

Arctic Dreams in the Desert

In the morning the jungle had taken my socks. It did not intend to let me have them back either. I had left them on the hammock's guy rope to air out overnight. There was no chance of them *drying out* here, and the shoes I would put on over them were soaked anyway. I slid out of my hammock and prepared to pull the socks over my pruned feet when I noticed something, a small egg case, on the inside of the cuff. I figured a fly had laid it there last night. And, I was right. I just didn't know how right. On further inspection I could see the socks had been taken over. Someone was already wearing my socks. Squirring egg cases were attached to each stitch of pile on the inside of my socks. Another pair lost to this job. Nature was having a good one on me, and I wasn't appreciating it this early in the day.

I woke up from a series of light naps strung together, not having gotten much sleep, and the dawn light filtering through the canopy was unwelcome. Its warmth, however, was. The jungle gets surprisingly cold at night when your camp is situated in a wind-blown saddle set high in the volcanic ridges of interior Pohnpei. I slept in a hammock with a cheap, blue, plastic tarp slung over it to keep the rain off me. The wind just carried it under the awning from other directions instead. Throughout the night the wind, rain, and shivers kept me awake enough to read the book I packed up there.

That book, Barry Lopez's first, was a collection of coyote trickster stories, *Giving Birth to Thunder, Sleeping with His Daughter*. Appropriate, considering the laughs the jungle was having at my expense. I brought the book to the island as part of a small collection of reading material intended to entertain me for five months. I was in the Pohnpei Cloud Forest on a project collecting data on birds and vegetation – trying to complete the only in depth survey of the area's avifauna. That data would serve as a baseline of information before the effects of rising sea

levels changed the Pacific islands and their plants and animals forever. One in a series of field biology jobs I've held.

And that was all that came from my first experience with Lopez's work. I was entertained, the book was finished, and then it was put back into my bag. It flew back across the Pacific and landed on a shelf at my parents' house in the Midwest. I traveled some until I took another temporary field biology job in northern California. Near the end of the season, I found a small bookstore in a coastal town where I picked up some books to read when we weren't working fourteen hour days. *Arctic Dreams* was in my pile. The cover had fallen off, and the pages were yellowed, but the price was right: \$1. I recognized Lopez's name from somewhere I could not quite remember. I knew nothing about the Arctic, so I decided to give it a try. I tossed the book into my truck, and that is where it stayed while I tore off on another cockamamie road trip to southern Arizona and my next field job. Across the Sierra Nevada, through Death Valley and into the Grand Canyon, I saw vistas too big to describe, trees named after presidents, and so much of nature's bounty Ansel Adams would have run out of film. All that book saw was the underside of my driver's seat.

When I finally reached Ajo, Arizona, I was sucked immediately into the unique wilderness. I worked almost half a year on that job, chasing desert rains and the ephemeral waters that flow through the Sonoran Desert on the Barry M. Goldwater Range managed by the United States Air Force. Some of the largest tracts of open land available for animals are housed on military property. I recorded information about new ways to find isolated waters, to determine water quality, and about the animals that use those rare waters. This work would eventually (unknowingly) lead to my pursuing my Master's Degree at Texas Tech University.

A day would start at 0400 and end whenever we lost light or access to the Range. Our working group had a security code name and was required to sign forms relieving the

government from responsibility in the event we accidentally blew ourselves up with the old, unexploded ordnance littering the range. We traveled through dunes fields and desert mountain ranges. The landscape was austere, beautiful, and often painful. But to those that were willing to look, there were things to find.

This was not my first work in the desert, but it was this time working in the Sonora that made me fall in love. The desert was setting up shop in my head. It laid down bedrock, aquifer, and roots. From the fissures of unknown cracks in my logic sprung forth the plants, animals, and waters of my enchantment. I had no reason to love the punishing environment I was working in, but I did. I would go out at night to watch the stars and scorpions crawl across their respective sides of up and down.

Besides late night animal tracking, evening entertainment at our field housing consisted mostly of siestas in the hammocks we had rigged up on the back porch. It was the only way to cope with late afternoon highs that reached into the 120s. Besides it was hard to beat those seats for watching the sunset, especially when you had a beer to help wash it down. I found the book on one such afternoon, looking for anything in my truck I had not already read. I plucked the tattered copy of *Arctic Dreams* from its hermitage and plopped down in the hammock. Three hours later I woke up having never actually started it.

