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Setting Forth in Their Footprints

Walking realizes motion, and some biologists feel that motion planning is a form of intelligence.

Teresa Zielinska

On the long, hairpinned climb from the Valley of the Gods, heading north from the town of Mexican Hat, I meet only one other vehicle on the road, a pickup headed south. So in midafternoon, when I see the guy with his thumb out and a hopeful look on his face heading north along Cedar Mesa, I think it must be up to me, although I vowed years ago to never, ever, not-even-once stop again for another hitchhiker. I slow the car.

This traveler's a young man, wearing a Marines t-shirt and magnificent sunglasses, with a pack on his back indicating that he's just climbed up from one of the canyons that transect and drain the mesa—eight hundred, maybe a thousand feet. There's a different code of ethical behavior in the wilderness, and he's still crusted with its dust and dried mud, but I remain a little wary, wondering if this is the smartest thing I've ever done.

“What's your story?” I ask without opening the door. He's already smiling broadly, dropping his pack to the ground by his feet. He says he's finished three days of backpacking in Grand Gulch, from Kane's Creek to Bullet Canyon, and is headed back to the ranger station along Route 261.

“So your loop includes a long hike on asphalt?” I ask him.

“They told me someone would surely pick me up,” he says.

“But you’re the first car I’ve seen. Thanks for stopping; you’ve saved me hours of walking.”

I clear out the passenger seat, he crams his pack on top of my already dusty gear in the back, and we continue north. I learn that his name is Aaron, and he’s not a Marine; that’s his younger brother’s shirt. In fact, he’s just out of the Peace Corps, his wife is in Salt Lake visiting relatives, and in the fall he’s starting a master’s program in education at the University of Chicago. Then he tells me excitedly about his hike—bitterly cold the first night. “Nineteen degrees,” he says with the precision of someone to whom each calibrated drop in temperature was significant. After that, beautiful weather. And he reached several Ancestral Pueblo ruins, even though his route came nowhere near to completing the sixty-mile length of the primitive area boxed in attractive green on the map. He’s still elated, uplifted from the trip, and I recognize both the place names he describes—Turkey Pen ruin, Jailhouse ruin—and the near-rush of narration, the delight in telling someone who’s interested—me, in this case—what he’s seen. I’m planning to day-hike in, still uncertain an old foot injury will let me pack the excessive weight of my too-roomy, two-person tent. He sells me his map for half of what he paid for it—“I believe in karma,” he says—and unfolds it on his lap, pointing out where he camped, where the water was clear rather than runoff muddy. In the parking lot, we shake hands, wish each other luck, and prepare to go our different ways.

That night I sleep on BLM land just up the road, overlooking Lyman Canyon, marked on the map as an intermittent stream a few hundred feet below the rim. There I pitch the tent on a

few inches of soil above sandstone, hardly enough to hold the stakes in place. A high mesa to the east changes color as I sit watching, cooling in the evening; a tiny bit of snow clings to its upper reaches, but the rock glows various shades of vermilion, rufus, ocher, and I recognize for a moment the perfect shade of a stone I picked up days ago, grinding from it a few experimental grains as if to approximate paint. Then, briefly, the rock seems to shine from within, the way the dying heart of a campfire would have if I'd kindled one, just in the last moments before it would be time to scatter the coals, douse them with water, and listen to the hiss of ash-scented steam. Instead, I listen to the current in the canyon below, an allegro of motion, of flow, the world in its exquisite movement into spring.

The next morning, I'm on the trail before 8:00, a day-use permit tucked beneath the bug-splashed windshield in the unpaved parking lot. This is Kane Gulch, heading southwest; the water here is muddy, cold, and seems in a tremendous hurry to pass through the landscape, leaving everything behind to the dry heat of the coming summer. Almost immediately I begin the sinuous trek back and forth across this meltwater current, as the slope of the wash itself deepens toward actual canyon. Before 9:00, a red-tailed hawk startles from where it has landed to drink, and it lifts heavily, legs dangling their angled talons.

