O. Alan Weltzien[1]

ANOTHER COUNTRY

When the sun drooped our first day in mid-June 2003, Lynn, the boys, and I find a prized spot to park and perch in the designated Sunset Viewing Area. I hear a babble of languages as dozens sit on vehicles or stand nearby, snacking and sipping and adjusting tripod cameras and video equipment far fancier than ours. As the sun spills its yolk somewhere behind us, the deep burnt red of Uluru blazes.

Minutes pass, the primary hue darkens imperceptibly but the monolith burns brightly, illumined from within. I have seen this symphony in red before, in Utah's and Arizona's red rock canyons, but never concentrated and isolated in one arkose mass, a long irregular loaf dented by wind-smoothed side canyons and draws. Then the full moon lifts, a closing circle, from Uluru's precise middle: fat like a harvest or winter full moon, almost bulging with light, too big. It is about a week before winter solstice and I had no idea we'd see a full moon birthed from Uluru's centre, arcing gracefully to the south as Uluru's own light fades into a dusky presence. Voices have dropped as the mass of witnesses shift between their eyes and artificial optics. We have never seen this combination of lunar ecru and flaming deep red, when the rock's myriad shades, muted during daylight hours, gather into a bright force like sunlight concentrated through a magnifier, hot like a laser beam.

It is a blessing and a sign—overwhelming, too contrived an epiphany, yet I cannot resist it. I don't try.

Days later, another. As sun's disc nears a fin of the West MacDonnell range, one afternoon's end, I walk up *Untyeye Artwilye,* Anzac Hill, at the north end of Alice Springs's town centre. Sounds dissipate and heat drops as other visitors climb quietly. Voices remain muted. From the top I see thirty miles to the west, my eyes tracing the outline of the West MacDonnells, part of an ancient mountain range that rises, like the plates of a stegosaurus, out of the deserts stretching in all four quadrants. The MacDonnell ranges spread roughly east-west, a wavering line of ridges and gorges at the continent's geographical center. Beyond them, vast deserts—the Simpson, the Tanami, the Gibson, the Great Victoria—extend for hundreds of kilometers, their surfaces prickled with spinifex and a few other hardy shrubs.

My eyes range over the leafy precincts of Alice Springs, a seriously remote small city by anyone's measure at Australia's heart. 'The Alice' is bordered on the east by the Charles and Todd Rivers, but rivers here mean, mainly, sandy beds. Water flows rarely, and I stretch my cognitive category to include dry rivers as rivers—the kind of lens adjustment required of anyone visiting the Red Centre, as Aussies call it. British-Aussie novelist Nevil Shute wrote *A Town Like Alice* (1950) seven years before reaching an international audience with his dystopic *On The Beach.* (1957)

Atop the hill my gaze lingers above the immediate vicinity of tree canopies. Light has settled into two distinct broad bands: a hot pink flushes luridly below a cool wash of pale blue. Neither wife nor sons joined me for this tramp—we'd been driving and walking all day and they felt tired. I have seen nothing like this popsicle before, except possibly in Arizona. My eyes keep shifting along and above those ridge lines, lost in that two-band, hot-cold light that sustains itself longer than I imagine. My eyes deceive me, I think. Part of a random, rapt gathering, we devour the split-color sunset and near-silence, burning it into visual memory. I had read before about the light in the Red Centre, as the southern district of Australia's Northern Territories is known. I had read that for some Aussies, it remains their favorite landscape, no matter its remoteness. I know the

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peculiar clarity of desert air and I live on the east slope of the Northern Rockies' Continental Divide, also a land of little rain. But not like this.
The pink flush inevitably fades, the lighter blue sinking, replaced by indigo shades higher up. Stars pop out all over as I descend and walk along Todd Mall to our room. Later I summon that light show at will, returning the band of loud pink above that ancient mountain range cut by ancient gorges and dry rivers. At such times in such places, geologic time overwhelms human time. Both privileged and wholly insignificant, we imaginatively traverse eons, glimpse into that country of archaic rock and light. Like spending days hiking and camping in Arches National Park, amidst rock mastodons and its signature airy arches. It proves the Red Centre's parting signature for me.
I knew we would reach Uluru, a global magnet I'd first read about many years ago; the subsequent days in the West MacDonnells and Alice Springs deepened my understanding, from Uluru and Kata Tjuta, of the country of ancient rock and light. When you step across a line of vision, sometimes you step back into the habits of 'regular' life reluctantly.
Monoliths demand awe and I happily don pilgrim's clothes.
I'm a climber, though, and I've got a problem I won't face for a while.