The next day I did start reading the book. Before I finished the preface, I found passages that still loom in my conscious, because I was trying to find a place for myself in the desert just as the desert had found a place in me. Even though Lopez was describing man's place in the Arctic, the desert sands were filling the gaps in between the letters on the page:

“The physical landscape is baffling in its ability to transcend whatever we would make of it. It is as subtle in its expression as the turns of the mind and larger than our grasp; and yet it is still knowable. The mind full of curiosity and analysis disassembles a landscape

and then reassembles the pieces – the nod of a flower, the color of the night sky, the murmur of an animal – trying to fathom its geography. At the same time the mind is trying to find its place within the land, to discover a way to dispel its own sense of estrangement.”

He even compared the Arctic to a desert. In many ways they are very similar, but it wasn't the environmental cues that were sticking out in my head when I read the book. There were too many human elements that could be strung together by a long thread from the far north to the desert.

I traveled by foot, truck, and airplane across this landscape. Each level of technological removal also encouraged a psychological removal. Trekking across this landscape can be daunting. The desolation and distances between destinations take a toll on a traveler. Creating a microcosm of control using a car or plane means there is metal and glass between you and the desert, its venom and thorns. A/C can insulate from the heat and four-wheel drive can prevent the burn from developing in your legs as you travel those miles. And this physical and emotional comfort that is afforded by the technological and psychological removal is alluring. However, as Lopez argues, removing the human from the landscape does neither landscape nor human any good. This removal and the consequences of this removal are something that often eludes conservation discourse and the subsequent management decisions based on that absence. This insight was surely something I lacked. The presence of modern humans in the Arctic was readily observed and seemed very out of place, according to Lopez. It is a sentiment I can readily vouch for in the Sonoran. Two-track crisscrosses the saguaro fields, and human trash stands out among the tans, rusts, and greens.

During field work when it was not my turn to drive, I read as we bounced along in the truck through desert arroyos and old access roads. I stopped every couple paragraphs just to stare

out the window and take in the scenery. I mixed it with the words I had read – passages full of broken schooners sprawled out across the ice, hull crumpled and holds empty, wooden ribs standing out against the landscape. I remembered descriptions of overland travel across the desert and the great Conestoga wagons left in the empty wastes. The imagery was the same. As I walked through the desert I saw the human remains of this day and age, cars with engine blocks rusted together, doors torn off the body and tumbled across the desert. Old military equipment, forgotten and useless, dotted the landscape.

The further into *Arctic Dreams* I read, the more I felt I understood the desert environment. Lopez's descriptions of physical phenomena, like mirages, would have still been enlightening if that is where it stopped. The human history of the Arctic is deeply linked to the physical phenomena, and Lopez is a master at communicating this connection. We know that the arctic region experiences drastic seasonal shifts in light. It was his detail of a cultural response to experience the depressive loneliness of darkness, the *perlerorneq* – a word with no English equivalent, which stuck with me. It illustrates how the human and landscape are products of each other. Mr. Lopez quotes an anthropologist that the word means, “to feel ‘the weight of life.’” But he continues and expands so that we can truly understand the darkness of the depression, and how much it resembles the sunless days of arctic winter.

I have yet to find an equivalent for the desert to this last notion, except maybe in regards to water. But that would be a reach, and I would have to try. This in itself is another reason Lopez has provided an invaluable addition to my understanding. Not everything translates but if I keep looking and trying to understand, I might just catch a glimpse of understanding. Anything that helps spark curiosity and a drive to sate that curiosity is a gift. I have given away my copy of the book to a friend to try and share that feeling, that gift.

This book deepened my love for the natural world, humans included. It provided insight into a region I knew very little about. Not just the arctic, but also the desert. The book moved across its designated landscape and the messages that emerged helped the desert communicate with me. The desert got into me. It wrinkled my skin, and cut my knees. The desert air parched my throat, and the desert water quenched my thirst. Words for unique features in the Sonora invaded my speech and changed how I looked at the world around me. Tinajas and charcos are my new water sources, and the rains that fill them are also the rains that bring flash floods. Now, I cannot hear rain without considering my traveling route. Maybe I would not have had as strong a reaction if I had *Arctic Dreams* in the jungle with me instead of in the desert, but I do not think that is the case. *Arctic Dreams* also tempered my passion so that it gave me a more useful and deeper understanding of the sense in which humanity is not and should not be removed from the natural systems. Without knowledge of place, we have no sense of place. We become lost. We are icebergs drifting slowly, melting in a sea foreign to us until we disappear and no longer resemble what we once were.