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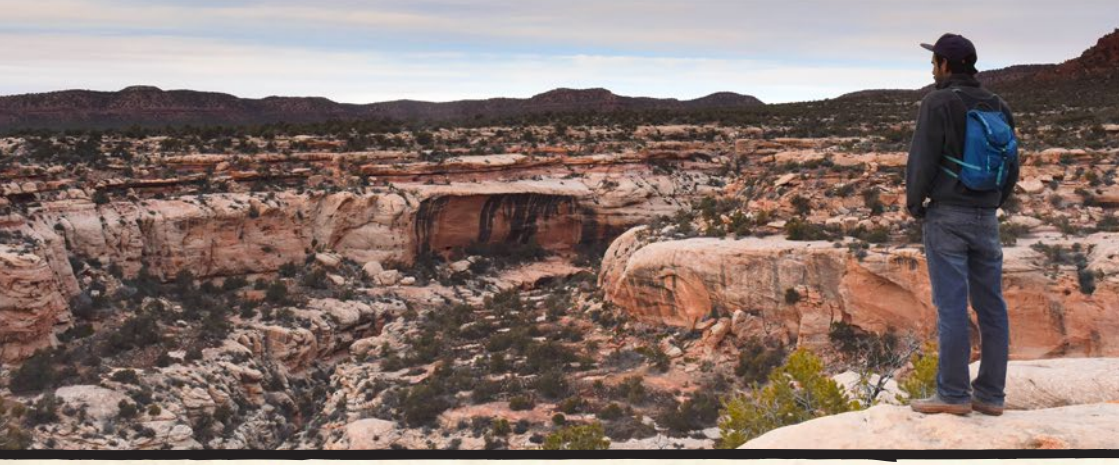
REMNANTS

Photo - Casey McFarland

Big country. At center, Neal soaks it up.



We've driven for 5 hours into emptiness. The last long stretch we've bounced slowly for miles over bedrock, mudded ruts, and cattle trails. My old pickup squeaks and rattles, annoyed at being ridden so hard. The landscape is a painted swath of red mesas and deep white canyons, all heavily sprinkled with pale green piñon and juniper. There's far more sand, clay and stone out here than rich soil—the earth is showing her bones—and any high ground is slowly busting apart, leaving the flatter stretches below strewn with boulders that look like broken teeth. There's no one out here, and it's *big* country.

It's cold when we awake the following morning. The night was clear and dry, the stars shimmering starkly above. With no moisture in the air to trap the day's heat, the earth cools dramatically after sundown. It takes considerable effort to leave the comfort of my sleeping bag. We huddle by the fire and drink coffee, waiting for the sun to rise enough to warm the land a bit.

Packed up, we wander across the flat country, our boots sinking deeply into the soft ground. What little moisture fell here this winter has caused the ground to freeze and thaw repeatedly, day after day, and the earth has "heaved" skyward, becoming fluffy. Anything that moves here leaves bold sign of its passing, and we cross the trails of badger, bobcat, gray fox and coyote.

At eye level, the space between the mesas and ridges looks like a flat, easy stroll. It's not. Every half mile or so, the land is cleaved by a massive sandstone canyon, falling abruptly some 300 feet. When we arrive at the first lip, my heart skips. *Oh, damn*. The prospect of navigating these cliffs hits me. Neal—a long time friend and adventurous soul—is giddy. He's used to canyons like this, trusts the grip of the sandstone, and isn't too worried about heights. I, on the other hand, don't care much for heights.

The canyon walls are a series of steps to the bottom that requires the traveller to carefully study the maze of ledges and discover routes from one to the next. It often requires commitment, too: once you drop off one ledge there may be no turning back. Within minutes I'm "cliffed out", unable to go up or down. There is a way, I just can't make it happen. My body is fully capable of the task, but my mind has shut it down. Fear has gripped me.

Fear is a strange beast. I watched a "Human Planet" episode not long ago, filmed deep in the jungles of the Congo, that showed a wiry man who looked to be in his late forties hack footholds into a massive, limbless tree trunk that skyrocketed high above the forest floor. He worked carefully upwards some 130 feet, his body held to the tree by a spindly vine wrapped about his waist and the trunk. He was after honey in a large hive tucked in the crown of the tree. *You have to empty your heart of fear*, he said. *If you have fear, you will fall*. Great. How comforting.

Neal makes his way back to me. As he nears, I claw out of my predicament, more driven by embarrassment than anything else. I'm annoyed with myself, but it's also hilarious. Through the following days, my progress down the sandstone walls can be marked by a steady stream of cursing. Like anything, though, we humans calibrate to where we are and what we're doing. My fear subsides to a useful degree and I begin to trust my boots on the steeply sloping stone. My body reclaims itself.

Photo - Casey McFarland

Checking a narrow slot for downward passage.

As we puzzle our way across country, I'm aware that these routes through the canyon walls are like those in life, too: some are terrifying, even if it's mostly in our heads, but we may have to take them. There's probably a better route, too, if one is willing to go farther to find it. I reflect on this as we drop down ledge after ledge, but mostly I just try to keep myself from going weak in the knees.

