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VACATION PICTURES

Helen Maxson

My son Bill wanted to go to the Grand Canyon, so the day he finished the sixth grade we set off to see it, along with a number of other marvels we had built into a two-week itinerary. I was tired from a year in the classroom, so the idea of vacating my day-to-day life was attractive. I was looking for refreshment, to see landscape not available in Oklahoma, to glimpse alien lifestyles that would broaden my perspective on things. I had a new camera with which I would capture all this refreshment so I could partake of it for the rest of my life.

The trip delivered immediately. As we headed toward Amarillo, I marveled at the deception in the fields along I-40. There did not seem to be much distance between me and the cows we passed, but since they looked like tiny plastic toys, I knew they were very far away. The rows of crops running perpendicular to the highway seemed to grow toward each other as the eye followed them outward, the distance between them shrinking as they approached the horizon. They seemed to radiate from a distant vanishing point, blades of a fan sweeping by us in one direction as we passed in the other. I was pleased. The process of vacating had started already. I wasn't seeing the usual sights of my life any more.

Crossing the mountains just east of Albuquerque offered, not only the refreshment of physical beauty, but also the intimation of something beyond themselves, something that promised, if only I could possess it permanently, to keep my perspective on life unskewed no matter how long before the next vacation. The altitude,

the sudden vistas out and down, the evergreens enfolding us, all seemed part of some monument to the best the earth can produce, and to the creative power behind it. The freeing sense I had of the world falling away as I progressed upward, my feelings of awe appropriate to a cathedral and comfort appropriate to a warm quilt as I drove down brook-side roads overarched with foliage, the play of sunlight on the brook and in the depths of the woods I peered into from the road, the road's paradoxical journey across and around in order to get over, the sense of power and strength we find in the massive shape that a mountain is: all these combined to give this landscape a monumental character. The mountains seem something ultimate and transcendent, no doubt for many who live among them, and especially for those who vacation in them, looking for something they can take home to cure the ills of everyday life. I shot as many rolls of film in the mountains as I had originally bought for the whole trip.

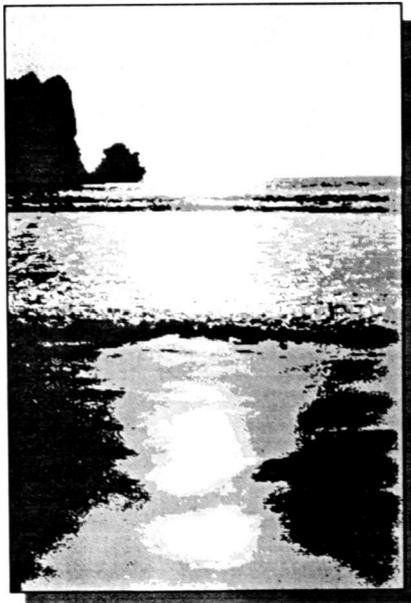
The Grand Canyon, of course, is a huge ditch carved in rock by water and wind. But even for those who live near it, it cannot fail to evoke an awe of something beyond rock, water, and air. It has its own list of monumental characteristics: the dramatic depth of the canyons, the multiplicity of rock forms scattered about within the rim, the ten-mile distance from north to south rim, the birds flying within the canyon that make it seem a universe in itself, the billions of years that painstakingly produced not only the canyon itself, but also the strata of rock in which it lies, the subtle gradations of hue that color the rocks, changing as the sun moves across the sky: all these speak of a largeness that we can only start to comprehend, of something unbelievable that,

because it is right there in front of us, we must believe in. Bill and I watched the sun rise on the Grand Canyon. The stillness was a strong presence despite the birds announcing the dawn, an unsettling presence. I guess I expected some sort of commotion when the sun broke the eastern horizon, but none occurred. The stillness continued as the sun cleared the rocks. Since I was studying a surface to the west, I almost missed the event. And then, a different kind of activity than I had anticipated began. The rising sun in the east shone a wash of yellow on the rocks in the west, starting at the canyon's rim and spreading slowly downward as the sun moved upward. One stratum after another glowed into color: red, brown, gray, orange, black, red; vertical cliffs of hard rock alternating with gentle slopes of softer, more easily eroded material. And I had a sense of the rocks slowly moving into the sunlight as if into an embrace, some surfaces boldly jutting into it, others shyly opening to it, letting the light into its recesses, one at a time. Later, as the sun spread its light more evenly from a higher point in the sky, the romance ended. But even then, it was no feat to see in the rocks something more than rocks.

