

MY **FATHER'S**
INDIAN HOW A BUTTERFLY
SPLIT THE OAK

ERIC DORSEY

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*How a Butterfly
Split the Oak*



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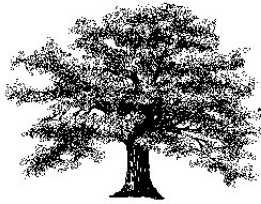
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For Leigh

Who kept me sane in our teens
And began my search for connection
In the kindest way possible

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PROLOGUE

*Time is the substance from which I am made.
Time is a river which carries me along, but I am the river;
It is a tiger that devours me, but I am the tiger;
It is a fire that consumes me, but I am the fire.*

Jorge Luis Borges

Slowly, gently, I begin to dance. Eyes closed, swaying before the bedroom mirror, I struggle to recapture the feeling. A weakness, this indulgence. Pausing, I peek at my reflection. We stare in silence, but after a moment she offers the slightest nod. Right. Today I need it, and that's ok.

A deep measured breath, inhale through the nose, exhale through the mouth. Once, twice, three times, relax, release. And I'm able to let go, sliding back in time, committed to a self-soothing habit dating back to my teens.

Three children, nine years old. Early autumn. The lightly sloping field, the gurgle of the creek, my sundress ruffling against downy legs with a cool breeze. How did that feel exactly?

I close my eyes tighter, dragging the tips of my shoes along the floor as I dance, channeling the long past warmth and grit of bare feet on sunbaked dirt. The vision of those ever-filthy feet makes me smile. Taking another deep breath, I pause momentarily, pressing one shoe flat against the wood floor,

willing my adult foot to feel soft dirt lightly giving, shifting, squeezing between my tiny nine-year-old toes.

A beat passes, longer than usual. I relax, dismiss the fear, focus. Abruptly the contrasting warmth of sunbaked dirt against that cool breeze fills me with an overwhelming tactile memory, fully immersing me in the past while sending the same goosebumps twenty years into the future. Relief floods my senses.

Sighing, I can smell the nearby grass, hear birds tweet and flutter about up in the branches. The sunlight flickers through the leaves of our old oak, the only tree in our secret spot, a place no one's parents ever found, sheltering countless adventures, make-shift picnics, one wobbly tree fort, and later drinking, virginity, rejection.

I shake my head, suppress the teenage memories. Nine years old. The light winks and dances across the dirt. My friends. The boy leans against the tree, legs askew, his toothy smile absorbs his face. The girl, nestled in the crook of his arm, lips closed but eyes bright, the constant half smile ready to burst into infectious laughter at any moment.

From a distance, you assume they're a couple. A few years older and certainly it's a scene of young love. Perhaps it still is, on some level, but not romantically. That field, that oak, before the complications of relationships, of expectations, hurt, disappointment. Loss. No, this was a casual intimacy we shared. Neither questioned nor appreciated, we simply experienced. It was safe. It was easy.

Always the entertainer, I dance before them. Part hula, part ballerina, all me. I sway and spin and giggle, basking in the attention of everything that matters. He throws a pile of leaves at me, she bats a few back in his face. We laugh.

There! Connected. Loved. Loving.

My breath catches. The feeling washes over me in a wave and I feel whole, if only for a moment. Inhaling fast and deep,

I strain my lungs to capacity before the feeling passes, memory and oxygen both suffusing me with life, desperately, as though I've clawed to the surface half drowned. Smiling, feeling light, I hold it in for a few seconds, relish it.

Opening my eyes, I return to reality, stare myself down in the mirror. What have you done? How did you get here?

"Whew. Suck it up buttercup." I whisper, poking my reflection on the nose.

Her smile wavers, uncertain, until a gentle frown takes hold. The feeling used to last longer, but I suppose it's fading with time, now no more than some half-remembered dream, a ghost. Ephemeral. Sighing, I shake my head at her. And no doubt romanticized.

Furrowing my brow lightly, I give her a casual appraisal while trying to finger comb long, wavy hair, my best feature. A bit messy today. And by a bit, I mean matted here and there, strays in all directions, knots galore, a veritable Jackson Pollock of hair!

