

A man with a beard and a cap, wearing a plaid shirt, stands in profile looking out over a vast desert canyon. The sky is filled with soft, white clouds against a pale blue background. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

Oracle in the Desert

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY CRAIG CHILDS

*A retired cop wanders the canyons of
Arizona looking for redemption*

A MOSAIC OF ROCKS covers the ground where a middle-aged, lightly graying man crouches over his heels. Around his shoulder is a coil of climbing rope. He leans forward and runs a hand across red dust and sharply broken debris. It looks like he is reading an invisible sign—an oracle paused in the desert.

“Come on,” he mutters to the ground. “Come on, give me something.”

I am looking too, crouched near him, hoping for a sign, a clue about how to get through this landscape. Around us, pale, bare cliffs tower one above the next. Canyons plunge into inescapable, winter-cold depths. Dirk and I have been walking for several days through this land, an untrailed, remote quarter of the Navajo Reservation in northern Arizona. This mode of travel has been our mutual pastime, wandering for weeks or months on end into the wilderness, seeing what might become of us.

We’re balanced on a platform of rock, geologic scaffolding, not a single living thing visible around us, no shrub or sprig of grass. The land looks elemental, the very bones of the Earth.

Dirk pushes his fingertips into parched blowsand and unearths a bighorn sheep dropping. The small, oval scat is exactly what he was looking for. It means there is a passage, a way through.



“Somebody’s been here,” Dirk says. Bighorn sheep navigate this territory, traveling finger-width ledges, leaping chasms. Their habitat, known as *escape terrain*, is convoluted country where predators cannot reach. The only hitch is you have to learn to move like an acrobat, every sense elevated at every step.

Dirk crushes the dropping and it falls apart like a pinch of sawdust.

I WOULD BE LOST without Dirk. Not to say I can’t navigate my way through here on my own, but he has an uncanny skill for finding routes. He can find his way through the impossible.

Dirk used to work as a street cop. His history is a menagerie of car accidents and gunfire. It might be why he is such a good route finder, fifteen years spent negotiating the underworld of an American city, trying to find his way out alive.

When I first met Dirk, he had just left the Denver police force. He moved to the desert, appearing in the wilderness like a shipwreck victim. That is where I found him, or he found me. I was living out of the back of my truck and spending months at a time in the wilderness. We began walking together.

He got out because he thought he was going to get a bullet through his head at any moment. More important, he was afraid he would go mad if he stayed in the city. He left and took a job as a river outfitter in Moab, Utah.

I was attracted to his uncanny alertness and ease of control. It was like traveling with a mountain lion by my side. As we journeyed through canyons, he told me that being out here was not so different from being a cop. Subtle observations are required if you want to survive. Nothing is taken for granted, no dry wash, no water hole.

Dirk told me this sort of awareness is like walking into a bar and trying to figure out who has a gun, who can kill you. I said to him there is a penetrating silence in the desert that has nothing to do with police work. Forces shaping the land are ancient, the wear of time, the lure of gravity. Dirk laughed, called me “nature boy.”

Our friendship stuck. For more than fifteen years we have walked together, traveling without maps or compasses, traversing nameless mazes to see what we can do with our bare hands and some rope.

WE SLEEP AMONG red stone monoliths, hemmed in by a sky full of winter stars. Morning comes slowly, constellations fading into the blue. I rise, throw on some warm clothes, and sit in my nest of gear to watch the sunrise. Dirk walks over wearing gloves, coat, wool hat. A drop of snot hangs like a cold jewel from the tip of his nose. He stops before me, opens a large book titled *The Selected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers*. It is over seven hundred

pages long, the heaviest single item we are carrying across the reservation. With pages laid open to either side of his forearm, Dirk reads to me.

“Man, you might say, is nature dreaming, but rock and water and sky are constants.” He pauses, moves his finger down the page, continues the quote. “Walk on gaunt shores and avoid the people; rock and wave are good prophets.”

Few might understand Jeffers’s words as well as Dirk. He has seen the dream of man, busted down its door with his shoulder. He leveled a handgun on a man emerging from a gas station robbery, a man who refused to stop even as Dirk shouted, a man who reached into his back pocket and pulled out a weapon, and who stopped only when Dirk pulled the trigger and blew apart his left shoulder.

