

MY STORY ABOUT Cave
THE CHANCE CONFERENCE
Vikings

November 8-10, 1996

Max Carmichael

Floor

Casino
o Cart

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Bodies

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Clark Mountain

A few years ago, Katie and I were in the desert during a heat wave. The temperature had stayed above 125 for a week, and the River was full of jet skis, so we finally headed for Clark Mountain, the highest peak in the California part of the Mojave. I had heard about it from botanists, who are interested in a relict stand of white fir near the summit, alpine trees left over from the last ice age and isolated in the midst of the desert.

Interstate 15, the road from LA to Vegas, also reaches its highest point in the saddle between Clark Mountain and the Mescal Range. Driving east up the long rise, you can see junipers and pinyons dotting the pale mountain slopes like pepper, an indication that these mountains are higher than the others. Then suddenly, at the top of Mountain Pass, your view off the road is blocked by squared-off heaps of red clay and industrial buildings: the largest rare earth mine in the western

hemisphere. I'm using rare earths to write this story, and rare earths will be used to distribute it. They're essential to our electrical and electronic hardware.

Katie and I approached the place in our usual fashion: squint at the map, which is definitely out of date; scan ahead through the windshield for "the road", as opposed to dead end arroyos and new or old trails not shown on the map; then stare up at the landscape for orientation and other clues. Finally we left the vast excavations behind and began climbing a rough track up a long narrow canyon toward forested slopes.

High up in a grove of pinyon we found cool relief, and an abandoned picnic ground furnished with industrial-size barbeques. I mean, these cast-concrete units were big enough to accommodate an entire beeve! They even had a rugged steel frame overhead equipped with a creaking chain pulley for raising the grill. And our vista was highly strategic, looking down the canyon toward the eastern playa where I-15 pierces the invisible Nevada state line.

Cave

Towering above us were shear cliffs of pink travertine, and on top of them, the legendary white fir trees. I had never seen terrain like this in the Mojave, and we were both stoked to get out and explore. We drove up a side canyon across steep meadows, entered a forest, and suddenly came out onto a slope covered with loose plates of slate where the trail disappeared. In my excitement I drove out onto the slate and stopped, and we hiked up to the head of the canyon where the cliffs formed a box wall. On the way up we spotted a cave high on the cliff, and as we got closer we could see a ladder leading to it from a ledge below.

I had heard romantic stories of desert hermits, and a cave with an old ladder leading to it, at the end of an abandoned road in a remote desert mountain range, is totally irresistible. There was no way of telling if we could reach it, so we tried. After scrambling, grasping, and levering ourselves up cracks and along narrow shelves in the travertine, we found ourselves just below the ladder - clinging to a sheer, unclimbable vertical wall.

Katie decided to walk the six miles or so back to camp to start dinner. I stuck around to take some pictures. I had heard a story about this place. I have friends who are wildlife biologists studying mountain sheep for California Fish and Game. Sheep are notoriously shy and usually keep up to a mile between themselves and intruding humans, so they're seldom seen even by the experts.

One of the Fish and Game pilots had gone down in a canyon near the peak of Clark Mountain - it could have been this one - and the recovery team of colleagues had buried him on the spot, there below those travertine cliffs. As the funeral ceremony drew to a close, one of the scientists looked up. Staring intently down at him from the top was a group of young rams, and in the middle stood something almost nobody ever sees, something the Paiutes had a special song about - the ghost sheep, a pure white ram.

Anyway, the sun was down behind the cliffs when I got back into the car to return to camp. I backed across the slate and turned downhill to circle back toward the forest, and as soon as my wheels were pointed downhill, the car began to slide straight down toward a precipice. It was like riding down a rapids of loose stone. Directly in front of me was a thin line of pinyon, and behind it, 200 feet of mountain air.

With no time to think, and essentially surfing on the slate, I managed to aim for a tree, and it did stop the car. It was my new 4WD "sport utility vehicle". After I laboriously rewound the life that had spun out before my eyes, I optimistically figured I could probably get out. But of course, a hill of loose slate is next thing to a hill of ball bearings. I tried everything and almost gave up several times, but something finally worked. After an hour of moving lots of rock by hand, and driving like I was carrying nitroglycerine, I got back to the road.

