

# A Lookout's Journal

**Ruminations on a  
Western Landscape**

**By Edward Abbey**

*O*ur most famous—and cantankerous—contemporary writer on the American West, Edward Abbey, died in 1989 leaving a legacy of many thoughtful and exuberant books. Much of his time was spent thinking about man and his relationship to the natural world. Especially in his early career, Abbey found firetowers a great place to conduct his observations. We have adapted this piece from his posthumously published journals.

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This article was adapted from *Confessions of a Barbarian*: Selections from the journals of Edward Abbey edited by David Petersen (Boston: Little, Brown and Company) published in October, 1994.



September 5, 1966—Mt. Harkness, California

Home in a stone tower: fire lookout. All around me spread the drab-green coniferous forests of Northern California. West stands the plug-dome volcano of Lassen Peak, northwest the shining Fuji-like form of Shasta, fourteen-thousand-feet high and eighty miles away.

September 13, 1966—Mt. Harkness

The deer (blacktails)—bony scrawny starving things, like giant mice, stare at me in motionless fascination when I play flute for them—not amused or amazed, or puzzled or frightened or pleased but simply...fascinated: silent wonder. They gather around the lookout and in the crater below in herds, as many as fifteen or sixteen at a time, counting fawns.

There is also a pair of golden eagles nesting nearby. Every day I see them soaring and sailing around the mountain, hovering in the wind or plunging down like projectiles below the rim into the woods—I have not been able to observe them catching anything.

May 22, 1968—Atascosa, Coronado N.F., Arizona

A golden eagle floated by under the kitchen window this morning as I poured myself a cup of

coffee. Hot, dry, windy weather.

This lookout is merely a flimsy old frame shack perched like an eagle's nest on a pinnacle of rock 6,235-feet high. Built in the 1930s by the CCC, of course. Held together by paint and wire and nuts and bolts. Shudders in the wind.

I'm sitting here idle as an abbot, wearing my huaraches. My Jesus shoes. Doing nothing much positive except letting my whiskers grow and brooding, of course, as always, over the anguish and delight of my tormented heart. (The frivolous forties.)

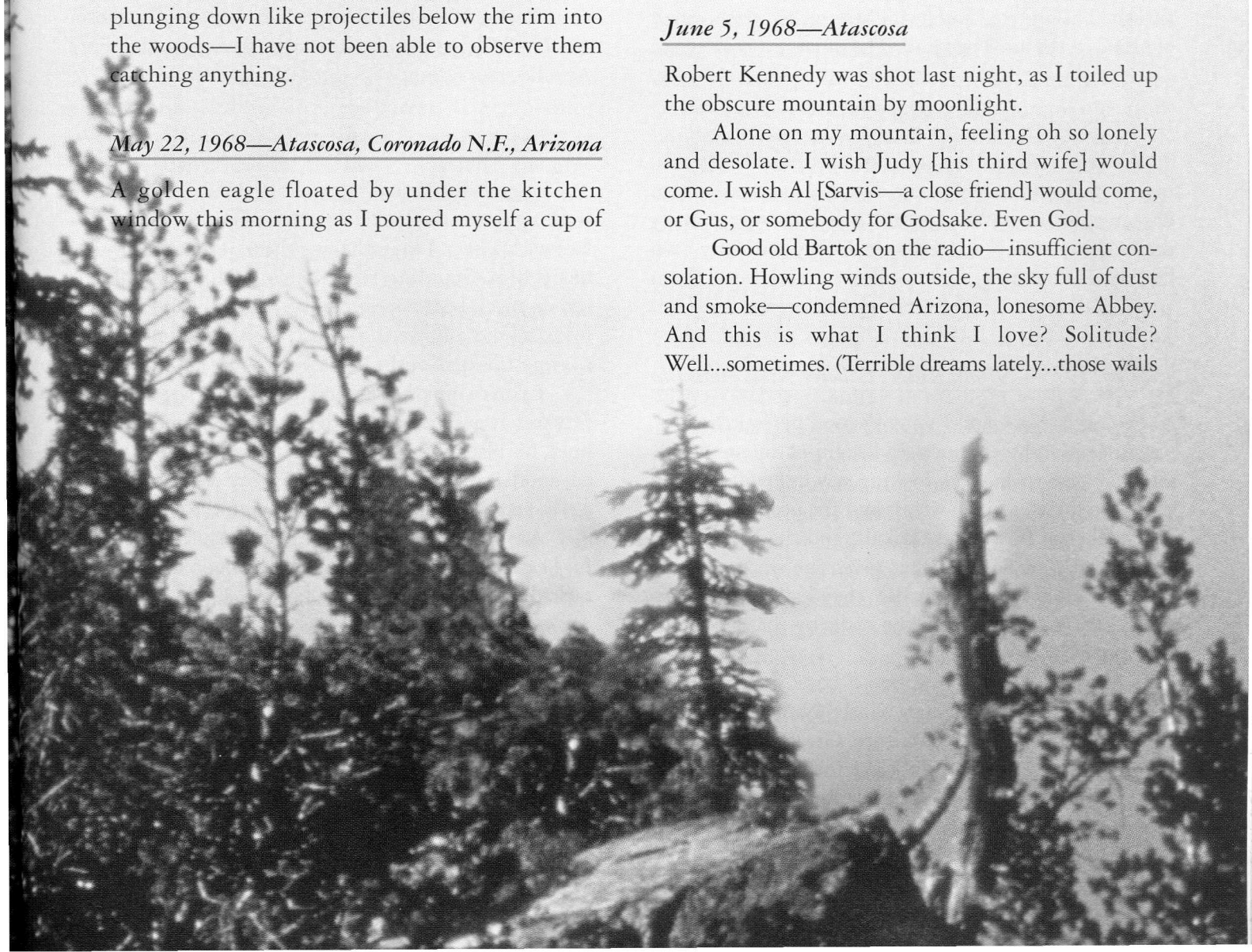
Well then. I left Organic Pop Caucus National Monument on [April] the 21st, went soon after to Denver where I whored it for a week, trying to peddle my book. TV, radio, a public speech that was at least provocative enough to rouse the hackles of some and cause others to walk out (tax motherhood; get out of Vietnam; resist the draft, etc.). Ravished by Denver, my heart cracked like a nut.

