

Trumpeter (1996)
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Homeward

Don Lago
Trumpeter

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The sun gazes at me as if it knows something I don't. As sunrise filters through the pine trees and into my cabin's eastern windows, another sun brightens on my eastern wall. This sun is a wooden plaque with a face on it, surrounded by a sunburst made of brightly colored yarn. I bought it at the Hopi village of Oraibi, fifty miles from here, a village continuously inhabited for a thousand years. Dawa, the Hopi sun spirit, gazes at me as I awake, and I gaze back.

On the shelf beneath Dawa is a Hopi pot filled with pottery shards. The pot was made by a member of the most famous family of Hopi potters, the Nampeyos. In the 1920s the first Nampeyo potter was inspired by the designs on pottery shards her husband was excavating from a Hopi ruin, and she began using those designs on her pottery. The shards in my pot were left by the ancestors of the Hopis, who lived on this land a thousand years ago. Every time a good rain washes the hillside beneath my cabin another shard peeks out, and I take it inside and place it, like an offering, beneath Dawa.

The pottery shards remind me that this land was once someone else's home. The Hopi's ancestors may have lived in this part of northern Arizona for only a few centuries before drought pushed them towards the mesas where perennial springs have sustained them until today. But for over 10,000 years someone may have lived here, leaving little trace. Through legends and archaeological techniques like tree-ring dating, the Hopis can trace their thousand year residence atop their mesas. The woman who made my Dawa plaque, Sandra, told me that her ancestors had lived at Oraibi for as long as anyone knew. As I took her hand in thanks, I felt as if I was touching a hand a thousand years old. As I gaze at her skillful handiwork on my wall, I feel the presence of the hands that made the pottery shards in my yard.

Sometimes I wonder what it is like to know you have lived in one place for a thousand years or more, drinking from the same spring, tending the same field, dwelling in the same house or at least in stones from your ancestor's houses, to identify so strongly with that past that it was not merely your people or your family that had dwelled there, but *you*. I wonder how a land feels when your whole religion ties you to its cycles of growth and harvest. No white American can feel such an intimate connection with the land on which they live. We are all part of one of the largest experiments in human history, in which tens of millions of people have abruptly severed their ties with the land of their ancestors and moved to someone else's continent. The encounter of Europeans with a land with which they had no ties has been a drama not just of conquest but of cultural confusion and quest.

Though environmentalists have emphasized the rapacious attitudes of European settlers towards the land, we should not forget that for a large proportion of

emigrants their motive in coming to America was to bond themselves to the land. They were peasants in semi-feudal societies, working the land for someone else's profit. They were willing to risk their lives to find land where they could plant their graves and descendants forever. But by historical chance, the emigration coincided with the industrial revolution, and disembarking emigrants discovered what while the available land was a difficult, expensive journey away, there were plenty of factory jobs just up the street. At the same moment industrialism gave humans unprecedented power to exploit nature, a whole continent lay unprotected by any sense of responsibility for it. An increasingly mobile society would leave few people living on the same land as their grandparents.

I have been on this land for five years. I do not immerse my hands in its soil to transmute it into my food and my body. No god has sanctified my presence here. In an effort to feel connected to this land, I once crumbled and scattered around my cabin leaves from the midwestern yard where I grew up. Yet this seemed more an act of bringing another place here. The deciduous leaves seemed out of place in a pine forest, leaving me wondering how I belonged here. There was a biological schedule by which those leaves would break down and be transformed into pine trees. But by what process would I become this place?

