

In May of 2011 Emily and I and our dog Margot met up with our friend Leslie in Denver. We were coming from Houston and Leslie had been in Nebraska. We rented a car and started driving south into New Mexico. We went to Taos and the sun went down there behind a slanted horizon. Then we headed to Santa Fe. Emily bought me a silver belt buckle that was cast in sand by a 6 year-old girl.

The next day - after debating the accuracy of cyber-maps - we started out for Bandelier National Monument and ended up on a 37-mile stretch of dirt road that cut through the Jemez Mountains. In places the road was solid sandstone with large crevasses and sloped radically sideways. We stopped at an overlook to take pictures. There were animal skulls hanging in spindly desert trees. We collected firewood and filled the rental car with it. We camped that night at Bandelier. People had lived in the canyon below the campground 10,000 years ago. There were a lot of stars and the air was warm. In the morning we walked through the canyon and explored the cliff dwellings. Later in the morning we drove into the town of Los Alamos. We had to pass through a security check to get into town. I thought about Oppenheimer and we had excellent tacos. Just outside of Los Alamos we stopped at the Jemez Caldera, one of 6 known land-based super-volcanoes. Down the road a ways we hiked to a hot spring with a meningitis warning. Afterward we all drank tequila, even the dog.

When we got to Jemez Pueblo we stopped at the pottery studio of Flo and Sal Yepa. They showed us what they were working on and talked about how they made the clay and showed us pictures of themselves with the Dalai Lama. They invited us to stay for dinner and told us we should go to the rain dance and see their friends at First Mesa in Hopi Land. We left Jemez and drove toward Monument Valley.

We arrived late in the evening. The deep black of the rising buttes was set off from the lighter violet blackness of the western sky as we descended off the plateau. In the morning we took a tour in the back of a pick-up truck through the valley. The sky was clear and blue and the sand was red. We stopped and looked at the towering formations cut away by rain and blowing sand. We lay on our backs with the German tourists, looking up through the "Eye Of The Sun" while the guide played a wooden flute. Around noon the wind picked up. By two o'clock the sand was whipping our eyes and cutting into our skin. The sky was turning pale orange as we left the valley and drove south toward Canyon de Chelly.

It was hard to keep the car on the road at times. The visibility decreased and at one point we had to stop. I took pictures of the red clouds of sand that blotted out the road. We arrived at Canyon de Chelly in the late afternoon and parked at the White House Overlook trailhead on the canyon rim. The wind was still blowing hard but we were now above the stinging sheets of sandstone. This trail is the only place visitors can access the valley floor without permission of the Navajo and a park guide. We started down in the late afternoon and the trail was all in shadow. About halfway down we stopped to look at a place where a streak of granite ran through the sandstone wall of the canyon. A small Navajo woman with a large white pit-bull was jogging up the trail towards us as we tried to remember the geological term for the anomaly in the rocks. When she got close enough she asked if we "liked rocks?" We said we did and then she said, "This is Pre-Cambrian granite. It's 2 billion years old. The sandstone is de Chelly Sandstone from Permian times - that's Pangea the super-continent, 300 million years ago. I grew up here in a Hogan. I had one jacket." And then she jogged on up the trail. Twenty minutes later she showed up again. She was jogging with her dog 20 feet above us on a small ridge that ran parallel to the trail. It was getting hard to make out what she was saying now but we heard something about looking out for trilobite fossils on the canyon walls and more geological history and then very clearly she yelled out, " Science!"

In the morning the wind was still blowing hard. We drove through Hopi Land and watched the sky turn milky yellow with sand. When we stopped for gas the car rocked back and forth and you could hear tiny sounds of granite granules pelting the windshield. A starving stray horse chewed dead grass in the ditch between the road and the gas station. We arrived at First Mesa around noon and parked just below the 1100 year old village of Walpi perched there on the cliff. We started walking up the hill, slitting our eyes against the sharp wind. As the road leveled off and we started to enter the village a single-file line of Kachina dancers emerged from the doorway of a stone house. They were chanting and stomping out a rhythm. We followed them through the tightly packed houses and emerged onto a large plaza. A woman offered us seats on a wooden bench and we watched the dancers for a few

hours. The dancers wore different masks. One of them, we learned later, was the "Snow Dancer." The ceremony was the rain dance. It is performed not only to bring rain but also to maintain contact with the supernatural world and to bring the community together. During a break the dancers handed out baskets of corn and fruit and vegetables. We left after about 3 1/2 hours. Time had slowed down. The wind was relentless and we were filled with sand. We drove west through grey hills and yellow wind toward the North Rim of the Grand Canyon.

When we passed over the Colorado River at Marble Canyon the sky was beginning to turn blue again. We stopped at an overlook where you can walk out over the river on a pedestrian bridge. The wind was still blowing but it was no longer filled with sand. We also saw rain clouds moving eastward toward Hopi Land. As we climbed in elevation toward Jacob Lake the temperature dropped and it started raining lightly. There were no campsites available in the park so we stayed at the Jacob Lake Inn. When we checked in there was a chalkboard weather report calling for snow that night. We unloaded the car and then drove 44 miles to the rim of the canyon. We passed through snow flurries on the way. The sun was setting when we arrived and the canyon was streaked with orange light in the places that weren't grey from the dark clouds above. The air was frosty and filled with pine. We walked a trail that followed a narrow ridge to a viewpoint that dropped straight down thousands of feet into the canyon. We talked about the people who had fallen or jumped or were pushed from places like this. We looked at the stratified layers of the canyon walls and remembered what the Navajo jogger had said about the 2 billion year old Pre-Cambrian granite at Canyon de Chelly. The amount of information visible all at once was overwhelming, sublime even. We followed the trail for a couple of miles along the rim until it was dark and cold.

We found the lodge bar and talked about what we had seen over the last few days. There was a fire and it was nice to be warm and getting a little high. When we stepped back into the night to leave we saw a few inches of snow covering the ground. The wind had picked up again and now instead of red clouds of sand obscuring the road it was blowing snow. We drifted a few times and I white-knuckled the steering wheel on the icy road. I had to flip back and forth between the high and low beams to keep from going cross-eyed as I stared into the chaos of swirling snowflakes and blackness. I felt heavy with the responsibility of keeping the car on the road. There were moments when the combination of alcohol, the black of night, the illuminated on-rushing snowflakes and the whiteness of the snow-covered road gave me the sensation of traveling through outerspace. It was like the effect they use in sci-fi movies to indicate warp speed. It created a kind of vertigo and a few times it momentarily seemed like the car had dissolved and that I was falling alone through a star-streaked void. Then suddenly I would feel the car back around me and on the road again. This cycle of feeling adrift in space and then back again continued for a good part of the drive back to the hotel.