

The Artists

Of the words that can be chosen to describe a person, so many fall flat, un-true biology doesn't describe correctly the inner geography. For example, Jonah was a young man, 28 with medium length blonde hair which he claimed to not cut out of a pervasive love of sloth, but which, in the closest reality he could describe, he let grow out (like he let his beard) to signify a certain distance from the normal motivations of the multitudes. He was an artist, and this word suited him. It was that descriptor, of that intangible thing, the inside body which only accepts certain signifiers, words like numerals which help us judge the equation of the face. Artist. Bohemian. A comprehensible level of intelligence which justifies certain behavior against the normal, but which in so doing, is completely obsessed with normality.

This was why Jonah liked living in backwater towns. It allowed him to keep a vain illusion of uniqueness. He enjoyed finding a similar vein in others. Artists. He often clung to these friendships as if they were signs from above. Waypoints in a life lived (by normal standards) indiscriminately. He liked Will from the start.

Will was also an artist. A musician, a raconteur of the past, susceptible to his own vanities by way of mining the experiences of others. This is what Will enjoyed about being a bookstore owner. Personal connections created by close proximity to the artists scattered alphabetically on his shelves. His novel in progress was a beast of interconnected reactions to the individuals he met. He had been working on a pair of novels for fifteen years, after reaching minor renown as a local poet.

Jonah walked into Will's bookstore and they had a connection.

But how do Artists connect? Through a shared love of re-appropriation? Expression? The need for the company of other artists, a community run on a set of uncertain principles and play?

Jonah had looked a lot of places for this community, and had never found it. Too careerist, too practical he had found other so called artists. Thus he had a great tolerance, and a desire to love any strand of artistry where in it could be joined, and worshiped, in the delusional grandeur that was the mindset of the truly artistically deranged.

In pursuit always of this artistic co-feeling, Jonah agreed without hesitation when one day Will invited him to go hiking at Craters of the Moon.

Idaho is, by its old toughness, one of the more beautiful states in the West. It holds old memories more strongly, more cogently than its state neighbors. It often portrays a deceptive simplicity.

Where the desert meets the mountains, Craters of the Moon, lava rock startled, slowed, destroyed axles and wheels for pioneers.

There is an embodied toughness, porous leniency results in uncompromising rigidity. Air into iron is steel. Air into molten rock works the same way. Hot air has done much to shape human history.

It at least shaped Jonah's. Hot air was why he took to hiking. After a bout of gastroenteritis in an asian country, his bowels never moved quite the same. Frequent attacks of gas could be most easily solved with long rambling walks. This wasn't exactly hiking, but he enjoyed the activity for its dual purpose, helping him not feel crappy.

Will invited Jonah which was defacto inviting his girlfriend Stacy. Will new this, he got along with Stacy. They sat in the front of Will's bookstore and talked gothic, Edgar Allen Poe.

Stacy and Jonah were in love, though to explain the exact dynamics of that love would be enough to cripple shared feelings. Explanation would expose faulty logic (she had always said, at best, she could be a muse. Jonah had always wanted to be worthy of a muse. So he accepted her love graciously.

Artists are naturally good at this. Patronage and grants, it is not enough for them to provide something useful, they have to coerce the soul, and accept their bread, meager as it is, aware they are a charity.

But as many need to give as need to receive). Though that was love. And, Stacy and Jonah shared certain domestic feelings. Togetherness accompanied with passive interaction which led, sometimes, to boredom. A sensual type of boredom, like sex; possibilities endless, yet completely limited to person.

It was during a particularly boring, anxious, juncture of the cool spring, that last little bit of April, the wish of summer almost here. Both were eager for an opportunity to do any activity that explored alternative reactions to their relationship, and the involvement of other people.

They drove up to meet Will at Craters of the Moon. There was a thick fog hanging in the valley between buttes. The heavy spring air was having its last caress of the earth. Jonah squinted through the windshield and slowed down on the highway. They putted, 5 miles an hour, around the Craters campground and they found Will wandering. He looked listless. He had that lovely aloof artist quality. Higher minded things flitting in and out through the nose. Jonah remembered how he had thought of writers as figures finding inspiration through their nostrils, lungs. This kind of sense memory involved, demanded, detached detention. The already being inside it, Will, not tapping his toes and waiting.

Already, being, inside his world, Jonah loved to see this.

Often artists can get bogged down with boring details, say, lengthy descriptions of attire; but in our time of neon sweatshirts, printed t-shirts and Patagonia jackets, it's helpful to picture Will in his 30+ year old brown leather jacket and cheap sunglasses. Jonah and Stacy got out of the car and waved happily. He brightened with a smile, his day old stubble shading his lips and mouth like an old volcano.