I ought to brush it out before braiding, but my brush is currently MIA. Losing things in a space too small to lose anything, a specialty of mine. My shoulders loosen as I fruitlessly poke about the room, as though accepting this truth somehow brings me back into the present, brings me home. It's so me! Did unearth my Hello Kitty mug though, tucked behind my 'to read' book pile.

"Hello old friend." I say aloud, frowning at an ageless coffee stain.

Resuming the task at hand, I eyeball the mess sitting on my head. It's compounded nightly by too much hair vs. too many blankets and pillows, plus a touch of drool, one twenty-five-year-old stuffed raccoon, and an unfathomable army of cozy socks all joining the fray, each vying for territory while I wrap myself into a cocoon against the chill.

Grimacing, tugging through knots, today is the breaking point. Today I will brave town for a new brush! Having split the mess into three semi-orderly sections, I mark the finger combing a success.

The narrow, angular face in the mirror tilts her head, questioning said success, and continues to scrutinize me as I pull the emerging braid to the front. I hate her pale blue eyes, too light, flirting with grey, dull. Mom says they shine, an overcompensating compliment. Makes it worse.

I blink, wiggle my eyebrows a little, pull a few faces I imagine to be seductive. Nope. Well, maybe that look wouldn't work on humans, but an emu? That was spot-on come-hither to an emu.

The notion makes me giggle, so I turn to the window and slap my thighs, arms open in anticipation.

"Get over here you big hunk of feathers! Rawr!"

Not a single emu trotting this way! Glancing back at the mirror I see my reflection has donned a face of surprise.

Feeling loose, I put my hands on my hips and shake my head at her, "An emu? Really?"

She arches her eyebrows smugly, a subtle, 'Well, not yet.'

Wiping a few strays from my face, I poke around for a headband, mumbling, "That'd be great, a nice, stately emu would really complete the vibe around here."

Another success! My rainbow headband, sticking out of the hamper, passes a smell test.

With a sweeping gesture I bow lightly to the empty corner, "I shall call him Steven, and he shall teach me the way of the noble emu as we galloway about in the mountains." Briefly I entertain the idea he would sport a monocle, but shake it off. Steven's too down to earth for nonsense.

Returning to the dork in the mirror, I throw my arms up, jutting a hip out ("bada-boom!"), proving once and for all my figure beats a twelve-year-old boy's! Up on tip toes, I imagine

being taller, shrug, and slide into a little soft eyed, hip swinging cabaret. Yes friends, small and feisty! Too hot to handle! I stop and jazz hands at her, fingers up and gyrating about, completing the effect with a little two-step.

Nodding together, we decide that's me, we'll take her. I'm more muscle than feminine curves, I'm fit, I eat well. Society can take their make-up and shove it.

Leaning over, I palm the floor, slap my calves a few times. "You two ready? At least twenty today!" On second thought, my legs are my best feature. I was reaching, admiring the rat's nest up top. I earned these legs!

I straighten up and smile sheepishly at my kitty, who's watching from the dresser, feigning boredom despite rapt attention.

"I'm just lonely today little one. Don't look at me like that."

Unmoved, he stares, clearly judgmental with those beady, black eyes. As the feeling of my fantasy flitters across my chest, I sigh. Fine.

Raising both hands in supplication, I declare, "Avert thy gaze oh wise one! Slay me with insight no more!" Lowering my arms, I murmur, "Jerk."

Thus addressed, he stands, comes to the edge. I bend so we can touch noses. Giving him a good scratch behind the ears, he bumps his head against my cheek. Judgmental or not, he is a sweet companion. I pick him up and he nuzzles my ear as I spin in a slow circle, taking in my little home in the mountains. Four hundred square feet of peace. What more do I need?

Meeting my reflection again, we squint at each other. Panicked with the tense, sudden stop, the damn cat claws my shoulder as he leaps away and skitters into the kitchen. Attacked! I jump back, pulling finger guns at the only remaining assailant, a goofy girl in the mirror! It's a tie.

"Bang, bang," I say quietly, blowing on the tips of my pointer fingers. We smile. Examining the three angry claw marks, I figure there's a metaphor in there somewhere. No blood at least.

Flinging the braid to my back, I throw a nervous glance at the pile of camping gear laid out against the wall, uneasily muttering, "Today's long run brought to you by hearty rationalizations. Backpacking clearly uses different muscles."

After a moment I nod once, emphatically, and stride outside.

