

When Arches Crumble

by Anne Whitehouse

Even after having been to the desert a few times before, hiking through Arches National Park feels mythical. For me, these arches and hoodoos¹ and bridges and other sandstone formations only existed in the world of postcards and documentaries. The sagebrush and juniper and red bluffs don't look like the Earth I know, which is mostly the forests of the Pacific Northwest—wet, rich with detritus, and covered with greens and browns. But even now that I'm really in the desert in person, it feels more like I'm in the postcard.

Maybe I feel this way because Arches is a national park—in many ways, it feels like an exhibit. There's a lovely, paved road winding across the desert from arch to arch, with signs at the trailheads telling you about the geology and the history of the rocks you're looking at. There are restrooms and trash cans. Ravens pick their way around the cars in the parking lot looking for leftovers. People with cameras and sunglasses and visors gather outside their cars at trailheads.

Because it all feels fake; I can't connect to the landscape very well, and because of that, my mind dwells on things far away from where I am. I want to be enjoying the wilderness and gaining insight from the wild, but it's just not working. I'm mostly just bemoaning industrialized wilderness tourism. Edward Abbey², whom I normally find unrealistic and a bit arrogant, seems rather reasonable out here in the desert he unintentionally popularized.

When my group finishes plodding to our destination—Landscape Arch—we all stop to look at it for a moment. The silly conversations started on our hike don't stop, however, and most of us undergraduates seem relatively unaffected by the arch. The arch is big, yes. Rather impressive. It looks like it could fall apart at any moment. It is truly cool, and worth the half mile we walked to get there. But it's not leaving an impression. It's just some weird rock formation in the desert. But someone decided to build a trail here and give it a name, so it must have had meaning to someone, once. Sadly, I don't think we're sensing that meaning.

1 A hoodoo is a sandstone formation that can look either like a tall spire (think Bryce Canyon) or smaller, squatty lumps (think Goblin Valley).

2 Edward Abbey was a nature writer and park ranger at Arches National Monument (before it became a park). His most well-known work is *Desert Solitaire*, in which he describes experiences in the desert around Moab. He's not my favorite writer to read because he seems so convinced that the way he experiences the wild is the only right way. But he does have a point about what is lost when we turn wild places into tourist attractions. Ironically, *Desert Solitaire* is one of the reasons Arches became so popular.

The conversations of the group aren't even about the arch. They're about random YouTube videos and other comments from our civilization of smartphones and Google and television sitcoms. Edward Abbey, in his typical arrogance, probably would have shaken his head in dismay. He had foreseen the disconnect between our expectations and the real arch. The arch has already died in the postcards we've seen. How can a real arch possibly compare to the expertly positioned, perfectly exposed images in calendars? Maybe we're wasting our time.

We don't spend long at the arch before we hike back. We want to make it to Delicate Arch before the sun goes down. We go back to the ravens in the parking lot, and I'm intrigued by their deep, throaty croaks. And, for some reason, they're much more interesting than Landscape Arch. One of them, sitting up high on one of the red bluffs, seems to be looking at me. It utters a guttural croak that echoes across the rocks. I wonder what it's saying, or if it's saying anything other than "I'm looking for the unwanted fragments of your lunch." I wonder what they did before this parking lot was here. But, for better or for worse, the parking lot is here and it might last longer than the arches themselves. I feel guilty that, for some reason, the arch didn't live up to my expectations, but the ravens and the parking lot did.

It is nearly dark when we make it to Delicate Arch. This arch is a little different from Landscape Arch; Delicate Arch looks, oxymoronically, stronger, which is a common observation of visitors. This arch stands alone. It dominates the landscape it is in. Here it is, the American icon in real life, dramatic in the fading light.

I walk around the deep sandstone bowl to go stand at the base of the arch. The closer I get to the arch, the more I grow afraid. It's kind of a steep path, and a misstep would not be forgiving. Approaching the arch from the side, it's very evident that I'm not in a postcard. I'm insensibly afraid that the sandstone will decide, after years of being an American icon, that it's tired of all the publicity and visitors and will just collapse right on top of me. Edward Abbey probably would have thought it just and natural. Maybe he would be right.

I stop in my tracks at the base of the arch and look up. My mouth gapes involuntarily, and I am stunned for a moment at the sheer size of the formation towering over me. The arch looks so small in all the pictures, but in truth it is massive, making my presence a tiny afterthought. I sit down on the rough sandstone floor and keep staring. There is something awesome and powerful here that I do not understand. This delicate balance of sandstone is ancient, and it feels imposing. Almost condescending. This arch is experience and wisdom and strength

and I am none of these things. I think it's speaking to me and, instead of ignoring it like I ignored the raven earlier, I try to put its communication in words: *You young, tiny girl. There are ages and events and lives I have seen that you could not even begin to comprehend.* It is otherworldly, and it wouldn't have fit in a postcard. I choose to leave before that narrow spot weakens and the arch decides to crush me.

As I walked away from the arch, I thought back to my first experiences with Utah landscapes. I confess, when I first moved to Utah three years ago, I thought it was ugly. Shocked at leaving my green, lush Pacific Northwest home, I reviled against the desert. I wasn't sure why anybody would want to live here. It's dry and brown, and the mountains—which everyone seems to rave about passionately—simply aren't mountains. They aren't even big enough to have glaciers. Having spent most of my life in the shadow of the Cascade Range in Washington State, I was under the impression that permanent snow was required for “mountain” status.