The danger of "falling in," by the way, is real. For some reason, I was glad it was. It was only when I was holding on to a tree that I would approach a sheer cliff at the rim and look straight down. If no tree was available, I took my pictures scooting forward on my rear end, shooting across, not down. We watched a rock squirrel disappear

nonchalantly over the edge of the rim. My head spun briefly. But the danger helped satisfy my need for unusual truths that would expand my ordinary life when I took it up again.

From Arizona, we headed to California to visit family. Twenty years ago, I had driven Route One, the narrow road along the coast, between San Diego and San Francisco. I remembered the drama of feeling sandwiched between mountains immediately to the left and abrupt drops to the ocean immediately to the right. I wanted to experience it again, and to give my son the same



PHOTOGRAPH BY LISA BRADFORD

opportunity. He wanted simply to say he had waded in the Pacific Ocean. Either way, we both wanted to drive to San Francisco on Route One. Needing to make time, I drove most of the northward journey in California on the interstate east of the coastal mountains. We crossed over to the ocean and found Route One just south of Santa Cruz. Immediately, we encountered signs offering free access to the ocean. We pulled off the road across from a particularly lovely beach with a particularly lively surf and a broad view out to sea. The driver in the California car behind us gave the thumbs-up as he passed, glad, I guess, that we deprived Okies would get to experience the ocean.

Of course, the sea is always suggestive of more than just rhythmically moving salt water, even if one has access to it every day. The huge, fluid interface between continents, it bespeaks the beginning of life, and evokes several notions as refreshment: the mysterious power of the waves; the immense pressure it must exert downward at

its deepest points; the vast expanses that it would present to one stranded on it; the drama of the breaking waves as they run up the beach and then recede, leaving porous, creamy foam behind; the energy of its counter-currents as they contort the waves they create; the green glassy undersides of the waves as they crest; the lacework of foam that overlies the glass. We knew we were in a world apart. Bill built a ritual sand castle and smashed it in a ritual dance of kicking and stomping. As he built, I gave into the hypnosis of the waves, staring for a long while and drawing as much salt as possible into my lungs, hoping that enough would stick to conjure up the ocean in my Oklahoma living room.

Having taken possession of the ocean, in lungs, on film, in spirit, we headed north to my aunt's home near San Francisco, and then east across Nevada, into the Salt Lake Valley. In Salt Lake City, we savored yet another unusual experience of monumental proportions, chancing on a rehearsal of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. For me, an avid lover of choral music, it was the high point of the trip. Those who take a guided tour of the Tabernacle are told that the building seats 6500 people, and that the organ has 11,650 pipes in it. The tour guide took us to the very back of the Tabernacle, and from the very front, a woman speaking in an unamplified voice told us in clearly audible and distinct terms that she would tear a piece of paper into strips. She did so, and it sounded like it was happening right next to us. Then she told us she would drop three straight pins, one at a time, on the table in front of her, followed, for contrast, by a nail. Each pin made a distinct sound, followed by a much louder clunk—the nail. The Tabernacle has phenomenal

acoustics created by an inverted dome roof. Imagine the sound of a 325-member choir, one of the finest choirs in the world, in that space. I do not have a highly-developed musical ear. I have thought more than once that a recording of a certain piece of music had more vitality and clarity of sound than the performed version I was hearing, at that moment, live. But, having heard several recordings of the Tabernacle Choir, I knew as I sat there in Salt Lake that no recording could ever capture the full sound of that choir in that building. It was a dense, enveloping sound; yet each component was clearly defined in itself. The crystalline highs, the deep, rich lows, the vibrant middle tones helped create a fabric in which no strand was lost. I greedily strove to impress on my memory not only the sound, in every detail, but also the experience of hearing it. For me, a real transportation results when I let a melody take me on its journey of notes, hear tones in harmony with each other, participate in their rhythmic interplay, and appreciate the timbre of a strong, lovely voice or instrument. I knew while I sat there on my journey that memory would never do it justice, no matter how greedily I journeyed.

From Salt Lake, we drove to Colorado, where we took a steam train into the mountains, visited the cliff dwellings of the ancient Anasazi Indians, and went white-water rafting in 43 degree water so swollen with spring run-off that it carried us over rocks usually one and a half stories tall. All these activities were the raw material of monumental experiences; all of them, perfectly alien destinations for two Oklahoma vacaters. When we finally came home, it was with a clear sense that we had been away, and had been broadened by our adventures. The rolling green and gold of



Oklahoma just before harvest looked Edenic after the Panhandle emptiness we passed through on the way home, and honestly lovely to our refreshed sensibilities.

