

# High Desert Journal

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“You could spend your entire life in lower Manhattan and yet already have visited every place in these photographs. And you could spend your entire life out in the lavas and sands of these images and yet never have spent a second in the place these photographs record. I know Beethoven knew this place and so did Charlie Bird Parker. I know coyotes and ants and badgers know this place.”

– From Charles Bowden’s introduction to the photographs of Michael P. Berman

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by **Michael P. Berman**



Diesel, Gila Bend, Arizona.



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It's hard to say when I finally learned that I had to learn. But I know it was a moment like this: I was into a walk of a hundred or two hundred miles, the afternoon sun had crushed me, and I crawled under the faint shade of a creosote bush, and there for hours I did nothing but achieve something and slowly but absolutely I lost my sense of identity and had no interest in anything but that exact second, and I floated in the fire of that afternoon and finally came into the country.

That afternoon and into the evening with Michael, I looked at hundreds of photographs. And then we began having rematches as he would stop by and show me the results of weeks spent out there. And each time the images got closer, not to the desert but to what exists within that place we call the desert.

I said, okay, let's do something.

I picked up a phone and made a book deal.

None of this really mattered. Michael kept going out there, kept chasing something he could not name and I could not name, but both of us knew existed and were more certain of this fact than of our own existence.





So here's the real deal: these photographs are not about the desert and the desert is not about the desert. These photographs are not really photographs. They are an effort to get past the words and images we normally use to avoid the place they record. You could spend your entire life in lower Manhattan and yet already have visited every place in these photographs. And you could spend your entire life out in the lavas and sands of these images and yet never have spent a second in the place these photographs record.

I know Beethoven knew this place and so did Charlie Bird Parker. I know coyotes and ants and badgers know this place.

I've been there myself.

And I'm here to to tell you these images are the true report.

*On April 18, 1904, Wallace Stevens, our favorite insurance-executive poet, was taking a ride and he noted, "I thought, on the train, how utterly we have forsaken the Earth, in the sense of excluding it from our thoughts. There are but few who consider its physical hugeness, its rough enormity. It is still a disparate monstrosity, full of solitudes & barrens & wilds. It still dwarfs & terrifies & crushes. The rivers still roar, the mountains still crash, the winds still shatter. Man is an affair of cities. His gardens & orchards & fields are mere scrapings. Somehow, however, he has managed to shut out the face of the giant from his windows. But the giant is there, nevertheless."*

*Well, Wally, I don't really think it is monstrous, but it is a giant and this giant lives within us and can be beckoned forth if we so wish. Forget the clap-trap of Nature, of the Environment, to hell with all those pieties. Surrender to appetite, and to dreams. Then you can get there.*

*Take a look.*

*You will see. <HDI>*



es that never were in fashion and never would be again; tools that seemed as familiar as objects stolen from a dream. Since Mother had long ago given away most of her china, we found little to call forth sentimental memories of holidays, but out in the garage we went weak with laughter at our father's foibles. A great one for weird sporting gizmos, our dad left a treasury of the bizarre – mostly mail order products used but once or twice, and many bespeaking interesting strategies toward animals. We found a set of electric wormers designed to shock nightcrawlers out of a wet lawn. Just plug these copper wands into a socket, shove them in the ground, and big 'crawlers would squirt out all over the place. We found Seater Heaters – tall metal cans with little white-gas burners inside to keep deer hunters' asses warm. We ran across electric socks, Fish Finders, downriggers, tubes of buck lure (the whitetail version smelled faintly of apples; the mule deer version reminded me of a high school chemistry experiment, a dangerous one). We located a bass-skinning machine, quilted satin longjohns, a wrought iron rifle rest, automatic fly reels (you wind them up like a clock, push a button, and your slack line would zip onto the spindle in an instant). We found telescopic casting rods that collapsed to the length of a butter knife. We discovered what appeared to be a mile of monofilament line neatly wrapped on a giant spool that seemed to have something to do with mine explosives.

We made big piles of stuff: things to go to Goodwill, things for the storage unit in Price, useful things to give to neighbors, things for the landfill, things we wanted for ourselves. Now I have a lot of antlers.

