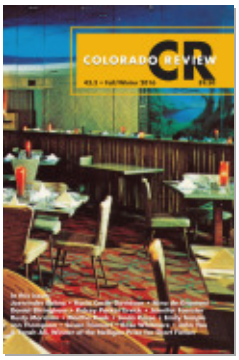
Witness

Rose Whitmore



Colorado Review, Volume 43, Number 3, Fall/Winter 2016, pp. 98-106 (Article)

Published by Center for Literary Publishing
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/col.2016.0083*

ROSE WHITMORE

WITNESS

In 1996, my father, a high school biology teacher and avid hunter, won a lottery for a bighorn sheep tag and thus the rights to hunt and kill one of the most elusive, solitary, and perfectly camouflaged animals in the world. We couldn't sell the winning ticket, which apparently was as rare as winning an actual lottery ticket, nor could my father pass up the opportunity for an adventure, so for three weeks over Christmas break, my family broke camp in a rocky corner of the Southern California desert known as Devils Playground.

Our days in the desert were filled with rifles and scopes and wind. We had high-caliber binoculars; sights that ranged hundreds of yards; and a base camp, fit for some level of infantry, that could be accessed only by turning off one dirt road, onto another, and finally onto a hand-cleared one. This small desert driveway led to a stretch of land my father dubbed "Area 52." There were no trees or paved roads, no running water or shade. Our hunting range straddled a wide, wind-swept valley, just south of a large military mining operation and east of Joshua Tree National Park. We were at the end of the line, in a swath of nothing, where old Route 66 tucked itself neatly into the folds of memory, where diners and nostalgia faded into the chalky, white landscape and the ghosts of strangers lived in abandoned towns between modern-day gas stations. Here, stones piled to the sky and thin desert flowers buckled under the dust of the earth.

My father and brother arrived first and set up a parachute shelter, sage green against the red of the mountains. Our tent sat on a small ridge, overlooking a dry creek bed that snaked across the land and served as a trench to explore when solitude was needed. This was camp. This was our winter vacation. This was Christmas that year, heralded by a spindly ocotillo draped with ornaments my mother brought from home.

The first morning, we piled into my family's oversized pickup. My father and ten-year-old brother wore desert camo. Nestled

neatly in the truck's bed were a host of rifles and scopes and sights and complicated instruments, expectant, ready to be eased into the long, precise vision for which they were created. I sat in the backseat next to my brother. My mother sat in the front. Dad drove. No radio played, no music. Scouting, it seemed, required the utmost concentration. Under my father's fastidious rules of hunting, looking for a bighorn sheep was accomplished by a family buy-in of scanning the repetitive and slow-moving landscape. The whole family had hunting licenses: more eyes meant more opportunity to find one of these elusive animals. Although I was never going to have to fire a shot, this was the first time I was required to participate in the act of hunting.

The going was slow. We were in the backcountry, far from any road. From the backseat, I watched the desert scenery slowly shift by: mountains that piled on mountains the color of rust, silica-laden, refracting the light. Dust covered everything. The air was dry—stiff with a chilling wind that whipped across the landscape and created sheer veils of sand that eddied at the base of ocotillos and stunted shrubs. There were no houses, no sign of human life, just our truck lurching over the open desert, rocking back and forth like an ocean liner at high sea, pulling itself over stones and cacti and anything else in our way. My stomach churned. I pressed my face against the cool glass of the window and waited for my car sickness to pass.

We were looking for the curve of a horn or cascade of rock down a slope, signaling movement. Maybe a rocky enclave or even a territorial spat between two males. Too much to hope for. It seems the bighorn's sole objective in life is to go unseen.

Within fifteen minutes, I fell into pessimism and slight boredom. There was nothing to see—just rocks and sand and abandoned mines. But complaining was not a part of the agenda. It never was. It did not matter that I was fourteen and nauseated. In my childhood, complaining led only to a piercing reminder that when it came to vacation, adventure, or hunting, I was not in any kind of control. This is why I didn't dare close my eyes. This was serious business, and my father could see me in the rearview—if he caught me sleeping, he'd wake me and insist I keep looking. Most of our trips involved some level of serious business—usually it was the business of rubbing up against danger to see ourselves reflected back on the surface.