My collecting of pottery shards out of the ground feels like a ceremony, a harvest by which the land offers me its past, a harvest that ties me to the rain and the cycles of nature. Partly it is from an impulse to *identify* with this land that I have filled my cabin with Hopi kachina dolls and art and two other of Sandra's plaques. On the sunshade of my truck I have pinned Sandra's miniature, thread version of Dawa, to intercede against the sun and remind me, when I am on the road, of home. Yet when I lift a pottery shard from the ground I also feel like a thief. Not that these are rare artifacts wanted by a museum or tribe. What I am illicitly taking is a past and a sense of belonging that are someone else's and that can only be earned through time and a way of living that has vanished even for most native Americans. I am unimpressed by whites who suppose that by wearing native jewellery and mimicking native rituals they can become natives. To visitors I justify my Hopi decor by pointing to the sign outside the door, *Hopi House*, left over from when this was a dude ranch in the 1920s, each cabin named for an Indian tribe. Even more appropriately, the workmen who built my cabin were Hopis. But this only reminds me that the dude ranch guests were mostly wealthy families who rode the Santa Fe railroad from eastern cities and here played at living in the woods like indians and riding horses like cowboys. Intellectuals may have better motives for playing indians, but they can be just as pretentious. The only land to which I can feel tied by centuries and family graves lies far away, across an ocean.

Recently I visited the town in Sweden where my relatives have been tailors since 1795. Unlike the many Americans who have forgotten their ancestral village or who have become so ethnically homogenized they no longer identify with any one nation, I had a place to go. I did not think of it as "going home," for my

Swedish ancestry had seemed an historical curiosity. The only contact I had had with Sweden was through befriending a Swedish couple studying journalism in America. One weekend I drove them to Ha Ha Tonka state park at the Lake of the Ozarks, and when they asked me the origin of this Indian name, I could not tell them. On a cliff overlooking the lake was the ruin of a mansion built in 1900, called "the castle." Cecilia had been a tour guide in a 12th century Viking castle and was amused by the American sense of history, which revered as old what in Sweden would be recent.

In Stockholm I was repeatedly mistaken for a native, being handed the Swedish language menu or museum guide, while other Americans automatically received the English version. Unexpectedly, by the end of my visit I had begun feeling like a native.

I rented a Saab and headed out of Stockholm. Soon I noticed a sign saying "Route 66 Restaurant." Route 66 was my address in Arizona. Curious, I stopped and inspected their decor of Arizona license plates and pictures of the Grand Canyon. It seemed both misplaced and auspicious.

Two hours later I arrived in Granna, one of the best preserved examples of traditional Swedish timber architecture, its orange tile roofs stretched out between bluffs and the blue of Sweden's second largest lake. Downtown was a clothing store with my name over the door: *Lagos*. Downstairs, tailoring away as he had been for 65 years, I met Leonard Lago, who looked just like me. With the help of someone who spoke English we talked about our family as if we were old friends. He remembered my father's visit twenty years before, which was the first they had heard from the Lagos who had left for America a century before. Later I read every gravestone in the cemetery and found many names I might have addressed around a dinner table had not my great grandfather decided to leave. I drove around the countryside to find the estate where my great grandfather had lived in a small house, the stone foundations of which were still there. I wandered the streets and shops and bluff and harbour, and by the time I left, wearing a sweater from our family shop, I felt that this was my hometown, in a way that no other place could ever be home. It was a questionable way to feel about a place you had never been before and might never return to, but perhaps my confusion is understandable as the intoxication of an American who had never before tasted such a connection.

A few months later I visited several Swedish settlements in the midwest, but it was not the same. The architecture and crafts and food were effective reminders of Sweden, but here they were part of the history of the American pioneer. Pioneer history was unavoidable at my great grandfather's house in Battleground, Indiana, where William Henry "Tippecanoe" Harrison crushed the last Indian resistance in the region.

From Stockholm I had sent a postcard to a Hopi friend who was carving a kachina doll for me. A few months before I had stood, at midnight, on the roof

of his kiva and watched the spring ceremonial within. On the postcard I noted that Stockholm had been founded at the same time as Oraibi, and expressed my envy that while his heritage was right there, I had to cross an ocean to experience mine. Back in my cabin, I wondered about the value of bonding myself to a place so distant. My trip had been worthwhile as an exploration of ethnic and family identity, but seemed less so as an act of relating myself to the earth. To the extent that I had felt myself to be Swedish, I had introduced a new separation between me and the land where I am. My attempts to identify with this land through pottery shards and kachina dolls seemed more dubious than ever.

