

BEN MYLIUS

Thinking Country

The sign at the edge of Utah State Route 24 reads: *Roads May Be Impassable Due To Storms*. From the roadside to Hans Flat is 46 miles. After that you need a Jeep.

The air is brittle here. The shadows of clouds move over the dirt, catching on the saltbush and shrub. Buttes stand snow-topped in the distance. Acres hum on the wind.

I wait on the cattle grid at the entrance to Canyonlands National Park with Gary Cox, Archaeological Technician for the Maze District. He picked me up three hours ago from outside the old Knights Inn. My body has arrived, but not my head: it's somewhere above the Midwest, catching up after long hours in the sky.

The businesses we drove past as we left town made it sound like an ecological paradise: Melon Vine Grocer, Shady Acres RV Park, Green River Bible Church. But what sticks in my mind are the abandoned gas stations and derelict motels. As if the town is still waiting for some Eden that's never appeared. Then we drove the I-70; State Route 95; State Route 24. And now we're here. Gary lights a cigarette.

In many indigenous languages, there's a concept rendered in English as 'Country'. Not 'country', merely a synonym for 'environment' or 'place', but something deeper, thicker – the relations between humans, other species and the breathing lands themselves. As I stand at the edge of this park, that's the word that comes to mind. Country for thinking; country *that* thinks. Canyonlands is Thinking Country.

As we drive towards the Ranger Station, Gary tells me stories. He grew up in Chicago, loved wandering and hated school. He dropped out, worked as a live-in carer for eight years, and then sold all his possessions and drove for two years until he found the Maze. His thought was to 'find a really, really beautiful place ... and then get to know that place really well.' When he got to Utah he knew he'd found it.

The US environmental imagination has a set of common narratives

about the Maze. It's the most pristine and least-visited park in the Lower 48; a place of 'superlative, scenic, scientific, and archeologic features' (per the 88th Congress); one of Edward Abbey's haunts in *Desert Solitaire*. Many of its other stories – like those of the working-class ranchers, the Native Americans, and the mosaic of other species that call it home – are not told so often. I can't tell those stories. The one I hope to learn is Gary's. We met six months ago, during a week I spent here doing field-work with several friends. The demands of that time didn't let me shadow him as much as I'd hoped; but we spoke a lot about creativity, and the potential for thinking with Country to generate new modes of thinking.

This struck a chord: I'm back to learn some more. I hope to compare notes with him on what it means to think in one place, and *with* one place. Gary's a special friend and guide for tasks like this. He's lived in Canyonlands with his wife, district supervisor Cynthia Beyer, for more than 30 years. Every summer for the last 12, the seasonal rangers have held a competition. The aim? To see if anyone can find something in the Maze that Gary didn't know. Some chert from an ancient campground, or a painting high in a canyon. Only once has anyone managed.

Gary and I are quite a contrast. I'm in my late twenties, he his fifties. I'm a placeless Australian expat; he's spent more than half his waking life here. He's an autodidact, devouring the writings of everyone from Richard Feynman to Jacques Lacan. I'm a graduate student, feeling constrained by the flawed kinds of inquiry that, increasingly, are consuming the urban academy. We hit it off immediately.

By the time we arrive at the Ranger Station, Gary is telling me about his theory of entanglements: the ways different phenomena in the Maze intersect with and influence each other. The land changes outside the pickup, from grazing land through thick red earth to sandstone. We jump out to a faceful of silence and snow. Cynthia emerges from the Station and gives us a warm hug. Once she and Gary have gone inside, I look over the mesa. I hope I can offer Gary something from the world of ideas, a world he loves. He, in turn, has invited me to walk with him, and think with him, in this Country he calls home.

One of the first things that strikes me in the Maze is its sheer scale. Canyonlands covers 527 square miles; there are rocks here that are more than 300 million years old. Some corners of the park are so remote that trekking out to them takes days. Life is precarious. One needs to think and act with care, for everything.