Katie had coals going and steaks out. We woofed them down by lantern glow. Then we carried my new African drums away from the light into a steep meadow facing the mouth of the canyon. Twenty miles away, out across the playa, the lights of cars flickered on the freeway. As we had countless times before, we realized

there was no way anybody out there could ever guess that this place existed, let alone imagine us, playing skin drums like “savages” below cliffs where ghost sheep lived. To almost all the people on that road, this was a barren, treeless waste, a place to be rapidly left behind on the way to more and more civilization.

Casino

I write about Clark Mountain because far below it, at the edge of the playa, is an apocalyptic installation, a place where an ambitious gathering of artists was held last weekend (I’m writing this the day after I returned). As anticipated on its web page, the conference was to be a “philosophical rave”, with its point of departure in the postmodern ravings of French theorist Jean Beaudrillard. Although I dearly love to theorize, theory has not rewarded me in life, so I had little interest in going, and had to be talked into it by a friend. I told myself it would at least be a road trip to the desert, and I was nostalgic for casinos and gambling, because the pursuit of debauchery in casinos is what had originally led me into the desert many years ago.

Between pink clay hills which anyone would consider barren (like the Death Valley of Antonioni), at the lacey edge of a white salt pan just over the invisible state line, is a totally isolated recreational complex, a group of casinos operated by one happy corporation. The complex is continually growing, because it is the gambling operation closest to Los Angeles. Like at Disneyland, a monorail and a fake steam train crisscross the freeway between buildings of all sizes and fanciful architectural styles.

The newest and tallest building is Buffalo Bill’s hotel, a very cheaply constructed but starkly beautiful hotel designed to look exactly like the mill building of a 19th-century mining camp, but on a surrealistically exaggerated scale. And towering over it is the world’s tallest and fastest roller coaster - an unavoidable challenge to the lust for going downhill fast which has hit me late in life. Like others of the new generation of rides, its track is designed to look as fragile as a spider’s web - really just a pale yellow trace across the pale blue desert sky, soaring transparently above the barren plain and its baked, brutal hills. I knew a transcendent form of

terror awaited me on that track. No matter what happened at the conference, I was about to experience something radically, viscerally new. Something which, as I knew from experience, could be as irreversible as your first real acid trip.

Showroom

Lights and bells, bells and lights. Hypnotic, continuous, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. No clocks, no windows. Walking, trying to reach your destination, just trying to move forward, you're interrupted again and again, channelled past the slots, toward the tables. People shuffling like cattle, like zombies. Change carts, drink girls, people of all ages dressed in wonderful variety. Still, there's no mistaking the artists among us.

The dark showroom. Big, even by Vegas standards. As the attendees arrive, they're absorbed into the dark, into the sound and spectacle broadcasting from the stage. At a table laden with electronic gadgetry, Spooky the DJ - from New York, for legitimacy - samples the universe from Trenton to Alpha Centauri. State-of-the-art lights scan and cycle around and over him and out into the audience while smoke creeps onto the stage, warning: this might become a rave.

In his movements, Spooky is pure insect. Settling in, I'm reminded of ants communicating through the contact of sensitive exoskeletal appendages. I'm reminded of the complex hierarchical societies of insects, which are often on my mind. Their control of breeding, analogous to genetic engineering. The transient, analogous to the transhuman.

Plastic

Shirley Tse, young artist from Hong Kong. Student of plastic, its technology and cultural significance. Dressed, of course, in plastic fabrics and a plastic coat. A cheerful talk moving easily from complex abstraction to the simple and concrete, and afterwards I go up to her and share my discovery of plastic folk art in Mexico, the American south (Yoruba bottle trees), and the Mojave (decorated creosote bushes on the Chemehuevi reservation). She knew about them all. "I've been paying attention to plastic for a long time," I realize.

For us, at least, the sharing has begun.

