

# BREATHING SPACE

“I don’t know if I could live in the woods, my horizons lost,” Craig Childs writes. “I think all the shadows would eat me. Who doesn’t need to breathe, to take in big gulps of the sky? No wonder viruses hit the lungs, considering the close quarters we tend to live in, breathing each other’s breath. We need air. We need space.”

AN ESSAY BY CRAIG CHILDS

Sandstone buttes reach skyward in the Navajo Nation’s Monument Valley, as viewed from Hunts Mesa.  
DEREK VON BRIESEN

WE ALWAYS BELIEVED THAT IF YOU COULD SEE SOMETHING, you could get there. In the Southwest, that's a tricky proposition. That mountain or mesa ahead of you is probably on the other side of countless washes, pouroffs, plunges, cliffs, crags and ravines that you can't see. The first Spaniards to encounter the Grand Canyon believed they could just get to the other side, and that the big red river toiling down in the bottom was just a creek. They found that to not be true. The land is rougher than it looks, and it already looks rough. But you will get there. It just takes time.

When the pandemic began rising like a wave in the United States, I was teaching a backcountry archaeology program just over the border from Arizona into Utah. Hiking from butte to ridge top, we could see into my home state of Arizona; or across the Four Corners to New Mexico, where my family's from; or next door to Colorado, where I live now. When the world gets topsy-turvy, you think of such things: where you are, what is familiar around you. We kept an eye on daily airplane traffic, seeing the usual contrails, which meant civilization was ticking along at its customary pace. Sporadic cell signals informed us that the numbers were rising, and the best option for us, for now, voiced by every dusty, unshowered participant, was to continue in isolation until the program was officially done.

A Hopi scholar was scheduled to meet us, but the Hopi mesas in Arizona locked down, a move to save precious lives. A Ute scholar on her way to our location was turned back in the same manner. Small Colorado Plateau communities were coming in tight to weather the storm.

We were a pint-size version of community, sitting around a fire at night, sleeping in our own tents along a cottonwood creek. We knew from the numbers we'd been hearing that as soon as we came out of the backcountry, we'd each have to hurry home, counties closing behind us.

THE SUBJECT OF THE BACKCOUNTRY COURSE was "ancient civilization of Pueblo ancestry," people a thousand or two years ago who built on the land to see and be seen. Their rubble mounds of masonry great houses and high-placed towers are positioned to sometimes look out over a hundred miles. On the tilted back of a mesa dark with junipers and piñons, we explored the crumbled rooms of what once was a three- or four-story complex aligned with the cardinal directions, its walls originally built like a compass. Now it's a hill of fallen stonework peppered with broken pottery, thorny wolfberry bushes grown up through everything. We were looking at A.D. 1150, shards of painted pottery on the ground, brushstroked with thin black lines, the thinness telling of a century before potters applied thicker, bolder lines on their pots and jars — the artwork evolving over time and maddeningly beautiful. We reached to the ground and thumbed through windows of what these ceramics originally looked like, complex symmetries of triangles and interlocked spirals, clan symbols and checkered flags. You could hold some up to the horizon, matching lines of paint to the lines of surrounding states.

People taking the program were mostly from far away — Georgia, Texas, etc. — but they'd been traveling here for years, some



A remote overlook offers a view of a rainbow in Northern Arizona's Paria Canyon. | GARY LADD

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taking classes, some wandering the desert of the Four Corners on their own, sweeping beneath the towering buttes of Monument Valley in Arizona or walking the beige cliff bands of Chaco in New Mexico. They treat the place like a refuge, the thing they look forward to all year long, vacations spent in red dust and chop block horizons. I live here, have lived here my entire life, and I see the place the same. It is sanctuary. Where else but the sprawling West are public lands laid out like a gift to silence and space, not privately owned and hurriedly

filled, but managed with the thought that they'll be here in the future? This matters in a world crushing itself with 7 billion people going on 8, the coughing haze and congestion of humanity covering continents. Miraculously, a lot of the haze would clear over the coming months as countries around the world went into lockdown and pollution receded, elk moving onto once-crowded beaches, coyotes trotting through the streets.

