

Wind That Shakes the Sage

nonfiction by Iver Arnegard

You could disappear here.

If there are any lawless places left in America, any scraps of the Old West, one of them is definitely Taos, New Mexico. There are more disappearances here than in most parts of the U.S., more unsolved arsons. People shoot their neighbor's dogs and each other for seemingly no reason at all.

I could disappear here.

Especially on a moonless night like this, the desert behind my house stretching into a darkness so deep and vast it seems to swallow everything. I look through my window to the west and there is nothing besides my own house light shooting a small yellow cone into the blackness. All I know for sure is the sound of wind rattling dry sage as it blows west where, somewhere out there, the earth suddenly drops away for a thousand feet. Nothing but emptiness plunging down the Rio Grande Gorge. The rocky canyon floor where that tired thread of water pulses south toward Mexico, and eventually the Gulf.

Some say Taos is a sacred, powerful site. A place of high vibration. An energetic vortex where people come to find meaning. Hippies and yuppies. Most of them white and looking for a more enchanted existence. Like Crestone, Colorado or Sedona, Arizona, they flock to these places. And it's crazy to me. Energy. Vortexes. Vibrations. I can't begrudge them. In some ways I'm *one* of them. And I don't blame anyone who looks for meaning in their lives in 21st Century America. Where we are micro-managed, most likely in cubicles, working soul-shredding 9:00 to 5:00ers for the rest of our lives.

America. Where any Google search will yield page after page on Beauty and almost nothing on Truth. America. Where Trust is a noun not a verb?

Can you blame them when they come searching for meaning?

Can you blame me?!

Looking back from my window, from the darkness outside, I spot my bottle of Captain Morgan on top of the fridge. I told myself I wouldn't drink tonight and gaze back down at the notebook on my table where I have tried to write for hours with nothing so far but scribbles.

It was the Day of the Dead when I finally got the guts to move to Taos. I didn't realize it at the time. Not until I arrived with everything I owned stuffed into my car. A coincidence, I thought. No. More than a coincidence. Fate. The old me was dead. I'd sluffed him off. This was a metamorphosis. I'd also come to find meaning and in doing so considered all the Taos clichés:

Camping outside the Hanuman Temple until I reached enlightenment.

Pilgrimaging to Chimayo for Easter, walking all the way from Taos on my knees.

I could learn to build Earth Ships and take my message of ecological sustainability around the globe.

I could disappear.

I could go native up on the Pueblo, try to find an American Indian elder who would teach me how to perform sweat lodge ceremonies and show me how to say *I'm an asshole* in Taos.

Could join a commune and preach world peace.

I could get a Zia tattooed to my fucking forehead!

Or. I could start writing poetry again. Become the latest, hottest Southwestern poet. And when I recite my poetry in public I could read it sensitively. Finishing each line with a lilt, as if I'm always asking a question. Like this? Like, am I the biggest asshole in the world?

But see, I'd already tried all that. Or some version of it. And anyway my restlessness, my search for meaning. These are First World problems. You have to be privileged to even have them. Angst drawn from a deep well of boredom, a nameless restlessness. And only the ultra-privileged get to even experience boredom. Or know what it means.

Only the ultra-privileged get to disappear.

I disappeared to Beirut once where I taught English to pay the bills but volunteered in Palestinian refugee camps out of curiosity and the misguided idealism and hubris that told me I could actually help. It was my first job after school. Well, that's not true. But it was the first job I cared about. The first one that mattered. My students didn't know what boredom was. In the camps where they lived, kids were electrocuted by improper wiring. Refugees carried guns and frequently used them. They wondered from week to week if drinking water would reach their camp. There was not only no plumbing but nowhere to pump out or ship all the waste. The camp smelled like shit. Like Hell. They called it the Fourth World because they needed an entirely new category to describe it.

Being bored? The Palestinians I worked with didn't know what "bored" meant. Explaining it to them would've been useless. And obtaining it, for them, was unthinkable. Like going to the moon.

And here I am. Years later. Safe, back in the U.S. So safe, I'm bored and have to wander the country looking for *that* place that would bring meaning. How about surviving the Middle East? How about having your freedom *and* your health? How about the privilege of *knowing* boredom?

There's your fucking meaning.

Some say the mountain calls you to Taos. Or, if you try to leave, and you belong here, the mountain calls you back. Others say Taos either embraces you or chews you up and spits you out.

For me, it was doing both at the same time.

What happens when this place is done with *me*? When the restlessness comes back with a vengeance and it hurts so bad I can't sit still? Talkeetna didn't work out. Fairbanks didn't. Pueblo. Salida. Nowhere has ever *worked* out.

First World problems, I tell myself. Not far from here there are so many people who don't know where their next meal will come from. With that thought, I push up from my chair, walk over to the fridge, and stare at the bottle of rum. The pirate face on the label stares back. A challenge. Gleaming from his one good eye. Let go. Just let go.

If the First World is so fulfilling, why are anti-depressants the fastest growing industry in America? We have lost something along the way. Some of us have. *I* have lost something. I think. And I came to Taos to find it. But all I've found is that a place doesn't fix you. *You* fix you. Because all of these things—the happiness, the meaning, just like the restlessness and depression—come from inside you. *You* have to choose what to tap into. And with that I give in, grab the bottle from the top of the fridge and crack the cap. Sitting back down, I lift it to my lips and that first swallow shoots down hot and bright as a rocket.

A few more sips and I'm back to the notebook, no longer scribbling, but actually stringing together sentences.

A couple more swallows and I feel there is meaning again and though it's an illusion, after another long gulp or two even the illusion becomes real.

Well below the neck I'm already bored with writing and just want to go outside. Out in the darkness. From my window I can see that some of the stars have flickered on.

By the time I get halfway down the bottle I pull on my boots and flannel, grab the rum, and head for the door.

Now I am more than buzzing. I'm drunk. I don't even lock up. Let the screen door yawn in the breeze. Creaking back and forth as I stagger down my driveway, turn west on the unmaintained dirt path,

and keep walking. My headlamp is in my pocket and I stretch it around my head.

Just in case.

As I pull away from my porch light, the desert sky shows itself. A night sky choked with stars and colors. You have never seen the Milky Way until you watch it stretch out above a New Mexican desert. Blue and green. Purple. A river of ancient gas and dust flowing, centuries away, above your head.

I'm wasted now, I know. I've lost the path and keep heading west, making sure Polaris stays above my right shoulder.

Here and now it seems all too easy to disappear.

Out here in all this emptiness.

When I trip over a coyote hole I flip on the headlamp to see where I'm going.

Sagebrush glows ghostly in the moonlight. Immaculate. The rational side of me says to turn around. Go back inside. Just sleep this fantasy off. But the rest of me, pickled with rum and romantic notions, urges my feet on.

Rationale, as always, is out numbered. Voted down.

For a second, I wonder how much juice is left in the headlamp. But the thought is eclipsed by a shooting star, ripping across the western sky.

Keep going. Just keep going, the voices tell me. This is where you'll disappear. Just finally disappear.

I hear a rattle near my feet and pray it's just wind shaking sagebrush. The light starts to fade. The battery must be nearly dead. But for some reason even I don't understand, I keep going. The headlamp flickers and goes dark. I keep walking. Brushing past sagebrush, the only thing reminding me I exist.

Suddenly, miraculously, the light flickers on again. Briefly. A final cone of light washing the wedge of desert white in front of me.

Then darkness. The light flickers one last time then dies for good.

And when it does, I disappear.



Eleanor Leonne Bennett
To Protect from Harsh Elements