Nearing the end, exhausted and emotionally drained, we approached the final room – Mother's fruit room downstairs. My sister Karen called it out, and we knew it had to be done. She and our sister Claudia and I went down together, bleary-eyed but determined to attack this final trove.

The door fit tightly, making the room feel snug. No one had been inside it for years; no one knew whether Mother used it anymore, or for what, or how long it had been since she went to it, cleaned it, sorted through the canned goods, if there were any. It had all the light it needed, in the form of a single bare bulb in the ceiling with a pull string. When the door came open, Karen reached inside and waved her hand around for the string.

"Here goes," she said, and gave a tug.

The light flooded the tiny room, revealing dozens of jars, neatly organized and covering every shelf. All of them were full, and they seemed to include every sort of thing our mother had ever sealed in bottles. There was just enough room for the three of us to squeeze in; and inside we marveled at her handiwork.

Over time, Karen had visited our mother most often in Orangetown, and although she could not pinpoint the date when Mom stopped canning, she knew it had been years, maybe a decade, ago. Mother's black, speckled canning pots had lain dormant in her pantry for so long, they had become storage bins for unwanted boxes of Jell-O. We had already found dozens of clean canning jars in the garage, and they lay in cartons so dry with age, the cardboard nearly shattered when we popped them open.

"What on earth will we do with this?" Karen asked.

Peaches, berries, cherries, pears, apricots, beans, peas, pickles, asparagus, venison, trout with our mother's trademark filip: a thin film of oily amber-orange on top of the canning water, denoting the tablespoon of French dressing she would add to every bottle. And not a mark or a date on a single jar. That was Mother's other trade-

mark: her steady refusal to date her canned goods.

I held a jar of peaches to the light. These had to be Colorado peaches from Fruita or Grand Junction, slightly brown and disintegrating with age, yet still bursting with summer sun. The Bing cherries – my favorite – shone nearly black in the light, dark orbs bumping around in their kirsch claret. I felt a sudden desire to pop a jar open and drink off the juice, but the red flags were flying for all of us. The venison seemed particularly alarming – lung-colored lumps of flesh with a slightly grayish cast. How long could meat last in bottle? How sick could you get if you ate from a jar of tainted deer?

"We better call her," Claudia said. "Better ask her how old this stuff is."

"Sis," Karen replied, "I think it's way too late."

I looked at my watch then realized that was not what my sister meant.

My wife Dorothy called me upstairs to go through a pile of last-minute things she had gathered from a hall closet. I left my sisters and their husbands to fetch boxes and begin dumping the fruit, fish and meat, jar by jar, down the three toilets of the house. I left them to clean the jars, load after load in my Mother's old Kenmore dishwasher, then to set boxes of sterling jars outside next to the street, with a sign saying "free."

The jars would be gone in an hour. I felt breathless at what we had found downstairs. A more intimate encounter with our mother I could not imagine – and I realized that the intimacy came from the context as much as from the objects themselves. Mother had put heart and soul into the contents of that room. There was nothing in the house that more keenly captured her, the essence of her love and skill. My mind wandered back over years of summers with her working the fruit in our cramped kitchens, a series of houses we had occupied. She wore spattered cotton aprons and labored though the heat of late summers, catching the fruit at its peak. She peeled every peach, popped out every rough stone with her fingers, pitted every cherry, adjusted her syrups to the exact sweetness and consistency her family loved. She poured sweat as she worked over the steaming pots, listening for the lids to ping shut. Her hair would start to tumble out of ties she'd tried to hold it, and she'd blow wisps of it away from her mouth. But she kept working, aiming to please. She knew my father and her children preferred more juice than fruit, a thinner syrup, a lightness on the tongue. As she worked, hour by hour, she knew how good this stuff would taste in the bitter dark of winter. Today we were rummaging around in our mother's very soul, and I was rattled.

