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The Maze and Aura

... a work of art opens a void, a moment of silence,
a question without answer, provokes a breach without
reconciliation where the world is forced to
question itself. — Michel Foucault



Just before dawn sometime in April 1964, I shoved my Kelty behind the seat of a small Piper Cub, climbed into the passenger seat, and fastened my safety belt as we motored onto the airport runway at Moab, Utah. Since it was empty, we kept going into the take-off without stopping and then climbed slowly, the little plane grinding for altitude. Soon we banked west, and as we cleared the cliffs bordering the Spanish Valley, a vast array of mesas spread before us, glowing faintly in the morning light.

We turned again, southwest, and set a course for Junction Butte, a landmark tower at the confluence of the Green and Colorado Rivers. Beyond the confluence was the Maze, a terra incognita some people wanted preserved as part of the newly proposed Canyonlands National Park. *National Geographic* magazine believed the Maze might harbor something to persuade Congress to include it in the new park. My friend Huntley Ingalls and I were to explore the area for three days and photograph what we found. The plane would drop us as close to the Maze as possible. In the darkness of the runway we had flipped a coin to see who would go in first, and I won.

The pilot—Bud—was silent. Since he knew the country below from landing at remote sites for uranium and oil companies, I tried to question him about features in the landscape. But the noise of the motor made conversation difficult so we lapsed into silence and flew on, bouncing like a boat in rapids off the thermals coming up from the canyons. Below, the Colorado River

meandered through swells of slickrock muted by purple shadow, while to the north, miles of fluted red walls led to Grand View Point. By the time we crossed the Green River, the first light had illuminated the grass covering the sandbars, and pools of water in the slickrock gleamed like tiny silver mirrors. There was not a cloud in the sky—a perfect day.

At Junction Butte we had turned west toward Ekker Butte. Beneath it, to the south, was Horse Canyon, an open valley that receded into a labyrinth of slots—the Maze. On a bench between Ekker Butte and the canyon was an airfield that looked like a matchstick. Bud dropped the nose of the Piper Cub and we made a pass several hundred feet above the dirt strip. It had not been used in years, Bud said, and I believed him. It was covered with small plants and netted with arroyos. Worse, the south fork of Horse Canyon was far away, and since it led into the heart of the Maze, I feared that if we landed here, we'd never reach our main objective. So I began to search for openings.

Beyond the nearest fork of Horse Canyon—the north fork—a two-track struck south to the edge of the south fork, a point now called the Maze Overlook. It was a perfect place to start from and I wanted to land there. Bud turned south. The road turned out to be old Caterpillar scrape, one blade wide—probably cut by a seismographic survey crew when oil companies explored this basin in the fifties. I asked Bud if he could land on the scrape. He wasn't sure. I wanted him to try. He was silent.

We dropped down for a closer look and banked slightly left above the narrow dirt path, Bud's face pressed against the window. Then we gained altitude and headed back, still in silence. Bud flipped switches and studied the instrument panel. Soon we were sinking toward the road, then slowly we settled in.

Several feet above the ground, a gust of wind blew us to the right and we landed hard in the blackbush flats. The right wheel hit first, and when the wheel strut punctured the floor between my feet, I pitched forward, striking my head against the instrument panel and spewing blood over the cockpit. The plane bounced gracefully into the air and Bud worked the stick, murmuring softly, "Whoa Baby, Whoa Baby." We lost control in slow motion, but we were without panic, a space I've encountered many times. Then the plane hit again, the wheels snagged a shallow arroyo, and we flipped upside down, sliding across the desert with a sickening screech.

When we stopped, we were hanging upside down from our seat belts. The pressure of our body weight made it difficult to release them so we hung there kicking, trying to brace ourselves against the windshield. I smelled my own blood—that strange metallic tang. I tried to smell gas, and all the while I'm thinking, "We're gonna get roasted." Finally Bud released his buckle and crashed into the windshield. He helped me release mine, and we sat together on the roof of the cockpit, trying to open the doors. Unfortunately, the wings were bent up just enough to prevent the doors from opening, so we both kicked hard on one door until something gave. Then we crawled out into the warm silence of a desert morning.

We were ecstatic—laughing, shaking hands, kicking our heels, and praising each other as though we had by sheer intelligence and talent achieved a magnificent goal. I licked the blood off my hands and congratulated myself for surviving my first airplane wreck. I was twenty-two years old.