The magpies were aflutter this morning. I woke to their shrill chatter, rolled over and spotted a dozen or so through the window, urgently hopping about in the yard. I can never decide if they're angry or excited when they do that, but it's theater generally reserved for an approaching storm.

Standing on my porch, I suppose they offered a false prophecy. The breeze touches my brow lightly, cool, the season turning already, but the sky is clear. Sharp in the distance, the Rockies offer the same awe inspired calm that brought me here in the first place. An involuntary sigh escapes.

A lone magpie remains, quiet, intent on something in the scruff before my footfall grabbed his attention. He cocks his head, stares, the moment pregnant. I'm certain he nods solemnly before taking off, quickly fading into a silhouette against the mountain backdrop. Smiling, I figure I should have saluted him, or at least complimented his little tuxedo.

Sucking in the mountain air, the view, the peace, I shake off the melancholy hanging about. I tap my nose. Right. Suck it up. Bouncing on my toes a little, I offer an exaggerated wink to no one, to everyone.

Grabbing my running vest, full of snacks and water, I suddenly sprint through the yard, still fumbling to clip the vest together. No warm up today, no pace. Heedlessly the

trail flies beneath, my home falling behind with its mirrors,
judgmental cats, fantasy, absurdity. I am churning legs and
heaving lungs, a singularity. And blissfully, there is only now.
I burn.

Embracing the obliterating silence of effort, I am free.



PART I

*She held her grief behind her eyes like an ocean
and when she leaned forward into the day it spilled onto the floor
and she wiped at it quickly with her foot
and pretended no one had seen.*

“Hidden Ocean”, Brian Andreas

1

Breathe.
I glance about to find myself in a rickety cabin I explored as a child. Awash with memory, I can feel the magic and mystery invoked by that bright-eyed little girl. It was all around as I tentatively tiptoed, a treasure waiting in every closet, behind every book, under a secret floorboard. Today I stand stock still, an emotional chill leaving goosebumps in its wake. Instantly familiar, yet out of place in time, the warm sunlight sparkling on the dust I've stirred. I inhale the stale, amber atmosphere. My breath catches. For a moment the walls act strangely, arching towards the depth of my morning yawn. No. Making the sound of a dying seagull, "bhrugurhubrhu!" I shake the sleep away. Is that the sound a dying seagull makes? I've never been here. Where the hell am I even? Surreal. Where's the F-ing coffee?

"Babe, did we bring coffee?"

"Mmprh."

"Coffee. Now. Function."

"Mm."

Scratching my belly, I slip back into the bedroom and fling myself onto John, snuffling him like a dog.

"Goode mowrning John, iths's time for coooofffee! Did we bring coffee? Have you hidden it from me? That's it. Those are fighting words. Fisticuffs!"

"Suz. Christ! We always bring coffee. Did you even look? What time is it?"

Knowing he'll sleep another hour, I give his cheek an aggressive pat and wander kitchen-ward, throwing a wistful, "Sure would be nice to share morning coffee with someone," over my shoulder.

Course that's not really true. Morning coffee, fresh morning air, fresh everything. Best alone really. I mean, imagine John trying to 'elucidate' on the way the light flickers in the leaves, the long shadows, the breeze ruffling my shirt. Well his shirt. Who 'elucidates' anyway? Who has two thumbs and 'elucidates?' 'This guy! Ho, hor, hor!' I wish he'd make that joke, taking himself less seriously. How do I twist that around? 'Who has two thumbs and elucidates?' 'You, dipshit!' God I can see the hurt look now.

Neanderthals built this cabin, before the advent of electricity. I offer a silent prayer of thanks to the god of large white cylinders that are outdoor propane tanks, and put on water for a pour over.

Waking, I am actually a bit confused on how we got here. A gap in time. Maybe there'll be a wrinkle and I'll crawl through the wardrobe, become a Hufflepuff or something.

I glance at John's backpack, neatly leaned against the bookshelf, a bastion of orderly packing. A downright manual. Role your undies like so, your socks like such, the shirts in a V shape, wah-lah, 0.002 extra cubic inches! The coffee, of course, pre ground in the blue Tupperware, second front pocket on the right. Hm, the vibrator on the left, a man of priorities. Tempting way to wake up, but I'll stick with the

coffee on this fine morning. Can still smell last night's romp on me. If I knew where I'd packed extra panties (did I?), be a good idea. Actually, John probably has a pair stashed somewhere. That, my friends, makes me smile.