By 11:00, I've given up keeping my feet dry and no longer even try to cross the current; I slosh right through. Occasionally, mud sucks at my feet as they try to step free; other times the channel bed is slickrock sandstone, smooth and mostly level except for the downstream tilt that lets the water hurry away. And once, I slip and splash and get wet to the waist, worrying briefly that I've dipped the pack, but no, it's only me, my shorts, and of course my shoes that are soaked from the clumsy dunk-

ing. So around noon, I find a dry cottonwood log to sit on, unlace the boots, and let my pale feet warm in the sunlight, wool socks dangling wetly, heavily, from a yucca spike. I take off my shorts, too, since no one is around, and sit in my underwear, drying off. Eating a peanut-butter-and-banana sandwich, I consider skeptically the ring of mud that rims each boot, the silty film that stains my legs, the faint dirty tinge that has darkened my spiffy blue orthotics, also set out to dry in the sun. In the sandy dust, the orthotics look like robot footprints, fleshless, toeless, futuristic in their shadow-cast of ball and arch, waiting for me to step into them again and move along.

For days, I've been thinking about the footprints that fleck the rock art of the American Southwest. Full sized, miniature. Single tracks or a series, left, right, left, indicating the route, the path, the journey—maybe even time (seven prints here, only four here). In Nevada, at Atlatl Rock, I saw what I want to call a classic footprint: the carved perfection of the idealized human form, toes down, a narrow heel like my own, but no apparent arch. Another footprint, equally well pecked, showed much less symmetry: the second toe was far longer than all the others (indicating it may be female; my own second toe is the longest on each foot). And that bonelike toe seemed damaged at its tip, bent, with the incised line interrupted as if in breakage. The foot pointed straight upward, heel aligned with earth and toes aligned toward sky, echoing the rock's monumental verticality. Rested from a night in a nearby, nearly empty campground, I stood awhile, considering. *Gawwwwd*, the composition seemed to me to say, *we walked nearly forever to get here. Just look what it's done to me!* In this it suggested something about the unidealized truth of the bipedal, perambulatory life. But who knows what

specificity the artist meant in carving the foot's deformity on this pinnacle of stone in a broad, red, and very dry valley?

In Arizona, in Chevelon Canyon, I came across another perfect print, which seemed again to celebrate the beauty of our lives as wanderers, walkers across the world. It was a pale gray glyph on slightly less pale gray sandstone; a grisaille image without the paint. Here, the foot with all its perfect toes faced downward from the canyon rim to the cold meltwater rushing through the smooth, carved walls. *Go down to the water*, the print said to me. And, in sandals this time, I waded in the current, planting my feet along the sandstone bottom and its slow resistance to almost-as-slow abrasion. Above, on the mesa's rim, I'd stooped in the sunshine to study a flat rock, much weathered, that is believed by some to be a map of the canyon. A long meandering line seems to mimic particular bends between the canyon walls, and a spiral that terminates the image could suggest the permanent water hole in the stream below. The hole itself is a deep pool that stretches wall to wall to fill the canyon. There, the moving sun casts shadows on some portion of the water most of the day. The place is decorated on the upstream side with a panel of vertical, zigzag lines, some narrow and tightly angled, others wider, and one more curvilinear, like a series of ox bows; all are topped with a flourish of dots. *Go down to the water*, and here it is in vibrant glory.

Back on Cedar Mesa, along Highway 95, there's a rock that's thought by some to be a way marker, a kind of signal post to the traveler. It's a nearly rectangular boulder, perhaps twice a tall man's height, marked with a vertical, zigzag line a good yard long; human figures; another zigzag, on the horizontal plane. And sandal prints! Two of them, neatly side by side, each narrow heel and wider toe box looking like the yucca-fiber remains

I saw once in a museum display case. Anasazi footwear. Yucca is tough, called Spanish bayonet by European travelers through the western plains. It would stand up, I think, in an inadvertent pun, to rough treatment, but it would take a lot of work to process the sharp clumps of its leaves into something to protect the flesh. The single shoe in the museum display looked itchy, like a mat of burlap, with a few frayed hemp cords. How physical, how remarkable the artifact was, framed in glass and poised beneath a wall painted with replica petroglyphs. It would have been about my size, I realized.