While Bud searched for the first-aid kit, I got some water from the Kely. I had six quarts, the standard rock climber's ration: two quarts per person per day, anywhere, under any conditions. We patched the gash in my head. Then, the adrenaline wearing off, we considered our plight. Bud felt he should walk to Anderson Bottom, a grassy stretch along the Green River with a line shack occupied by one of the local ranchers. I thought we should stay put. We had warm clothes, one sleeping bag, gas from the plane, matches for a brush fire, food, and water. Furthermore, we were highly visible—a light green airplane on a red desert. Within hours, Huntley would organize a rescue flight and easily spot us from above the airfield across the north fork. Bud would not stay, however, and after a few minutes he left, walking north with neither water nor supplies. The next day he was picked up near the Green River.

I examined my Kely for what, typically, was not there: no compass, no maps, no tent, no stove, no binoculars, no flares, no signal mirror. This probably had something to do with being kicked out of Boy Scouts. There were just two climbing ropes, some rock-climbing gear, a bivouac tarp, a sleeping bag, a Leica M2, the usual climber's food—summer sausage, cheese, gorp—and water.

I walked to the rim of the south fork. It was perhaps five hundred feet to the bottom of Horse Canyon. Across the canyon were spires of shale topped by dollops of White Rim sandstone, a for-

mation now called “the Chocolate Drops.” The canyon walls were more eroded than the Navajo and Kayenta sandstone I was familiar with from Glen Canyon, but everywhere were braids of a real labyrinth. The so-called south fork divided into at least three more canyons and everything kept forking. To my delight I saw marshes and a pool of water. It was utterly still. I sat on the rim and asked a question that came up often during the next thirty years: Why, exactly, am I here?

I was there because of Huntley. During the fifties he worked in southern Utah for the Coast and Geodetic Survey, traveling by Jeep and foot throughout the canyonlands conducting magnetic surveys. During those years he photographed spires he thought would make interesting rock climbs and showed his slides to other climbers living in Boulder, Colorado. He had photographs of the Fisher Towers, Totem Pole, Spider Rock, Standing Rock, Castle-ton Tower, and the Six-Shooter Peaks. By 1964 these spires had been climbed, some by Yosemite climbers, but many by Huntley and Layton Kor. Huntley had published articles on the first ascents of the Fisher Tower and Standing Rock in *National Geographic*, and now they thought he might use his climbing expertise to explore the Maze. Since I had climbed a lot with Kor and Huntley, was interested in wild places and was Huntley’s friend, here I was staring at the labyrinth.

The Utah desert was relatively unknown in the early sixties. In 1960 the road south of Blanding was dirt most of the way to Tuba City; the bridges were often one lane and made of wood. Eliot Porter’s *Glen Canyon: The Place No One Knew* was not published until 1963, and Edward Abbey’s *Desert Solitaire* did not come out until 1968. There were no guidebooks to these wild lands. Many of the parks and monuments and wilderness areas that now cover the area did not exist, and the country was vast and wild and easy to get lost in; there were no restrictions, and little management. We wandered the desert as we wished, lounged in the pools at Havasu, waded the Zion Narrows, climbed the desert towers, drifted down Glen Canyon, and explored the Escalante enjoying virtually no contact with other people. The Maze was simply another place on Huntley’s long list of wild places to see.

Although the Maze was de facto wilderness, I did not then think of wilderness as a separate place needing preservation. The Wilderness Act was not passed until 1964. To the degree I even thought

about preservation, I presumed it was conducted by nice old ladies in big cities. It certainly had nothing to do with me. I simply liked climbing big walls and spires and exploring remote places, preferably before anyone else did. Like most rock climbers, I didn’t even like to hike. I didn’t know the name of a single wildflower, and Huntley had to tell me, “These are cottonwoods” or “These are Utah juniper.” My knowledge of animals derived mainly from hunting and killing them. (Years later, when I read Schopenhauer, I recognized myself in those days: “in the mind of a man who is filled with his own aims, the world appears as a beautiful landscape appears on the plan of a battlefield.”)¹

I walked back to the plane and wrote a message on the road with the heel of my boot: “All OK,” “Bud”—then an arrow—and “Anderson Bottom.” I drank a quart of water, pulled out my foam pad, and settled into the shade beside the fuselage. I had no books, no paints or nature guides. I wasn’t worried, I was bored.

