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The Shock of the Real

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THE SHOCK OF THE REAL
COLLECTED JOURNALS FROM HERE AND THERE
CHRISSEY WEBB

Thursday, April 10, 2014: Dirty Devil River, UT

Not so gently reminded today that wild nature is not meant for the weak-minded. My shoes began to rub my heels raw after pulling each foot out of the unforgiving jaws of fast acting mud. Though we walked with the current, tromping through the water (shin- to thigh- deep) was enough work to have me exhausted by lunch. Amelia and I both had traumatic experiences. We forced ourselves to take them in stride, laughing when all we needed was to cry. Her brief slip in the mud resulted in our whole crew yanking her out, a few sinking themselves. I took a bad step off of a bank, misjudging the river's depth; its café au crème color erased any hope of seeing bottom. Then I was face down: the suction of the mud, the current of the river, the weight of my monstrous pack all working against my ability to upright myself. John yanked me up, gasping, by the prayer flags on my pack. First inklings of desperation and helplessness.

My thighs look like large pills, those colored pills, long and round, a line sharply separating the colors at the mid-way point. The length of my thin nylon shorts separates winter white from burned red. The night is warm, though my fried skin would radiate heat no matter the temperature. I choose to sleep another night in the tent anyways. Before settling in, I glance up at the night sky to remind myself why I'm here. Lacking lotion, I rub Vaseline all over my legs; sand immediately sticks to me.

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Friday, April 10, 2015: Mansfield Library, Missoula, MT

I'm offered a chocolate Easter egg by a boy I've never spoken to, even seen or noticed for that matter. Confused, I take the egg. Feeling lousy, I assume he senses my inherent need of chocolate. It's not the first time an unknown male has offered me chocolate; it's the second. The first time I was buying spices in bulk to cook a turkey, which, ironically was also a first time event. The cashier, sensing my lack of domestic confidence, handed me a small, potentially foreign, chocolate bar. The label read "Daim!" I still have the chocolate in my backpack.

Dylan is over for dinner. All three roommates flirt, two of us knowing he's taken by the third. He eats spilled salad from his lap and discusses Texan manners, what his mother would say if she saw him do such a thing. His pants are dark blue, baggy corduroy, the kind you never really see sold but always see people wearing. Anyways, I take advantage of the opportunity to stare at his crotch, at those big climber hands groping for every last bit of cabbage. I usually don't chop my vegetables so finely; perhaps the chocolate egg had me unconsciously dreaming of fertility.

Saturday, April 12, 2014: Dirty Devil River, UT

Today I relished the most lackadaisical day since my pre-trips days of loafing in Billings. I left my sleeping bag only to pee, watching its quick absorption into the dry sand every time, and otherwise remained horizontal until 11ish to dip in the river. Dani, Amelia, and I stripped down and wallowed in the mud, comparing tan lines, burn lines, and far-off stories of adolescence. Today, the mud was friend, not foe, as we discovered the magical silkiness of purposeful sinking. Of course thunder rolled in not long after. I'm starting to believe the weather of the west repels contentedness more than I. I was exhilarated by the power of the first electrical storm I'd experienced in the desert. Breaking regulation and walking back to camp barefoot, we came upon a grouping of skinny, black, dry potato-esque roots protruding from the eroded stream bank. Running low on food, I immediately saw salvation in this homely tuber and collected a few: greasy fries! hash browns! chips! Salted starch, a staple I've since been without. Patrick, upon inspection, claimed he knew of only one potato-esque plant in the desert: *Datura*. Hallucinogenic, deadly, beautiful *Datura*; large, white-blossomed *Datura*, with scents nauseatingly sweet and intoxicating. Food cravings forgotten in the name of endlessly intriguing desert botany.

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Sunday, April 12, 2015: Front lawn, Woodford homestead, Missoula, MT

Parker offers delicate New Zealand hot chocolate and biscotti—gifts from her parents. I suggest beer, one red ale and one Busch—gifts from my parents. She gets the Busch. I never claimed to be a good hostess, and I feel sickeningly like my father when I drink Busch.

Sitting in alley-found lawn chairs, weather indecisive but generally unwelcoming, I feel strangely mature, discussing plans for the future. She's wrapped in a blanket and is wearing a few sweaters, one came from the same dumpster as our faux hot fudge sauce in the fridge. I'm barefoot. We discuss our days, because we're roommates and not every conversation has to be so intellectual. She planted tiny flowers and learned sexy, new facts about her cowboy boss. I wore waders and picked up pebbles in Lolo Creek.

Wednesday, April 16, 2014: Dirty Devil River, Happy Canyon, UT

In Happy Canyon, you can hear the rush of the nearby river. I know this sound; it was the sound of camping as a child. But I could never tell if it was angry wind, or a promising river, or rushing cars. No question here—I know that turbid water and its sound of constant movement. Patrick's quiet strumming of the faithful ukulele interrupts the homogeneity; I don't mind.

The narrowest portion of Happy is stunning. Stone curves, sensuous in their form, intensify with evening shadows. The beauty is delicate, even feminine, and will leave soon. But this crack in the Earth will remain. Tomorrow the shadows will be just as elegant.