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I knew that, once we realized we would be living in Australia half a year, I wanted the family to reach the Red Centre—by car. Not a plane flight that spanned half a continent in a few hours. We'd make the time, transit the skin of that "sunburned country" to its interior heart—pilgrims in a rental car, approaching in an older, slower way though, of course, nowhere as slow as atop camels, first imported from Afghanistan in the mid-19th century. Our "caravan" moved above 100 kph. Tourists with inevitably limited time usually fly in to Alice from Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne, or Adelaide. I held out about driving to Uluru and the Alice. I wanted us to taste the Outback, whatever risks it held.
Maybe I apply the clichéd judgment, saving the best for last, only retrospectively, after our return to the USA. In our months in Australia, every trip broadened our palette, filled our senses with new cockatoos, new river red or snow gums, new expressions of endless coastline, mostly uncrowded. We certainly did not believe one region or journey better than another. Yet we consciously saved our longest trip by car until the Aussie winter, when temperatures stayed below 25 degrees Centigrade. It has proven our longest foray into desert, officially Australia's largest landscape (70% of continent), and as certain breeds of ascetics, mystics, malcontents, painters, and writers have always known, in deserts one's vision changes.
I was in my fifth month as a visiting scholar in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences (affectionately known as the "Hussies"), Faculty of Arts, at Charles Sturt University. Wagga Wagga, our temporary home, prides itself on being the largest city in interior New South Wales, across the Great Dividing Range. I had been given an office in CSU's Marchant Hall on the campus, located a few kilometers north of Wagga and the westward-flowing Murrumbidgee River that borders Wagga on the north. Though we had a small flat, we walked to Wagga's Bayless Street in fifteen minutes, and felt comfortable in the city. My wife, Lynn, home-schooled our younger son, Joel, then in the third grade; older son, Alec, took the needed high school courses online. Thanks to caring mates, both sons had found mates of their own to hang out with. Because I taught very little, we had plenty of days to explore, and explore we did. Wagga became our centre from which we traversed many radial spokes in a ten-year-old Hyundai.
Since childhood I've been obsessed with maps, and love nothing more than planning trips of various lengths. I'm an unreasonable planner, always wanting to visit more museums or historic or geologic sites, more art galleries or wineries, than is possible, so my family and my body grudgingly suffer my desires. I grow too excited as though I'm an endlessly porous sponge, capable of absorbing indefinitely . I fool myself, of course, and my family complains, but Lynn tries to forgive me. We took many trips to Sydney, and extensively explored New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania, and South Australia, and even drove to Brisbane and spent some days near Cairns. We poked about in the Riverina, closer to Wagga, and I jogged the 30-km. Wiradjuri Walking Tract that girdles Wagga.
But looming in my mind's eye, Uluru lured as it lures visitors from all corners of the globe. Visible from space and credited with being earth's largest monolith, it pricks the imagination and beckons, like a giant redstone

Siren, many to draw near. One day in early June, we four packed the University Toyota Prado, for "private hire," and drove, once again, west on the Sturt Highway which parallels, in part, the Murrumbidgee and Murray Rivers. Australia's major highways—concentrated, like the population, in the southeast and east—number few enough that they bear names. Sturt, who also got the university named after him, was one of a handful of white explorers pushing well west of the Great Dividing Range in the early 19th century, he and his men discovering the thirsty meanings of Outback. The Sturt highway threads across the Hay plain and through the Mallee scrub district, crossing the Murray River before reaching South Australia.