Around eleven in the morning I heard a plane and soon Huntley flew over in a Cessna 180 piloted by George Hubler, the owner of the Moab airport. After several passes to make sure I was ambulatory, they dropped a message saying they would land Huntley on the old airstrip. He would then cross the north fork and meet me at the wreck.

I settled back into the shade, even more bored. I could not get over the silence; it ate at me and I couldn’t sit still. I wandered around looking for something interesting to do and found nothing. So I sat in the shade, oblivious to the glory that engulfed my every moment.

The day passed slowly with no sign of Huntley. In the evening I walked to the rim of the north fork of Horse Canyon and searched for him, but to no avail. That night I consumed more of my water supply. I slept fitfully.

The next morning, when there was still no sign of Huntley, I went back and walked the rim searching for him. Finally, in the late afternoon, I found him placing an expansion bolt several feet below the White Rim sandstone cap. He had already done some wild unroped climbing, but the cap was featureless, and that meant bolting. Soon he was up. We shook hands and greeted each other formally by last name, in the best British mountaineering tradition.

Huntley had left most of his gear at the bottom of the canyon

while searching for a way through the cliffs. Since Hubler would return to the airfield the following day at noon, we had less than twenty-four hours to explore the Maze. We decided to leave Huntley's gear where it was and go on into the south fork. The plan was simple: we would walk into the Maze until dark, hike back through the night to the north fork, collect Huntley's things, and climb to the airfield to meet Hubler in the morning.

We returned to the wreck, gathered my gear, and after some scrambling and several rappels, reached the bottom of the canyon. After filling the water bottles at the algae-filled pool (we never treated water in those days), we hiked to the main canyon and up the middle of the three forks.

Soon Huntley began moving slowly and muttering about new boots. (Eventually he would lose all his toenails, which for years he kept in a small jar as a reminder.) After awhile he urged me to go on so I could cover as much ground as possible before dark. We dropped our packs in an obvious spot and I hurried up the canyon in fading light, moving rapidly, my eyes sweeping the landscape like radar. I missed the soaring walls and alcoves of the Escalante, the water, the seeps. I was still bored. But mostly from a sense of obligation, I walked on doggedly through the extraordinary silence.

Then, in the last light of day, I was startled by a line of dark torsos and a strange hand on a wall just above the canyon floor. I froze, rigid with fear. My usual mental categories of alive and not-alive became permeable. The painted figures stared at me, transmuted from mere stone as if by magic, and I stared back in terror.

After a few seconds, my body intervened with my mind, pulling it away from a gaze that engulfed me. The torsos became *just* pictures. My mind discovered a comfortable category for the original perception and the confusion passed. But strangely, seeing them as representations did not reduce the emotion I felt. I was chilled, shivering, though the air was warm. I could not override the feeling that the figures were looking at me, and that I was seeing what I wasn't supposed to see.

I can say now this fear resulted from confusion: perhaps from the exhaustion of the past two days, perhaps because of my anxiety for Huntley's situation and the increasing extremity of our position. But in retrospect, I believe it was the inherent power of the figures.

They were pictographs, but not the usual stick figures and crude animals I'd seen before. There were fifteen of them, painted a dark, almost indigo blue. Some were life-size, some smaller. Some were abstract, like mummies with big buggy eyes and horns. Others had feet and hands. One particularly beautiful figure I assumed was female. Among the figures were small animals, insects, snakes, and birds, all painted in remarkable detail. The most unusual figure displayed an enlarged hand with clearly articulated fingers; springing from the end of the middle finger was a fountain of what looked like blood—a spurting wound. Farther left along the wall were more figures. One did not appear abstract at all. It was dressed and masked, had feet, perhaps even moccasins, and held what looked like a spear.

I yelled for Huntley, hoping he would hear me and be able to see the figures before dark. In a few minutes he came hobbling up the canyon. Although he'd seen many examples of rock art throughout the canyon country, he had never seen anything like these figures, and he too was captured by their powerful presence. While photographing them with long time-exposures, we stared in silence. Although spooky and unsettling, they absorbed us, and we did not want to leave.

Reluctantly, we walked down canyon and collected my gear. By the time we headed for the north fork, it was dark, and Huntley kept walking into things and stubbing his painful toes. After a mile or so, we bivouacked, dividing up my clothes and sleeping bag and adopting fetal positions on a sandstone slab in the middle of the wash. Such nights pass slowly, like time in a hospital, where disturbed sleep confuses what is dream and what is real. I dreamed of traps and spears. Huntley talked in his sleep and screamed at nightmares.