Is there a difference between going on a hike with an artist and a person of a less compromised identity structure? Yes, though it's minimal. The sound of earth pushed, and an omniscient gaze take over much of the mental processes. Yet all excursions have their notable exceptions. And with artists, artistic expectations.

The fog lifted beautifully, thirty minutes into their hike it rolled over the buttes and was pushed up by Idaho's hot air.

Will, feeling good, and as aged raconteur and leader, Idaho his home, started on a story of sneaking up the Crater Butte, ripping through a bowl of fine aromatic green, climbing down the sharp rock to the sandy plains, finding a marked pioneer trail. Trail of the Gods he called it. High and marveling at these old stones, more accurately basalt he knew, the technical term. Stacy and Jonah listened politely, not knowing what they were in for.

Walking now, off the loose gravel path through the looser gravelier desert, turning their heads and admiring the spacing of the wild grasses, which due to water restriction lined themselves in organized rows. They approached Will's Trail. Lava rock chunks, spaced four to five feet apart in a line. Discovering the oddity and artistry of nature sculpted on these chest-sized shrapnel of ancient explosion, was a slow process. Firstly is the wonderment at their placement, like red dots illuminating a dark runway for which the craft to land has long since disappeared. Will said this was how the pioneers found the way to water their horses, which only later seemed to Jonah a dubious claim (in that whatever water source they might have been after was long gone) but this only increased his enchantment with this road from the other world.

At the time, Jonah was experimenting with some Steinbeckian mysticism, which he felt that the logical rational world had been suppressing in him. He agreed with the rational world's basic tenants, not

wanting to lend too much credibility to situation, he felt them as arbitrary, not connected to the global sense of humanity and knowledge. Yet he couldn't help but feel the powers of a place; endless teachable moments which one will forget 99% of. This increases the benign-ness of beauty which one has to overcome with an allowance of imperfect contemplation. That is, he was trying to find again that part of himself which he had allowed himself to lose. That the truth was; the world was a mysterious and magical place, in itself, not just through the prism of fiction. (This was helped along by Will and Stacy. They drank beer in Will's store, discussed Hawthorne. Will quoted from *The Artist of the Beautiful* "It is as we go onward in life, when objects begin to lose their freshness of hue and our souls their delicacy of perception, that the spirit of beauty is most needed"). As they stopped and started to examine each rock, all had to break through the suspicious tossing off of examination. Concentrate on the subtle nuances of each rock as object, piece, all of its own.

Every rock was like a sculpture. Will moved between them marveling outloud at their existence. Behind his dark glasses was a soul prone to misty romanticism. Artistic impulse cannot avoid this. This was another thing that implicitly attracted artists, hatred and love and a religious feeling which can't be dismissed because of its basis on some obscure text. It was a multitude of texts, a multitude of feelings. None less valid then the other. A shared contract between beings, which artists try and bridge.

Together the three of them slowly began to speak out loud, comment on the rocks. Perhaps they were shards from bombs of lava blown by deep pressure, cooled en-route and split upon the ground. They shared impressions of certain rocks, the way one does while sitting with friends watching the clouds. The pieces ranged from dark auburns, to sandy white and brown. Sporting weathered croppings and juttings which mimicked animal faces. The three of them speculated over shapes the way one does on a lazy picnic, trying to see features in the sky. Though each piece did not seem transitory, each seemed magical in and of its uniqueness. Jonah, after some careful observation found a favorite. It looked like a photo-realistic sculpture of a canyon. Immediately he imagined owning it. He imagined it sitting on a beautiful black walnut desk, where he might gaze at it with sharp and scanning eyes, receiving inspiration up through his spinal column to write the next great piece of literature.

Thinking out-loud he said, "You might end up regretting taking me here Will, I think I'm gonna need to take one of these home with me."

Will, eyes lost behind his dark glasses, turned his head towards Jonah, said "You can't do that."

Jonah immediately capitulated, yes oh of course he wouldn't actually it would ruin the spirit of the

place. Yet already he was concocting a return trip with a large backpack and a light lunch.

Later, after hiking through more sage brush and crunchy trails, they were sitting by their briquette fired dinner drinking beer and they were joking about a story where someone like Jonah goes back and steals a rock and someone like Will, when after a series of coincidence and accidental coercion, they go on a similar hike back to Trail of the Gods and he notices a gap, one of the pieces missing.

“And in a spree of artistic indignation” said Will, “You would pick up a rock and beat me to death with it.”

Stacy inserted, “And the blood splatter on that rock would be so beautiful Jonah'd be filled with joy.”
Jonah laughed, “And then what? I just get away with it?”