Dirk flips the huge book of poetry shut and tosses it onto my bag. It lands like a slab of wood.

“Your turn to carry it.”

We lift our heavy winter packs and move deeper into the country, climbing through towers and shadowy alcoves of sandstone. Late in the day we come upon a bald dome of rock sloping down into oblivion. A misstep would be fatal. You would slide down the face for a few seconds, and then you would become airborne. Then, as far as I can tell, you would vanish into shadow, consumed by the Earth.

There is nothing to anchor off of, so we cannot use rope. This is a bare-handed route.

I go first, happenstance of our order, keeping my weight close to the rock face and not looking down. Suddenly, I hear a sound behind me, a sickening rasp of fabric scraping across rock. An inhuman language hisses from between Dirk’s teeth. I know the sound. He is falling.

I turn my head, trying not to throw myself off balance, and I see Dirk gliding uncontrollably down the rock. He drags his fingers, desperately hunting for something to hold. His left leg extends below him, his boot catching aberrations in the rock, slipping past them.

I whisper, “No.”

Dirk is my key, the one thing that keeps me safe in these bottomless places. If he falls I will spend the rest of my life hunting for his bones in the depths below.

I hear a sharp bite of air from Dirk’s lungs. It is the last sound, all of his life given to the rock. His knuckles turn white and hard as he wills himself into the bending cliff, his face crushed by muscles. He slows by sheer resistance, and at the final edge, he grinds to a halt.

Emptiness lingers beneath him as he hangs by friction. He grits his teeth and slides one boot across, fingers creeping. By tiny increments, he moves along the face, and finally reaches a

ledge no wider than a spoon handle. There, about twenty feet below me, Dirk stops and lets out a breath, spreading his arms against the wall. His cheek presses against cold sandstone. His lower lip wilts open, saliva bright on the rock. I wait several seconds, saying nothing. Dirk looks up to me and nods. He is okay.

"CONSCIOUSNESS IS a motherfucker every goddamned day," Dirk once told me. "We all have to build walls inside of ourselves, come up with answers, do whatever we must to keep from going stark-raving mad."

