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Desert Pilgrim

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After the crisis of representation, alternative forms of research representation have appeared increasingly within the social sciences. This poem with accompanying photographs is based on consumer research fieldwork conducted in 1999 at the Burning Man project, a countercultural and antimarketing event that occurs annually near Gerlach, Nevada. Incorporating informant interview data, the poem is intended to reflexively capture some of the emotional intensity, creative, utopian and self-transformative possibilities of attending the event, and to simultaneously reflect upon the self-conscious tensions inherent in ethnographic fieldwork.

From Reno, you go east
Along I-80.
Your buffet belly ballooned
Against the seat belt buckle.
You will fast.
You will be filled with Other,
Things.

Two hours in, you have to stop. Pink mountains
So different from one another
Etched against vastness
Of valley and desert sky.
Take a picture. Panorama.
Get busy. Capture the moment.
Stop the journey for a
Quick,
Cheapening shot.

You come seeking
knowledge.
Desert pilgrim, do you come seeking
abstraction?
Or some kind of close encounter
With yourself?

The ethnographic entries

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Spoken with rising
Interpretation,
Anticipation,
Like a spy, into your little tape recorder,
As the caravan incorporates your car
Anticipates the journey
Effortlessly.

Through Empire, then Gerlach, dry and poor.
The corner store,
Where the carnival dress blossoms,
Smiles begin to flow.
The meditating man in poncho does not look up,
Casting a spell
Of peace
You must lightly walk
Around.
The long gate in,
Dust and rock
And signs that mock.

No Vending.
Yield to Temptation.
Yield to Change.
No Regrets.
Severe DEHYDRATION Risk. Drink water at all times. Piss clear.
Leave No Trace.
Non-commercial Zone Ahead. Strictly Enforced.
Warning: You Are Temporary.
Fame Limit: 10 minutes.
Attention Span: 2 minutes.
First act,
A Rite,
You go visit the man.
He's the center of the clock
The life of the place
Rotates
From his face.

Mute, he stands, as
People party
Nearby, heaping on him
Their gazes and
Demons.

Careful.
Don't touch.
His neon wire's exposed.
No one to protect you
From yourself.
The hellos ring out, and surprisingly soon
In a strange land no one seems a stranger.
You are casting the spell of community yourself.
Hello.
Hi.

The night comes.
The drums thump
Their drum
Thumps as you
Dance
The dance
The enchanted
Dance
The trancing
Dance
Of the shaman.

A rich sensorium assault.
Not simply the desert
Heat and dryness, the visions
They have you have,

When creations surround you,
The desert flows
With sculpture, flags, shrines.

Life becomes art.
When vehicles roam the playa
A Viking ship, a star-lit UFO,
A red squid, a silverfish,
A moving living room, a taxidermied horse.

When people's bodies are costumed,
Winged, horned, helmented, hatted
Painted, glittered, striped, decorated,

When monsters on stilts stumble dance,
Large statues
Come to life
And do battle
Next to flame-throwing robots
Art becomes Life.

Art rules.
As there
Are rules
Here.

Together,
Scattered,
In various tones of
Hypocrisy and enforcement
You recite them, a litany.

Piss Clear, you call to one another.
No Vending.
No Spectators.
Mask the Brand Names.
Radical Self-Expression.
Radical Self-Reliance.
Open your mind. Grok.
Leave no trace.
Give of yourself.
After moving in, my neighbor "Lorianne" asked me
"What did you come
To burn?"
"What did you bring
To leave behind?"
"It can be a word, a person, a history, a feeling?"
Is there a monkey along for the ride?
Chattering in your ear?
Closing your eyes?
Covering your mouth?
"What do you need
To do without?"
"What did you come
To burn?"
“Luke of the Library” said
“When people set themselves
A common task
And recognize a set of
Community-oriented goals
Then a lot of the problems that
Beset us in other contexts
Suddenly melt away
And
Many things are possible.
And I think that our civilization
Unfortunately
Discourages that kind of
Getting under the hood
Of everyday life and
Challenging basic assumptions.
When I talk to relatives
For instance
About the bartering,
Um
Well,
Or
Just
Trying to survive
In an extreme location like
The Black Rock desert,
There’s just this
Degree of incomprehension
That shows me that
Uh
Well
That they are placid
And content in their lives
And because they’re affluent
And comfortable
They think
That everything’s okay.
Well, it’s quite clear
To us
That everything is not okay.
The world can’t continue
As it is going.
This
Rampant
Blind
Consumption
Where you know
An infinitesimal part
Of the world’s population
Has access to most of its resources.
I mean
That's insane.
It
Can't be sustained.
And
Uh,
You know
I'm not saying
That we're going to develop
Universal solutions
From what we do here.
But
You know
It's a good place to start.”