I cannot count the number of times I feared for my life on our family vacations. But to admit fear was to admit weakness. This haunts me still: how easily people express fear or doubt, the vanity of it, the freedom. It falls in direct contrast with the refrain from my youth: Participation is not an option. You will like the activity presented no matter what. Revolts will be quashed. Teenage angst is utterly off the table. Complaining amid perils that any child would fear is not only frowned upon, it will earn you ridicule for years to come.

This is how I witnessed the Sierras, at age seven, under the load of a backpack, my brother still in diapers, strapped to my mother's back. And how I witnessed the Arctic Ocean at age ten from a canoe, mosquito-plagued and hungry. These experiences were bestowed upon us under the auspices of love: One day you'll love this. One day you won't be afraid. One day you'll do this yourself. One day.

What I know of hunting is mostly imagined. It is largely a synonym for things I never see: Camouflaged duck blinds that can be reached only by wading through waist-deep water in the early morning hours. There, pregnant with hope, men sit in low-lit, warm little nests, waiting. They drink whiskey and hot coffee, eyes focused overhead as a heavy sun rises. Guns loaded, they're ready for dawn, for that ephemeral moment when ducks fill the sky and are lured down into range by painted impostors of their own kind.

At home, I knew these approximations: Duck decoys that lived in the garage, piled in netting, painted by hand. Eyes rendered with a careful precision—as lifeless as the real ones that showed up later—eyes that stared through the glass compartment of our industrial-size refrigerator as I reached for an after-school snack. Iridescent wings beneath a gallon of milk. I never saw them leave the sky, never saw them grace the fold of the blind, made warm by human bodies and something else, a crackling pulse—primal and glowing.

I know of structures. A small cabin, held in by the walls of other small cabins, blending into the early morning fog and tule of central California. In the fall, everything is golden and brown, a dying color. When not serving as a home base for my father's duck hunts, this cabin is where we'll spend Thanksgiv-

ing in a few years, tight together in bunk beds, warm against the chill outside.

I know of culture, of autumn cold snaps and the taut skin of a buck hanging from a pine at high camp in the Marble Mountains of California. I know of campfires and the slow gait of horses; the cold clap of breath in the night air; wet lips on the open mouths of beer bottles and jokes that caused eruptions of laughter, followed by silences held by the depth of the forest.

I know of logistics. Early wake-up calls, sleeping in the back of the truck, rolling in before dawn. Daylong gun-safety classes, little brother itching in his seat, asking for hot chocolate, worried he won't pass the test. Worried he won't get his license.

This was my father's life. A life of camping and divining, of fishing twine and the cold, hidden crevices of high Sierra streams where he knew fish lurked in the shadows. A life of hardened meat in the freezer, stiff after the kill. It was the thrill of the open ocean, chasing salmon, throwing nets across smelt as they ran through the waves. In his life, he recognized that beautiful chasm between what we can see and what we cannot, and chased to close it with his bare hands.

By fourteen, I was an accomplished smelter, graceful with a throw-net, unafraid of the cold of the Pacific, and could inhabit a Zen-like state watching the waves for runs of small fish in the water. In the ocean, everything is a mad rush, flooding at you, pulling you into its own tidal heave. Bighorn sheep hunting was different. Scouting for a notoriously elusive animal was a tedious affair, buttressed by the fact that I did not particularly care to see one killed—a desire that magnified as the hours in the desert rolled on.

The outward gaze of looking for a bighorn was exhausting. It required constant attention. When I allowed myself quick breaks from the landscape and looked around the interior of the car, my eyes always settled on my father's hands, loose on the wheel, each of his thumbnails stained with a dark and permanent bloom of old blood, remnants from an ill-fated nature lesson with a rattlesnake in front of a group of his students on a backpacking trip nearly twenty years ago. The blood under his thumbs made me think of what we see and what we don't: In the desert, the elusive bighorn was there, but not seen. In

the car, it was my father's heart medication. I knew it was in the glove box. There were some spare pills in the center console. Perhaps a baggie stuffed in the back, under the lining of the bed. The medication was a constant presence in our lives: A series of different colored pills congregated in every corner of our house. They were in every drawer, on top of the dresser, and in a small basket above the microwave. There was a set in his desk at school and in the mess of paperwork in his office. Everywhere pills sat idle, an unspoken guarantee against disaster—omnipresent but never seen. These pills followed us, a conversation laid bare between us, a ubiquitous and yet overlooked sign that this was a dangerous, precious life.