Here, we have it all the time. Hawks outnumber people. You drive with a sharpened sense of the highway being



Stars make trails across the night sky in a long-exposure photo of the Mittens in Monument Valley. | KERRICK JAMES

an alien stream running through wildlife corridors, deer and badgers on the road. It's no turnpike. The Colorado Plateau, a high desert that sits on the Four Corners and encompasses a quarter or half of each state, has no large cities in its 130,000 square miles. Phoenix, Las Vegas, Salt Lake City and Albuquerque are located just off its edges. One reason may be that the place is too broken up. Driving across it can take forever. A hundred miles as the crow flies becomes 300 by highway, circumventing mountains and canyons that range from grand to impassable.

Another reason this part of the world is mildly populated is the jarring cold of winter and wretched summer heat, an inhospitable setting suited for twisted ogres of junipers and cliff dwellers. Its rivers do not play well with farming. They flood and recede — some years enormous, some nearing a trickle — and often are incised into canyons and gorges that do not welcome ditches and head gates. To grow here, you've got to think Hopi dry farming, catching sparse precipitation, planting corn deeply, praying for moisture. It is a place to stand up high and see forever around you, watching each rising thunderhead in the distance, calling the rain.

On a class out here six months earlier, working for the Crow Canyon Archaeological Center out of Cortez, Colorado, I co-taught with Hopi archaeologist Lyle Balenquah. We led our group up the steep flank of one of the Bears Ears in Utah, one of the twin buttes brick red and standing high on the Colorado Plateau, looking like the ears of a bear coming over the rise. Balenquah pointed to the southern horizon, at the farthest milky opacity in Northern Arizona, and said he could see the darkness of Black Mesa, and beyond it was the faint skim of the Hopi mesas. He was in view of home.

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I turned around, looking northeast, where I found the solitary cone of a 12,000-foot mountain in Southwestern Colorado, locating where I live along its broad skirt. If it weren't for the haze of distance, I could practically see my house. More than 200 miles apart, his residence and mine were within view, line of sight making us neighbors.

**Y**OU CAN TRIANGULATE IN THIS TERRAIN, seeing where you've come from and where you're going. I don't know if I could live in the woods, my horizons lost. I think all the shadows would eat me. Who doesn't need to breathe, to take in big gulps of the sky? No wonder viruses hit the lungs, considering the close quarters we tend to live in, breathing each other's breath. We need air. We need space.

The rising number of infections and deaths was on all of our minds as we talked about painting techniques on ancient pottery, and studied red and yellow handprints painted in hollow, echoing canyons. People who lived under the stars.

On the mesa-top site, with its pits of ancient chambers and collapsed walls, we scattered after the lecture, everyone drifting into their own horizon, eyes to the ground looking for pottery, eyes to the line of the sky looking for where we were. I'd been talking about sightlines and how Pueblo ancestors used to have fire signals that could connect hundreds of miles. From here we could see the prow of Mesa Verde in Colorado, the ragged sail of Ship Rock in New Mexico and the shadows of Canyon de Chelly in Arizona. A blaze lit in any of those places could be seen from this Pueblo great house. Archaeological evidence backs it up, rock turned orange and cracked where bonfires had been lit, messages sent to the corners of their world. Connectivity matters. What you see, what you can reach with your voice, with a fire lit on a hilltop, is part of your world. This landscape is strung together by these visual corridors as if by a mythic spider, a figure from Hopi and Navajo cosmology who wove the world into existence, each strand drawn out and anchored. If you pluck one end, the other feels it.

As people drifted over the mesa top, I noticed phones coming out. Calls were being made home, situations checked, promises made. We had line of sight up here, cell towers eking out their signals all the way to us, invisible lines in Spider Woman's growing web. I couldn't hear the conversations, but I imagined what they were saying to those they love: We're safe, we're safe, we're safe. [AH](#)