My puzzlement was part of a cultural confusion that has been part of American life from the start and is still unfolding. We have confronted a continent of wilderness with the attitudes of a desert promised land religion and European empires and added attitudes from our own national experience. We viewed nature as fuel for the American dream of quick wealth, and yet in our craving for national identity we found that, besides the flag and George Washington, natural wonders were the only thing that belonged to all of us and set us apart from Europe. As the continent has become home, we have increasingly been willing to see it on its own terms. After demonizing and slaughtering the natives, we have drafted them to be spokesmen for the land, even if confusing them with European romantics. Yet it is a milestone that, as models for relating to the land, our pioneer heroes have faded and been replaced by indians. As a boy I marvelled over the exploits of Boone, Crockett, Kit Carson, and Buffalo Bill, and I suppose that my moving west from Boone County, Missouri contained the American impulse that equates open spaces not with deprivation but with freedom, inspiration, and opportunity, an impulse that has remained consistent from the pilgrims to the cowboys to the hippies to the astronauts. As I watch the vigorous attempts of our culture to define our relationship to the land, I wonder if our national experience will, in the end, provide the energy for a different kind of pioneering, important to all humans. It was not just our continent that suffered from a people untied to it, but ourselves. We have been left with a unique hunger, at a time when the whole human species has been challenged to relate itself to the Earth anew.

In our era we have recognized both the smallness and the largeness of the Earth. We have seen images of ourselves in space, shockingly tiny, yet we have also uncovered an evolutionary story in which life is a huge, four billion year old entity constantly changing form in which millions of past species are still alive within us, animating our cells and hearts and brains. We have only begun coming to terms with this vision. No tribe from any continent has had such a vision. While we may require a reverence for the land akin to a tribal bond, it may be our task to give a greater meaning to "the land." We who have no homeland may have to settle for the only place we never left: the tiny blue dot in space. We who can identify with no one place may have been set free to identify with all places, to see the whole Earth as home. Identifying with only

one place has often promoted division among humans. Our task is to learn to love a place not because it sets us apart from other people, but because it is our personal contact with the Earth that has been life's home for eons. We need the native American's affinity with nature, but we must learn to apply it to the nature discovered by biologists, to which we are tied not by mere proximity or lifestyle or magic, but by the deepest and most ancient roots. On my last day in Stockholm I was wandering through the medieval streets when something in a store window caught my attention. It was a kachina doll. It was carved in the latest style of Hopi carvers, leaving the natural twists of the wood. Peering in the window, I saw that the carving was skilfully done. But it was obviously not done by a Hopi. The doll was a dolphin leaping out of waves. I supposed that some Swede had admired kachina dolls enough to teach himself the art, and applied it to an animal more familiar to Swedes. I couldn't find out more, because the shop was closed. As I gazed around the shop, I was startled to see something very familiar. On the wall was a Dawa face amidst a sunburst of coloured yarn. It was unmistakably the work of Sandra from Oraibi.

At the time, I was amused, as I was in the Route 66 restaurant, that I had come so far only to find something from so close to home. But now, as sunrise filters into my cabin and I gaze at its Dawa face, I am reminded of the sun that never set over Stockholm. The Dawa I intended to make me feel at home reminds me of having felt at home elsewhere. Yet just as I could never be Hopi, I also realized I had never been Swedish. Perhaps I could be a dolphin kachina, an earth spirit unbounded by place or race or culture, born from a world that had become so small that Route 66 and Oraibi merged with the stone streets of Stockholm. I had not needed to travel so far to find home, nor did the Swedish kachina doll carver, for I had always been home, if only I could see it the way Dawa has seen Earth for four billion years as it circled Dawa and spun itself not just in space but into a rich community of life.

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