The complex of apartments is at the end of a dirt track behind the Station. Gary and Cynthia's unit is filled with shelves of books on cosmology, birdwatching, Freud. There are racks of teas and spices, instruments and hanging planters and ornaments from around the world. And Canyonlands out the window. The map tucked away in my bag has its many different names. Some are visual: Stillwater, Golden Stairs, Red Lake Canyon. Others, geological: Cedar Mesa, Confluence Overlook, Cataract Canyon. Still others evoke people, imagined or real: Brown Betty Rapids, Paul Bunyans Potty, Cowboy Cave. And some are mysteries: the Plug, Spanish Bottom, the Doll House. Gary will know.

My apartment's empty. The benches are bare, chairs neatly under the table. I lug my bags in with a billow from the cold. The silence feels different, the muffle of walls. My things look squat and lonely in their lump on the floor. There are three clocks – on the oven, thermostat and wall. Each one tells a different time.

I unpack my food. The clouds pass over the mesa. I sit on the couch. The clouds pass some more. I wait. I think. Five minutes go by. I watch the cragged bushes. The far-off La Sals. The clouds have moved a little further. I listen to the silence. I wonder if something should have happened. Quick bodies take their time to readjust to the contours of this place.

In the frigid light next morning, Gary and I drive out to check the Flint Trail. The track is only a few miles, but so rocky that the crossing takes three hours.

As the landscape rises and falls, the hum of the pickup changing as Gary navigates the corrugations, we try to get to grips with scale. Some anthropologists propose that the ability to navigate scales – to move with ease from very large to very small – is a defining feature of the human species. Symbolic thinking and language are what enable us to abstract to different scales: to engage with things that are not here, may not be here, or could never be here at all. We can invent worlds, imagine stories, devise lives. These are extraordinary capacities. But risky as well. Most significantly, they can unroot us from the pulsing, living world.

Gary stops the Jeep and we get out. We watch the sun arc through the sky. He pours me a coffee from his battered Thermos and gestures at piñon pines, rock layers, icy puddles. Abstraction began here, he says. Our languages, our thought, even our math: all of it began as a response to concrete things, to the challenge of ordering and reshaping and

moving in the world. However far removed our new abstractions might become, it should be possible to trace a genealogy that shows their rootedness in the non-symbolic realm.

But this has become hard. I take a pine cone from the snowy earth and turn it in my hand. How do the words and frameworks we use link back to this physical thing? Some of our most venerable philosophical traditions surrender to a sort of dual forgetting. First they deny that the symbolic emerges from the world (or the iconic and indexical). Then they deny, in many cases, that this first denial happened at all. It is possible, they seem to imply, to think ‘ontologically neutrally’. It isn’t possible. But believing it could be tends towards suggestions that the purpose of the human is transcending the world altogether.

We walk over soft dirt below the pines and I recount some things about the symbioses between languages and earth. One study I’ve read proposes correlations between habitat and language; another between environmental features and ways of conceiving direction. Perhaps most interesting, I tell him, are the studies of ecological linkages mirrored in sets of words. One Australian indigenous language, for example, has one word for two different things (linguist Nicholas Evans has studied it in detail). A particular species of fish and a river-growing tree are both called *Bokorn*. The tree grows fruit that drop into the river, attracting the fish. Kunwinkju speakers can remember this because the two have the same name. In English, the tree is a ‘white apple’ and the fish a ‘spangled grunter’. There are, presumably, few English-speakers waiting round at spawning time.

There are similar entanglements in Canyonlands, between the piñon pines and the piñon jays, their interspecies cousins. Many of the trees grow where they are because the birds collected pine nuts and then stored them underground. Now climate change has altered seasonal temperatures, and thus the jays’ migrations. Meanwhile, a particular insect species has begun expanding *its* range, eating the pines so the forest is now shrinking.