Our family had reached Broken Hill and Silverton, of "Mad Max" fame, the sunset from the latter, a wash of oranges, a warm preview of the culminating light show at Alice. The Stuart Highway, though, pulled our eyes as we hurled north in that Prado, whose double tanks gave us a range of 1500 kilometers before a fill-up. Having read about the Outback for years, now we were in it, its endless flatness replacing the legions of artsy photos and worming my anxiety. No place for a breakdown. We didn't drive slowly, no one does. "Road trains" (triple tractor-trailer rigs) occasionally thundered by just as we "overtook" trains, an irregular leap-frogging progress. We spent one night in Coober Pedy (*kapa piti,* or "white man in a hole"), the self-styled--in inevitable local brag--"opal capital of the world." Alec and Joel thought it funny that many "buildings" and businesses existed underground, and their own song became a family joke: "I'm goin' to Coober Peedy / gonna live in a hole / in the groaawwnnd." Due to surface temperatures much of the year, Coober Pedy thrives, in part, below the surface. Coober Pedy boasts "Desert Cave," "The World's Only Underground International Hotel," and, in classic Aussie fashion, "the Big Winch."

Even from the safety of the Stuart, my breathing rate occasionally bumps up. For all its romance, the Outback—the continent's flat hot dry interior—pricks my stamina. Home place of aborigines for millennia, its big deserts demand careful preparation and attention from white visitors. A minimalist landscape ruled by flat planes, a hot dry ocean, a "flyover" terrain that could easily swallow us whole. To reach the continent's heart we pass through huge precincts of "no place," bereft of any cues of habitation. Part of me holds my breath as we push north even as another part revels in seemingly limitless space. Easy to disappear here. We cross the deserts to encounter something essential.

Having passed into Northern Territory—Oz's least populous state, with the highest proportion of aboriginal peoples—at Erldunda we turn left onto the Lasseter Highway, the pilgrimage route that reaches, after another 242 km, Yulara, or Ayers Rock Resort. Before halfway there, the flat-topped dome of Mt. Connor, a monolith as high as Uluru (863m.), rises out of the terrain, commands our eyes, a preview to its far more famous neighbor farther west. It shimmers in a thin winter haze, a spectacular interruption to the challenging horizontal world. Tens of kilometers later, Uluru mushrooms south of the highway, matching or exceeding its endless reproduced images. My heart lurches as we approach Yulara, my eyes barely track the road.

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In 1958, when Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park was dedicated, less than 3,000 visitors came; the subsequent half century braids a common narrative of affluence, pilgrimage tourism, desire, and infrastructure. By the mid-1980s the Ayers Rock resort, a self-contained village, opened to accommodate the thickening river of visitors; in 1985 Australia's Governor General returned the National Park to Anangu peoples, and since then the Park has been co-managed by Anangu staff and "Parks Australia"; in 1987, it was listed as a World Heritage Site; and by the year we drew near, about 500,000 others joined us.

One morning before dawn, Alec rides with me to the Sunrise Viewing Area, a couple of hundred metres off Uluru's northeast edge. As with the sunset panorama, we've plenty of company who breathe quietly and pan with binoculars. Chilly but not cold. We witness, as expected, the symmetrically reversed light sequence. Low sunbeams radiate Uluru's bulk and fire the red dun shades of night. Rapidly the ochre and terra cotta walls gleam their brightest, then fade slightly as the sun ascends, the atmosphere-as-prism no longer favoring the red end of the spectrum. At Uluru, sunset and sunrise resemble a diurnal rite wherein visitors, for a brief time, become seekers before blazing rock.

In the coming days, like tens of thousands before and after us, we walk and pause, poke and pry, try to come to terms with Uluru and Kata Tjuta, somehow fit them into the cumulative picture galleries of our lives. One day we drive the 42km. west to Kata Tjuta (Pitjantjatjara, "many heads"), known in English as the Olgas:

German botanist Baron von Mueller, one of the first whites to visit the region, named the formation after his patron's consort. The first white to climb Uluru, William Christie Gosse (1873), named Uluru "Ayers Rock" after the then-Secretary-General of the South Australia colony. The usual colonial story of appropriation, and ever since, the pair of imported names compete with the native ones: by the last century's end, the native names have rightly taken precedence.