A short time after the jars had been unloaded, Karen came up again from the cellar, this time carrying a huge bottle – not a canning jar but a glass jeroboam filled with colorful flat objects. She set the jar on the dining room table, one of the last pieces of furniture still standing inside, and gathered everyone around.

"Okay," she said. "First person to figure this one out wins a pizza."

"What's on the pizza?" her daughter Jennifer asked.

"I'll figure that out later. Just tell me what you see in this jar."

We all looked, looked closer at familiar shapes and colors.

"These are all pieces of soap," I said. "They're all little tail ends of bath soap."

"That's right," Karen said. "But why are they in a jar? Who put 'em here?"

We pondered. No one was getting it, but Karen's husband Burt exchanged knowing glances with her.

Finally Karen said, "It's the Depression," and as she spoke, tears began streaming from her eyes. "Mother and Dad went through the Great Depression. Think of what that did to them, the impact . . ." Her voice trailed away.

And suddenly it was clear before Karen could say it, but she went ahead and said it.

"Mother would never throw anything of value away. After the Depression, no matter how much money they had, Mother never knew if she'd be able to buy essentials – what if something happened?" Karen said.

She saved these little dabs of soap for thirty years, thinking one day she might have to melt them down and re-form them into fresh, rainbow-colored bars for the tub. Mother would be prepared.

Karen opened the lid and let the flowery scents of six or eight brands of ordinary bath soap fill the room. Suddenly I felt like I was back in the real Orangeville, in a garden bursting with flowers.

**AT NIGHT WHEN** my parents went to bed – this could be any of dozens of nights when I made my visits to Orangeville, repeating my father's peregrinations, over the twenty years they lived together in the modular home next to Cleao's – this could be any night when I remained awake until the hours just before dawn, in the habit of mine which has always been the opposite habit of my parents – I would stand out in their yard beneath a desert sky still dark enough to reveal the Milky Way, a whiskey or a glass of wine in my hand, perhaps a smoke, in honor of my mixed heritage, Mormon/Gentile/Infidel, and I would count the flashes of the massive strobe lights warning aircraft away from the new Hunter Power Station in full view of my

parents' home. I would remember the irrigation, the big irrigation canal that ran alongside Cleao and Sam's property just over there a hundred feet or so; I would remember the open ditch filled with muddy water and interesting fish, and lined with willow and lilacs and wild asparagus, remember that the ditch had to be destroyed for reasons of liability and efficiency, had to be replaced with an invisible underground pipeline, and the flora and fauna and graceful smells of open flowing water and children swimming on scalding days had to be erased, an improvement, and the dirt streets and little ditches that ran alongside them, too, had been erased, the ditches turned to pipes, the streets paved, and with them, all else – the mercantile, the butcher shop, the tiny appliance store, the filling station, the feed mill on Orangeville's main street – all likewise had been erased to make room for safety and efficiency and scale, and yet the irrigation water still ran, was still available, and everyone in Orangeville had the money now to drive into Price City, 40 miles one way to Wal-Mart and most would say, if you asked them, they wouldn't want it any other way. I would remember, as the strobes announced every few seconds the sale of electricity to California, the conversion of water to cabbages instead of kilowatts, the dirt streets that spoke of poverty, the stink of animals that had not been debased to the status of pets; I would remember little boys with their shirts off on a weekday morning, bouncing along on the tall metal seats of crimson Farmall "A" tractors, the gangly ones with the two-lung engine, the tricycle stance, the paired front tires beveled into one with a "V," the boys bouncing, their determined grips on those black rubber steering wheels with the long visible shafts, bouncing as they disappeared down the street. <HDJ>

## SLIVER

Grandpa Ted sits at a table in the room you always go to, drinking gin from a mason jar. You never knew him – he's been dead for 50 years – but somehow it doesn't seem strange to be standing in the kitchen doorway, looking in. He wears one of those white undershirts that don't have any sleeves. He needs a shave. His eyes shine glassy and dark.

Once when your mother was a girl she was washing dishes in a wooden sink and a sliver got stuck in her finger. It dug deep into her flesh. But Grandpa's hands shook so hard when he tried to hold the tweezers, he was so bleary and drunk, all he could do was cry. Mom remembers this. How the tweezers shook above her bloody finger. How the tears streamed down his stubbly chin.