June 5, 1968—Atascosa

Robert Kennedy was shot last night, as I toiled up the obscure mountain by moonlight.

Alone on my mountain, feeling oh so lonely and desolate. I wish Judy [his third wife] would come. I wish Al [Sarvis—a close friend] would come, or Gus, or somebody for God's sake. Even God.

Good old Bartok on the radio—insufficient consolation. Howling winds outside, the sky full of dust and smoke—condemned Arizona, lonesome Abbey. And this is what I think I love? Solitude? Well...sometimes. (Terrible dreams lately...those wails



of anguish.) Gotta get to work on my masterpiece.

A great grimy sunset glowers on the west. Plains of gold, veils of dust, wind-whipped clouds. The big aching tooth of Baboquivari far and high on the skyline.

Oh Lord have mercy. Mercy. Not justice. Mercy. Forgive me if you can my meanness and selfishness, my cruelty and stupidity. For I cannot. Darkening now. The light is going out. I cannot.

### July 5, Atascosa

Woke up this morning on an island in the sky, surrounded by clouds. Wild swirling banks of vapor, flowing and passing to reveal brief glimpses of rocky crags, dripping trees, the golden grassy hillsides far below.

### June 6, 1969—North Rim, Grand Canyon, Arizona

Back at the old stand again. The cabin in the woods. The steel tower. The sea of treetops, spruce, fir and aspen. The violet-green swallows and the hermit thrush. The crooked forest. Lightning, red flash, smell of ozone in the air. The wind. The quietness between....

### June 26, 1969—North Rim

The sweet clear silver song of the hermit thrush, morning and evening, every day. A flute music from dark woods. (from the heart?) A bittersweet, faintly melancholy tune—so perfectly in key with my own feelings. The bird is common here, I hear them singing all around...and yet very seldom see one.

### July 10, 1975—Numa Ridge, Glacier N.P., Montana

So here we are, me and Renny [Renee, his fourth wife], seven-thousand feet above sea level, in a square wooden shack on a rocky peak looking down down down on a million acres of piney woods and the peculiar, milky-green lakes of Bowman, Akokala, and the North Fork of the Flathead River. What gives the water here its strange color? "Glacial milk," they call it, the powdered rubble ground from the rocks by the ponderous movement of the glaciers.

Above us loom a number of bare, grim, craggy, snow-dappled peaks: Reuter, Kintla, Numa, Chapman, Carter, Rainbow, Square, Vulture, Great Northern and Logging. The highest in sight is Kintla, over ten-thousand feet. The roughest-looking is Rainbow, which has been climbed by only thirty-five people in all of human

history. So far as known. I shall be thirty-sixth.

Wildlife: We've seen a few black bears, one cow moose, deer, a golden eagle. Mountain goat tracks on the trail, also elk droppings and bear shit. There is indeed, as Doug [Peacock, author of *Grizzly Years*], says, something "titivating" about a woods wherein Grizz, *Ursus arctos horribilus*, is known to prowl. One stays alert. One pays attention to strange noises back in the brush. One looks about for climbable trees.

Renee is a delightful companion in this situation. Cheerful, clever, sharp and unafraid, and growing prettier every hour—I have never loved her as much as I do now. How fortunate I am, ugly hairy smelly morose old man, to have so good and strong and beautiful a wife.

Bears, beans, bores and bugs: Numa Ridge Lookout.