At first light we were up and moving, eating gorp and summer sausage as we walked. By now Huntley was beyond cursing. We walked slowly, reaching his equipment by mid-morning. Then we climbed to the rim by way of a chimney that pierced the White Rim sandstone just below the airfield. Hubler arrived on time, hopping his Cessna over the arroyos, and soon we were back at Moab. We tried to drive home to Boulder, but after several hours we stopped to sleep on the bare ground under a cottonwood, my head resting on my folded hands. Then we drove on into the night, talking about the figures and making plans to return. I did not know

then that when I returned—and I knew I would—it would be in another context, with expectations and knowledge that would erode their power.

The contrast between that long weekend and my job appalled me. I knew I wanted to have more experiences like that, even if I couldn't explain what "like that" meant. There was the adventure and the wilderness, of course, but what interested me was something more. Two months later we went back.

II

By May it was clear that the Maze would be left out of the new park, so *National Geographic* was no longer interested in our photographs. We were on our own.

Huntley and I had been talking up the Maze, showing pictures, and researching rock art, so numerous people were now interested in seeing the pictographs. There would be five of us on this trip. Besides Huntley and me, there was my wife Anne and our friends Judith and David. Since we wanted to stay for a week, the main problem was getting supplies into the Maze. None of us had four-wheel drive, so we decided on an airdrop.

By June we were back at the Moab airport. Hubler was piloting the Cessna. We removed the passenger door and seat, and I sat on the floor tied in with a climbing sling. It was going to be an airy ride. Huntley was in the back with a pile of Army duffel bags stuffed with camping supplies and canned food packed in crushed newspapers—there was not much freeze-dried food in those days.

The idea, again, was simple. We would drop into the south fork and sort of stall the plane while Huntley handed me duffels, and I would toss them out. Hubler said we would be close to the ground and moving so slowly they'd survive the fall. Having been a fighter pilot in Korea, he had the right spirit for such an enterprise.

An hour later we were above the Maze Overlook. The Piper Cub was gone, disassembled and hauled out to the old Colorado River crossing at Hite—no mean feat. As we dropped into the south fork, Hubler cut the engine back and we soared between the canyon walls, carving turns with the streambed as we lost altitude. When we were about forty feet above the ground, I shoved a duffel out the doorway and Hubler gunned the plane into what seemed like a ninety-degree turn, straight up the rock walls. From my choice view at the door I could almost pick plants as we cleared the cliffs.

Hubler was smiling and allowed that this was better than working for the oil companies. We came around and dropped in again, and this time I got several bags out. A third pass finished the task, and after dropping Huntley and me at the Ekker Butte landing strip, Hubler returned to Moab for the others. By midafternoon, we were all hiking into the south fork.

Most periods of bliss in life are forgotten, but our week in that wild canyon is an exception. The weather was flawless, with days of blue skies following one another like waves out of the sea. We explored all the south fork canyons, and David and Huntley descended the steep and isolated Jasper Canyon, which led directly to the Colorado River. Huntley found a perfect arrowhead. We sat in the sun, bathed in slickrock pools, dreamed of other explorations—and studied the pictographs.

The pictographs were still wonderful, but now they were just things we were visiting. I had become a tourist to my own experience. I tried unsuccessfully to recapture the magic of those first moments. I took notes, but they exceeded my power of description. I kept photographing, first in 35 mm, then with my $2\frac{1}{4} \times 3\frac{1}{4}$ Zeiss. But what I sought could not be captured with photography or language. Indeed, the more we talked, described, and photographed, the more common they seemed. Everyone was appreciative, impressed, but the unmediated, the raw, and the unique was history.

I tried sitting with them alone in the dark, but they neither gazed at nor engulfed me now. The pictographs remained as they had for centuries, preserved by their isolation and the dry desert air, but what I would later learn to call their "aura" seemed to be gone.

When we returned to Boulder, Anne wrote a paper on the pictographs for an anthropology class and used my photographs as illustrations. That fall, Huntley returned with other friends for still another exploration, but then the Maze passed from our lives. I did not return for thirty-one years.

III

In the years that followed, my life diverged along an axis I came to understand as central to my life. Those early visits to the Maze, Glen Canyon, and the Escalante led me to the margins of the modern world, areas wild in the sense Thoreau meant when he said

that in wildness is the preservation of the world: places where the land, the flora and fauna, the people, their culture, their language and arts were still ordered by energies and interests fundamentally their own, not by the homogenization and normalization of modern life.

