

JOURNEY TO BLUE

Glenna Holloway

Chicago winters drag their frigid feet through March, even tracking up April's tentative green floors. But what I suffer from isn't garden variety doldrums. It's more like crippling dehydration. The city drains my lubricants, cages me. Any city would feel the same. Yet I'm city born and continue to be an urbanite by choice.

The problem may be genetic. Periodically, I crave primitive areas with metaphysically defined ambience and uninterrupted sky of a particular shade. It gets so bad it's like a physical need, a desert thirst. I go west for the cure. When the budget allows, I go to hunt mule deer and pronghorn antelope in early fall. But that takes a lot of pre-planning. Sometimes these seizures come without warning, often around the vernal equinox.

Over the years of self-diagnosis, back fence treatment and advice, a few things emerge clearly. This isn't a simplistic desire for a change. A trip to Florida or the

Catskills, however pleasant, doesn't alleviate the pangs. Aloneness may be part of the nostrum but that state can be achieved in nearby woods. Neither is it a case of deprivation of beauty. Our country is full of beauty. My neighborhood is beautiful. What I crave is not even considered beautiful by many people. The adjectives heard most often are "stark", "inhospitable", "harsh."

I always arrive at night-- my favorite time. Each trip there's been a ripe moon. A serendipity moon climbing rock steeples and minarets. Here in the high blue watching places I feel like a participant in some ancient ritual my cells seem to remember.

Whether desert or badlands, these Arizona places hold the essence of eternity. Yes, some of the same timelessness exists in the mountains but there's too much minutiae-- too much digression and distraction. Here the whole composition seems to be in its final stage of mutation. It's a palimpsest for everything between life and death and it zaps unfailingly into the center of thought and feeling. Somehow it's good to know that even here within these premises of seeming finality and immutability, change is still taking place.

This is predator country. A sudden coyote flings itself leanly into the chase of shadows, silent as a star shooting.

Sometimes it's a bobcat. I never saw it, but once I heard a cougar. Its sound made an ice blue peak on my spinal graph.

It's also crisis country, land of drought and violent storms. There is nothing here that hasn't evolved on hard edges, nothing that hasn't formed rhyme with voids and cryptics, nothing that hasn't learned blue patience.

Tonight is a new shade near the ground-- like teal and copen brushed over a thin slice of obsidian. Traffic and tollways vanish in the ash patterns of a native potter's cold fire. All the custom-made cacophony of my world disappears under the humps of hogans listening to Venus rising.

My destination is always opportunistic. If there's a road in the direction my internal compass is pointing I take it. If the magnet that's pulling is too much for my rental four-wheel drive, I hire a horse. Accomodations are seldom great, they may even be my vehicle. But it's the best sleep of my life.

Early in the morning I inhale endless turquoise horizons. The air sliding through my lungs is like silk pulled through a cool, clean gun barrel. My eyes aren't halted by stacks of people-boxes shoved together by corporate cliff dwellers. They don't stumble over smoke-ropes. They're not even stopped by ridges rousing vague questions of what's beyond.

My sight is simply regaled by the meaning of blue.

I move slowly through wood and granite halls accented with murals or bas-reliefs in agate, chalcedony and jasper. Surreal sculptures on carved plinths fill the miles of galleries. Pinyons and spruces line some of the perimeters. Manzanita, sage, cholla, even loco weed add colors and strange curvilinear shapes. Bristlecones and creosote bushes, vying hotly among experts for the title of oldest on earth, make stubborn contributions to the collage. Indifferent to age, investing everything in life, one splits stone to pursue it. The other clears out a swath of competitors with chemical warfare.

The light is alive, changing constantly, offering new swatches and samples of sheen, stipple and glow. Bias bands and vivid ricochets backlight, highlight, bounce-light the rich textures-- all against ubiquitous blue.

Afternoon is cerulean, a favorite of my watercolorist friend back home who divulged a trade secret of turning his landscapes upside down after laying a sky wash so the pigments are deeper at the top. Nature is a watercolorist. Water is the prime mover of all the ingredients of form as well, leaching out softer rock, leaving bizaare shapes of harder stone-- gnashing away the footing of canyon walls, drilling, grooving, dimpling and depositing. Everything here

is under the direction of water, wind and temperature,
posing similes for the centuries and for me.

My horse and I are part of the texture. Each sense is
honed and magnified, yet my long unused saddle muscles are
only a subliminal discomfort. I'm attuned to small sounds in
large silence, the feel of leather and pinto hide. I touch
ocotillos and last year's agave seeds and shards of
petrified wood.

I can't stay, of course. This is the outmost periphery of
my natural habitat, probably an atavistic part. I'm not
equipped to live here. I've quieted for awhile the throwback
genes that made me come. Atop a slope I stop and look back
at pronghorns as I leave. Predictably, they exchange swift
retreat for a turn to look again at me. The bond is more
than curiosity-- each kind has seen the other many times
before. Perhaps there is a nascent recognition of mutual
longings, a desire to share some God-given lore.

Undiluted azure anoints me now. My mouth still tastes of
last night's royal. And the crimped mass of springs and
wires behind my eyes and my smile has loosened like a
resurrection plant in rain.