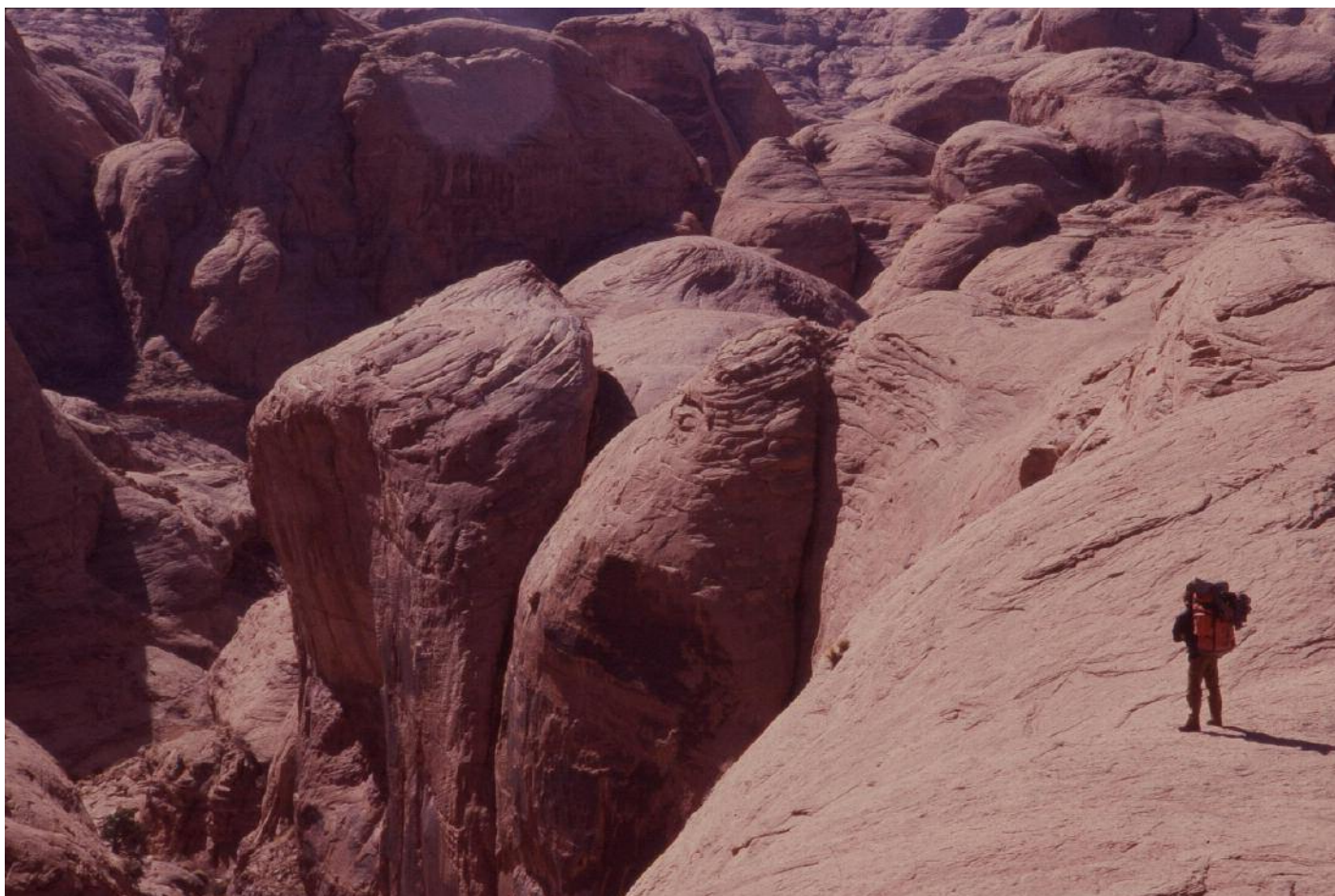
He said, "Sure, I danced the edge. I mean, there is some madness you've got to work with. Going to some woman who had her geraniums stolen when ten minutes ago you were fighting fucking tooth and nail for your very life, some goddamned shoot-out, bar scene . . . whatever it was. And you have to put on this face that says, *Oh yeah, I'm perfectly sane and rational now. How many geraniums were stolen?*"

Though Dirk seemed sane to me, over years of walking together I got the sense that he had chewed his leg off in a trap to get here.

He would often speak of a beast dwelling inside of him, something he once conjured like a demon to get him through his cop years. It was the only way to survive, peeling out of his own humanity to become a creature of instinct and ferocity, beating the crap out of someone with a nightstick in order to protect himself. He said we all have the beast, and some of us let it out, some of us befriend it, work with it. But it changes you. You become it. It is not something you necessarily control, but something you live with. It never goes away.

I could see this beast just behind his eyes, his own private brutality. Though I was curious about this facet of him, there was something deeper that drew me to Dirk. It was his ceaseless, almost childlike searching, turning every stone to find what it means to be human in this world. As we walked together he dissected his beast and everything else about himself.

Dirk let wind, sun, and rock wear him down. He traveled so hard that at times his fingerprints disappeared, replaced with smooth nubs, more climbing tools than digits. He was stripping away layers of who he was, removing the obligatory identities of his past in search of what he called Real Self.



Meanwhile, I watched him. I filled notebooks about him, writing down his words, his actions from our years together. He was a maze that I traveled through.

At one point I went to Denver to try and understand his former landscape. At ten in the morning I sat in an unmarked police car parked two blocks off Colfax Avenue. It could have been any city. At a certain point they all look the same. Bail bonds storefronts, check cashing, XXX video. Drunk guy on the corner wearing a torn sweater, hand rummaging in his coat pocket.

Not far from here a former partner of Dirk's was shot in the head, left to die in the street. Near that an elderly man was stabbed forty times with an ice pick, and near that the violent end to a high-speed chase, all parts of stories Dirk had told me over the years.

Behind the wheel next to me sat Casey, a homicide detective who once worked with Dirk. Casey brought me here because something is always going on, Colfax being the main avenue into downtown.

Casey gave running commentary on whatever caught his eye, pedestrians who might be carrying concealed weapons, people

tripping on crack or methamphetamines.

