

## Home(sick) Wonder

One of the most stunning things about travel is when you pinpoint exactly what makes a landscape feel like home. I've lived my entire remembered childhood and teenage adolescence in Salt Lake Valley, and my family continues to live in the same house, even as I now spend half my year or more in Northfield, Minnesota. I have driven through most of the gridded streets of Salt Lake City, I have hiked up many of the Wasatch Mountain peaks to the west, I have stared at many a sunset over the Oquirrh Mountains to the east, and I have frequently crossed the height of Traverse Ridge to the south. The maps I have drawn of this valley are many and varied. I know how I am oriented to this valley, and, in some ways, that may mean I am disoriented to the rest of the world. Still, I keep finding myself drawing outlines of home into each new horizon I see (and hear and taste and smell and feel).

This spring, in the midst of the pandemic, my family made our own journey to encounter the horizons of Arizona for the first time. We packed pre-made meals into a cooler, downloaded podcasts onto our phones, loaded ourselves into the car, and set off.

Road trips are no new event to this family: my childhood is scattered with three-day weekends overcome with the rush down to Southern Utah. I know the drifting calm of hours on muted highways divided by bursts of 2- or 4- or 8-mile hikes through red rocks and juniper woods. Road trips are *routine*. I've learned to pack two pairs of shoes—one for quick gas station bathroom breaks and hops out of the car to read interpretive signs and one for hiking; I've perfected the ability to sleep with two jackets scrunched up against the jittering car window; I've honed the ability to read for hours at a time in a moving vehicle without getting carsick. My body knows the hour between Provo and Salt Lake City so well that I will invariably wake up as

we turn onto our street whether I've been asleep for two minutes or two hours (and my heart always sighs familiarly).

The advent of all of my siblings and I into adulthood has only increased the reach of these trips. On our trip to two National Parks and three National Monuments over this spring break, the driving was shared between four adults with driver's licenses. We could switch whenever someone needed a nap or wanted to enjoy the clouds a little bit more. We could regulate each other's moods rather than having a singular adult responsible for the happiness of two or three children.

My initiation into adulthood, and thereby college, has also meant that I can't quite call Salt Lake City my home in the same way that I did before. Two years ago, any trip I took—by car or plane—was tracked in my mind as a spoke on a wheel out from the turning hub of the Salt Lake Valley. But I'm now spending so much time in Northfield, Minnesota that my imagination tracks trips out from this city as well. Two hubs now drive my life in a complicated dance that I still don't know the steps to.

I suppose it's fitting then that I've road tripped to college at the beginning of each year: driving through the badlands with all their rain-puffed dirt and endless fields of grain, looking out across lake after lake as they flash by between the conifers. These week-long trips let me drag a viscous feeling of home along with me towards the Upper Midwest. But (never mind how immediately I fell in love with the glaze of sunset on the Cannon River) in those first few months I felt exposed in a way that meant I never felt quite at home as I stumbled through the painful embarrassments of making new friends and the inherent dissonance of waking up every day in a place you don't know the shape of.

Eventually, I settled into a habit of walking out to the hill that slopes down to Lyman Lake. I would sit up against the low wall and stare out across towards the forested Arb and listen to the geese cackle. Nestled in that dip which hosted two pieces of a lake and the graduated steps of a river, I would breathe a little bit better.

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As we drove south in our brief ten-day jaunt to Arizona, I could feel myself pulling on a spoke out from the hub of Salt Lake Valley (but I could also feel a phantom limb reaching out towards Northfield).

We exclaimed over brilliant clouds rushing across the sky in the opposite direction to us as we traced the edge of the Rocky Mountains. We delighted in the frozen contortions of A'a lava around Sunset Crater (and I found my gaze drawn to the solitary San Francisco Mountain range). We found ourselves enchanted by the fallen specter of the Petrified Forest (and I felt my teeth clench as I looked out over the flat desert surrounding us for hundreds of miles).

When we drove into Saguaro National Park the next day, I felt more comfortable for no reason I could identify. I dismissed it in the face of all these cartoon cacti come to life in a thick forest of spines. I found myself easily distracted with reading the interpretive signs about the different adaptations of each cacti and bush, the limits of their growth, their named history. Learning more about all the parts of this desert that were unfamiliar allowed me to lose my sense of self in information.

This investigation was interrupted by the rush of wind that came before a length of storm clouds across the sky. I laughed at the rain that sped across the landscape at midday and left behind a faded rainbow on the hillside. It felt fantastic to arrive in a place so known for its arid

weather, for its heat, and encounter a gusting day where I had to wear a jacket I had gotten for the cold winters of Minnesota.

Later that day, we embarked on a hike up the side of the mountain in the eastern section of the park. As we ascended toward an abandoned mine, the desert before us painted itself purple in the light of the growing sunset at our backs. I remarked on the ribs of saguaros and the calls of birds as we worked our way to the summit.

When we stopped for water, I turned to face the setting sun.

I looked out across the valley and saw something new: a forest of saguaro, prickly pear, chain-fruit cholla, mesquite; a forest of red-tailed hawks, mourning doves, Costa's hummingbird, crows.

I looked out across the valley and saw something I knew: a ribbon of sunset orange between the deep purple of the mountains and the dusted blue of the clouds; a stretch of undulating city overcome by a stretching shadow of mountains not so far away. My heart met my breath in my chest.

My upbringing was making itself felt, and I suddenly found that a longing I didn't even know existed was sated. The steepness of the mountains enclosed me like a blanket. The cloud-spotted sunset softened my gaze. I felt like a child nestling deeper into the covers and hiding a book as my father cracked the door open at 2am, letting the hallway light spilling in. It was that exact feeling of elation over a new plot development mixed with a heady exhaustion.

In the foothills across from twin mountains, I was at home.

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I'm struggling to reconcile this gasping need for the landscape I grew up *in* with my love of each new landscape I encounter.

It ultimately comes down to this abstract desire: I wish I could spread my place-based knowledge like ink across the page, each branch of ink shaping itself to the turn of city corners and edges of reaching mesas. I wish there were some way to feel this ink on my skin and let it mark me as these landscapes have marked my mind.

Maybe then, with that tattooed map on my skin, I could draw myself into the new landscape of Northfield. Then, I could finally identify my unfilled silhouette against the open sky that I find myself so lost against. And, if I could paint myself here, I know that my understanding of home will have that many more defined edges.