

EPIPHANY AT ARROYO BLANCO

Charles L. Williamson

*Far or forgot to me is near;
Shadow and sunlight are the same;
The vanished gods to me appear;
And one to me are shame and fame.*

*They reckon ill who leave me out;
When me they fly, I am the wings;
I am the doubter and the doubt,
And I the hymn the Brahmin sings.*

BRAHMA (2-3) Ralph Waldo Emerson



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"Awshit!" The engine sputtered a few times and then quit. Getting out of the pickup, Dory slammed the door and stood alone in the mechanical stillness, eight miles from the nearest paved road. She shouted her frustration to the empty desert- which accepted her rebuke in silence. There should have been plenty of fuel in the tank. Trying the lights- she determined that the battery was ok. "Damn computerized engines" she thought, "you needed a computer in order to fix anything." She opened the hood. Everything looked fine at first, all the wires and hoses in place, but she could smell gas. Her gaze ran along the fuel line, and sure enough, she found it, a longitudinal crack in the metal tubing. She could hear fuel dripping slowly into the desert. Electrical or duct tape might have sufficed for a temporary repair and gotten her back to the highway- but naturally, there was no tape. She wasn't going anywhere tonight, and with the sun racing for the mesa, darkness would soon cloak her and her problem. Already the cliff face was casting long cooling shadows across the arroyo.

"Damn, damn, damn. Can't very well stumble out in the dark" she thought. Returning to the truck, she inventoried two full gallon plastic jugs of emergency water, an old army blanket, half a cheese sandwich and an apple left over from lunch, a book of matches in the glove compartment, the flashlight, a small box of Kleenex (toilet paper now), her purse- and an umbrella. She tried the cell-phone again, and saw "No Service"- again. To be expected, on a dirt road somewhere north of Corrales and 8 miles west of state highway 44 in the mountains of north central New Mexico.

She could imagine the story buried on a back page in the *Albuquerque Journal*: "Engineer from 'Polymer Magic' of Seattle found dead of dehydration only a mile from the highway, one shriveled hand (strangely) holding an umbrella". This would be preceded by a year old photo of the trim, pretty, 27 year old brunette in overalls, standing in front of a cluttered instrument rack. A strange looking device with many protruding wires was cradled in her arms, looking for all the world like a newborn hydra.

Of course she'd known desert travel was not to be taken lightly, and reflected further, that desert gods, like other environmental gods, could be capricious. She should have been better prepared! Even summer nights could get cold on the high desert and she was wearing just a T-shirt, shorts and canvas shoes. She'd need a fire, but didn't want to risk blowing herself up by making one near the truck.

Scanning the surroundings, she noticed that there was plenty of scrub for a fire. Just then her eye caught the outline of an opening about 15 or 20 feet up on the Southwest side of the arroyo. She was no geologist but it seemed as though that part of the cliff face had collapsed recently. It enlarged what looked like a cave entrance. Even a shallow cave would make a good shelter if a fire could be built at the entrance. Taking the flashlight, she picked her way through the rubble and up the short steep slope. She hiked quickly and smoothly, in that delicate state of moving balance a seasoned climber employs when traversing loose talus. Her graceful movement proved a worthy match for the loose rock, as no stones dislodged or shifted in her wake.

The cave entrance proved to be about 6 feet high, 8 across and extended back about 20 feet. The flashlight beam illuminated a dry empty cave with smooth walls and a somewhat littered floor that extended out from the cave opening enough to make a small flat platform. It would do.

Returning to the truck she quickly retrieved the blanket, water, purse and most importantly, the matches from the glove compartment. After dropping these off at her new shelter, she proceeded to make half a dozen trips to gather firewood, enough to last the night. These chores took the better part

of a half hour. The sunset tinted clouds were dissipating now, radiating away the energy that had formed them out of shapeless vapor. The night would be clear. Dory stacked some twigs in the shape of a small teepee. Dry, they ignited eagerly. There was no wind and sparks from newly deposited branches rose straight up into the darkening sky.