We head back to the Jeep and drive on: bump up and down; and stop. A juniper branch has collapsed onto the track and we must get outside to drag it off. On the horizon there are steel and purple clouds. Tonight there’ll be a blizzard.

The whispers of unfamiliar geographies are curling in my head. *Steppe, scar, spur, seep, mesa, gulch, wash*. We're back in the apartment, sharing soup. The final light is fading from the sky outside.

Gary has been reading about the Anthropocene, and wants my take on what it means. I tell him that for me it captures the idea that 'the human' and 'the natural' can only be effectively conceptualised as distinguishable but inseparable. Even as the natural sciences reveal the many different ways that we're dependent on the earth, the humanities and social sciences show how our ways of thinking can foster ways of living that damage the survival of earth's systems.

Our discussion drifts to animals. Cynthia recounts a story of the coyote that she's seen, nosing around the shrub outside the complex. She tells me Gary befriended two other coyotes some years ago, and christened them Carlos and Squint. They were his friends. Then Utah revived a law putting bounties on coyote scalps. Gary goes spectacularly quiet.

Later we sit in the flickering dark watching *Koyaanisqatsi*, gazing at frantic, distant metropolises. At the climax of the film, Gary draws my attention to the rock art it shows. Their real life versions, he says, are deep in Horseshoe Canyon, about 11 miles from here: 'The Great Gallery'. Barrier Canyon Style pictographs, as they're known, are perhaps the most significant on the continent. They're supposed to be up to 3,000 years old.

Theories abound about what the paintings might mean. One proposes that they fit with the gallery's acoustics, so hidden actors could have made them seem to sing. Another says that they're a record of rituals and legends. According to a third, the natural amphitheatre where they're painted was a site for meetings and commerce.

What strikes me is not which theory is true – we can't know – but how strong a sense of *intentionality* we get looking at them. Any modern human sees that the various daubings and scratchings were intended to have meaning. In the absence of certainty, we guess. We want to write the story.

But we should hesitate before settling too comfortably on a clear interpretation: deciding the question and so storing it away. The philosopher Foucault developed the concept of *epistemes*: different paradigms of discourse that give rise to separate, sometimes mutually incomprehensible regimes of logic and meaning. Premodern taxonomies, for example, which often include imaginary creatures like leprechauns alongside crea-

tures like humans and horses, are easy to dismiss as the product of ill-informed minds. But what if the premodern taxonomies were created from within a different episteme – following a rigorous internal logic, but one *whose very ordering principles* don't correspond to our own? Hesitating on this insight, and the alterity of other ways of seeing, might prompt us to strive for new creative modes of thinking. At the very least, it should prompt us to look more closely at our own episteme, our own framework of ordering, to see how it's contingent, with only its deep familiarity making it feel 'natural'.

Darkness outside, I prop myself up in bed with some books. The first is a collection of photos from the interplanetary probes. The Great Red Spot, Jupiter's storm, twice the size of earth; Saturn's frozen rings and the stretches of the Oort Cloud and the limits of the observable universe. The scales are almost unthinkable. The second is an introduction to string theory. Suddenly I'm down in scales so small they're completely imperceptible. At this scale, subjectivity matters. Measurements change outcomes and the search for dark matter is hindered by the fact that such 'matter' doesn't interact with light.

I dream of Millard Canyon, of being struck by the Australian desire to shout *cooe* through mouth-cupping hands. I dream of escarpments where water seeps through cracks and swells and freezes so it breaks apart the stone. I dream of cryptobiotic soil crust, the wizened, dry-grey hash of life at the base of the junipers, life that stays dormant for years before bursting back when hit by rain.

The next day the sky is pink, the snow crisp and clear in the pale light. The La Sals are imperious at sunrise. Steel grey and lavender. When I go outside a cottontail is nibbling gamely on a piñon pine. The air is crucifyingly cold. An old sheep's skull sits down the slope from my apartment, on a barbecue plate. Its eye sockets have filled with snow.