In the midst of his otherwise astonishingly dense syntax, which feels a little like trying to gaze through a pane of conglomerate rock instead of glass, Heidegger writes a paragraph of utter clarity. He's explicating, suddenly, a painting by Van Gogh, conceiving of a pair of peasant's shoes as equipment for a certain kind of life, a truth the painting actualizes—"presences," he says—as it "unconceals" the otherwise ordinary objects of agrarian life:

From out of the dark opening of the well-worn insides of the shoes the toil of the worker's tread stares forth. In the crudely solid heaviness of the shoes accumulates the tenacity of the slow trudge through the far-stretching and ever-uniform furrows of the field swept by a raw wind. On the leather lies the dampness and richness of the soil. Under the soles slides the loneliness of the field path as evening falls. The shoes vibrate with the silent call of the earth, its ripening grain, its unexplained self-refusal in the wintry field. This equipment is pervaded by uncomplaining worry as to the certainty of bread, wordless joy at having once more withstood want, trembling before the impending birth, and shivering at the surrounding menace of death.

And so, Heidegger decides, through his essay's canyonland of branched and eddied sentences, through prose that pools and muddies and, to my mind, almost never holds a clear, bright mirror to the reflected sky: "World is never an object that stands before us and can be looked at. World is that always-nonobjectual to which we are subject as long as the paths of birth and death, blessing and curse, keep us transported into being." That is, he explains, "*World worlds*"—and, one recognizes in the gasp of unexpected alliteration, that the power of perception, especially that of the aesthetic, inheres in verbs, in the motion of becoming—"setting forth," he says later.

Canyonland is my term, rising from the landscape and its mapped representation that I've been traveling through. *Holzwege* is Heidegger's word, literally "Timber Tracks" or "Forest Paths"—rendered in the translation I trudged through as "Off the Beaten Track." There is something perverse in keeping intellectual company with a twentieth-century European phenomenologist while walking alone in the American Southwest. I realize this. But it's Heidegger's insistence on what he calls "the thingliness" of things, their nountude, as it were, exaggerated until it makes the Doppler shift into verbitude, that cheers me as I think about these images in stone. Sandstone, mostly, that substrate's substance set against the shadow shapes that are the petroglyphs. My map, like every guidebook I've consulted, reminds in block letters, DON'T TOUCH THE ROCK ART—this is a ubiquitous caution to aesthetic pilgrims in the desert Southwest. Oils from your hand can accelerate the weathering, the self-effacement, of the images. It seems counterintuitive, that the mere touch of flesh could slough off what's been "set in stone" to last—as it has—for centuries, sometimes mil-

lennia. But that's part of the almost inexplicable joy of standing before rock art, heart pumping from the climb, or hike, or wade-through-water that brought you to this very instant when you pause, in the light and shadow of the day you're filling with the mortal exuberance of having arrived, and seen, and thought about the power of what seems like stasis—stone—but really is transitory, monumental but momentary.

“Art is, then,” says Heidegger, “a becoming and happening of truth.” And you feel it, even if you don't know what it means—the image on the rock, or the abstract noun that ends the sentence, there on the page.

No one is around when I veer away from the stream and follow the sand along the cliff's eroded curve. I met a few other small groups of hikers earlier this afternoon—couples, mostly, and a solitary man who sped past me with the taut, wiry musculature of the athletically elite, but for now I'm alone, and the path I've taken over the sand has been untrampled since the most recent rain.

Suddenly, the stream has hairpinned back to meet the canyon wall, and I'm standing, unexpectedly, before a panel of Ancestral Puebloan art. Right here, on the rock, just where my own arms could reach out and touch them, are a flurry of palm prints, dozens of them—nearly a hundred. They seem, as I abruptly stop and stare, to rise up, a show of hands. Some are painted red; others are slightly reddish-brown. Mostly in pairs. A few are larger than the hand I lift in greeting or comparison, but most are my own size, my slender fingers and unimpressive nails.

No one else is around, so I exclaim quietly to myself and try to make out patterns in the galaxy of hands. All the red-paint

prints are pairs and are clustered toward the left of the panel; but the browner tints predominate, and among these are the largest palm prints, too. The occasional odd hand could be an anomaly, its mate erased by weather, by time. Perhaps a person who, some seven hundred years ago, most likely, besmeared herself with paint and leaned against the height of stone, right here, pushed a little harder with one arm than the other. Perhaps the pigment adhered imperfectly to the sandstone surface, even under her weight. Perhaps a trick of weather, some chaotic eddy of wind or sun-warmed, airborne sand erased one of the pair of hands. But most record the posture of the body—both hands up, in front of the face, thumbs inches apart—the unstylized, un-improved-upon signature of the person, standing where today I stand, impressing on impassive stone the flesh print of an individual.