At the two "car parks" near Kata Tjuta, a handful of cars—a fraction of the number circling Uluru. Alec, our older son, hikes with me; Lynn and Joel opt to walk short distances only. On the short track into Walpa Gorge, we step lightly across smooth pavements to a stand of spearwood, tiny green oasis below soaring red domes. My neck creaks as I tilt upwards, our cheeks brushed by softly sighing breaths of hot breeze. In this acoustic chamber I hear wind puff before I feel it. On the longer walk up to Karingana Lookout and beyond—Alec opting to stay with the others—I trace prominent fissures in massive rock plains and my hands rub exposed sections of conglomerate (including granite and basalt gravels)—the primary rock of Kata Tjuta. The looming rock towers remind me of Monument Valley, except they pile closer to the track. Beyond the Lookout to the north, in a more open section, I see no one along the track as my eyes peer into the distant heat haze. I stand on an edge, face "nothing," borrow Robert Frost: the deserts are lovely, long and thick / And I've kilometres to go before I sit. I drink more water, gradually descend, beyond the trail junction, to meet my sons walking towards me.

Our second day in the Park, we tour the Cultural Centre, according to the Park *Visitor Guide*, "a free form structure built from locally made mud bricks. It resembles the two ancestral snakes Kuniya and Liru. The stories of these two ancestral snakes give meaning to the southern side of Uluru." In the Centre's central courtyard, several Anangu cook bush food and paint in the distinct 'dot matrix' narrative style—visually abstract yet storied. The Centre, like the *Visitor Guide,* instructs First World tourists in *Tjukurpa*, central tenet in the Anangu belief system. *Tjukurpa* embraces past, present, and future time, *Tjukuritja* (ancestral beings) as well as religion, morality, and law. *Tjukurpa* manifests itself in a pervasive ethic of stewardship, the legal manifestation of which is the Anangu's shared management of the Park. Visitors, unsurprisingly, absorb the anthropological lesson variably: though most act with sensitivity, every day some display, usually not egregiously, their indifference.

The Centre teaches what the *Guide* repeatedly states, the first time near the beginning, *Nganana Tatintja Wiya*, ("We Don't Climb)." The facing page announces, "Don't Risk Your Life" followed by the international warning sign (red triangle, black exclamation mark within), and "Please Don't Climb the Rock." These pages, placed before the discussion of *Tjukurpa,* include testimony by three "Traditional Owners" and stress its dangers (e.g. over thirty-five dead) and sacrilegious nature—a point the Cultural Centre emphasizes. Historically, Mala men ("the hare-wallaby people") walked up Uluru from Mala Puta, at its west end; since 1873, whites have followed the same route, but of course their purposes vary. And there's the rub. So the Anangu discourage but don't prohibit, conceding a First World tradition of over a century.

I'm a climber, though, and I've got a problem that now looms like Uluru, whose circumference we first trace.

I remember the account of Gary Snyder, Philip Whelan, and Allen Ginsburg circumambulating Mt. Tamalpais, chanting and bell ringing at each station. Sans bells, Alec and I circumambulate Uluru from its west end, strolling in a clockwise direction. We join a group on the Mala Walk led by an Anangu guide who weaves *Tjukurpa* with botany, stresses the sacred precincts of specific caves and waterholes (e.g. Kantju Gorge). We traverse Uluru's north faces and at its east end, Lynn and Joel meet us for a picnic lunch on some flat slabs. We turn along the south side, pausing at the Mutitjulu Gorge and waterhole. Here the primary ancestral beings, Kuniya (a woma python) and Lira (a western brown snake, poisonous) battled, their struggles marking the landscape (cf. the Cultural Centre's design). As at Kantju, a mini-oasis dependent upon the miracle of a pool of water, the river red gums and mulga trees shading us just as they've shaded Anangu for millennia. At the base of certain creases, just below parallel fissures or scaly walls of arkose, flourishing plant and animal communities—rich pockets of life at the edge of monolith and endless desert, like the *kopjes* in Serengeti National Park.

