

4-30-2018

Sea Turtle Sagebrush

Katherine Rasmussen

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/oval>

Recommended Citation

Rasmussen, Katherine (2018) "Sea Turtle Sagebrush," *The Oval*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/oval/vol11/iss2/5>

This Prose is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Oval by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.

sea turtle sagebrush.

by katherine rasmussen

Every summer, a handful of European romantics voyage to Lakota country sporting braids and arrowhead jewelry in search of an authentic indigenous experience. My Dad's buddy on the tribal council, Archie Fire, likes to capitalize on these Self-Proclaimed Sioux by carting them around to powwows and facilitating vision quests. Archie packs them and their expensive tents into a spot on our place we call the Three Peaks. They quest for visions a while then leave after the last Sundance because there's no way to sugar coat the Res once the weather turns cold.

I hadn't talked to one of these New Age Natives much before Archie dropped Jean Claude off in our driveway. Archie needed a break from being spiritual tour guide and my Dad owed him for scaring the last yuppie off. A few weeks before, my dad and I brought over a steer for the nearby powwow stew pot. We parked the pickup and trailer by the arena as usual. An elder spoke a few kind words to the animal and my dad gave his own version of a blessing before pulling the hammer back. Shortly after, we heard the horrified shriek of a French lady in Birkenstocks who had just received her first lesson in The Circle of Life.

My only other experiences with people like the lady with an aversion to reality led me to believe these tourists all thought they were a better version of white because of their world view. Once, in the grocery store check out line, a German tourist wearing a war bonnet print t-shirt told me that I live in a place where I don't belong. I was thirteen and shy so I said nothing and studied the cow shit on my cracked leather boots. The man in line behind the tourist, clearly un-amused with the war bonnet t-shirt, set his groceries on the counter and said, "At least she's not trying to be something she isn't."

I'm the youngest day laborer on the family place, meaning I inherit the jobs nobody else wants like pulling a dead bull out of a dam or playing tour guide for the occasional visitor. I saddled two horses once Archie left and loaded them in the trailer.

Jean Claude appeared from the house transformed from hippie to dime store cowboy complete with new Wranglers and bolo tie; his thin braid now a low ponytail under a wide brimmed hat. I had orders to show Jean Claude the spot where his upcoming vision quest would be. Aside from the occasional culture tourist, no one visits the Three Peaks outside of checking the fence line in the spring. This fence requires several days of hiking steel posts and barbwire into rough country. I don't mind it though. It's a prime spot to hunt for fossils. After a good rain, ancient relics surface for the last time before weathering into soil. Seeing the creatures is usually enough, but sometimes I can't help pocketing a shell or three toed horse tooth for the jar by my bed.

I parked the pickup and trailer a few miles from our destination, tightened cinches and covered the do's and don'ts of sitting on a horse. I took it slow, even though he seemed agile enough for a middle-aged city person, and braced myself for the coming sermon of cultural enlightenment.

A pair of falcons scanned the horizon and the light dropped, softening the badland ridges and puffs of sagebrush. My bitterness for giving the evening up to pretend we ran a dude ranch began to slip as we rode in silence. Instead of forced conversation, quiet happiness radiated from Jean Claude as he settled into his surroundings. I didn't have the heart to tell him Three Peaks wasn't sacred in the way Archie sells it. He tells the tourists

this place is the one and only ancient vision quest site in the land. No way would the tribe bring tourists to actual sacred places. If they did, the place wouldn't be sacred after a profit was made on it. The real sacred places, I imagine, are less conspicuous than the postcard badland feature we rode towards. Once, while taking a break from replacing my great grandfather's axe cut posts with steel ones, I heard the faint sounds of drums traveling over the grass. I lay on a chalky badland spine connecting two of the Three Peaks and listened to the thrum that came from a place foreigners never go.

We stopped and hobbled the horses to make our way through the rest of the cedars on foot. I looped my watch around the saddle horn-- a habit I picked up as a kid. Fossils are easier to spot without the distraction of a clock. Jean Claude watched and did the same without questioning my methods. The old fart was starting to make me glad I didn't put him on the horse that likes to wipe people off his back with trees.

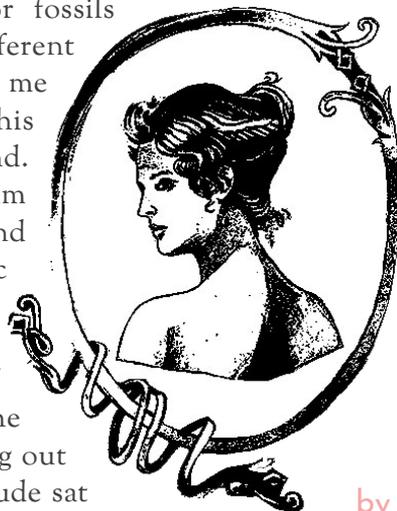
Jean Claude and I pushed through the cedars and walked out into a clearing at the base of the Three Peaks. I showed him where he'd have his vision quest later in the week and shoved an empty tuna can in my pocket left over from the lady Archie brought last year. Jean Claude stood with his hands by his side marveling at the towering chalk buttes, their pink and dun ribbons of dried gumbo like a painted movie set. He noticed me studying the crumbling badlands for fossils and followed my lead in a different spot. After a while, he called me over to a molar the size of his fist sticking out of the ground. The glint in his eyes made him look like a kid who just found out he'd get to see Jurassic Park. We moved on without the need for chatter and watched for more signs of ancient life until I spotted the profile of a sea turtle sticking out of a badland bank. Jean Claude sat

on the ground and looked up at the brittle remains that were sea turtle for 75 millions years and would be grass by the next growing season. He broke off a piece of the sagebrush by his foot, nodded his head to sea turtle in the eroding bank as if to say Thank You, and pocketed the silvery green twig. We studied the cross section of sediment exposing the land's memory until the nighthawks started feeding on mosquitoes.

We made our way back to the horses as the sky began to darken. I took the hobbles off my horse and Jean Claude followed my lead. We slackened our reigns and let the horses choose the best route back. After seeing his appreciation for the place, I started warming up to conversation. I nearly fell off my horse when he said he was 76 years old. The man looked more like a weathered 55. He told me about traveling damn near the whole globe. He told me about raising the wild bulls people run with in Spain. He raises his own horses. He built his own sailboat. He likes Jesus, as a friend, and has scandalous theories of God's son and Marie Magdalene. He married his wife, the most beautiful sculptor in the world, after falling in love with her the first moment he saw her. He told me I'm welcome anytime in their guest cottage on the French Rivera.

"You sell the ranch one day and travel?" he asked after I finished grilling him on what the Pyramids were like.

"No! That would be selling an appendage," I said. He gave a knowing smile like he understood. As we dismounted and loaded the horses into the trailer, he told me about finishing cancer treatment the week before. His doctor told him to stay in France but he believes he survived because of his spirit and his spirit needed time in a sacred place.



◀ jewel
by mary mccormick