But let's not forget this is a conference, too, with trendy theoretical topics. One topic is chaos, and Marcella Greening, mathematician, rollerblade fanatic, and massage therapist, is here to aggressively remind us of quantum theory, the uncertainty principle, turbulence, and the fractal structures of nature: patterns that repeat themselves at every scale of participation. She relates chaos theory to semiotics, politics and society, and the uncertain identity of the individual. She speaks of our sensory/cognitive equipment, "We're pattern recognition machines." She gets personal and intimate, urges us not to fear the uncertainty: if we can escape the old linear cause-and-effect paradigm that trips us up in chaotic surroundings, we may be able to behave responsibly by harmonizing with the social patterns around us: "dance with the patterns", mindfully, in the present, not trying to anticipate.

(I've reconstructed a lot of dialog here from memory, trying to get the spirit if not the words right. Anybody who recorded it or remembers differently should correct me, and I apologize if I misrepresented anyone. Also, I think I've only used the verbs "to suck" and "to rock" once each; let me know if you find anything I've really abused.)

I remember that nobody anymore knows how or when the word "paradigm" came into academic use, let alone general use. When I was in college, Thomas Kuhn's book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* had just come out and was required reading in my liberal arts curriculum. He was subsequently thrashed by the scientific priesthood, but he was clearly responsible - that one guy led to all the recent jargon abuse by MBA types, twenty-something entrepreneurs, spin doctors, and would-be visionaries (like myself). His notion was that the progress of scientific knowledge was episodic and depended on the political acceptance of new theories, actually modes of thought that resonate with the experience of a new historical era. He called the characteristic theory of an era its paradigm, and the overthrow of a paradigm, leading to the next era, was a scientific revolution. Chaos theory, for example, is a paradigm of our era. For me, as a student of science qua human nature rather than "search for truth",

the important discovery was that science had fashions, and these fashions were part of our culture.

Marcella's message is stridently academic until the inspirational punch line, as if she were trying to find an opening into the as-yet-undefined spirit of this gathering. As Chance progresses she will appear in more and more provocative clothing, a tall, strong, well-endowed woman.

Buffet

Back out into the carnival frenzy of the casino, tracing the labyrinth toward the inevitable buffet, friend of the veteran gambler. Most Chance attendees are unfamiliar with casino fare and will venture tragically into one of the overpriced full-service restaurants where you can't see what you're getting until it's too late. From my buffet table, I stare at a big luminous sign hanging in the distance across the room, above the flashing machines and the milling bodies. Does it say CHANGE or CHANCE? Later one of the speakers will suggest they're the same.

Orgasm

Back in the showroom, there's a band. More people have arrived. I stride back and forth between the rows of tables, smiling broadly and looking for babes. I suddenly realize why I'm feeling so comfortable. The band is playing 1981 art-noise-rock, almost note-for-note what I heard from the New York band DNA in the climactic year of the first punk era in San Francisco. And the conference topics - exactly what was considered hip back then, when my old friends were in art school. In fact, we used to have events like this in San Francisco before Reagan was elected and scared everybody back into their holes. And in our first Powwow in 1986 the topics of identity, chance and error, chaos, semiotics and deconstruction, computers and cyberspace, all got covered in similar ways. Apparently people, in the words of the immortal Bono, still haven't found what they're looking for.

Then even deeper into nostalgia. Diane DiPrima, beatnik poet. A lovely interlude of personal memoir, just reading from her 1960 journals, heart-rending descrip-

tions of the contents of chaotic kitchen tables in tiny Manhattan apartments, again resonating with our first Powwow and the snare pictures of Daniel Spoerri. One of her characters is doing “publicity” - now there’s a word you don’t hear anymore!

Now in going over the program the name Allucquere Rosanne Stone didn’t ring a bell - I’m so out of touch with theory! - but I was told she’s associated with Semiotexte in some way, so I assumed she must be another self-absorbed deconstructionist. And whenever I’ve encountered people struggling with transgender identities, I’ve tried to sympathize, but I’ve always found them, too, excessively self-indulgent, maybe by necessity, so if you’d told me she was one of them, I would’ve come with the attitude.

