

June 1998

A Beginner's Mind

Thomas Lynch

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, tlynch2@unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/englishfacpubs>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Lynch, Thomas, "A Beginner's Mind" (1998). *Faculty Publications -- Department of English*. 39.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/englishfacpubs/39>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications -- Department of English by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

A BEGINNER'S MIND

TOM LYNCH

New Mexico State University

In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities; in the expert's there are few.

—Shunryu Suzuki

Recently I moved to Las Cruces in the southern part of New Mexico. My new home lies in the Mesilla Valley of the Rio Grande, as it courses muddy through the Chihuahuan desert, North America's largest but least celebrated arid land. The Organ Mountains rise to the east, serrating the dawn's liminal blue. In the first few weeks of my residence, I made some tentative contacts with the landscape on a series of short hikes, toting my 16-month-old boy, Riley, in a backpack.

The "beginner's mind," the elusive skill to look without preconceptions, to perceive originally, is an ideal in Zen and in haiku poetry. Moving to a new place, especially one so different from prior experiences, can nudge one toward that ideal. Of course I've read about this place, even passed through a time or two, so it is not entirely new, and I am certainly burdened with preconceptions, expectations, fears; but still, I am a neophyte, greenhorn, scurfed with innocence.

Yet, while haiku poetry nurtures a beginner's mind, it also does so in a landscape that is familiar, not exotic. Traditionally, the audience for Japanese haiku knew the look, sound, and scent of each plant named, each animal mentioned, each landscape traversed, and had read hundreds, thousands of haiku on the same subject. Can the allusive form work here? The intimate haiku of plum blossoms, bush warblers, crows, and crickets—will it get lost in the vastness of basin and range, the vocabulary of bajada and playa, piñon and nopale, ocotillo and arroyo, acacia and mesquite? Can it speak in the prickly dialect of desert words, so remote from the verdant Japanese diction?



viii/21/97

southern edge of Jornada del Muerto

Hiking midmorning with, as usual, a baby on my back and a border collie trotting ahead. Temperature in the low 90s. Jeep trail off the interstate—scattered debris from beer bashes: smashed bottles, faded cartons, yellow shotgun shells in sandy soil, the copper glint of spent cartridges. I can imagine it all. Drink a six-pack, load a six-shooter, see who can drink the most and shoot the straightest. Concussion and shattering glass, whoops and more beer tops popped. Desert party in the wasteland, gunfighter heritage of this too little loved land.

Today, I-25 murmurs in the distance, bees hover, ants scurry in grit.

arroyo sand—
brown bottle glass
glints morning light

ant mounds—
shotgun shells
filling with silent sand.

Where the sand is fine, numerous lizard tracks from the night before criss-cross—prominent in the low-angled light shadows. So many, more than you'd imagine. Excited to be out, and unfamiliar with the climate, my dog runs ahead the first quarter mile, then slows.

mesquite shade—
trotting dog
pauses a moment

It's the rainy season, the monsoon, humid and not that "yes, but it's a dry heat" one hears of. A desert greener than I guessed and a vast scatter of flowers brimming the Jornada del Muerto basin—creosote bush yellow, peppergrass white.

As of now, only the most obvious plants and animals do I know: mesquite, jackrabbit, red-tailed hawk. Is it true that "the names of things bring them closer" (Sund, 1969)? Is the sensation—the primal touch—enhanced or diminished by knowledge? Does my field guide, as I flip through for the matching flower, lead me toward or away from intimacy? Suzuki (1970) says, "So the most difficult thing is always to keep your beginner's mind." But what of the old-timer's sense of familiar comfort? When will I be able to say to this tree at hand, "Mesquite, my old friend, I greet you again today"?



viii/22/97
night storm

Creosote bush, disdained shrub of the desert. Vast flat valleys stuffed with creosote bush, spaced decisively across the red sand. They whiz past the car windows as we, going someplace else, hurry through. Wretched plant of wretched wastes. To live here and evade desiccation, their leaves are coated with a water-retaining resin, at the touch of rain dissolving aroma into the breeze, borne miles ahead by the storm's wind.

Tonight, I lie in bed as a storm approaches.

Distant thunder—
curtain swells
with the scent of creosote bush



viii/25/97
The Rio Grande

A stroll along the great river. Camino Real came through here, conquistadors and ox carts, billowing banners northward with empire. Now a gravel road atop a levee.

no grande—
yellow butterflies eddy
over the coursing current

muddy river—
tamarisk shadows
cool the water

river's sound—
a tumbleweed turns over, over
in the languid current



viii/28/97

La Cueva Trail

This trail leads to a small cave, occupied from at least 5000 B.C. Later, Apaches, no doubt, rested here after raids on travelers below—La Placita de las Cruces, where stones and rude crosses covered victims. Las Cruces, a town built on graves. And then a local legend:

El Ermitano (The Hermit of La Cueva)

Italian-born hermit Agostini-Justiniani spent many years walking through Europe, South America, Mexico, and Cuba. After wandering the Western deserts, associating with the Penitente Brotherhood in the Sangre de Cristo range of Northern New Mexico, he moved south into this very cave. When warned by locals of the dangers of staying there alone, he supposedly replied, "I shall make a fire in front of my cave every Friday evening while I shall be alive. If the fire fails to appear, it will be because I have been killed." He gathered herbs and healed the sick. One Friday night in the spring of 1869, the fire failed to appear at La Cueva. Antonio Garcia led a group up the mountain to find the Hermit lying face down on his crucifix with a knife in his back. He was wearing a penitential girdle full of spikes.