Will got up from the picnic table, “Exactly man, you put it on your mantle.”

Staying the night on the hard ground of their tent Jonah couldn't sleep. Stacy turned and lay an arm over his belly. He had visions of artists buried by their work. Will in the desert, eulogized and hidden beneath a pile of art and nature. If he was writing the story, he thought, the murder weapon would not sit on his mantel, but be the headstone to a grave of spiritual and artistic feeling. Murder in the desert was easy to believe, getting away with it. What was harder to get a handle on were the motivations of big ego, the large fluctuations of feeling and pleasure which might surround such a brutal death. The narrowing of perceptions and goals to such a specific place. It was the kind of thing that always roused morbid human curiosity. Jonah breathed sleeplessly thinking of his literary interpretation. Chekhov meets Poe. A murder for the sake of art.

In the morning, after drinking coffee out of wide-mouth mason jars, Will and Jonah went for a stroll. Jonah was trying to figure how he might write his story of the artists in the desert. Maybe it had something to do with sex, Jonah's character a bawdy misogynist who tried to fill his apartment with fancy art pieces in order to seduce more women. Will's character would realize the truth, and be utterly disgusted, and in a shame rage Jonah would kill him. That might be fine, Jonah could insert a line from his own life, how he was never all that much attracted to large tits. He flicked himself in the temple and his eyes stammered in his sockets. He was hungover and everything had that morning shimmer. He was looking at a 40 foot dagger of lava rock sticking out from the ground, and he wondered how it got there. If he even saw it correctly. He had trusted his perceptions to a fault but was growing more used

to being confused. Allowing misunderstanding where it might lead to something magical. He tried to put this in as many words to Will, who responded; “My whole life has been guided by a forced perspective, seeing things too near when they were far away. Judging others as beyond my grasp when really I only need to hike a hundred yards.”

“The tyranny of the senses.” Jonah responded. They were looking around aimlessly, the caffeine flit of the brain.

“Ambient occultations, the overlapping of surfaces. That's one phrase I learned, occultations.”

“Like the occult?”

“Phases of the planets man. Things overlapping each other.”

Will's mind worked well in the mornings. Wellness which at a certain age (somewhere in the early fifties) becomes feeling fine and not thinking too much. Leaving room for inspiration in the mundane. The accessible. A needed break after years of taking the world too seriously.

Jonah was watching his cigarette burn strangely, burning a long contiguous ash-end that didn't scatter when he flicked it. His mind didn't work so well in the mornings, under the impression that he was wherein the brain needs to undergo a *hard* reset. Calories caffeine nicotine, maybe another beer.

Meanwhile, the morning sun seemed to be filling the porous piles of rocks that was the décor of the small campground, and each person was happy in their own way. Stacy was cooking breakfast (the non-focus and dizziness of a hangover was comfortable to her disposition. She indulged in feeling, to the point of discomfort, this was perhaps her connection to the silly artists). Will and Jonah were completing their loop, feeling positive about camping and nature, under the impression that through the sun's rays of fission, their life could be more full. Even in simple ways.

Jonah asked, continued with his dialectical exploration, “Let me lecture at you for a minute; would it really be such a crime to take one of those rocks? What if we each took one? Dual pieces, a shared secret. It's not like the rocks are a natural part of the landscape anyway, they were selected and moved by people already. What harm could there be?”

Will, hard as ever to read behind his dark glasses, sauntered on the cement roadway, took his mason jar and placed it under a water spigot, pulled up on the heavy metal handle and water blew into and out of the glass. He took a large sip, wondered aloud why Jonah seemed to be obsessing about this.

“I have a very strong feeling I need something magical in my life. You said it yourself, there's magic out there. How often do you find that?”

“Yes there is, in fact I wouldn't mind being buried out there.”

Jonah laughed despite himself, “Like an old indian wandering into the wilderness to die.”

Though Will often behaved with a youthful ambivalence, he was past retirement age. He had lived a fairly simple life, set up roots in a community which treated him like a novelty. Respectable and a fixture, but a novelty. His roots to familial normalcy strained by the artistic disposition. He didn't regret anything about his life but he did wonder about his legacy, was beginning to take the thought quite seriously. And for months after their fateful hike he considered his death passionately.

The ridiculous nature of being burned or being buried. His son would come with the grandkids, they'd shed a few tears, a local artist would read from one of his poems. It didn't suit him at all. But what did took years to solidify, and when it did it was hard as lava rock. A plan.