After divorces and attempts at ordinary jobs, Judith, Huntley, and I drifted into Asia, not so much for adventure as for what existed only at the limits of our world: the archaic, wildness, a faintly criminal madness, drugs, passion, art, Eastern religion—the Other.

Huntley was the first to go. In 1965 he cashed in his retirement and with four thousand dollars headed east. He was gone two and a half years. His first letter came from Herat, Afghanistan, where he had spent most of a winter. The next was from India and concerned blue monkeys and a yogi with a master's degree in physics from Oxford who had taken a vow of silence and who spent his time playing classical Indian instruments. A year later an aerogram arrived from a hill town in northern India. Huntley had been traveling in Sri Lanka, India, and Nepal and was now living among a Gurdjieff group in a small bungalow overlooking the Himalayas.

By the time Huntley returned, I was in graduate school studying philosophy. We talked endlessly of his travels, of gurus, temples, Indian music, drugs, neuropsychology, Cantor sets, and Tibetans. I was envious. My life seemed small and I could not imagine how to make it larger.

Years passed. In 1974, Judith left for Asia. I was living on the southern coast of Crete for the summer, so we met in Istanbul and traveled down the western coast of Turkey and around to Side on the southern shore. Then we hugged good-bye. I rode the Orient Express back to Europe and flew home to Chicago to be a professor; she went overland, alone, to Nepal. Except for short periods, she has lived there ever since. She has a guru, she and her second husband were married in a Hindu ceremony, she studies with teachers of Tibetan Buddhism. Her photographs of Nepali craftsmen are in the Smithsonian Institution, and she has written a book on the indigenous crafts of Nepal. Several years ago, to celebrate her fiftieth birthday, she trekked for five weeks across northwestern Nepal with a porter. Then, worrying about his safety, she crossed the border alone and continued into western Tibet. She bathed naked in the sacred lake of Manasarovar and bowed to

sacred Mount Kailas, believed by Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains to be the center of the universe. Judith's letters that first year further underlined my misery in Chicago and with academia, and I determined to go myself.

I spent the following summer wandering the Karakoram Himalaya and the Hindu Kush. By autumn I knew I would leave academia to see as much of the old world as I could before it was gone. Like the bear that went over the mountain, all I wanted to see was the other side, again and again. And I saw a lot. For the next eighteen years I traveled part of each year in the mountains of Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bhutan, China, Tibet, and Peru, scouting or guiding treks and easy mountaineering expeditions.

In retrospect, Judith and Huntley and I were part of a modern exodus of hundreds of thousands of Western people who left home and went to Asia. Some were hippies; some were pilgrims who ended up with Rajneesh in Poona, with Vipassana monks in the forests of Thailand, with Tibetan masters in Kathmandu, with Zen teachers in Kamakura; some were the first wave of what would become the adventure travel and ecotourism industries; some went to war in Vietnam; some went into the Peace Corps; some were merely ambassadors of capitalism and consumerism.

This great exodus and its consequences, especially the transformations of subjective experience that were both the end and means of many journeys to the East, remain unstudied and unknown. Some say, cynically, this is because everyone fried their brains with drugs. I think we still lack the language to describe why people went or what we found. This much, however, is clear: we dragged the modern world with us. We left home with a love of difference, but carried within us the seeds of homogeny. By the eighties it was over, and the cultures we loved were forever altered by modernity. We traveled a modern Asia that was no longer very Other.

My understanding of these events, and my own journey, is anchored in that early experience of those strange figures in the Maze—and in Walter Benjamin's justly famous essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."² It began with a specific event.

I was standing in a meditation room at Hemis Monastery in Ladakh watching a German professor of Tibetology lecture his tour group. German-speaking members of other groups were attempting, with varying degrees of success, to translate his comments to

their comrades. Behind him, two Tibetan monks faced a crowd of perhaps eighty Germans, Americans, French, and Japanese armed with cameras, flash units, camcorders, and tape players. The older monk wore a large white Pan Am button on the lapel of his maroon robe. The younger monk looked scared.