I love these hand prints, every one of them. I think of my friends who hang in their homes and offices the palm prints made by their young children, painted brightly in primary colors, molded into plaster of Paris. I think of the image of my father in the driveway as my car pulls away, lifting his steady, generous hand in farewell. I think of the night, in tears, I grasped a friend's hand and he grasped back, a blood-warmed grip of compassion, and of promised care.

I love the hand prints, but I keep returning to the image of the foot. Back home, on my desk, I study a photograph from Southern California, a remarkable canyon in the Coso Mountains, where the petroglyphs trace back through thousands of years; some were likely carved in the nineteenth century, while others date to more than sixteen thousand years ago. My snapshot offers up a lovely foot, a smooth pale shape on pale, water-

polished rock. It is the toes that seem deeply, intimately perfect: the big toe is rounded exactly as in life, the others descending in length, one after another, with a delicacy that makes one think, for a moment, that it's not a carving at all, but the imprint left on a firm, wet beach, just moments ago. But as I gaze, I realize the print—the petroglyph, I mean—is static, with no hint of rolling from the heel, through the spring of the arch, to the toes' final curl before they release their friction with the resistant, solid earth. This foot is not in motion; the body language simulated by the artist's hand implies nothing of the press and swing and lift of gait.

This makes me wonder. I've never seen a “real” footprint, laid on deliberately in paint or mud, the way the hand prints mark the body's contact with the world. Nor, come to think of it, have I ever seen a pictograph foot, that is, a painted “footprint” rendered through abstraction or design. They're always petroglyphs, pecked and incised into stone. However elaborate the panels of hand prints, however symbolic their intent, they strike me as the lyric impulse, registering through paint on stone. The sense of physical spontaneity, the mortal press of once-living flesh, seems more directly accessed through these isolated vertical compositions of paint and mud. Both kinds of images could be construed essentially as metonymy, the *part* that implies, symbolically, the *whole*, but there's a different pitch or tone or timbre to the formal studies that these feet present. Two different meanings, I think, of “becoming.” To my mind, the footprints register more fully in the realm of oratory, story. They lend themselves more easily to the narrative of journey—then we came this way; then we rose up; then we dropped down; then we traveled a long and difficult way to get here; I tell you, we walked until we felt our legs and feet had turned to stone.

Paleontologists tell us we stood up to walk long before we were ourselves, before we stepped into the chamber of language and art, the great clearing where our minds explored their abstract potential like a bright new habitat, bristling with richness and difference. For a few million years, we didn't stride out into the open of the imagination; we stayed near actual shadows of the trees. *Australopithecus afarensis*, the tiny hominid who lived in Africa 3.5 million years ago, was a more efficient walker, in terms of expended energy, than we are today, though she likely couldn't run very well. The famous trail of footprints at Laetoli records a pair who walked together, side by side, so close they may have been holding hands. It might have been a couple—a not-yet-man and a smaller not-yet-woman. It might have been a parent and a juvenile. And the pair may have been followed by a third, who stepped into the taller one's footprints, ever so slightly blurring the tracks. I've studied a photograph of one of these footprints, which, cast in the African dust and ash of another geologic world, looks remarkably like the footprints carved in Great Basin sandstone. The arch isn't high enough to register a narrowness of form; the outline is precise, a little boxy, but without the neat perfection of the toes that I love from some renditions. The bones of *afarensis* were like ours, where the thigh slopes back to meet the knee; this is called the valgus angle and permits the kind of swinging balance we need to stride from leg to leg as we move forward. Since they were smaller, they likely had less back trouble—one of the ills that accompany the bipedal life—and they were keenly athletic, excellent climbers as well as walkers.