As we drive north across the snow-scratched roads we come across a deer. It pauses, ears quivering, antlers raised. As we watch it through the windscreen, an eagle floats high off in the failing sky.

I've been thinking about the pictographs, wondering how they might serve as a step to imagining further, beyond our species altogether. If the creativity required to empathise with other humans is hard, matters get even more complex when we think with other life-forms. *Homo sapiens* are visually-oriented, or oculo-centric, which means our eyes are the dominant organ we use to navigate the world. An abstracted version of

this dominance informs our ways of thinking, too – we talk about ‘seeing’ truths, ‘spotting’ mistakes, ‘visualising’ solutions. Our go-to metaphors for creative and intellectual journeying are often visual and spatial. We wander ‘topographies of thinking’ (the phrase is Jedediah Purdy’s), develop maps to order territories, fear dark ages, seek the light.

At the rim of Horseshoe Canyon, we hike along the upper western edge. The sky is turning grey. I find myself thinking of the 18th-century biologist Jakob von Uexkull, who developed a theory of *Umwelten* – ‘self-centred worlds’ – in order to provide a language to talk about how different species exist in separate phenomenal spheres. A creature’s *Umwelt* is circumscribed by the kinds of stimuli its sense organs permit it to perceive. Sonar, for example, does not figure in the human *Umwelt*. But it’s a big part of the *Umwelt* of a bat.

Uexkull’s most famous discussion involves a tick. Ticks, he proposes, have only four ‘sense-vectors’: sensitivity to light, via their skin, which they use to find a spot to wait for prey; sensitivity to butyric acid, which occurs in mammal skin glands; sensitivity to things in their environment at 36 degrees, which is the temperature of mammal blood; and sensitivity to hairy versus non-hairy surfaces, which they use to find a burrowing-place on a victim’s skin.

Gary indicates an eagle circling in the sky above us, and a plant down by my feet. Could we stretch our creativity by trying to imagine these foreign ways of being? Even if we can’t inhabit the worlds of those creatures, perhaps an imaginary attempt can help us find new ways to ‘palpate’ the world (to borrow a term from Todd May’s *Deleuze*): to think of all the things that there might be which we can’t see. Could we hone a more *ecological* creativity – broad, thoughtful, ethically-oriented – by puzzling through the unpossessable sense-organs of other species? Could we use our human strength – symbolic abstraction – to imagine other real ways of perceiving the world, and then use that imagination to re-encounter our own world as strange and laden with potential?

The snow is falling again. We get back in the Jeep and then I get out and run and the flakes stick on my clothes. All around us are the cragged thoughts of piñon pines and junipers.

We drive for an hour or so before we stop on a broad slope of rock. Gary turns over a pebble with his boot. Beneath it he’s hidden a little carved arrowhead he found. It sits in his palm like a tiny red pine tree. I’m amazed. These are worlds deeply foreign to me, and yet legible to Gary

and to others. His trained eyes lead to prowess that almost seems superhuman: a skill akin to navigating with the stars or co-existing with the ocean. He tells me he can walk unaided through mist, fog, and snow, over miles, guided only by his memories. Often he tries it just to test himself, to find his way home. He can. He knows this Country closely; he doesn't need a map. The geography he draws on lives safe inside his feet.

My hands are going numb from the cold. I wonder what it would be like to hold Gary's knowledge in them. What that map would look like, with all its symbols, contours and bends. At a minimum it helps him see more different things. I notice trees and shapes and birds. He sees fresh rock falls and long-term plant growth and slowly-changing haze.

But Gary's abilities aren't 'superhuman', in the etymological sense of that word – transcending the human. Perhaps a better term is *ultrahuman*: he's honed potentialities inherent in our species to a degree I can only imagine, through his intimate knowledge of Country. As he sees it, and to quote a book he likes, perhaps he is 'becoming animal'. Falling back in amongst the birds flying effortless in flocks, the fish schooling in water, the branches bending to catch the wind, the rivers bending through old stones.