After a while it became clear that the high point of the professor's presentation would be the first public viewing of a particularly sacred *thangka*, a scroll painting on linen depicting a powerful Tibetan deity. Until that moment, it had been viewed just once a year in a religious ceremony attended only by the monks at Hemis. With a flourish the professor asked the senior monk to unveil the *thangka*. The senior monk turned to the young monk, and he froze. Then the professor yelled, the senior monk yelled, and the young monk finally removed a soiled silk veil. As the room exploded with flashes, motor drives, and camcorders, the young monk stood paralyzed, waiting for his blasphemy to be justly punished. But, of course, objectively, nothing happened. The professor smiled, everyone (including me) stretched their necks to see, and the earth continued to spin on its axis.

Later I thought of a passage in Benjamin's essay:

The elk portrayed by the man of the Stone Age on the walls of his cave was an instrument of magic. He did expose it to his fellow men, but in the main it was meant for the spirits. Today the cult value would seem to demand that the work of art remain hidden. Certain statues of gods are accessible only to the priest in the cella; certain Madonnas remain covered nearly all year round; certain sculptures on medieval cathedrals are invisible to the spectator on ground level. With the emancipation of the various art practices from ritual go increasing opportunities for the exhibition of their products. (225)

What I observed that day in the Hemis Monastery was the passage of an object from ritual to exhibition. The object remained; I am sure it is still there today. But something changed that is reflected only in human experience, in, for example, the experience of that young monk. Similarly, the Maze and those wonderful pictographs remain, but for me something is lost, a quality of my experience of them, something Benjamin calls the "aura" of art and landscape: "its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be" (220).

Benjamin's essay examines two of the processes that diminish aura, both "related to the increasing significance of the masses in contemporary life. Namely, the desire of contemporary masses to bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction" (223). The primary mode of reproduction is photography; the primary means of bringing the natural and cultural worlds closer is mass tourism. The pictographs and the Maze started down this path when I yelled for Huntley, took photographs, researched rock art, and gave slide shows, and when I brought others there. Had we remained silent, others could have, for a while, shared that powerful experience. And what if everyone remained silent?

Benjamin also discusses the many ways that loss of aura affects an art object: it undermines authenticity, jeopardizes the object's authority, shatters tradition, diminishes the importance of ritual, and perhaps most important, "the quality of its presence is always depreciated" (221).³ This last point is for me the heart of the matter. If I have an interest in preservation, it is in preserving the power of presence—of landscape, art, flora, and fauna. It is more complicated than merely preserving habitat and species, and one might suppose it is something that could be added on later, after we successfully preserve biodiversity, say. But no, it's the other way around: the loss of aura and presence is the main reason we are losing so much of the natural world.

Photographic reproduction and mass tourism are now commonplace and diminish a family of qualities broader than, though including, our experience of art: aura is affected, but so is wilderness, spirit, enchantment, the sacred, holiness, magic, and soul. We understand these terms intuitively, but they evade definition, analysis, and measurement because they refer to our experience of the material world rather than the material world itself. Hence they are excluded from the rationalized discourse of preservation, and we are hard pressed to figure out how to keep them in the world of our experience. You will not read much about them in *Art Forum*, *Sierra*, or *Conservation Biology*.

Unfortunately, these qualities deserve as much, if not more, attention as the decline of wilderness and biodiversity, because the decline of the latter has its root cause in the decline of the former. We treat the natural world according to our experience of it. With-

out aura, wildness, magic, spirit, holiness, the sacred, and soul, we treat flora, fauna, art, and landscape as resources and amusement. Fun. Their importance is merely a function of current fashions in hobbies. Virtually all of southern Utah is now photographed and exhibited to the public, so much so that looking at photographs of arches or pictographs, reading a guide book, examining maps, receiving instructions on where to go, where to camp, what to expect, how to act—and being watched over the entire time by a cadre of rangers—is now the normal mode of experience. Most people know no other.

IV

In May of 1995 I returned to the Maze. Things had changed. The Maze is now part of Canyonlands National Park, and the pictographs that so moved me are no longer unknown. They have a name—the Harvest Site (or Bird Site)—and they are marked on topographic maps. A small library of books and articles describes, displays, compares, and analyzes each mark and figure, and various theories pigeonhole the paintings into categories created by these theories themselves. This doesn't mean we know much about them, however. Castleon, in the second volume of his encyclopedic *Petroglyphs and Pictographs of Utah*, concludes his discussion of the Barrier Canyon style, which includes the Harvest Site, with admirable candor: "The dearth of extensive archeological study of them makes it impossible to suggest the cultural affiliation or chronology of the style with any certainty" (289). Nonetheless, it is widely assumed that the paintings are the work of an archaic desert people, hunters and gatherers who occupied the Colorado Plateau from approximately 5500 B.C. until the time of Christ. It was their home in a sense we can no longer imagine.