"Her, there," Casey said, lifting his finger off the steering wheel. It was a woman wearing a tight and uncomplimentary dress on a street corner two blocks away.

"Prostitute," he said. "If she's any good she'll spot us."

The woman suddenly peered in our direction as if overhearing. "Now she's going to leave," he said.

The woman turned on her heels and moved quickly out of our view.

"Like clockwork," Casey marveled.

I understood, then, why Dirk was so drawn to the canyons we walked. They, too, are like clockwork. You have to know their timing and intricacies in order to survive, the way boulders hang on each other, cracks through cliffs, routes in and out of oblivion.

Casey said, "Dirk was always the one asking questions. He had a bigger picture of the world, and it made him different. At the end of the day he wanted to know why we were doing this, why we were working as cops, why any of this was happening to begin with. It makes sense he needed to escape."



I smiled, hearing how Casey used the word *escape*. He obviously did not understand why Dirk left. Most people think you go to the wilderness to flee something. But in the desert there is nowhere to hide. Your body stands on naked, cracked plains of rock. Even in the deepest shadows of canyons you are exposed, every move a question and an answer.

I know why Dirk came to the desert. He was not so much running from something as toward something. Having seen enough of humanity, he wanted a greater clock to move through.

OVER THE YEARS, as Dirk dug away at himself, his boundaries ultimately began to unravel. He started having blackouts and flashbacks. It would not take much to trigger them, a hit of dope, a song on the radio, a nightmare. Sometimes they would happen in the desert and he would get dangerous, dancing across huge exposures of rock he had no business being on. He called these moments “trances.” All he remembered of them were episodes of either psychotic ecstasy or unimaginable terror.

In one instance, he was trancing under a tree when he looked up and saw an eternal, glimmering heaven, all the voices of time bound into a canopy of branches and leaves. In another episode he found himself raving in hell, jumping up and down on the hood of a parked patrol car right before he was handcuffed and thrown in the back.

Of that episode he recalls lying on the patrol car’s bench seat, looking through the open door at a cop looking in on him.

“Are you a human being?” Dirk asked.

The cop said, “Lucky for you, I am.”

“Hell,” Dirk complained to me, “it was the fucking job that trained me with the tools to undertake this kind of truth-quest in the first place.”

I did not know if Dirk was on the verge of prophethood or if he was becoming an utter lunatic. I worried for a while he was going to kill himself.

Trying to understand what he was going through, I sought help from Dr. Katherine Ellison, the matriarch of police psychology, whose early psychiatric studies in the subject changed the way law-enforcement agencies handle emotional trauma. Dr. Ellison spoke with a jocular grace as she explained how violence and unpredictability have damaged the minds and lives of so many police officers. She told me that cops tend to have the same problems as disaster victims, suffering an assortment of shudders, nightmares, panic attacks, and suicides.

To Dr. Ellison it sounded like post-traumatic stress disorder—the pigeonhole of PTSD. She told me there might also be something glitched in the left anterior temporal lobe of his brain, a region of hallucinations and memory. She thought he should be checked for seizures.

I told her I was worried for him. Dirk kept a gun from when he was a cop, a black semiautomatic .45 caliber. It was often nearby. Dr. Ellison confirmed my fear, explaining that the suicide rate for cops is twice the national average, and they generally kill themselves with whatever gun they used in the line of duty.

To offer perspective, she said, “You must remember, police are just working-class people, like any of us. They are ordinary people who have responded to extraordinary pressure.”

But to me, Dirk is no ordinary man. He seems to be living a mythical life, a hero’s journey like those recounted by Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell. For fifteen years it had been Dirk’s profession to travel into the urban underworld like a shaman, carrying an assortment of talismans—a couple handguns, a concealed knife, a nightstick, a badge. Daily, nightly, Dirk and all the other blue-suited cops would rise back to the surface, to their patrol cars, their headquarters, where they would write reports as if reciting stories, tales of man, nature dreaming.

There is another, lesser-known term besides PTSD. It is post-traumatic growth syndrome, the idea that life-rending events might actually serve to elevate your understanding of yourself and the world around you.

