

The Dark Sky Paradox

On an evening in late August of 2012, I emerged from the eastern rampart of the San Rafael Swell and looked out onto the buff-colored expanse of the Colorado Plateau. In the passenger seat of my Volvo lay a weather-beaten copy of Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*, at the time my favorite book and the inspiration for my move to Moab from California. I had found a position at Dead Horse Point State Park, a quaint place perched above the Colorado and the potash mines that line its northern bank as the river goosenecks its way into Canyonlands. The job was the result of months of exhausting searching, resume submittals and interviews, with *Desert Solitaire* supervising the process. The book was my bible. Since picking it up my sophomore year of high school, it had come to define my perception of the world. Abbey's deep reverence, political leanings, and particularly his profound cynicism spoke to values that I held dear. If there were ever to be "one truth," as my eighteen-year-old self understood it, *Desert Solitaire* was it.

Dead Horse Point represents everything that Abbey despised about parks and tourism. The park is designed for the motorized tourist. Its primary attractions are the Neck and the Overlook. The former is a spot where the mesa tapers down to about twenty feet wide, a natural curiosity that Mormon cowboys would supposedly use to trap wild horses. Most people would marvel at it through the window of a moving car. Few would even stop, though we did once catch an errant golfer driving balls into the abyss.

The Overlook "offers spectacular views of the Colorado River and Beyond," to quote my script. It's entirely paved, and even sports a mile-long handicap-accessible walking trail. The whole park is overrun by the type of tourist that would attract the ire of Abbey, the type that ask, "How long does it take to see this place?" so frequently that the park-sanctioned answer is taped to the wall of the entrance station.

But *Desert Solitaire* was set to expire as my sole source of wisdom. It began with the potash mines, the white and blue splotches marring the viewshed across the entire eastern edge of the park. Even within the boundary of the park, the company itself was inescapable. The company name, Intrepid, was scrawled across the top of the trail signs marking our flagship series of mountain-bike trails, and I would scoff to myself as I passed them on my near-daily ride. I settled down into a sort of rhythm during my working days. My shift would end at the visitor center and I would gently shepherd the remaining visitors outside. I would walk around the interpretive geology center, scowling as I locked up the Intrepid sponsored models of the Colorado Plateau. Once finished I would walk across the dust-covered lot to my house, grab my bike, and head out for the park's eastern reaches on the Intrepid trail system, scowling as I passed the first few trail signs. At some point I would branch out west along the slickrock Kayenta formation, taking care to avoid the marbly patches of cryptobiotic soil, which grew in patches like gangrenous witch fingers from the burnished soil. My favorite spot in the whole park lay on a sort of spur which blocked the view of the potash mines. The spur contained natural potholes of varying sizes, each of which had its own tiny ecosystem. Some contained near-microscopic shrimp, others had tadpoles, depending on how recently it had rained. One pothole was big enough to stand or lie down in and usually empty, and I often would strip naked and hide inside, peeking just my head out above the crumbly rim and watch the wild desert wind whip strands of sand or snow or rain across the White Rim 600 feet below. This sojourn being complete, I would then bike back home, mustering the necessary indignance as I passed the many signs reminding bikers that Intrepid had sponsored the trail's creation.

The final chapter of *Desert Solitaire*, the chapter which questions whether or not Abbey will ever return at all to Arches, is titled “Paradox and Bedrock”. Abbey wrestles with paradox throughout *Solitaire*, “dream[ing] of a hard and brutal mysticism in which the naked self merges with a non-human world and yet somehow survives still intact, individual, separate.” This passage had always somewhat confused me, and I’d usually skip over these musings in favor of sections where he describes a cliffrose or kills rabbits with a rock. The parameters of Abbey’s paradox had never seemed all that clear to me. Was there ever a difference between the human and the non-human? The two seemed hopelessly intertwined, but my philosophical merger with Abbey had somewhat eliminated the possibility of resistance. Bedrock and paradox it was.

It took until my second month at the park to actually read the descriptions in the Intrepid geology interpretive center. I had gone upstairs to close but neglected to lock the front door. This oversight led to a bus of fifteen seniors ambling into the gift shop less than a minute before closing time. I walked around on the upper level shutting windows and locking exhibits, trying to make it clear that visiting hours were over. After a few of them began settling in I resigned myself to examining the placards. I glazed one of the signs explaining what exactly the Potash miners were after. My eyes caught a peculiar word. *Paradox*. The Paradox Basin. I immediately thought of Abbey. Stunned, I read closer. The Paradox Basin is a layer of salt underlying all the desert sediment, the remnants of an ancient sea, and the source of the potassium the miners were extracting. This salt, according to the placard, is responsible for the otherworldly shapes of the desert. As pressure is applied in a particular area of the basin, the salt moves like a fluid, uplifting other areas to compensate. The undulating waves of buffed sandstone visible from my backyard, the greenish-blue Chinle cliffs lining the Colorado like sickly lips, the endless lines of Wingate that drew me and the Uranium that birthed Moab itself; The Paradox Basin made it all. Paradox and Bedrock. Abbey, you bastard.

Over time, working at the park tempered my hatred for tourists and disabused me of some of my cynicism. The final blow came one evening shortly before my departure from the park.

It was mid-November, the night of the new moon. Dead Horse Point acquired a certification from the International Dark Sky Association in 2015, but in 2012 the park was still relatively unknown for its stargazing. Some nights, as I walked back to my apartment from the ranger station, I could see what I thought were traces of purple in the Milky Way.

On this particular evening, I began my final sweep of the the park around ten. I conducted a campsite inspection by headlamp before moving to check the water level in the storage tanks on a knoll overlooking the rest of the park. From the rise I could see the swell of the La Sals embossed slightly against the horizon, gently obscuring the night sky around it. The faint lights of Moab and Castle Valley were distinguishable from starlight only by their concentration, looking like out-of-place constellations dotting the otherwise dark expanse of rock and canyon. I returned to my truck and drove to the Overlook, my final stop before turning in for the evening. I was surprised to find another car at the overlook, particularly this late in the season. The Overlook is technically closed after 10:00 P.M., so I parked the truck and walked over to confront the interlopers.

There were two of them, apparently an older couple, the woman sitting down and the older fellow hobbling around a telescope. They smiled at me as I walked over. Their geniality threw me off guard. The two of them invited me to look through their telescope at Pleiades, offered me tea from a thermos. They told me they had traveled to Dead Horse Point from Chicago. They asked if it they could stay in the parking lot. I didn’t have the heart to tell them they couldn’t, so I told them to look out for the morning shift and went on my way.

I still think about them from time to time. I wonder what they saw in the blackness. I know what I saw myself. I saw the seven stars of Pleiades. I saw seven great turning forges of matter, the same furnaces that put iron in my hemoglobin and turned Moab red. I saw an ancient sea, where tiny shelled creatures died en masse and laid a layer of calcium carbonate underneath the hoodoo stone of Arches. I saw these shells in the concrete rimming the placid Overlook, their sharp edges in the limestone that tore my feet as I ran over exposed stone to my pothole on the spur. I saw potash in the ground and in the stars and in myself.

Abbey still holds some significance as the curator of my adolescence, but I've made new space for other ideas, and Dead Horse Point exists as a reminder that the world is so much more complex than I ever could have imagined.