The Maze itself is laced with trails all clearly marked on maps available at the ranger station, and the roads in and around it are described in detail by a series of books. Indeed, there is a hiking guide to virtually every canyon on the Colorado Plateau, a guide to every dirt road, another for every stretch of the Green and Colorado Rivers, and yet another to every river, creek, and stream in the state of Utah. Not to mention, of course, the rock-climbing guides or mountain-biking guides, or slot-canyon guides, or . . . And this is why southern Utah is no longer wild. Maps and guides destroy the wildness of a place just as surely as photography and mass tour-

ism destroy the aura of art and nature. Indeed, the three together—knowledge (speaking generally), photography, and mass tourism—are the unholy trinity that destroys the mysteries of both art and nature.

The Maze is, however, by modern standards, still remote and difficult to reach—the standard approach is an eighty-mile excursion from the nearest paved road. The park describes it as "a rugged and wild area with remoteness and self-reliance the principal elements of the visitor experience." A visit requires a four-wheel-drive vehicle or a mountain bike, and a hard walk. The scrape where we crashed the plane is now the road to the Maze Overlook. At the end are two designated campsites and a parking lot. There's also a trail now, a difficult one that drops into the canyon and requires a bit of climbing.

To the degree that can be expected, the Maze is preserved and protected. In 1995 the park passed a tough backcountry management plan that limits both four-wheel-drive camping and hiking, and the rangers stationed there clearly love the place and guard it with a fierce devotion all too rare in the National Park Service. The pictographs remain unmarred.

I am thankful for all these things.

Enough history of the Maze is now known to place our little adventure in a historical context. We were not the first modern people to see the pictographs. Dean Brimhall, a journalist from Salt Lake City, photographed the Harvest Site in 1954 and later explored the intricacies of the south fork for other pictographs and petroglyphs. Local ranchers also knew about the site. Fortunately, I did not know any of this. Had I known the location of the paintings and seen Brimhall's photographs, there would have been less adventure, no exploration, and no aura—the "quality of its presence" would have been diminished if not erased. I can only wonder how many other gifts from the gods have been obscured by knowledge.

The man who visited the Maze in the spring of 1995 had also changed. I drove a 4×4 and played old Dylan and Emmylou tapes until I reached the infamous drop named the Flint Trail—a lovely so-called road requiring four-wheel drive, compound low, first gear, and lots of attention. For that I switched to Bach and Yo-Yo Ma. Spring had brought unusually heavy rains, and the desert was alive with lupine, globemallow, evening primrose, and little ruby

clusters of Indian paintbrush. When I stopped and turned off the tape player, the silence was still there, but I was no longer bored.

I parked my truck and hiked into the south fork. From my pack hung a tag—my camping permit. I had reserved a spot by phone, paying for it with my Visa card and verifying my existence with lots of numbers. When I arrived at the Harvest Site, a couple was sitting in the shade of a cottonwood across from the pictographs. After we talked a few minutes, they asked if the paintings were the same as they were thirty-one years ago. When I said they were, the woman said she was glad to hear that. And I was glad to say so. To explain otherwise would have been too dark and sad.

After they left, I painted a small watercolor of the wall and figures, ate summer sausage, cheese, and gorp, and waited for dusk. Then I meditated with the figures for an hour, occasionally raising my eyes to study their mysterious visages. In the silence of the evening light, some of their presence returned. I saw the figures as a work of art, a group portrait—the shaman, the goddess, the hunter, the gatherers, an extended family including the birds and snakes and rabbits and insects. Perhaps the little band returned each year to this place and, as animals do, marked their territory. Whoever they were, they knew how to express and present something we have lost. At the end of my meditation I thanked them and bowed to them.

I am pleased the Harvest Site is preserved in the Maze District of Canyonlands National Park. I am happier still that the pictographs remain difficult to visit. I am delighted they remain in such good condition. I support the tough new backcountry management plan. I praise the rangers for their courage, their vision, and their devotion to a place I love.

But I wish we were wise enough to preserve something more. I wish that children seven generations from now could wander into an unknown canyon and receive at dusk the energy captured by a now-forgotten but empowered people. I wish these children could endure their gaze and, if only for a moment, bask in the aura of their gift.