

JOURNEY TO BLUE

Midwest winters drag their feet through March, even tracking up April's tentative green floors. But what my family and I suffer from isn't the common malady spring relieves. It's more like crippling dehydration. The city absorbs our lubricants, alters our dispositions, our sleep. Any city would feel the same. We continue to be urbanites by choice, but now and then we have to go far away for a cure.

The problem may be genetic. My grandfather was afflicted, too. Periodically, we need primitive areas with metaphysically defined ambience and uninterrupted sky of a particular shade. It gets so bad it's like a febrile ache and thirst. The only remedy is west. To a place you must hunt for. A ritual event.

Over the years of self-diagnosis, back fence treatment and neighborly advice, one thing emerges clearly. This isn't a simplistic desire for change. A trip to the Bahamas 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. Our neighborhood is beautiful. What we crave, all four of us, husband, wife, and my parents, is not even considered beautiful by many people. The adjectives heard most often are "stark," "inhospitable," "harsh." Our destination is called badlands or desert.

We always arrive at night. Each trip, there's been a ripe moon like this one--a serendipity moon climbing rock steeples and minarets. Here in the high blue watching places we're passive participants in some ancient ritual our cells recall.

Here is the essence of eternity. Some of the same timelessness exists in the mountains but there's too much minutiae-- too much digression and distraction. Here the whole composition has the appearance of a final stage of mutation. It's a palimpsest for everything between life and death and it zaps unfailingly into the center of what man is and what he still hopes to be. Somehow it's good to know that even within the premises of seeming finality and immutability, change is always 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. We never saw it, but once we heard

a cougar. Its sound made ice blue peaks on our spinal graphs.

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 our world disappears under the humps of hogans listening to Venus rising.

The route is always opportunistic as is the blooming of the desert. It's decided by rain and sensory perception. If there are no blossoms, we follow internal compasses. If the consensual magnet that's pulling us is too much for our rental four-wheel drive, we hire horses. Accomodations are seldom great, they may even be our vehicle. But it's the best sleep of our lives.

Early in the morning we inhale endless turquoise horizons. We come as unarmed hunters but the air sliding through our lungs is like silk pulled through a gun barrel. Our 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. Sight is simply regaled by the multiple meanings of blue.

We move slowly through wood and granite halls accented with murals and bas-reliefs in agate. Surreal chalcedony and jasper 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 their stubborn contributions to the collage: Indifferent to age, investing everything in life, one splits stone to pursue it; the other cuts a swath through its competitors with chemical warfare.

And whatever's blooming, there will be lots of it. Fighting for continuance through its one beautiful, brief chance to attract whatever pollinates it, it soon sets seed that may remain dormant for years.

The light is alive, changing constantly, offering new