So imagine my surprise when the spotlight opens at the back of the dark stage, a narrow cone of light falling on the back of a woman in a long black dress, and rising slowly, she walks dramatically to the front of the stage, and lighting a candle, proceeds to speak very movingly of her mother’s death, and how her mother began to speak in a lost tongue, and I realize from the voice and the body that this person is or was a man somehow, and as she moves with great honesty and directness from this story to another, and another, each story illustrating her theoretical points in the ancient way, the fireside way, with song and dance, comedy and tragedy - I find myself totally in awe of this person who comes to encourage us by example, who by painful experience has come to understand a range of human nature that I didn’t think it was possible for one person to comprehend.

She moves from world to world and takes us with her, like somebody close to myth, like the Greeks. Arriving at avatars, MUD’s, phantom limbs. She demonstrates how to move your clitoris into your hand. She gets the whole audience to help stimulate her to orgasm this way, like a stadium cheering a team. She recovers and shows us a slide of her daughter beaming in the glow of a computer screen, wondering what new realities her daughter will help define. Toward the end, like other visionaries I know and love, she goes farther than I’m prepared to follow - but why not? It’s her path. She actually says that theory is fiction, that you

can only make sense of your world through narrative. She finishes as she began, with the same story of her mother, the same words, returning to the position in the spotlight at the back. It's theater, and it's theory - but most of all, wierdly enough, it's the Powwow thing, share your story to encourage the rest of us. The credits come up and she returns to take a bow, and I finally realize this was fully scripted and choreographed. Bravo! Theoreticians finally acknowledge their audience!

Tower

Our rooms are in the Tower, and my room faces the Hill. My big window is not plate glass but is dissected by a fine black grid, a Structure measuring the picture outside, the landscape, the Hill. In the morning I get up and spread the curtains, and the Hill fills the window, barren pink clay. Halfway up it, roughly on a level with me, there's a water tank. I look down and spot a lone figure, a man purposefully climbing the steep hill. A slender man with a buzz cut like mine, dressed all in black. No one but a Chance attendee, and in his hand a notebook. I glance at my notebook on the table beside me, and I glance back at him. He's moving rapidly and effortlessly, flowing up the hill, the way I like to climb. I think about the shape he has to be in, the energy he has to have. I take in the stark hill and the tank and remember Antonioni's film Red Desert. I think about the uncountable times I've been that man, climbing a hill in the morning, because that's a thing I do, and I feel a chill.

Wristband

Registration for the Chance Conference was cheap, notification was by invitation only, apparently there is a sizable press contingent, and the event is sponsored by Art Center and the French Cultural Service. I found out through my membership in another group at Art Center. The producer of the event is Chris Kraus, a hyper chick who teaches at Art Center and looks very Charlie's Angels, which has been the hip LA style in the 90's. Except most of the chicks here confuse the 70's look by cultivating the seriously unhealthy skin tone and posture of the 80's art scene.

Sheppard Powell, a very non-90's bearded cat coming

from some sort of zen center in San Francisco, squats at the edge of the stage and throws off disconnected facts about the I Ching while Diane DiPrima keeps exchanging unreadable slides, back and forth. In the slides are matrices of hexagrams, trigrams, and binary codes. He equates divination and magic. None of it seems to connect, until gradually it becomes hypnotic. I remember Katie assembling petroglyph symbols from the Coso Range, which anthropologists say is the ancient homeland of the Paiutes, into a matrix like this. I remember matrices of symbols from the Kongo and Brazil, encountered in Thompson's *Flash of the Spirit*. Sheppard seems to be saying that matrices of symbols represent diversity in balance. He says it's important to remember the yin and yang are not opposites, but rather two sides of the same thing.

I realize that simply because a matrix is a pattern - harking back to Marcella - and a visual mnemonic or device for remembering, it resonates with other patterns in nature, on both macro and micro scales, like fractal geometry.

At last - Jean Beaudrillard, our hero! takes the stage. Unfortunately, his accent filtered through amplification makes him nearly incomprehensible. So he is to remain an icon. Presumably he's talking about *butoh*, but as usual the poetics of postmodern theory come out sounding like a Hollywood screenwriter's treatment for the next *Terminator* movie: "Massive freight cars plummet into the black river of desire, extravagant explosions highlight the text of corporate agony" or something like that. He's reading from one of his books, which are piled on a table next to the entrance.