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Back at the big Mala Puta car park, a bit weary from the walk, I face my choice. Alec, heeding the polite injunctions from the Cultural Centre, decides not to climb. I'm on my own.

Can I separate myself from First World peakbaggers though I'm one myself? Will my quiet manner and reverential mindset quiet my dilemma? I recall climbing Bearpaw Baldy, in north-central Montana, a steep short hike to the highest point of that island range. I saw no one as my eyes traced the big gouge of the Missouri River to the south. A couple of years later I heard a Chippewa Cree in Havre explain that this peak is closed to whites. No signs exist, but I blushed anyway as though caught in the act. I've always wanted to climb Chief Mountain, near Glacier National Park's east edge and *omphalos* for the Blackfeet Nation, though I won't be fasting for days and nights. My vision quests are far less ambitious. When young I thought climbing peaks enhanced the ego, affording visual perspectives on a lower world. In recent decades, though, I've come to realize, in company with ascending pilgrims past and present around the globe, that it's a matter of self-effacement rather than self-aggrandizement. Walking meditation, in Zen Buddhist tradition, represents a mode of worship with one's legs and lungs. Since adolescence I worship in the mountains.

So I draw breath and climb, damping down my disquiet. Every day, many display cultural insensitivity or, at least, subdue their misgivings. We bear no resemblance to old Mala Men but I like to think my purposes overlap, at least a bit, with theirs. I hope I have sorted through self-deception. The initial section, moderate angle, is the steepest, and those walking up or down cling to a cable anchored, every ten-fifteen metres, by short iron posts sunk in the stone. My shoes push against hard-worn steps, not unlike those old Anasazi indentations threading steep sandstone all over the Southwest. The scene resembles the Chilkoot Pass scene, an antline of miners, in Charlie Chaplin's *The Gold Rush*. But it's past mid-afternoon and the volume has dropped. I rise quickly, breathe faster, and disappear over the verge. White paint stripes abundantly mark the route, and I recall similar stripes over stone in the Adirondacks and high on Greece's Mt. Olympus—another pilgrimage. No off-trail here.

The route dips through small plunge pools, pockets of plants, and rises easily. I note the monolith's folds and creases from above, and in well under an hour, I have reached the cairn. Oddly, no one else here, 863m. above sea level, as though arranged for private communion. Eyes and body slowly circle as I trace the smoothened curves and folds of sandstone that plunge, at the foreground's edge, out of sight. Beyond, I pan the desert, part of the Katiti Aboriginal Land Trust, searching Lake Amadeus to the north and Mt. Connor's block to the east. Puffs of warm wind sigh past me. I have never stood atop such a scene before: an island range of one, giant redrock beacon that draws together the surrounding desert and its people, and briefly, visitors from afar. How far can I see in this horizontal yellow? My vision has tilted again in this desert winter air and old rock. For brief moments, I step across into this alien landscape, a country inhabited by Anangu, according to anthropologists, for tens of thousands of years. Through my shoes I have touched Uluru, circling then rising above. A transitory speck, I shiver inside, drawn like a palmer to these glimpses into broader, inconceivable spans of time, the storyline of geology's epochs and eons. I step out of my time.

At this hour the reds and browns pulse dully, but I know they will glow when the sun drops. I give thanks, follow the white stripes in reverse, descend quickly and join my family. In the coming days we will hike Kings Canyon (Watarrka National Park) and Palm Valley (Finke Gorge National Park), and Alec and I will watch rock wallabies drinking and playing in Redbank Gorge, Ormiston Gorge, and Serpentine Gorge.

Years later, when our seasons Down Under feel slightly out of focus, unreal, the Red Centre lights up in my memory's slides, the austere dance of light and rock starkly etched. In Australia's heart, a bulging monolith and a spiny mountain range, like ancient altars, puncture the pervasive flattened world. We stepped close and I aspired. I have never recovered.