Settling onto the kitchen floor, I savor the rough wood against my legs. A long stretch, a sigh. Content, I listen for the water to boil, I take in a breeze through open windows, I drift. Magic.



"Susan?" lilting, my mother.

"Susan, darling? Are you ok?" Tap, tap. Knock. Tentative.

"Ah, just finishing up!" turning on the water.

No. No I am not ok. Who am I? Both hands on the sink. Stable. Solid. I squeeze the porcelain a bit, run my thumb over the cool metal border, build the courage to look up. There you are. Ok. Not so bad. I look totally the same.

Letting out an aggressive sigh I fluff my bangs, making me laugh. Takes me back to stealing Alice's hairdryer, lips and cheeks fluttering like a crazed puffer fish, hair straight up and dancing. People have sex all the time. No big deal. In fact, I've just gotten an adult merit badge.



I snap to, angry water splashing the blue propane flames. Popping up I fumble into John's backpack for the coffee, grabbing my Hello Kitty mug and pour over filter in the process. So much for listening for the water to boil. Why didn't I measure the coffee before daydream time?

Odd space on that one. It's not like my virginity was traumatic. Ethan was sweet, stumbling along, actually worried about me. Could have dated first I guess, or been

sober, but no, I've got no complaints. You hear all these horror stories, and I'm just like, yeah, I lost mine to a childhood friend who loved me from the time we were seven. Broke his heart of course, but who's counting? You can't stay with the first. That's like, eh, like having one kind of taco your whole life. There are all kinds of epic tacos out there! Sure, I'd have enjoyed that one for a while if I hadn't been so terrified, but c'mon, we were kids. Besides, a few bland tacos are essential to appreciating a good one, plus the bad ones are so safe. Throw away a violent, insecure taco, everyone wins! Find the best taco ever, and it's nothing but work, work, work, making sure to keep the taco around. I just can't spend my life worrying about taco accessibility.

A totally decent, albeit not that challenging, taco? That's a winner. Wish mine would drag his sweet ass out of bed right about now. I'll stir him up wafting some coffee in his face. He'll have to get his own damn cup, but that'll get him moving. Maybe.

2

Heavy footsteps mark the belated arrival of a yawning and bleary eyed John, mumbling, “Hm. Morning Suz. Been up long?”

“Ah! The beast arises!” Stumbling around the deck, I grunt and scratch. “Smell woman! A great pheromonal call hath drug me from slumber!”

My arms raised, getting excited. “From whence doth this intoxication smolder? A peach! A soft sweetly tangy flower! Ah! Forsooth! The exquisite goddess Susan Marie hath called me hither. My soul awakens; I am forsaken. I am yours!”

“Cute,” running a hand down my back, smiling, “Actually I believe the smell of coffee called me hither. Lovely out eh?”

John is strikingly attractive. Tall, sharp featured, his dark, always messy hair offset by crystal blue eyes. His usual scratchy shadow of what could be a thick beard, filled in more than normal today. Seeing him in his standard hoodie and shorts, the outline of his chest still visible through the layers, I always feel a twinge of girlish excitement. Yes, casually muscled legs, you just want to chew on them a little! The

fastidiousness of his entire personality extends well into the physical regiment of running, swimming and weights. I'm not certain I really fit him, being anything but fastidious, but I reap the benefits, and we love running together. Well, to be fair I think I entertain him. Loose in a way he can't permit himself to be, but enjoys being around.

Placing my hand on his chest, I lean in, close my eyes. Comfort as he tousles my hair distractedly, looking out at the trees. I stand on my tip toes and kiss him lightly.

"I made you a cup, should still be hot."

Squeezing me for a moment, he rubs my back again and plants a kiss in my hair, "That's nothing short of spectacular. Thanks gorgeous. Sorry I was grumpy earlier." He heads back inside, follows his nose.

"You're always grumpy in the morning," I call after him, "That's the fun of it! Come back and sit with me. There's a double porch swing."

Rocking gently, I know he'll have to get in a workout soon, but he's mine for now. Curled into the Suz-nook of his right arm, legs flung across his lap, I note the swing's remarkably well maintained for a deserted cabin, with clean, comfy cushions and a shiny new chain.