When I spoke to Dr. Ellison I wanted to believe that Dirk was more than an ordinary victim, not simply a man going mad. There had to be something deeper. He did not seem crushed by PTSD. Instead, he was steadily making his way through an unknown world. I asked her, “Could it be that he is on a journey?”

“Of course he is,” Dr. Ellison said.

WHEN I AM ALONE in the desert, far from any other human, I sometimes wonder how many of them are out here. How many cops are cast adrift in the wilderness around me, sanding off their fingerprints, bending themselves back into the shape of the Earth. I met another one once, a man named Neal who had also worked as a Denver cop not long after Dirk had left.

Neal told me that all cops need a methodology, a system that works for them. Otherwise they go crazy. His system was rivers. He took his kayak out whenever he could and buried his daily horrors in the roil of whitewater. That kept him going for seventeen years, but finally he had to quit when he realized he could not keep both his job and his sanity. He barely made it out alive.

Neal resigned, filled out the paperwork, and was about to leave when all hell broke loose. Three days before Neal turned in his badge, a pair of outrageously armed teenagers marched into a high school in his district, where they pulled off what was at the time the deadliest school shooting in U.S. history.

Charging onto the campus of Columbine High School, Neal did not have time to calculate. He found himself suddenly pinned down by sporadic gunfire from classroom windows. Neal

and a few other cops took shelter behind a cinder-block wall, where they found several students, all of them shot, some dying. A young football player lay gasping with four entry and exit wounds through his torso. Neal could not help him. There was nothing that could be done.

Inside the school, an elaborate massacre was taking place, the two young assailants using pipe bombs and an arsenal of guns. Meanwhile Neal remained trapped behind his cover. He had no idea what was happening, just erratic gunfire and bleeding teenagers. Explanations did not come across his radio. No one knew.

When sharpshooters finally arrived to return fire, Neal and the other cops began running wounded students out on their shoulders, an act of bravery that won Neal a glittering silver metal and a touching letter from the police department. He'd given up the football player for dead when at the last second he saw the young man's chest barely rise for a breath. Neal enlisted the help of a coach, and they hauled away the 260-pound kid. Meanwhile, the two assailants killed themselves inside the school amid the bodies of their classmates.

"It was absolute presence in the midst of unbelievable psychotic bedlam," Neal explained. "The closest thing I have to compare it to is kayaking class IV rapids. At that level mistakes can easily be life threatening or at least very injurious. You've got total focus. Yet rapids can be scouted and assessed and portaged if need be. Columbine could not."

The Columbine High School massacre was on a Tuesday. Friday was Neal's last day of work. On Saturday he put his kayak onto the San Juan River. His memory of the trip through red gorges in southeast Utah is spotty, a blur of motion, his mind numb from unabated panic. All he really remembers is the swiftness and muddiness of river water, and the sandstone that slid past day after day, occasionally opening to let in nameless side canyons. It is all that needs remembering.

FOR A TIME Dirk's blackouts worsen. I am there for one of them, holding him, demanding that he keep eye contact with me. Then I see the beast come out, his fingernails gripping at my flesh before he breaks into garbled weeping. I imagine the tightrope he walks, the pitfalls of his journey. I am not a religious man, but after this episode I pray for him, standing in the desert alone, saying his name out loud. *Make it through, Dirk. Come on, make it through.*

After fifteen years heading a river outfit in Moab, he quits and moves to a West Texas border town. Twenty-six years of marriage end in divorce. He takes odd jobs, moves in with a raw, jumpy, intellectual woman from Manhattan with house cats. As far as I can see, he is falling off the map.

A few years pass since our last journey together, then I start getting letters from him. They are cryptic and weirdly brilliant. For the first time in a long while, I see oracular clarity return to his words. Here is one:

Two days ago, sprucing the neglected yard,, though only We will know the difference,, two junk cars next door have hosted a hundred generations of vermin,, the alley behind is mexicochic, shreds of paper, plastic, old screen, bottles, rusted metal, weeds. But my nature is as much Mine as theirs is, all excrete as they may. I clean the border of our alley fence and gate. Buried in dried thistle, wet and dried many times over lie forty to sixty pages of surprisingly white crinkly book pages, still bound to each other but lacking any cover. From standing height and haunted youth I recognize the biblical attributes. I close my eyes as i lean down to pick up the pages and leaf through them blindly, thoroughly until my right index finger rests where it should.