Each good path that we find has likely been used by others in the distant past. From high ground we've scoured the length of the canyons with our eyes for the dwellings of those that lived here hundreds of years before. One might catch the glimpse of misplaced stone, or the right angles of ancient masonry wedged beneath rock overhangs. We've spotted one from a ridge about mile out, and the sun is setting by the time we finally arrive. The canyon air is still, cool and dead quiet. A hundred feet above, the low sun turns the rock of the opposite canyon wall brilliant pink and orange but the ruins are deep in shadow. We step softly through the deep dust, holding up bits of another time to the waning light. Broken pottery, split willow, charcoal from hundreds of hours of fire. Little corncobs litter the site, ancestors of their contemporary counterparts. The clay roofs look as if they were put in place yesterday. We watch the light fade from the canyon and pull ourselves away... we've got one last climb out and it needs to be done before dark.

Corn, small in size, that was grown in the canyon beyond...hundreds of years ago.

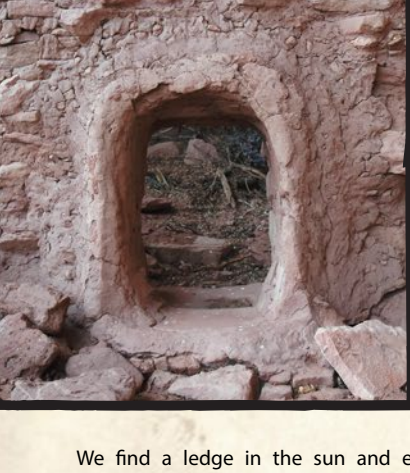
Photo: Casey Mize

The following day we find another ruin, this time built higher in the bands of rock. The ceiling of stone is caked black from wood smoke. Poles of juniper and fir were used as walls, or split for lattice for the roof. Tidy bundles of juniper bark, neatly folded and packed between posts, kept out the wind; those that aren't in place are scattered across the ground, looking as if they were pulled from the tree moments ago. The clay that makes the outer walls and roofs of the dwelling is clean, strong, and bears hundreds of fingerprints and the smooth spread of palms where it was patted into place. Everything looks near perfect; the arid climate and protection from the elements has suspended time.

Photos - Casey McFarland

Folded juniper bark, stacked to fill the gaps between beams.

A perfect print of the hand that pressed this mud into place.



One of the pieces found, and left, among the ruins.

We find a ledge in the sun and eat our lunch. Looking across the canyon, I wonder about what it must've been like to live a full lifetime here. We talk about small children growing up in these cliffs, and what it would've looked like to see a kid in his prime scamper across the canyons. We consider how much work it took to get all these materials up here, and how best to haul freshly killed game down from above. We imagine these canyons alive with the sound of voices, crackling fire, the grinding of corn or ax heads on stone.

But it's just ghosts now, and the only sound is that of the wind. It's strange to sit among such fresh-looking sign of other humans but know that it was made before Europeans arrived on the shores of this continent. During much of that era, the surrounding country teemed with big-horn sheep. The high plateaus of North America held seas of pronghorn antelope, numbering second only to the 60 million or so bison that moved like storms across the grasslands. Around the time this little home was built, there were roughly 300 million people on all of Earth. Between deer, elk, moose, big-horn, prongies, and bison, numbers of native ungulates in North America alone rivaled that of all human beings.

Today, my home-state of New Mexico—by definition empty, "wild" country—holds two million people, double that of when I was born there in 1979. Not bad for having enough landmass to encompass the entire United Kingdom, with 62 million fewer people. Yet we outnumber our state's deer and elk nearly twelve to one.

The whole planet is a world of ghosts and remnants—of land, of culture, of wildlife. Out here in these deep cuts in earth, we find ourselves in a surreal intersection of past and present, made especially poignant by the smattering of handprints and by the cookware and corncobs left lying in the dirt at our feet. We came out here to get as far from everything as we can, but that's a task hard to complete. Our world has indeed become a human one, and as wild as patches of it still may be, there's not a stretch from the Artic to Antarctica that isn't under our heavy influence. Here, too the fingerprints of modern man are everywhere; archeologists have taken core samples from wooden beams at some of these ruins, weathered boot prints tell of hikers wandering miles up the canyon bottoms, 4-wheeler trails crisscross the desert, and cattle bellow from surrounding ridges.

Like the dwelling, this big open country is itself a remnant. Its colored stone and stubby woodlands look much the same as they have for centuries, and it still holds the amber flash of bobcat eyes and the calm movements of wild ungulates. But it's very different now, worn thin. Relationship with places like this is enlivening and inspiring while at the same time made heavy by the traces of massive change, visible to the eye or not.

As we make our final climb out of a canyon back to the truck, I consider our species' choice of routes and where they'll lead us. I wonder about the nature of my own fear, for life and limb and for the wild world itself. I look up a small stretch of rock, waiting for Neal to make it to the top. I take a breath, find my grip, and move forward.

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