I am ashamed to remember my intense dislike now, but there was only vague reconciliation with my surroundings until I met Daniel.³ As a Utah native and outdoorsman, Daniel saw beauty in the desert and those lackluster “mountains” that I didn't understand. I once found a postcard drawing with the figure of a hiker who looked just like him: red-checked shirt, wide-brimmed hat, homemade hiking stick, big backpack, and contemplative outdoorsiness, looking into the distant mountains. I found the postcard charming and saw it as a symbol for Daniel's personality and essence.

He showed me the desert. He showed me how to play in the hoodoos of Goblin Valley. We gazed out across the empty desert landscape, and he spoke poetry about the life that was hidden under the sagebrush and in the rocky cliffs. In the winter, we snowshoed up a canyon in the mountains and explored caves and wandered off the trail. I asked him why he loved these mountains and he showed me. Slowly, I realized that I was actually beginning to like different parts of Utah: the drama of the canyons, the hidden riparian areas, the way the dirt smells, the taste of dry air, the way the moon rises over the Wasatch.

One cold night we huddled under a blanket in the desert, shivering and clinging to each other for warmth as we looked up at the stars. Since the clouds in the Pacific Northwest make stargazing a little difficult, the clear desert night showed me a sky I had never seen before. Letting my eyes adjust to the thick darkness around me, I soon saw a tapestry of light woven into constellations. I could see everything I needed to see. The crickets sang around us,

and I was comforted by Daniel's steady inhales and exhales. I relished the contrast between Daniel's warm embrace and the chilled caresses of the cold desert air running its fingers through my hair.

Thinking about the constellations and the stories we tell with them, I looked for something in the stars and I saw him there. Every time I looked at the stars after that night, I thought of him and wondered *what if* and *if only*.⁴ I was falling in love with a person and a landscape simultaneously, the love of each facilitating greater love of the other.

Months later, Daniel and I climbed Buckley Mountain together. There was only him, me, and the brown, snow-trimmed mountain.

We stopped halfway up to eat lunch and read Aldo Leopold while sitting on the edge of a cliff looking into the canyon. "Thinking Like a Mountain" had power there and we both felt it. By this point, I loved the brown mountains and the dry air and the crunchy snow almost as much as I loved my old-growth forests back home (almost).

Looking ahead at Daniel's slim figure clad in the red-checked flannel and the wide-brimmed leather hat, he still resembled that postcard I had found ages ago, but by this time I knew him well enough to know he was nothing like that idealized icon. Now that I think about it, the idea seems silly. An image can't capture a preference for cats over dogs or a deep devotion to God or a childhood living in the Salt Lake Valley. There's no room in the postcard for a practice of patient listening or a taste for hole-in-the-wall taco stands or a penchant for pranks and mischief. In that moment, I stopped loving the postcard, and I chose to love him.

Maybe my new understanding had something to do with the mountain. So far, all of the good in our relationship had everything to do with learning the brown mountains and the vast desert and the arid landscape that I hated but then loved because I was learning to love him. Because I was learning to chip away my expectations about the man and the land, blow by blow.

Despite all the good, it was not to last. Even though I had chosen to love him, I allowed fear to hold me back in many ways. These were painful months. I tried multiple times to just forget about Daniel and move on. But nothing was working; the stars were still his, and I saw him every time I looked up on a clear night. *What if? If only.*

4 "What if and if only" is a phrase I borrowed from the writings of Daniel.

One day, many months later, our relationship ended for good. It reduced both of us to silence as we sat in the car and stared at the rubble, unable look each other in the eye. My fears came true; we had failed. The next day—the first day with no *what if* or *if only*—I moved through the day choking on tears and struggling to remember daily responsibilities. Life felt as fake as these red rock “theme parks”.

I leave Delicate Arch with my group. It is dark and the stars are out in the numberless glory that is only possible far away from the glow of city lights and polluted air. It has only been a week since Daniel and I ended things. I look up at the stars, and I realize that I don't see Daniel in them anymore. I see what was, but not the *what if* or *if only*. He is starting to become a memory.

When I write about memories, I end up making mental exhibits for people and experiences, even though they are just as wild as the ancient arch, the ravens, and the other hidden creatures. The times that I've bumped into Daniel since we ended things have been emotionally confusing. The reality of him and his continuing life and wide-open future don't fit in my changing paradigms. They never do—saying I love the postcard is a lot easier than loving the person because I don't have to deal with all the mess of fallibility and change. Will I still love a broken arch? A volcano after it erupts? A mountain whose glaciers have receded into nothing?

I can memorialize the past, but not living, changing things. When I say “this is what happened” and “this is what it meant” and “this is who they are”, the people, places, and experiences dearest to me become static. We crop them onto a postcard and put them in a scrapbook where they will never fall on top of us or bring us to our knees with awe. Where we and they will never change. There are no more possibilities for them—only facts.

Arches National Park is also very much alive. The cycles of the desert never stop; they're just too slow to capture in a postcard or a weekend visit. These arches will deteriorate slowly from the wind, and one day the weak spots will weaken enough that the arches will fall. We park visitors will mourn because we do not understand, because there's nothing left in the theme park to see except for some fat ravens and all the postcards showing us what was. It will be the final end of Edward Abbey's world.

But, when the arch crumbles, there won't be nothing. The horizon will be born anew in a tumble of broken sandstone, and I can learn to love it again. Perhaps I can learn to love it better.