The ritual shouts
At Cirque de Flambe
Were classic Freudian Eros/Thanatos
“Take your clothes off!”
“Burn him!”
What did you come to burn?
Desert pilgrim? Did you pack
Your theories?
Did you come seeking
Knowledge?

On Nightshot infrared,
The Mother said:
“There's excess
And overload
And
Chaos.
But some of that’s
Necessary
To break down
The shells that
We’re stuck in.”

“Do you think so?” I said.
“I do think so,” she said.

“I read in the
Black Rock City Gazette
You know
We have a newspaper
For a week
Um, that if you see
Your neighbor running around
Chasing orange peels
That what you should do
Is try to find the little place in yourself
That might enjoy that
And enjoy that
For him
And
With him.
It’s building
Bridges
Again.”

Tonight,
It’s still
Tonight.
Neon fish swam the night
In a school
Of twenty
A fake
Meteor passed by. Pyrotechnics
The show
Of fire, somehow, impossibly,
Topped it off
By puffing a thick black smoke ring
To circle the moon.

When parodies of religion
Invite atonement,
Sin,
Repentance
At every corner
Every intersection
Of dust
And wind
You confess at Papal Indulgence
Are whipped at the Temple of Atonement
Meditate at Transcendental Realm
And are painted by the Sacred Disorder of the Enigmata.

Elevation finally comes,
As you plough into a cobra
To the mellow strains
Of the King
At Elvis Yoga.

Invitations to step away
And look under the hood
You think
You believe
The moment
Is Here
In this place,
Where life becomes art.

Desert pilgrim,
Scribbling
Your thoughts
Like writing on water
Hiding
Behind your camera
Face
Your silent
Mask of
Science, your veil
Of words and badges.

Do you feel the
Heart
Beat
Now?
Strange sounds of lasers
You can taste!
Palpable sonics
Technotronics
Trance Dance
Drum circles and all night
Rhythmic—
The lifeless desert itself
Moaning,
Cracked, sun-scorched Earth
Tickled and burnt
Three feet down
Battered
Soul
Of the Planet
Pulsing
with
Mystery.
Fire.

The night is for mystics.
The night
Is
For mystics.
The night's still got some magic,
Some mystery left in it.

Weighted down with
Words and cameras
You need no
Equipment
For this
Soul night
Is alight
With the magic of tides
And blood
And bones
And sex and fever.

"Wild Wolf," the corporate biochemist said:
"I think in the future, if
We could develop
A society
That got away
From the pursuit of
Wealth
And instead
Answered
The pursuit of
Creative expression
Like Burning Man
Then we would see
The emergence
Of such a
Beautiful society
I mean we
Would be back
And One
With the Earth
Identifying with the Earth again
Be part of the Earth
And part of the Living Structure
Be part of the Network
Of Life
Instead of thinking
Ourselves
Above it."

"William" said:
"The idea
I've been thinking about it over the past few days
Of the barter society
The utopian, anti-capitalist
Set up
Is kind of interesting
Because it's very temporary.
This can be sustained, for your
Regular person,
For about a week. For the
Hardcore
For about a month. Beyond that
The hardcore
Are working all year in
Their capitalist society
To do this.
Without that
There could not
Be this."

Did you bring your science
To the burn?
Did you bring questions
To burn?

What better
Illusions
To leave behind
Than the ones
You had to follow
To bring you
Here?

NOTES

1. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the anonymity of ethnographic informants.