And yet, there was more to the vacation than loveliness. One of my strongest impressions was of the vast amount of barren desert we passed through. It was not beautiful or magic as essays on the desert have suggested. It was drab, ugly, monotonous, and even frightening. Realizing that I had neglected to fill my gas tank at the last human outpost for nearly a hundred miles on a relentlessly hot day was a new experience for me. I was fairly sure I had the gas to make it to the next town on the map, but not positive. The safety net of civilization was gone. In the Grand Canyon, I could look at danger while avoiding it. Here, I was caught in its midst. True, I took comfort in the frequent emergency phones on the side of the road, but even they suggested the seriousness of my situation. One could say that my fear was a genuine vacating of the day-to-day of Weatherford, Oklahoma, a form of what I was looking for. The fact that I don't say it reveals my aversion to anything problematic in my getaway. I wanted ease and reassurance, not dramatic variations on the stress of everyday life.

And we were blessed with a smooth trip. But although stress was largely missing, the mundane was not. We spent far more time crossing monotonous, arid land on the way to the monuments than we did in their presence. I don't remember the series of fast food joints that provided most of our nourishment on the trip, or the series of Motel 6 rooms where we slept when we weren't camping. My son does remember their swimming pools, but he swims in a similar pool

every day in Weatherford. I do remember a restaurant-video store in Monticello, Utah, at a tiny crossroads in the middle of nowhere where we turned east toward Colorado. It was getting ready to storm, and we still had a few hours to drive before we could put up our tent. It would be a dreary drive.

And I remember watching a teen-ager in the restaurant-video store while we had supper. He had long, somewhat greasy blond hair, earrings lining the outer lobe of his ear, sunglasses, and two packs of cigarettes rolled into the sleeve of his black t-shirt, perched obtrusively on his shoulder. I remember, on one hand, marveling that he existed at all in the middle of the desert. He was as unlikely there as the bright new video posters all over the walls, a counter to the desert.

But, he was part of the desert too. There was no irony in his impersonation of a 50's-60's teenager. In fact, it was not an impersonation at all. He really was the person he portrayed. And, in that naiveté, he became, for me, a counter to the mountains and the ocean. Not eternal, but specific in time and place, outdated, stale, and in an ugly place at that. Furthermore, Monticello was like many other towns on the trip, a collection of five (or fewer) buildings surrounded by vast wasteland. I wondered what it would be like to live in one of them, or to live near enough to it in the desert (where? in what?) to be able to work there daily.

The mundane was a big part of the trip. I shut it out as well as I could with the excitement of being on the road, but when I got home, it was prominent in my memories, although excluded from the photographs. In the end, it underscored what I had known all along, that seeing my trip as

a vacating of the mundane was a creative act, as was seeing the choir or the ocean as monumental, even though the beauties of life did conspire with my will in the creation. And I knew that every time I used my new camera to capture a monument, I was, to borrow the poet Wordsworth's notion, half-perceiving and half-creating. I framed and angled my pictures carefully so as to maximize their monumental nature. I won't go so far as to say that reality cannot be monumental in itself, but surely the degree of healing power we find in its wonders is proportionate to our desire for a cure.

I showed the pictures to a friend. Sad to say, new camera notwithstanding, they seemed flat compared to the soaring heights, wide gulfs, and rich textures I had thrilled to when on the scene. The "wow!" was missing. And it was startling how soon after I returned I lost my temper at a phone that kept ringing one day-to-day hassle into my life after another. It was as if I had never gone. So much for the restorative power of vacating, or of wishfully invented monuments.

And yet I realized, when I showed my pictures to my friend, that they hadn't seemed that flat the few times I had looked at them myself, just after they were developed. Seeing them through eyes that hadn't been to the places portrayed was what flattened them. And so, my eyes must have picked up a permanent change of perspective on the trip. Or perhaps I retained, through my memories of being there, the power of my wishful imagination to transform what I had seen, a power growing out of an original magic not operable in the living room. To first acquire the power as a life-long antidote, we must leave home, coming into the presence of an unusual loveliness and

mixing it with whatever evils we need it to fend off, whatever voids we need it to fill, whatever hurts we need it to mend. It may be the mixing itself that provides the original potency, a sort of alchemical process that produces not gold from base metal, but rather a golden activity in itself. In the end we are not deceived. Having heard the Tabernacle Choir cannot reduce our resistance to the telephone, or keep it from ringing. But we know, in our living rooms after the alchemy has taken place, that we have hoped it could, let ourselves believe it could, for a while. We savor the pictures of our trips in light of that faith, no matter how the day-to-day may flatten them, knowing that on some future trip, it will operate again.