She wished that Bob was here to ward off the night critters real or imagined that could be lurking just outside the circle of firelight. Moving to the side of the fire, she gazed out into the night, and realized that she could no longer see the truck. The thought of being alone at night in such a remote place was a unnerving, and she fought against it. She'd think of Bob.

Dory had met Bob only three months earlier. Recalling her "through the looking glass" experience- she was still astonished at the emotional firestorm that had left her both shaken and elated. Shaken, because the feelings within her were new and their intensity frightening. But at the *same time*, she found herself unrelentingly happy and alive. How remarkable, she thought, that we live our lives imprisoned within our bodies, communication with others limited to the way we pose our eyes, or by movement or touch, and most importantly by the sounds that we assemble into words- scarcely a muted echo of the complex thoughts and indescribable feelings we're trying (sometimes desperately) to express. And yet, she had experienced the mysteriously direct channel that sometimes exists between people at the moment when their two personalities fuse; a chrysalis, out of which emerges a single soul, ineffable and fleeting as a butterfly.

A meteor, its billion year journey interrupted by the earth's atmosphere etched a glowing trail through the milky way, before extinguishing itself in the horizon to the west. Its passage also interrupted her musings. Looking up just as it crossed overhead, she counted eight seconds before the incandescent trail faded away. "Wow!" she thought; "that was a big one". Standing up and stretching her muscles, Dory added some more wood to the fire. It would be a long night.

Firelight reflected off of what appeared to be white sticks on the cave floor. Curious, she picked up the flashlight, one of those large 6 volt lantern types, turned it on and walked back about 15 feet into the darkness. In the light beam she could see a great many bones scattered about, and on closer inspection, stones and stone flakes. She seemed to have stumbled into a stone-age dwelling! Some of the floor litter was half buried, but looking closer she could discern small rodent bones and hair. She guessed that the cave had been later used by small animals, perhaps to escape bad weather. It was then she noticed that about two feet up from the floor, the East side of the cave wall, a dark hole- it was the darkness that attracted her eye. Walking across the cave carefully to avoid the bones, she found herself looking into the opening of another cave. A cave within a cave!

This inner cave opening was only about two and a half feet wide, by three high. Its bottom was the floor of the new cave, and what she saw through the opening nearly stopped her breathing. There in the flashlight beam, in full stride, was a buffalo, or rather a painting of one- with arrows sticking out of its side.

Without conscious decision, she stuck her head into the opening, placed one knee up on the ledge and then the other and crawled about three feet, immersing, with sore knees, into prehistory.

The inner cave was rather ovalish, about 12 by 15 feet and maybe 10 feet tall with a rounded ceiling. Horizontal banding of the rock strata was visible from floor level up to about two feet. The room seemed to be naturally formed, the floor smooth and dusty, the ceiling dark. Such was the cavern's shape, the metrics of the small universe she had discovered.

Displayed upon the walls were paintings of animals. Their numbers, variety and beauty were spellbinding. She stood up slowly, without lowering her gaze, and brushed the sand off her knees. Walking carefully into the center of the room, she slowly made a complete turn, flashlight scanning the walls.

The landscape of the ancient artisan was indiscernible, but its inhabitants were strikingly portrayed. Herds of bison and antelope were running from unseen predators. The antelope were looking back, a forest of antlered heads turned in unison towards an unseen foe. On the opposite wall, a herd of bison was moving in a headlong charge, their dense bodies a frightening wall of flesh, bones, hair and horn. And then she saw it again, lagging behind the herd, the single bison with four arrows protruding from its back and side. Below were the hunters- human figures with triangle shaped body outlines, holding bows. Straight lines (symbols?) emanated from their heads like spokes of a wheel. Above, circling in a stone sky, were birds of prey with menacing talons and long curved beaks.

Other pictographs incorporated images of snakes, turtles and lizards. She also spotted the familiar sun symbol found on New Mexico license plates. Finally, above the entry, was the dark outline of a human hand, a sign that the paintings were sacred or perhaps the signature of the artist.

Dory placed the lantern face up so that its outer glow would illuminate the whole room then sat down in raptured admiration.

The temperature in the cave seemed neither warm nor cold, but the air was dry, and she felt its desiccating presence filling the cave. Who were these people, the hunters, the artist. How old were these scenes, hundreds of years or thousands?