### May 7, 1977—Aztec Peak, Arizona

Lookout job. A beautiful place: yellow pine and aspen and spruce, eight-thousand feet elevation. Spectacular view: Roosevelt [Reservoir], Superstition Mountains, Four Peaks, Mogollon Rim, Salt River Canyon, Sierra Ancha Wilderness, buttes and mesas of the Fort Apache reservation.

### June 23, 1978—Aztec Peak

The longest day. Yesterday evening, about 7 P.M., while walking down the lookout trail, I came almost face-to-face with a bear. I knew he was there, in the brush—I'd heard him. Standing still, waiting, this big golden-brown black bear appears, quite suddenly and silently, from behind a flowering locust. Head weaving a little, sniffing the air. Cousin Weak-Eyes.

I don't think he saw me, though he was less than fifty feet away. Fleas and midges hovered 'round his furry head, his black muzzle. He looked like a big dog. I waited; another moment and he caught my scent, snorted in alarm and rushed off, crashing through the woods.

Anyone who'd destroy that rare, beautiful, delightful beast for the sake of a rug on the floor should be tacked to barn wall for a dart board.

### July 22, 1978—Aztec Peak

The Windhover: Watching a redtail hawk poised on the wind; wind at twenty-five to thirty-five mph; the magnificent bird balanced in space, head twitching back and forth, watching below; the bird suddenly veers down, swooping, not in a dive, but feet first, legs



dangling—disappears into pines—reappears with a small brown thing wriggling in one talon—the hawk drops, loses the mouse a moment, which falls diagonally, blown by the wind, back toward earth—hawk plunges after, re-snatches it, swoops to the top of a pine tree—pecks at mouse—glimpse of blood, red flesh—then gulps mouse whole, swallows, takes off again high into space, hovering about, indifferent to my movement and glasses.

In its swift sudden descent, the bird resembles a lady in skirts jumping off a bridge.

Saw my first authentic peregrine falcon yesterday. Exciting and beautiful, a true prince among birds, harassing the vultures—once I saw feathers fly. The falcons swoops, veers, hovers, planing and skating on the air; the vultures soar and sail, wings wagging in a shallow dihedral vee.

[I also saw the peregrine] eating a mouse in mid-air. Hovering and stooping, at terrific speed, head-first (unlike redtail) into the forest. It perched for awhile on a nearby pine, where I was able to make positive identification: the black mustache, the gray back, the narrow tail (fanned out in flight), the pinkish, speckled breast.

Dark clouds, a lightning storm beyond.

Do I want to be a hawk or a falcon? No; I've had enough of extreme passion, anger, horror, pride and victory in this life; I'll settle for the contemplative insouciance of the turkey buzzard. Neither a Stoic nor an Epicure, but a Cynic. A Zen cynic.

### September 7, 1978—Aztec Peak

It occurs to me, now and then, that my solitary life here on the lookout much resembles my old fantasy of living alone in a stone hut deep in the desert—carrying water, wandering naked, reading, writing, thinking, playing flute, dreaming, doing nothing at all; simply being.

But one does not really do much thinking alone. Not much. Most thought, I suspect, is generated in the company of others—by problems, conflict, disorder. Of course, in a way, reading and writing (if published) serve as a fairly adequate substitute for face-to-face contact. In some ways it's better, espe-



cially for slow-witted types like me who do not function well in extemporaneous debate.

Heidegger in his alpine cabin. Zarathushtra in his cave. Jesus alone in the wilderness. Nietzsche alone in his madness. The silent monks of the Crystal Mountain....What do they know that we don't? They may be simply hiding from their creditors—or from their wives. My wife has long suspected that the holy beggardom of Hindu mystics, adopted in mid-life traditionally, was mainly an excuse to desert the care, trouble and aggravation of wife and family.

All solitude, too long endured, becomes madness.

### September 26, 1979—Aztec Peak

My next-to-last day here. Probably my last season also. Not that it seems less beautiful than before—it has never been more beautiful!—but I have become bored, restless, anxious for new adventures. This job is too confining. I must explore the remainder of our glorious Southwest before it's all overrun and destroyed.

Oh Gawd, there's so many of them, these lovely and lonesome, wild and way-off places. And all, apparently, under the sign of DOOM. The Doomsday book.

### September 27, 1979—Aztec Peak

Owls and bats swoop around this tower at twilight. And the giant Luna moth, big as a hummingbird, with its red eyes shining in my light.

Night. The west wind moans and mumbles outside the windows of my tower, feels and gropes and fumbles at the door. The unrelenting, unceasing, eternal wind.

The eternal is now. The present moment, fully lived, is the eternal; the only eternity we can know. The purpose of art is to fix those moments for all eternity. Or as long as eternity endures. Eternity is but a moment.

Mysticism is a relaxation of the mind. "God" is a substitute for thought. The supernatural is a failure of the human imagination and an insult to the majesty of the real. Imagination may be only a substitute for understanding.

Death: I fear dying, pain, suffering, but I do not fear death. The earth has fed me for half a century; I owe the earth a meal....