"John," I mumble softly, "Do you remember Ethan?"

"Of course. it's my solemn duty as Alpha Male to have a passing knowledge of all your sexual escapades, especially concerning the guy you grew up with who claimed your virginity."

"Heh, no I mean really remember him, not know of him. Wasn't he in your Economics class or something?"

"Ah, English actually, Junior year I think. No, I never knew him. I sought him out at a party once, after I met you, doing a little Susan reconnaissance, and putting a face to your history. It wasn't until then that I even realized we were in a class together." Smiling down at me he adds, "Seemed like a

pretty cool guy while we shot the shit, but somehow asking about you dampened his enthusiasm."

This amuses me. The idea of John and Ethan drinking together at a party, silently appraising each other while discussing *The Old Man and the Sea* or something. In my mind, two gorillas scratching and bumping chests, John the Silverback, Ethan small but brave, not backing down, proud. Suddenly I picture Ethan's courage winning John over, the silverback affectionately cuffing him, dancing excitedly and offering a handful of the best berries. If only.

"Why? Got him on the mind? You really should call him and reconnect. Rachel too. It's like you've thrown away the idyllic childhood everyone else wishes they had."

The mention of Rachel expands the lump in my throat, "My childhood was hardly idyllic." I ruffle John's hair, still picturing him as a Silverback. "Something about this cabin reminds me of him. Can't place it though."

Grabbing my hand, he casually nibbles at my fingers, like he's reading my mind and playacting the gorilla. "Come on Suz, your father aside, everything I hear about your childhood would make Disney proud. Few people have connections that deep at such a young age."

Unamused, my face flat, I stare out at the trees. After a moment I remind him, "John, I don't have a father," maybe a little more aggressively than intended. Quietly I add, "His choice, not mine."

He sits motionless, still holding my fingers to his lips. John knows better than to push the subject and patiently waits for me to settle.

Giving him a pass for bringing it up, I steer us back, "Most Disney childhoods are pretty tragic actually, setting up the redemption. Anyway, depth was the problem, doomed us to implode. Some connections are not meant to last."

"I dunno Suz," dropping my hand, "You're all adults now. I think you'd be surprised."

I'm silent a minute, increasingly uncomfortable with where this is heading. I take a deep breath, deciding to steer us in a direction I'm certain will annoy him. I don't relish the idea, but I need to bring it up. Better than talking about Rachel or Ethan at least.

"John," I pause, staring off into the trees, "How did we get here?"

"Us specifically? The way your hips blinded my sensibilities, inspiring one awkwardly fortuitous sticky note *despite* having to carry your sloppy drunk ass up the stairs, coffee, hikes, runs, and finally you sealing the deal with the gradual seepage of Suz inner dialog? Or is this breezy peace inspiring a deeper question? The human condition? The great metaphorical debate!" Raising one hand to the sky, emphatically, "How?"

The relationship synopsis makes me smile, though he never lets me forget how hammered I was the night we met. "Ah, well, both interesting. But, mm, no." Sitting up a bit, stealing a cushion for my back, I lean against the armrest to look his way more directly. "I mean literally. Like how did we get to this cabin?"

This grabs his attention, eyeing me quizzically, wearily. "Is this one of those Suz questions I'm too square to understand? I don't feel like playing that game today. Not here."

"No, no. Sorry. I just don't really remember exactly. I feel a little confused." Playing with his fingertips, his hand resting on my left thigh.

A sigh, taking his hand away, placing it on the back of the swing. "Have you eaten today? Do you think your blood sugar is ok?" John, ever the healthcare layman, with just enough googling to be dangerous.

"My blood sugar is fine. I don't think it works that way babe, I'm not diabetic. Humor me."

I can sense his slight exasperation, like I'm tainting the peaceful cabin experience asking him to do something he doesn't understand. I should drop it, but the time gap gnaws along the edges of reality. Something is not quite right. A favorite song fluttering in the sub-conscious recesses I can't quite access. My long dead grandmother's face not quite remembered. It's there, but lost in time. I can't fully put it together. But yesterday. Yesterday shouldn't feel so detached! I wait, staring past him quietly. I'll win this one, our time together definitely includes his regularly humoring me.

Finally, tired of waiting for him to decide he can't figure me out, I prompt, "We were backpacking?"