Sunday, November 16, 2014: Cabin in the woods outside of Bonner, MT

A poem

A responsibility, I'm told
Stomach the rewards,
Stomach the act.
Cuddling to limp
the nerves say no
Thumper wants to jump more

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iron does not let go
“his eyes are open,
but he is dead”
now my first cringe

a severed black head
placed in the snow
frightening in purity

the blood,
wrongful in cheerfulness
gives warmth to black and white

something ancient makes it ok.
bare hands fracture legs
clean tools have done this before.

like removing a shirt
from a small child
more human, less fur

This is the liver,
and an offer to consume.
This is the heart,
and watch it beat in my palm.
This is the digestive system
and the shit never reaches full potential.

Friday, April 18, 2014: Hanksville, UT

We haven't been out of the canyon for a full day, but I feel myself staggering back into a “civilized” lifestyle. Already messing around on my phone, dedicated to that devilish little screen. Lathering my body to a state of unnatural cleanliness, making drier my parched skin than the ceaseless sand of

the Dirty Devil. Gulping down food without even a thought of its meaning, of its sacredness. It's a way of living unconsciously. I hope I don't so easily fall back into this trance at the course's end. But I must admit that music has been glorious to hear again. 14 days with nothing but a few known chords on the uke and the irrationally bad array of songs that would come, and never leave, my mind. The bacon cheeseburger and chocolate strawberry malt at Blondie's was a near spiritual experience. Perhaps I'm just a little overwhelmed.

Tuesday, November 18, 2014: Studio, Missoula, MT

Tonight I earn \$20. I start by sitting, a large wicker chair. I've committed myself to the unwise position of a turned head, propped up with the left hand. Both quickly go numb and I know I'll have red splotches from the pressure. We break, Margot has brought snacks: chips and beer; a classic in my mind but not what I assume the artsy world to consume.

Napping comes easily now, due in part to the free beer but mainly the sprawled lying pose. I always worry my legs will flop open too far; I'm naked but there are still lines I don't want to cross. The room is full of females and just one gay man. Drooling should really be more of a concern.

Saturday, April 26, 2014: Navajo Nation

Our sweat became much more intense. Perhaps it was the mountain tobacco, smoked from a stone pipe, bright green in color, reminiscent of another familiar herb. I didn't know what the mixture of ten different native plants would do. "It's a deep bowl," William said, "toke as much as you like." We were later chastised for being such terrible smokers; I tried not to be offended, it had been a while.

He sang to us, explaining the significance behind each song. This is what I'd been wanting to hear. But I'm frustrated. William told us these cultural traditions are what give him hope in the face of the sometimes desolate social situation of his tribe and reservation, yet he hasn't passed these down to his children.

"My parents only hoped to give us a life better than their own," he told us, and he's making the same attempts now as a parent. But what is "better?" Certainly not the white, consumeristic lifestyle of the majority of Americans?

I lit the fire to heat the rocks. I saw colors and shapes in our third round. We sang Meg's melancholy rowing song, its slow and steady beat the only thing that kept my mind from floating away completely. But I loved it; I loved the worn comforters used as an insulating door, keeping the heat

stout in the earthen mound. I loved the sage and red earth we scrubbed on our naked bodies. I loved how close I felt with the desert, and these strong women. We used old corrugated cans to scoop warm water from a garbage can, rinsing ourselves, cleansing ourselves.

Monday, January 26, 2015: Missoula, MT

Parker got an abortion today.
I went to school today.

Tuesday, May 6, 2014: Night alone, Dark Canyon Wilderness, UT

I sit somewhere I'll never sit again. Here I'm as emotional as the intense red rock; its sand is embedded into my being and I glad. The solitude makes me attentive.

I wash my hair with yucca root, a traditional Navajo ceremony. My ceremony is solitude; my deity is the Wild. The pools on the canyon floor disappear in the evening; I walk to find water and find mountain lion tracks. Cliff fendlerbush is in bloom. Tonight I'll sleep beneath the stars.

Shirt comes off. Head of a side canyon, unnamed, my own—so like a womb. Pants come off. Boots stay on, feet are essential, if not glamorous. Wilderness is naked canyon yoga.

“Goodnight moon,” I whispered, and longed for a response.

Tuesday, January 6, 2015: Deli counter, Billings, MT

Semi-homeless man looks over our local, made-with-honey truffles. He says to me: “Look at that dread! That’s tight. You’re killin’ me. How much are those chocolates?” I don’t know if he’s actually interested in purchasing one, no one ever seems interested in purchasing one, or if he’s just putting on an air of potential purchasing so as not to feel awkward.

Me: “\$2.50.”

Him: “You’re killin’ me.”

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Thursday, May 8, 2014: Dark Canyon, UT

“Water changes everything,” Meg wisely said. Dirty Devil’s water changed things, not always in the best way. This water is different. It’s clear and runs gently; its bottom doesn’t attempt to eat slow feet. We rediscover the power of our most primeval desire.