I'll die here in this land. I won't go across the Jordan. But you are about to cross over it. And you are about to take that good land as your own. Be careful. Don't forget the covenant the Lord your God made with you. Don't make for yourselves a statue of any god at all. He has told you not to. So don't do it.

I think, Dirk is no sacrificial Moses. Regardless of how I once saw him, he is, indeed, an ordinary man who has seen extraordinary things. He is, like any of us, on a hero's journey through his own life. Carefully reading his letters, I come to believe Dirk is going to make it to the other side.

DIRK DRIVES HIS PICKUP from Texas to meet me in northern Arizona, where we put on backpacks and walk into the desert once again. It has been four years since we last walked together, the longest break Dirk and I have ever taken from each other.

We travel across bare rock and sand, listening to each other's footsteps. When we come to old rainwater in a bedrock hollow, we both get down on hands and knees to drink. It is good to be with an old friend.

Dirk tells me his trances have subsided, or at least have integrated themselves into the rest of his life. He says every moment now feels charged to him, senses prickled, consciousness as much a motherfucker as it ever was, but without so much unstoppable panic. In fact, he seems to have earned an air of electrified serenity.

I laugh, tell him he cut that one pretty damn close. For a while there I did not think he was going to make it.

“It was worth it,” he says.

We have nowhere in particular to go, days of wandering ahead of us. We move from one waterhole to the next, playing out our old rituals, palms on stone, shoulder blades pitched toward the sky, our heads nearly touching. The water is cool and crystalline. We come up smiling, beards dripping into our laps.

I look at my friend, at his hands butchered from the sun, hands that have punched and torn and pulled triggers. I look at his steel-blue eyes and am reminded of what it is like to have a strong companion in these wild places.

We spend days meandering through sun-dazzled rock, then return to my truck parked in red sand next to a fence. We disgorge gear onto the ground. Dirk lays his black .45 handgun on the tailgate, treating it with the acquaintance of a wallet or a journal.

I pick up the gun, safety on, barrel tucked into a black leather sheath. Dirk watches me, making sure I don't do anything stupid.

“When was the last time you fired it?” I ask.

Dirk gestures toward Denver, hundreds of miles away.

“Let's shoot it,” I say.

Dirk laughs. “Don't be stupid, nature boy.”

Then I dare him. He scowls at me.

We take the gun into the open desert behind the truck. He levels it on a dry horizon, fixing the sight on a metal boundary sign forty feet away.

“The W in WILDERNESS,” Dirk says.

The gun pops. A spark of sand erupts in the distance. It is a clean miss.

He looks at the gun, mystified. The second bullet, which should have slid into place, is jammed. Then he looks back at the sign, puzzling over how he could have missed by so much.

Dirk clears the chamber, knocks the magazine back into place, and hands me the gun. I am not a gun person. I grew up hunting, but even then, the boom and the kickback were frightening. I take the gun anyway. It was part of the bargain.

Sweat softens my palms around the solid metal butt. I hold it up the same as Dirk, level its sights on the sign. I expect the recoil to knock me back, but it is a sturdy gun, and it merely gives a quick jolt. A three-hundredth of a second later the bullet pierces the sign, putting a hole just above the W in WILDERNESS.

I lower the gun, dismayed. Dirk stares at the hole in the sign, squinting in the sun.

“Well, shit,” Dirk says with his trickster's grin—the smile of a madman, a desert apostle. “I guess you can be the cop now.”

The gun feels curiously inviting in my hand, a little taste of empire. I ask Dirk if I can have it.

Dirk stops grinning. He reaches out his hand.

“No,” he says, and he takes his gun back, sliding it into the holster, the two of us facing each other under a turquoise sky. 🐉

+1

+2 Possible Psalm

When I saw light the carpenter chiseling sheer bluff from slope—the punk wood landing as shadow in down-mountain saddles, a coarse grit teasing out the basalt's facelike features, then finer grains crazing the air with duff—

I said aloud *good light*: as if it were dog or obedient child, as if there were some other kind. As if it had not by then vanished into that antipodal room, the work shrouded in dark sheet.

—Chris Dombrowski