The hermit, I wonder, did he love this landscape, these birds so numerous, the trill of canyon wren, the filter of breeze through lacy acacia, impossibly jagged mountains beyond?

Every plant here bethorned—acacia, mesquite, yucca, prickly pear, barrel cactus—and snakes, wasps, scorpions, biting ants, too. His own spikes tortured his flesh, did these add? Was each thorn a penalty for his body's delight? He crossed the world to this place most remote from temptation, but he could not escape a cool breeze on a hot day caressing the flesh. Was he home here, or in exile from this and any place, from his very incarnation?

The knife in the back, another and final thorn to gouge desire.

hermit's cave—
wasps buzz in sand,
acacia shadows flutter

In the cool of the cave, growing out toward the sun, sacred datura's green leaves and white funnels of flowers. Jimsonweed, psychedelic and deadly.

cool white—
 in the cave mouth
 sacred datura blossoms

Did the hermit nibble datura, envision a cactus huge with fleshy pink petals, a yucca spear yearning toward sky, a cloud's crisp outline against cosmic blue, wind tossing a million grama grasses? These mountains, for once, seen.

Riley sits in the cave shade, sifts sand from clenched hands, happy just to watch the falling, falling. We depart, trot back down the trail.

beyond the yucca spears
 red-tail hawk wheels
 in sun brilliance

sun—
 each thorn distinct on the
 prickly pear shadow

speckled mesquite shade—
 baby lifts to me
 a cool rock



ix/11/97
 Baylor Pass Trail

last night's rain,
 pooled in the rocks
 glints the hot sun

Riley in the pack dozes as we hike. These scents—wet sand, sun-dried rocks, Apache plume, creosote bush—and these sights—yucca, quivering cactus, abounding boulders— forever exotic to me, but, archotyping his place on earth, they seep into his psyche.

spreading acacia shade—
 boulders worn smooth
 by hiker bottoms

dung beetles
 swarm across coyote turd—
 a breeze dries my sweat



ix/17/97
 Baylor Pass Trail

Hot and still morning alive with birds: loggerhead shrike atop a yucca, cactus wren, black-chinned sparrow, Inca doves, evasive sparrows I can't decode.

As I pass up into the bajada boulders, rock squirrels yelp alarm, grasshoppers shoot off with red wings clicking. Sweat beads sting the eye, intent ants cross the trail. Atop a boulder, against blue sky, a roadrunner cocks his head, watching me, immigrant, human.

In the shade of a grey oak, where arroyo descends the boulder strewn bajada, we sit on rock ledge in shade. Dog laps water, Riley holds a rice cake. I scribble notes, sweat-soaked back cooling in a casual whiff of wind.

Trudge back down the arroyo. Whiptail lizards dart away, and the red-winged grasshoppers clatter, and that one, there, a pale blue surprise. As I alternately flip through Peterson's guide and peer through scope at bird on the acacia branch,

baby in the backpack
repeats
"birdee, birdee, birdee, birdee."



x/2/97

Rabbit Ears Plateau Trail

At the trail head, the BLM "w ld rne s stu y a e" sign, hard to read for the spatter of bullet holes. A mile up the trail—a rough jeep road—old stone mine house gradually whittling to dust. Amid shotgun shells and cigarette butts, shattered glass sparkles. Mine relics rust a sun's redness. Shafts with rigid doors open into mountain's inner dark, a distant Bud light can flecks the verge of blackness.

Back down the trail in the bright, bright, squinting light: gilded flicker undulates over boulders, rises to cling to yucca shaft, squawks twice. Ruby-crowned kinglet hops on acacia branch, swallows something leggy. Indifferent, these seem, to human detritus, at home regardless.

We pause on the trail, gaze out across the boulder-strewn landscape. Layers of distance recede. I look, Riley looks: between our parallax, the emerging dimensions of a world.

atop a rock
2 rock wrens hop and twitter—
feathered stone

REFERENCES

- "El Ermitano." (n.d.) In J. Baumann, R. Calderon, C. Carrillo, & H. H. Ramli (Eds.), *La cueva trail guide*. United States Bureau of Land Management and the Nature Conservancy.
- Sund, R. (1969). *Bunch grass*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Suzuki, S. (1970). *Zen mind, beginner's mind*. New York: Weatherhill.