Water turns desert into jungle. We swim in deep blue pools, as mysterious as they are inviting, with reeds the size of trees. I let the roots touch my toes, and shiver not from the cold. Canyon tree frogs share the pool, kicking their plumb little hind legs like Jar-Jar Binks. Below our pool, the cool water cascades over a bed of bright green algae to create the first and finest waterfall I’d seen in the desert.

Crazy to think of how little time we have left out here. Too much confusion; too much distraction; too little time to sit and think and take in the pleasantness of this life; too many people and too few canyon tree frogs; too many worries about things other than food, water, and warmth.

Monday, December 8, 2014: Intersection of Franklin and Woodford, Missoula, MT

I wept over *Dances with Wolves*. Crying during films is one of my favorite activities. It’s easier to cry over situations and people I’m not really connected to than to cry over those that I really know, unfortunately. Society fears tears, or maybe I fear what society will think of me if they see me in tears. Anyways, tonight Kevin Costner and Two Socks were the outlet for my sadness.

I paused it during a buffalo hunt scene. There’s this skull I’ve been eyeing that lives in the flower bed (though no flowers grow) of an empty house down the street; it’s my understanding the skull is tragically underappreciated in such a home. I leashed Coca and took a small reusable grocery bag, the floral handmade one from my grandmother, walked the few blocks and it was mine. There was an unsettling uprooting noise and more resistance than I expected as I lifted him. But I left flowers in his place and consider it, one-sidedly maybe, a good trade. I celebrated at Rose Park with some animalistic noises, and my dog flashed a few judgmental glances my way. Here, perhaps, is something society fears more than tears: savagery.

Tuesday, May 20, 2014: Green River, Labyrinth Canyon, UT

Tonight I say goodnight to this life of backcountry tramping. No better place to do it. This camp ranks high on my list of most beautiful and welcoming. Stunning little nooks are linked together

by trails alongside steep canyon walls. Tamarisk is now in bloom; though invasive I can't help myself from thinking it luscious and tropical. Looking up at the interplay of familiar bur oak leaves and blue blue sky I think of Dandelion Wine: "Finest kind of lace there is," Father Spaulding says to the boys. It's summer and I feel it. There's little responsivity now that we're near the course's end. We float in the sun and sometimes paddle. We shit comfortably in a bucket affectionately called "The Groover," in individual little baggies complete with wet wipes wrapped in American flag decorated packaging. It rotates canoes daily, and now we've added sage to mask its ripe odor. Hot sun does not help; but I can't complain, 1/8th of that stank is mine. The canyon is narrow and well-traveled. Without groovers we'd be swimming in, camping on, even drinking all the shits of paddlers' past. Wind blew again against us today, preventing casual "float 'n bloats." But it's not every day you get to lose yourself in the rhythmic motion of canoeing. Hear the lull of moving water—purpose but no hurry. Tomorrow we'll pass Horseshoe Canyon, where we began two months ago. With luck I'll be a different person than I was then.

Dani and I swam naked under the moon, saying goodbye to this sacred body of water, this soothing teacher, this unruly friend.

Friday, October 31, 2014: Missoula, MT

Gussied up, unibrow and all, channeling my inner Frida. Then there was much dancing; I was sweaty and didn't even consider the smudging unibrow but felt tall and powerful, a rare breed of woman. Cooper played new, strange music I wanted to remember but couldn't.

Suddenly we were in the streets, Cooper, Nick, James, and I. Running through alleys; pit stop to dance and drink with strangers. Nick might have done a keg stand, but maybe that was a fantasy of granola meeting jock.

Shimmied through windows of the ROTC gym. Warm women's locker room, decorated distastefully, 70's-eque and unpleasant. Then the dark gymnasium, kicking a single artificial candle they found eerily on the window sill, and not saying much, not needing to say much. They got the big rope down from the ceiling, the kind we used to swing on in elementary school gym class. That's just what we did now; I was pleased to not trip over my long skirt, or tall bots, or intoxication. It was nearly silent; every noise I did hear sounded threatening.

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Wednesday, May 21, 2014: Green River, Labyrinth Canyon, UT

A letter

“All good things must come to an end,” Dani reminds me. My heart breaks. Perhaps this is necessary; perhaps this is not a break but an expansion of the heart. For my current capacity for friendship is fulfilled; my thoughts overwhelmed by the philosophical beauties of Earth; my vision engrained with the vivid alien landscapes I’ve called home for two months. But time passes, the river moves, and so must we.

Today we returned to Horseshoe very much a family, very much different from the awkward group that was here last. More flowers have blossomed, more trees have leafed out. The sun shines brighter, hotter, more intensely. The river grew mightier. And yet the wind still blew, on it riding the undeniable urgency of change.

Change. We became masters of this trade—changing homes nightly, changing perspectives, habits, lifestyles.

We came upon a slab, broken from a more massive cliff, decorated with petroglyphs. In it I saw an infinity symbol. What its original meaning was I will never know, but I found timely significance in its simple elegance. “Nothing is ever lost except that epiphenomenon known as human delight,” Ed Abbey said. I don’t foresee one ounce of delight being lost within this fine group of organic souls. Though we’ll soon go our separate ways, live our own unique lives, spread our enthusiasm here and there and everywhere, the power of this experience is infinite and will never be lost.

Happy journeys, my dear friends.