Much later, about 1.9 million years ago, *Homo ergaster* (“the workman”) headed out of Africa, spreading into Indonesia, China, the Caucasus of Europe. These beings lived for almost 2 million years, only disappearing from Asia about 50,000 years

ago—well after other *Homo* lineages had stepped into something like the languaged life we know today. And of course, *Homo erectus*, *H. ergaster*'s descendent, who traveled, over generations, some 6,000 miles out of Africa and throughout Europe. The pattern of the journey, of the long walk, comes to us from way before our own deep time, from before the emergence of symbol and speech. Long before art. But the pattern, through time, becomes story, one of our oldest, and it's ritualized in its fine formality, like the handsome print that's sitting, yet another facsimile of paper and pigment, courtesy of the grocery store's film drop-off, on my desk this morning. And though the story of the journey has often taken its form through the masculine experience—the young man, for example, setting forth to meet some physical and psychological challenge, to slay beasts both within and without—primatologists suggest that it's the females in our distant ancestors who most often left the group and struck out for the unknown. For social beings living in small bands, what's called dispersal is essential to prevent inbreeding. And among chimps, our closest primate relatives, it's the females who leave the bosom of their families and move through the forest to find some other chimpanzee group to make their home. The journey is not, I believe, an exclusively male archetypal component of our deepest sense of self.

I think of this when I'm out walking, for I feel so fully alive, so exuberant in movement, so *presencing*, pack on my back, stick in my hand, heading up or down trail. Purposeful motion may very well be a form of intelligence; for me, it is certainly a form of joy. It is a part of living well and living wholly. Whole, I mean, and wholly present. Partially, it is the rhythm of the walk, the swing of being in concert with oneself—lungs and legs, arms and heart. Some scientists theorize that song was inherently

part of the earliest rise of hominid language: unlike other primates, human beings are more deeply rhythmic, with a control of breathing and voice that allow coordinated, formal, and, perhaps importantly, *shared* participation in the song. The emotional reach of music, the way it unleashes feelings that seem free from language, is, when you think about it, remarkable—we are so usually shaped by speech that the wordless response to music, even a capella voices in a language we don't know, seems to stir deep portions of our psyche, what I want to call the body's mind.

What is bipedalism good for? Why did we stand and walk? Some say we needed to see above the tallgrass of the African plains, as the climate dried in the wake of the Himalayas' uplift. Some say we needed more efficient ways to move between increasingly distant food sources. Some say that as the African continent dried and heated up, we needed better ways to cool the body, presenting only our heads directly to the sun, instead of the broad panel of the horizontal back. Whatever the pressures of selection, we are their inheritors; and even today, it feels good to stand, and stretch, and walk. It feels so good to the body and, as I say, to the body's mind. Sometimes the journey is a walking away, a turning the back on what must be left behind, in order to carry on. Sometimes it's travel toward what beckons, full of hints and mystery, from just beyond the known horizon.

I'm hiking alone in White Canyon, thrashing my way through a tiny thicket of Gambel's oaks, when I come across a couple at the streambed. I stumble down the bank, calling a greeting, and the man begins talking at once, asking about the number of stream crossings still ahead. His wife is leaning on a

pair of trekker poles, and she looks a little tired, though she's smiling.

But I interrupt him. "We know each other!" I exclaim. For, though we're dressed in different hats—for sun, today, not snow—I recognize their faces and search a moment for their names.

"You're Elizabeth," the woman beats me to it. It's Ken and Anita, a retired couple I met in an April snowstorm last week, two hundred miles away, on Skeleton Mesa, waiting for the guided hike to Betatakin Ruin. Ken's face opens wide in delighted astonishment.

"Well," he sputters. "Great minds think alike"—and he gestures mutely at the canyon walls, the landscape. Clearly, a *great* place to be. So I describe the stream crossings that await them—easy—and they ask whether, in the intervening days, I'd reached the other canyon full of petroglyphs that I'd planned to see. We're all pleased with this unexpected, social moment. Then we move off, they at their pace, and I at mine. They're headed for Sipapu Bridge, the landform to our north and east that spans this handsome canyon. I have a different goal; I'm going to Kachina Bridge, where Armstrong Canyon joins the White. I want to find the strange, stick-figure petroglyphs, like slender dancers with wild hair, carved into the southwestern edge of the stream-eroded arch. It's late in the afternoon, already, but the weather is fine. There's food in my pack and a bottle of clean water, too. There's a jacket in case of rain. And before me there are options. I could take the trail that loops back up, along the mesa, through pine and juniper, as it's pictured on the map; or retracing my steps the way I've come, I could return to see each rock face, each sandbar, from a different angle, in recognition and variation, rhythm and syncopation. Each foot's rise and fall, a journey of becoming.