These pills followed us, a conversation laid bare between us, a ubiquitous and yet overlooked sign that this was a dangerous, precious life.

Once, I asked my father why he liked hunting. "It's a primal thing—an adrenaline rush," he said. He didn't expand, but I imagine it like a sliver of intoxicating power, slipped into your blood, and with it comes some greater understanding or vision concerning our place in the natural order. The narrow scope of our attention is focused, for a moment, on what is before us and the nanoseconds of anticipating what comes next. Perhaps that's what my father meant—to witness the before and after of *life* is the thrill.

But hunting usually involves some level of deception or distortion of perception. We hunt the things *we* can't see, usually knowing what *they* can see. It's understanding the space between vision and shadow. These contrasts weigh heavily when it comes to life and death, and hunting is largely a narrative of voyeurism we carefully sculpt: perched in the reeds, we know where the ducks will land. We know the path of the deer, unsuspecting of an ambush. We wear camouflage and call out to animals in their own strange tongue. We approximate a life and, in that moment, have power over it, power to pick and choose where and when it ends—a power we don't have over our own lives, or the ones of those we love.

In those long days in the desert, we drove as a break from scouting. We drove two hours to Barstow to walk through the brightly lit aisles of a grocery store. Once, to my delight, my mother accidentally bought only non-alcoholic beer and we had to make the round trip once more for beer that would suffice. On these trips, we could listen to music. We could be leisurely. We could enjoy, not scrutinize, the scenery. We drove through the back entrance to Joshua Tree and marveled at those wild trees, spectacular in their strangeness. We stopped and dug for trilobites, ancient little sea creatures that had been pressed into clay long ago and were now upended on the side of the road, seeing the sun for the first time.

There were no rules in the desert, and we were just as free. One afternoon, my father found a strange, wild bush growing in our valley that he inexplicably boiled into a rudimentary tea. He bounced around camp, proffering cups to each of us, buoyed by his discovery. "It gives you a little pep to your step," he said. He loaded bushes in the truck and carted them back to San Francisco, where he went from shop to shop in Chinatown, looking for a buyer. He was met by stern expressions and shut doors. He had ephedra. A substance banned by the FDA. He burned the bushes shortly after but kept one in his classroom, an otherworldly talisman, the only thing we would bring back from the bighorn hunt. For the years we were together at school, it perched in plain sight—a strange weed above the requisite jars of creatures frozen in formaldehyde—a secret only he and I shared.

As a teenager, I was wary of the division of life and death in the hunt. I was not patient with the contrasts the desert presented to me. I'd like to say I dreamt of bigger things while we hunted. I'd like to say I dreamt of words, lived myself into a philosophy, inched my way toward being a better, more grounded human. I wish I could say I saw the future of my days stretching out across a fine line of good things, and that I shed my teenage malaise as easily as slipping into a new skin.

But all I wanted was escape. Back at camp, after hours of driving through the desert, I curled up in the tent, out of the wind. I lay in that little dome of warmth, listened to music, and waited for dinner. I waited for the moon to illuminate the shad-

ows that fell across the desert floor. I closed my eyes and tried to nap, but behind my lids, all I could see was wash upon wash of glittering desert sand.

I saw my father take aim and fire at an animal only one time. We were in a canoe, on a winding river in the Arctic, surrounded by harsh, wild, unexplored land. The trees were stunted, their lines of growth held captive by the changing seasons. The presence of unseen animals lingered everywhere: grizzlies, moose, the great song of the unknown. A duck, startled from ahead in the river, flew wildly toward the sun as we turned a bend. My father quickly loaded the rifle, paused to track the bird in his sight, and let loose a shot, missing. The duck went briefly out of vision. We pulled up on a sandy bank around the corner to see if the bird had been wounded, fallen, or if we could startle more to take flight.

In the sand, unmistakably fresh grizzly tracks marred the bank. They came from a copse of thin willow on the far end of the shore, meandered down to the water line where we stood, and from there, in a rush of wild, they galloped back into the brush. The paw prints of the startled grizzly were bigger than my head. Wild scars in the sand. My brother, who loved dinosaurs, pressed his tiny, six-year-old hand into the claw marks with reverence.