There is a modern dance performance by a group from LA that is supposed to be *butoh*, but is mostly just modern dance. Not that I'm an expert, but I have seen real *butoh*, and everybody else I talk to agrees. Not that they're bad, they're no more boring to most of us than real *butoh*. Much of it is beautiful, and they work hard. It's the first strictly physical piece we've seen so far, and I begin thinking about it in relation to the body issues raised earlier: transgender, transhuman, theater, identity, interaction, touching. The message of *Chance "butoh"* is that the body is disjointed, stressed, and isolated from other bodies, virtualized. I think: We will

look for the messages which show us how to connect. We will try to make that connection without an intermediary, even though intermediaries are marketed and sold to us with masterful persuasion and high technology. No more profits for the middleman!

I feel something and look at my wrist. It's the Chance wristband. At registration, each of us has a hospital wristband permanently snapped on. They bear arbitrary names. They're innocuous but keep reminding you why you're here, wherever you happen to be at the time - in the shower, in bed, making love, eating a meal. It's really a great idea, although if we do it at the Powwow, I would encourage people to personalize them. I didn't want to cut mine off, but I finally did the morning after I got back to LA.

Pool

Meanwhile people continue to meet each other. The sense of time begins to slide - is it sliding toward casino time, or toward Indian time? I've immersed myself in both - maybe they're analogous. Several times I find myself talking to people who are worried about the soul-wasting addiction of gambling. I point out how important gambling is in traditional cultures, and we compare the circumstances, exchange of resources with your community versus the empty pursuit of risk. We try to compare the endless hypnotic ringing of the slots with the chanting of the Paiute hand game.

I walk around the pool, eyeing the fake stone waterfall. Some Chance people frolic happily in the jacuzzi, others lie on deck chairs fully dressed in black, still protected by their intermediaries.

Sympathy

Calvin Meyers is the spokesperson for the Moapa Paiute band, from the reservation just north of Vegas. His people are in line for America's high-level nuclear waste, which our government is intent on burying nearby at Yucca Mountain. Calvin is fighting our government persistently by learning their game and using the rules against them. He reads everything that comes out. He studied communications at UNLV and he is very grateful for the opportunity.

Like many Indians I've met who are good communicators, Calvin doesn't broadcast his knowledge or his intelligence. He talks in simple terms about the nuclear dump, about his people's relations with the government, his schooling and his family, how the reservation is set up, what kinds of jobs he's had, his ethics and morality. What would be cliches from my mouth are simple truths from Calvin. Nobody can doubt it. He is absolutely clear about who he is and how he lives. He speaks for a while, not a short time, not a rehearsed speech, but not long or rambling like other Indians I've heard at the microphone. He speaks plainly and from his heart, and returns, like Sandy Stone, to the points he made at the beginning, and ends. The house, which is full now, gives him an ovation.

Like Sandy, Calvin is a hard act to follow. Doug Hepworth, the "standup stockbroker", turns out to be not so funny after all, but what do you expect? His point about the relation of chaos theory to futures trading has already been made effectively in one sentence of the Chance program, so his overlong talk is redundant. We sit through it politely, although he veers into seemingly irrelevant territory and can't figure out how to make it relevant. Something about why do market crashes occur, it's not this, it's not that, woops, time's up. I do learn that the word "algorithm" comes from the name of a 9th century Persian mathematician.

Oh my god, who booked the music for this thing! The house is rapidly cleared as a band "from San Francisco" begins embarrassing us with something indescribably lame. I mean, there's some sympathy applause from five or six people, and the band gives up after about three songs.

Bar

By this point our sense of time is completely gone, and so is the schedule. We keep coming back to the showroom for the big event of the evening, Beaudrillard's talk, only to find nothing onstage and a small crowd divided into knots at the bar. You enter the showroom up a narrow stair and around a corner into a long, broad bar. The bar faces the hall and a railing divides the two. Tables for bookselling are set up against the

railing. I scour them to no avail, except for BIG AD magazine which advertises extremely obese men from around the country as love objects. I can accept that, but it hurts. I am the only man in my family that has not been able to get fat.