Heraclitus believed that it is impossible to step into the same river twice. If that's so, and change is prior to substance, perhaps the goal of creative thinking is not to pin things down like butterflies dead on a board but to experience them in movement, circle around, wonder at them while accepting that they contain something forever beyond our grasp. Cyberneticist Gregory Bateson once observed that 'ecological problems are a result of not being able to think ecologically'. Does thinking creatively mean thinking ecologically? Relationally? Ethically? Many thinkers since Uexkull – Leopold, Levinas, Derrida – have reflected on what it means to meet with other beings, to perceive the 'ferce green fire' in the eyes of dying wolves, the companionship of concentration camp dogs, or the stare of truculent housecats. What would it mean to see climate change in a similar way? The ethicist Dale Jamieson observes that phenomena like climate change defy moral consideration because they occur on spatiotemporal scales so vast that they're tough to comprehend. Timothy Morton goes even further and proposes that they rupture thinking entirely.

During the night I get up, just once, and Canyonlands is quiet out my window, poised beneath the moonlight. The stars are high and they remind me of the sky seen from Australia, my home.

It's almost time for me to go. On my last day, we bounce over the corrugations, weaving back and forth, over curdled dirt and rocky steps, to Panorama Point. Words cannot describe the vast intricacies and the surrealism of this place. Laid out, residing there, existing. I walk and run and bend and look and turn and feel lightheaded. Still it remains. Gary and I hardly know what to do with ourselves. In the end, we drink our water and we write. A bird flies high, and I look over the living forms and the escarpments. My own heart seems small in the face of this: but strangely home.

Back at the Station, Gary asks to see what Country was for me. Amongst the rocks and brochures and fake lizards I open a map on his computer of the tiny town in the Australian Flinders Ranges where I spent time as a child. Melrose: population 406. My parents met in this town. I tell him about the cries of magpies and kookaburras and cockatoos.

The day fades over the mountains. Safe in their apartment, we spend the evening talking and drinking. But we're winding down. The next morning, light bright, Gary drives me the three hours out of the park. We talk, but not about the fact I've left. By the time we round the final set of bends and the road leads down a slope between the final buttes there's no more snow.

And then I am moving, again. The hum of the highway and the trucks and caravans. Turns and shadows and turns. The roar of ATVs and the twinkle of boom-mounted electrics. The bus comes and it has televisions. There has been a shooting in San Bernardino and the faces of terrified people shine out through the screens.

The landmarks pass like a film rolling backwards. The Silver Eagle gas station and the Walmart hulking in the town of Price and the sharp, metallic mountains. The car exhausts are steaming. The TV says the California shooters had military weapons. When the bus drops me in Salt Lake City I visit the Tabernacle where a white-frosted man plays the same refrain, over and over. I go to a bar down the street and get drunk. Something just happened, but too fast. I'm only wearing sweatpants and a shirt. I catch the tram back to the airport and call my mother in Australia, where I'll be soon. She's concerned because a wildfire has burnt ten miles from their house. Last summer another one burnt 800 hectares in six days. This one burnt 8,000 in six hours. I feel a scratch deep in my throat and I'm scared I'm getting ill. I try to hear what Mum is saying but

her words keep getting drowned out beneath the noise of cheering Mormons.

And then I'm back in the air, space without time, a small seat in a humming room of metal and plastic. There are 300 tiny screens all playing different videos. I'm throwing my body 10,000 kilometers in 15 hours. When I step out of this box, in Australia, it will be summer.

The stewardess is coming down the aisle with drinks in little cans. I remember the words of writer David Abram, who proposed a scale of progressive removal from the earth that comes with biking, driving, flying. Killing speed. For some reason this makes me think of Einstein. My mind works differently in planes. Einstein's famous realisation was that space and time are interrelated. Sometimes more of one means less of the other. In the age and curves of Canyonlands, the world, the space, felt endless. Up here in this box in the air it doesn't feel like there's much time.