Now he sits at a table in the room you always go to. It's morning and he is drinking from a mason jar, skin sallow and damp. You think how frail he is. But then he looks up. His eyes focus. He smiles. He knows you, he knows everything about you, and he wants to say something now, he wants to speak. So lifting up the jar with both hands, the gin clear as water, he speaks to you in a voice stronger and deeper

than you thought it could be. Take and drink, he says. Take and drink.

by **Chris Anderson**



## THE LORAX GENERATION

PHOTO: PHIL BRICK

by **Phil Brick**


### TEACHING TO THE EPIPHANY

**IT'S A CRISP AUTUMN MORNING**, and I'm leading a caravan of Chevrolet Suburbans full of college students up a dusty road to Rowe Mesa, in the Carson National Forest near Pecos, New Mexico. I have been on the road with these students for nearly three months, leading a semester-long odyssey throughout the interior American West for our environmental studies field program, Whitman College Semester in the West.

Traveling with 21 hormone-crazed students is no subtle affair. As we wind up the road, our vehicles kick up tremendous clouds of dust, and I'm pretty sure I can hear the thump da thump thump bass-line of a car stereo two vehicles back. I often wish the students would turn down the music and spend more quiet time looking out the window, soaking in the vast expanses of bunchgrass, piñon and juniper that unfold before us. But students these days know something I apparently don't: you can't engage a car's transmission without first mobilizing a good soundtrack, the more bone-rattling bass, the better.

So, this is *generation X*. Or, was that *Y*? Or, *Next*? I can hardly keep track. I suppose that if you really want to insult someone, you assign them an absolutely meaningless label and be done with them.

I have no intention, of course, of insulting my students. I hand-picked them for this journey, and they have been excellent traveling companions. Every morning I awake to the sound of laughter, no matter the weather or the strenuous schedule ahead of us. We've camped together in some spectacular places, from the rim of Hells Canyon to the expansive slickrock of the Colorado Plateau. Apart from a full academic workload of ecology, writing and policy courses, students must cook, clean and make camp themselves. We typically rise before the sun and settle down in our sleeping bags late in the evening. Our days are packed with meetings, readings, discussions, ecology fieldwork, writing and many miles of travel on rough roads in cramped vehicles. Through all this, students have taken good care

of each other. They are polite, eager, inquisitive and cheerful. I can't decide if they make me feel 20 years younger, or so exhausted that I need to check and see how much is in my retirement account. Every teacher should be so lucky.

Fondly, I've taken to calling my students the Lorax Generation, after the Dr. Seuss tale they all grew up with, which is also a favorite of my 4-year-old daughter. For the uninitiated, the Lorax is a chap who claims to speak for *Truffula* trees and the many animals that make their home in the *Truffula* forest. Despite constant protests and appeals from the Lorax, the forest is being steadily logged to meet consumer demand by a greedy industrialist, a certain Mr. Once-ler. Years after the forest is logged out and all the animals forced to flee, Once-ler sees the error of his ways and charges a young boy with replanting the forest. The story's message is clear, and my daughter repeats it every time we read it. "The grown-ups should have listened to the Lorax," she exclaims, "that's sad." At least the story ends on a hopeful note with a new mandate for the next generation, which will hopefully be able to restore the forest (with no apparent expertise or funding) and then somehow have better luck keeping those who would harm the forest at bay.

Man, it's not easy being green, always knowing what's right, but then there's the constant challenge of convincing others, if not oneself, to do the right thing. What's more, greens tend to throw lousy parties. What could be duller than a room of self-appointed moralists, arguing the fine points of alternate apocalyptic scenarios, or worse, debating the scintillating question that vexes us all, "paper or plastic?" Yet my students come to college with remarkably strong environmental commitments. Green ideas seem etched into their DNA, buttressed by the energy and confidence of youth. Speaking for nature and protecting it from the greedy intentions of others is a mantle the Lorax generation takes for granted. In this age of political apa-