blackbrush sage.









Travelers

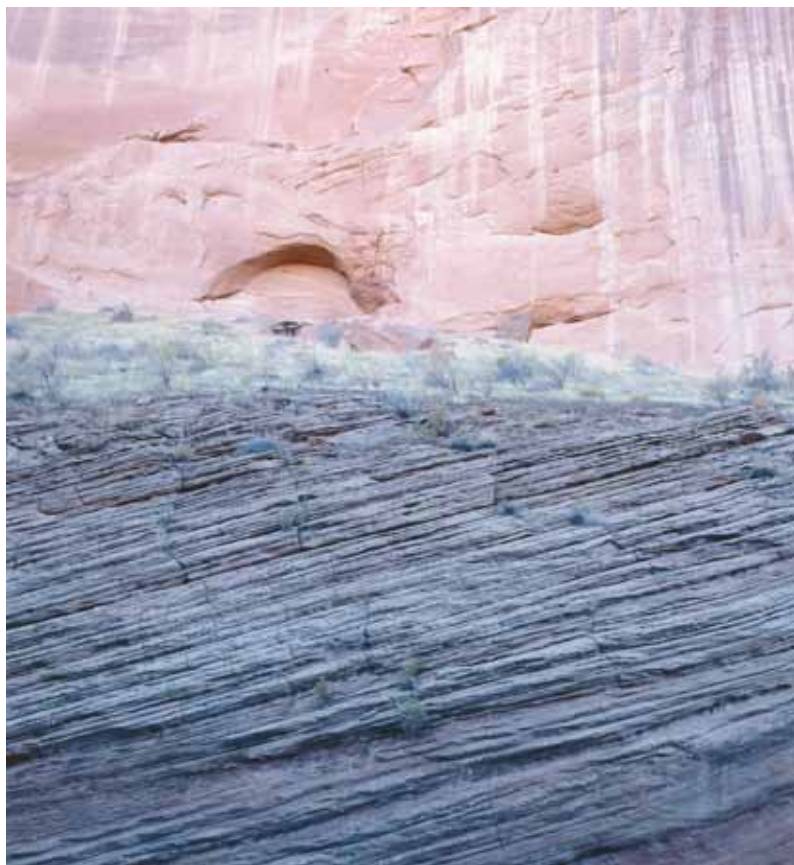
The Moon Speeds Past the Cliff

Light sails in my bones, carves out curves
hollows, makes me saurian, spacious
—and I don't want to go back

I'm dropping leaves in the creek for the song I hear sung.
Directions are bent round by the season
(it's fall, the sun is south). Light is a wild sky
revealing this: yellow cottonwoods by the wash
that shone over the child I was—small fleet sighting.

A cluster of gold hangs east
like the Pleiades—sun sets over a rib.
The moon speeds past the cliff.
You can see it go over the sill of the cliff's stillness—

what we might enter, if we knew the ritual
(there must be many) for going through.





Wild, Possibly

We walked through old drifts
and new mud thinking *wild*
possibly, or mundane

(the red kitchen bag
with matches and the little Svea stove over which
I was the keeper of supper; our candle
lanterns or erratic flares of shooting
stars in a night sky sliced

by fighter jets getting on in their indifferent travels
seriously into distance, sucking us right up
out of the canyon, but fortunately we sank down
again on our cottonwood log
and sat there, leaning
shoulders, the hawk-shouldered cliffs
leaning too, black into the silent
burning body of stars—)

*“I passed through the shadow so I could be amazed by it”**

and its trick twin, light. It makes
you talk about angle and equator,
and event horizon, it makes you dream deer dreams,

which are river scent and blue flickers
of fear. Here, your bones are made of light,
orange light drawn

deep inside shadow by water, the aster light
of dawn, light where the stream goes
through rock, and the light behind,

in a fragile desert meadow,
every color of after-storm and fall shade—

sun inscribes walls like
sage chisels air after rain

* From *Bright Existence* by Brenda Hillman.



Sun Going Down

Or it could be the sun that burning burning
no-mercy item

(against which we check
our list of high-tech endurance
high-quality best purchased by the end
of the century tack like sun screen and lip
screen light-weight polar fleece
etc. etc so our packs are more sustainable at forty
pounds than those flannel before-the-flood fifties
bedrolls and old Abbey's cans of beans and slicker
than arrows and ready skin and local knowledge
that traveled through here on two calloused feet
lightweight and mocking)
could be that hard harsh
brittle scent-sucking brutal white sun
that in leaving makes us love everything else.



Where the Stream Goes Through Rock

I was walking in the early a.m.
in light like eating a delicate fruit ripe
in a perfect season

(light so singled out
and so complicated it took you up
behind small cracks and yes, human
places, the hollow of the throat, or
behind the ear).

There was a meeting.
My traveling companion laid herself down
at that very meeting where the cliff
curves in just slightly as it goes under
mud and she looked up from her lying down
so far to where the long sweep
of cliff arranges with the sky an edge—

Two ravens flew over, checking.





Land Marked

—so primal is light, flung past on the blue-black
raven, or touching up that moony,

bony scapula, wing blade of nothing
mammalian, nothing driven
by blood.

And yet there are wings.

Or parts of rings, the mark
of an old opening, something
thrown through like a weight through water.

We've walked into openings,
relations of light to passage—

a crack, a canyon, an arch.

(before us, ready skin and local knowledge
moving through on two calloused feet
lightweight and mocking)

the coordinates are the colors that light comes bearing
on inanimate solar wings in the morning.



Travelers

Four of us walked in differing spirits
out to an edge. At first our few days
unspooled slowly,
 apace with the canyon's
uncurling inner lining of Wingate sandstone, us tucked
at the bottom in lavender shadow and blue mud.

Five night skies rounded over huge black verticals
and there was no need for dream where
the body itself was part dream

until the canyon loosed us into wider and wider terrain,
turned flat wash lined by extravagant rabbit brush.

We were still hearing the travel of invisible water
over the dry streambed,
 happiness traveling
over loneliness or some other sad thing—



KATH ANDERSON's first love was the landscape of northern Arizona, where she was born and raised and subsequently spent ten years as a seasonal ranger for the National Park Service. Her poems have appeared in many journals, including *Georgia Review*, *Sonora Review*, and *Stone Canoe*. Seven of the poems in this book first appeared in *Poetry—Distance; Surface; Above; Fourth Canyon, Second Bend; Western Rim; Slot Canyon; and Spring, Last Bend*, and two first appeared in *Orion—Cottonwood Bench* and *Fork*. Many thanks to the editors. Kath works in health literacy and teaches ESL classes in Austin, TX, where she lives with her husband and two daughters. She is a long-standing member of the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance.

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