"He must have heard the gun and been scared off," my dad said. He paused and looked up river. "He must have scared the duck."

We were quiet, each carefully imagining the subtle shift in the power of the unknown.

To escape the monotony of camp, I went on long walks along the washed-out creek bed. As the days passed, I slowly found myself giving into the art of awareness. It was easier to appreciate where I was when I immersed myself in the desert as opposed to simply scanning it. I felt the stones that piled up against the pale sky. I touched the bent and frayed edges of desert grass, and inspected the cold crevices where rowdy wildflowers bloomed in small, surprising bursts. I watched sunsets paint the desert hills purple and rose, and smelled the sweet desert air that welled up from the earth at the end of the day.

I noticed small brush bent by the winds that roared through

our valley; the whole landscape sculpted and challenged, churned by eternal forces, written and erased and rebuilt by passages of time that dwarfed our short visit. I began to lean against it—time. I leaned into the openness of the landscape and with it, a gentle understanding of the freedom that the wilderness offered. I began, in that desert, to see the faint shadows of someone I could become, and with that, I looked down to see myself on the precipice of understanding. I began to understand what drew my parents to the wild. That day, that long-awaited day my parents promised, had finally come.

But try as I might, I still could not see the bighorns in their rocky holds, or the murmur that was slowly eroding the comforting beat of my father's heart.

But try as I might, I still could not see the bighorns in their rocky holds, or the murmur that was slowly eroding the comforting beat of my father's heart.

On Christmas Day, 1999, three years after our bighorn sheep hunt, my father collapsed at the door of the duck-hunting cabin, in the land of tules and fog, where men hid in folds with rifles slung, their breath warmed with whiskey and hope, waiting to own that twilight between life and death.

We were told he died instantly. No pain. I was not there, though. I did not see it. What I know is just another approximation.

We had spent the morning together, until he and my brother left to meet my uncle for a few days of duck hunting. There, while unloading the truck, he slumped down against the door of the cabin—the cabin of our Thanksgivings—after safely driving my little brother five hours north with no sign of trouble. A missed stoplight or minute delay might have kept them on the road. A minute might have cost us my brother's life, too. The silent tick of an invisible clock kept my brother safe, but it did not spare him what he had to witness.

I was not there. I did not have to see it.

On Christmas Eve, 1996, a bright moon illuminated the desert floor. Beneath the parachute back at camp, we huddled around the warmth of a fire and sat with the emptiness of the night: a

cold breeze, clear skies. We were quiet. We seemed to be waiting, but we were living. We opened one present and sat again in the stillness.

"Come here," my father said to me and my brother.

We walked over. He wrapped his arms around both of us and hugged us into his lap. We were too big, the mix of limbs too awkward, but he was insistent, pulling us closer to his chest even as we struggled to get comfortable. He smelled of the earth, strong and sweet, and of the surrounding desert: of sage and dust and a distinct smell that was all his. He smelled of things both ancient and temporary.

We squirmed; he drew us tighter. And with no record, no one but the stars and that old, ancient desert as witness, he said, "I love you. I love my family. I love you more than anything."

With his words, and the weight of all their clarity, he was grounding us, placing us in time. His words were the earth—and he was holding us all suspended, connected, while overhead the spiraling of distant galaxies exploded in wild, mesmerizing arcs. We were real. He was real. It was all before us, laid out in a world that did not require foresight or vision or a delineation between what we knew to be in the shadows and what we knew to make of them. It was the last time we would be in the wild like this again. It was our last camping trip together. A thing none of us could see.

A light breeze lifted the branches of our Christmas ocotillo, making the ornaments dance. Thinking of those sheep, folded tight in sleep and alone in the desert beyond, I leaned my head against my father's chest to feel what he felt. I did not feel the faulty beat of his heart, the channels gasping and the arrhythmic pounding, but I was happy under the ruffle of our parachute, safe within the definitions of our lives, away from our troubles, alone in the wilderness. I understood and accepted the solitude we sought together.

The parachute snapped against the wind, and he let us go, to find our way to the tent through the desert, to unknowingly count down our days together. My brother and I pulled ourselves off his lap. We said goodnight, and when we walked away from the fire, we were met by darkness.