Big sigh this time. "Yes, we're backpacking. Though I'd say this cabin is definitely cheating."

A robin lights on the deck's railing. Hopping along, taking us in side eyed. No food here friend. John stops the swing gently with his toes, sitting quietly we share the moment. The robin, feeling unthreatened, preens jerkily, hops a few more inches, suddenly takes off at the sound of a chipmunk in the leafy detritus below.

Knowing I'm still waiting he gives up. "Of course Suz can't stick to a planned route, but as per usual we really lucked out with this distraction." Now he's offering half a smile my way. He's always bemused when my haphazard approach finds more reward than his carefully outlined plans. The smile creeps across his face as we process this same thought. He laughs, shakes his head at the chipmunk.

"Hey little guy, does your chipmunk lady ignore all logical odds, yet somehow make your life better in the process?" Seeming to understand he's being addressed, the chipmunk leans back on his haunches, blinking our way, paused mid thought, a nut in paw.

Chuckling at me now, amused with himself. "I'd already passed the trail. If I didn't know better, I'd say it wasn't even there. I mean, I'm always alert to the risk of missing a turn! But you saw it, buried under overgrowth, vines and branches."

I smile at him, the description sounding vaguely familiar. I take his hand and place it back on my thigh where it belongs. He smiles too, an apology behind the crinkle in his eyes. I love it when he relaxes into not quite understanding me.

"And that sign! Creepy, intriguing and absolutely irresistible all at once. You brushed the kudzu aside and immediately we exchanged a glance, eyebrows up in unison. I mean, who names a trail, or location, or whatever that sign was supposed to demark, after a literary term? In the middle of freaking nowhere, the trail overgrown, obscured. All so fitting somehow! Ha! And what the fuck did they mean by it? Freedom from society? Responsibility? I mean, we already had those things just being out in the backcountry, backpacking, without some fancy cabin. Rescued from ourselves perhaps? Each other? Heh."

Shaking his head again, "It almost feels like a different layer entirely. Sinister maybe."

Furrowing his brow, he actually shudders. I can tell he finds something not quite right about all this too, but he smiles with the adventure. I've never seen John shudder. He's excited now though, leaning forward in the swing, making me sigh. Drawing this version of John to the surface and I fall for him all over again.

"By then I couldn't have passed it up either, and was just pumped you spotted it! And here we are, a short hike later, nearly a bushwhack really, the trail so disused. An immaculate cabin, water running, propane available, sheets on the bed. Bit dusty maybe, but fairly clean. See the sign above the door?"

I look up. In elaborate script the door tells us:

*You Are Here
All Who Seek
All Who Wander
-- And Wonder --
You Are Welcome*

I gape at the sign. That I know! I'm certain. I've seen that quote before. In that very script! But Jesus Jumping Christ, where? This place is driving me crazy.

I turn back to John, afraid to taint his enthusiasm with my distraction. He can tell I don't remember the trail sign, but now he's savoring the suspense, enjoying my curiosity and complete engagement in his retelling.

I thump him on the chest, "Well? What did the trail say?!"

He laughs, still bemused, gesturing to the cabin, the trees, breathes deep for a moment, winks at the still watching chipmunk.

"Deus Ex Machina."

The chipmunk cocks his head, oddly attentive. The air grows still, shadows deepening with a passing cloud. The robin peers at us intently. A wave shudders the trees, almost seaweed swaying underwater, and sound closes off around me, like the cabin of an airplane pressurizing. The powerful mirage sends a small chill head to toe, dizzying. I close my eyes to stop the dancing trees, but this only enhances the sensation of forced silence, of isolation. There it is again, the feeling of something lost, but present. Just out of reach. Something my subconscious knows, keeping trapped below sea level. I shake it off, looking up at John, and sound returns with the creak of the swing. His eyes are closed, fully content, basking in the feeling all around us. The cabin, the trees, sunlight, the magic and mystery of our hidden discovery.

The chipmunk chews his nut, the robin busies himself in the dirt, a seed in reach. Of course they were never watching. I chastise myself for anthropomorphizing the locals, a side effect of the disquieting sensations washing over me, imbued by unexplained confusion in this remarkable, beautiful, enchanting spot. My imagination tends to run full speed ahead, unbridled.

Something about this place. Nostalgic