She could feel the tug of history pulling her backwards, away from the sharply etched present, to the barely perceptible shapes of the deep past.

Long before recorded history, people would have lived mostly in small groups. With only a limited knowledge of agriculture, they would have survived by hunting and gathering in an unforgiving, dangerous world. Their lives, Dory was sure, were short, with death always near and mysterious. Lacking rational explanations for natural phenomena, superstition would have regulated their lives. Perhaps the paintings endowed the painters with a 'magic' that gave them a much needed, *illusion of control*, as if in reproducing their world they might gain some power over their hostile surroundings...

As she sat cross-legged and unmoving, myriads of dust motes danced in the lantern's beam, energized by the air currents convecting upward from the heat of her body.

Thinking back to even earlier times, she imagined the beginnings of human consciousness, a gray time when the

first pricks of self-awareness began to illuminate the shadowy recesses of instinctive thought. Living then must have been like living a dream, half asleep, half awake, and yet she knew that she was a descendent of these "almost people". Indeed her lineage ran back thousands of millions of years- back to the first living cell immersed in a primal sea pregnant with possibility. Every single one of her ancestors had managed to reproduce and so pass the genetic inheritance that made her existence possible. She was the last link in an unbroken chain of life nearly four billion years long! Now it was her turn at the cosmic wheel of fortune; a game of survival in a future where chance and necessity converged... on her number.

"Have our beliefs and myths," she wondered, "evolved to provide us with the *illusion of control*? Is the chimera built into our genes? Could it be that even with all our technology, we're but cave painters still?"

What did it really mean she went on thinking, to be "awake", sentient and alive? A thousand years- a million years from now, would her progeny, whether flesh or silicon, assert that she had been "awake"?

Sentient, thoughtful, caring life on this planet had come a long way up from the ooze, a long way from nature's pitiless indifference, a long way from the monumental ignorance and bestiality of the deep past. Reason and compassion had come after a brutal childhood- filth, starvation, unfettered disease, human sacrifice, sanctioned torture, superstition, bondage, intolerance and the rule of the many by the few, with no recourse for the great mass of victims but the release of death. "Yes", she thought, "though some of these things still exist, we've still climbed a long way up from the darkness." Robert Audrey, the play-

wright turned paleontologist, had been right, when he'd said that we were not fallen angels- but rather, "risen apes".

The profound stillness of the painted world was strangely comforting. Dory could almost feel the presence of the painter speaking to her through his art- of danger, hardship, a longing for truth, and beneath it all... an enduring love of life. Dory resolved that when she got back to Seattle, she'd try her hand at painting. The artist, she was beginning to believe, was a magician after all.

Smiling inwardly, she removed one of her earrings. Holding the small gold circle for a few moments in the lantern's beam, Dory placed it carefully on the floor- a gift to honor the artist and his people. The other she would keep in token of this night in "his" world.

Reluctantly, feeling that it was time to leave, Dory stood up and walked slowly to the entrance. Just above the opening was the imprint of the hand she had seen earlier. Reverently, she placed her right hand on the rock; palm on palm, finger on finger, a congruence of past and present, of flesh and stone. In a place that had endured centuries of silence, she spoke softly and with feeling. "Thank you".

Making her way out of the cave and back to the present, she noticed that the fire had burned down to coals, but she wasn't at all cold, or tired or fearful. Standing in the cave entrance, Dory looked out into the night with fearless eyes.

The apexes of the Summer Triangle: Deneb, Altar and Vega drew her gaze upward to a bejeweled sky such as "he" would have seen and wished upon, or prayed to. Placing more branches on the fire, she sat down on the blanket with her knees pulled up to her chin and watched the flames dance in the darkness. While she "dreamed the fire", the earth's angular momentum rushed her inexorably eastwards, towards the morning terminator.

She thought it best to head out early. Once over the ridge she'd be within cell-phone range and could call for a tow into Corrales.

With the first light of dawn Dory rolled the water bottles and purse in the blanket. Tying it over one shoulder, she picked up her umbrella and walked out of Arroyo Blanco towards NM-44.



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