It was a fateful day, which ended after breakfast. They each went home. Will and Jonah collaborated over beers for months about publishing a book together, but soon realizing nothing was going to come of it, Jonah decided to move on. Found a friend in southern Oregon where he worked on an onion farm, and went through the yearly rotation of energy sources to guide his inspiration. He and Stacy got married, though he wondered about it. If it was meant for them, for any artist.

At the age of 72 Will was diagnosed with a brain tumor.

He had been having a lot of trouble reading and the tumor was very close to his spine so the operation was risky.

He decided to enact his plan. Jonah and Will had kept in contact. Jonah enjoyed talking to him once every month or so, bullshitting the artist lifestyle. The oblique challenges, the lack of money. It made him feel better to know he wasn't the only one for whom the whole thing had never panned out.

Perhaps he was too lazy, or just not very talented, but he and Will commiserated.

For the first time in a couple years, Will called him. He told him of the illness.

Then he told him his plan, would he go with him, would he help him see his spot?

“Does it need to be somewhere specific?”

Yes, where someone knew where he was, to mark it somehow, his last strain of vanity. His impact on the earth. And he couldn't just leave his Jeep in the park, it would look suspicious. Jonah agreed but he wasn't sure why. A mystical death was tantalizing. Morbid and so ridiculously artistic.

Off the gravel trail Jonah had to steady Will's balance as he climbed over lava rock. Jonah asked him if he remembered so many years ago when they had hiked in the park together. Yes Will remembered, though he either didn't remember or didn't recall that their conversation of homicide had sparked his idea to die out here. And he had other things on his mind, a life of hikes in Craters of the Moon. Young ambitious adventurer, bush whacking for days and shivering at the howl of wolves. Hiking as aging poet, seeing its unique beauty like no other before him.

They sat on an old dry branch and smoked weed. In the late afternoon Will would inject a lethal amount of heroin and Jonah would do what he wished.

“What's going to happen to the bookstore?” Jonah wondered.

“There's a local kid, with schizophrenia, he lives in an institution and was on a fixed income. He wanted to buy lots of books but couldn't afford it. We became friends and I told him he could come over anytime and read in the back. I thought it should go to him. He'll care for it.”

Jonah nodded. “Are you scared?” Jonah was, the marijuana had unlocked the mechanism he had been using to compartmentalize Will's death from his own, and the death of all people.

“You know this is very literary.” Jonah said, rambling as distraction. “Wasn't it McCarthy who said literature should deal with life and death, I never believed him, never liked him very much really.”

“No, but he's not wrong.” Will said, “I'm making my literary figure. I'm expecting you to write about this.”

Jonah did know, but he wasn't sure he ever could.

Did they find a beautiful spot? Beautiful enough to inspire generations by its imagination and vision?

Jonah realized death didn't work like that. It was dusty and hot, even in the shade of their small evergreen and large sagebrush. Death was like an afternoon in early September in high desert, it had a seizure. It was very barren. When you looked around it was lots of the same.

Though Jonah was tired, he was high and able to concentrate. He had five miles there and back to hike to Trail of the Gods. He was gonna see how many rocks he could fit in his pack and place as many around Will as he could carry. He hadn't told Will he was going to do this, but he couldn't help it.

The crunch of the ground on the walk away from Will's body sounded like musical death rattles. This was not a bit of poetry, he started skipping so the footsteps did not remind him of the ticking clock of mortality.

He could not find Trail of the Gods. They had gone far off the beaten path and Jonah had not been back in years. At first he thought he knew where he was going and had quickened his pace and skipped and jogged down the grades of lava dust but found he was lost. He became worried about what he might do for his own life. He only had a swallow of water left, so he had the nice distracting pragmatism of chiding himself.

With a last gasp of hope to get his bearings he made the decision to climb up one of the small buttes and see what he could see. His lungs started to burn as he climbed the hill, his heart thumped hard, extra hard from the weed and though Jonah might have worried for his health, or slowed down or started to really get concerned about the sun starting to set, he climbed harder and harder. At the top he was woozy and swayed, he used a hand and dropped his ass on a sharp rock. The pain was glorious nonsense. And as he got his equilibrium normalized, and looked across the empty plains of sage, looking towards the setting sun behind the beautiful shade of a big butte in the northeast, he was overcome with a very strong feeling of sadness, regret somehow about being human, there was an intense pressure at the corner of his eyes and he realized he wanted to cry. He shed as many tears as he could, which was only a couple, he was dehydrated. He realized his tongue tasted of heavy metals.

And as soon as they had come, his strong feelings were beaten by an even stronger sense of melancholic boredom, antagonistic, the foil to his desires. A reality which he didn't want to encourage but was always more potent. He wiped his face with his hands and insisted on a greater urge. That he must pursue strong feeling doggedly, no matter the consequences.