Floor

Finally somebody tracked me and Michael down “on the floor” (slang for “in the casino”) and notified us that Beaudrillard had indeed spoken and we had missed it. Nancy told us that it was impossible to follow but that occasional phrases made sense. This is in fact our experience with a lot of communications in general. So maybe Jean was modeling that. We also heard about people falling asleep and waking up and catching fragments of the talk. It’s an image I like, but I’m still looking for Jean B. to blurt something out without reflecting on it first. Of course, people say the same thing about me!

Bodies

The lighting in a room changes with the addition of bodies. Casinos are designed to use this and other effects, to interact with us, and there’s a lot to learn from that. On Saturday night the party begins with a lowering of house lights and a gathering of bodies: the Deep Space Nine of the showroom fills with people beaming in, like a rapid evacuation from some neighboring vessel that’s about to go critical. The bodies in the bar area filter the light so they appear to be onstage, mirroring the intentional stage across the hall. In between, bodies in shadow absorb the radiated light, so that the center of the hall seems to darken.

I find us a choice booth in the margins. In the showroom, there’s an upper deck with booths and a lower dance floor. The dance floor is full of chairs for the talks but has been cleared for the Party. Are we to assume there will be dancing? We know there is a band - the “Chance” Band. Michael walks up and leans into my ear, gleefully: “You know that anything we hear tonight is going to be incredibly self-indulgent!”

Oh, the foolishness of intellectuals! See, we should have got the real message from Freud: anybody who

thinks too much is sick.

Espresso Cart

Long hours later we are still sitting ignoring the band, which has fortunately been accompanied by groovy lights and drifting disco reflections. The room is really big now. Earlier we tanked up at the Espresso Cart, which is the only place in the Casino you can get decent coffee. The Espresso Cart only opens after enough people bitch, and even then there is a long delay while somebody goes to get the Espresso Chick. But it's not that simple because the Espresso Chick can't set up the Espresso Machine by herself so she goes to get the Setup Guy and brings him back and the Setup Guy sets it up and then the Setup Guy and the Espresso Chick go downstairs to get the Espresso and have a cigarette and check their messages and finally they come back with the Stuff and start cranking, at which point everybody hears this growling sound from the foam and people bolt over their chairs and trample each other .

. . .

Smoke

From time to time I get up and wander around and into the bar area. My academic friend Peter and his wife Susan are sitting on the floor against the back wall, watching the show from there. I'm considering offering to get them high, but I chicken out because they're dressed like professors, even though I know the codes have changed. Finally I decide this scene isn't going to get any more locked in, and it's time to smoke. I whip it out at the table and everybody takes serious hits: Ann, Michael, Eugenia, Nancy and me.

I turn to study the band: 5 or 6 men dressed like Vegas dealers, with vests (unfortunately not at all like the dealers here at Whiskey Pete's), and a couple girls dressed perfectly like the bargirls in the Casino. It sucks, because they prove occasionally that they can rock, but they keep avoiding a dance groove like the true art-farts they are. The best parts are when Jean or Sandy decide to come on. Then the band goes into a sweet disembodied trance. Sandy improvises on repetitive phrases of theory, but Jean, perhaps hampered by his second language, continues to read from his old

books. I roam around the “dance floor” trying to give them a whammy.

For all my irreverence, I have to say that this image will stay with me: a wide casino showroom, darkened, with spots of disco light floating dreamily across its surfaces; a cool trance groove filling the space in between; and Jean Beaudrillard, heir to the throne of French theory, a brief but leonine man dressed in a full-on Elvis jacket with brilliant sequined lapels, softly reciting his debased visions into the matrix.

Robot

At one point I go for a drink and find Peter under attack by a remote control video robot. It’s a little moon-crawler type deal, long and lowcut, with a gaping headlight and a camera on top. It keeps charging him and he keeps kicking it away, and him and Susan are cracking up. At first I think it’s controlled through the internet, which would be pretty cool, but it turns out there’s a guy with a radio control across the room. Then when I go back into the hall I see they’re displaying it on the monitor onstage. Whoop tee doo.

3:30

No dancing = no party. I don’t make the laws, I just enforce them. Somehow it becomes 3:30 in the morning and I’m at a bar somewhere far across the casino with Ann, and everybody else has gone to bed. I realize dimly that I’m hoping to go on a walk with Calvin in a couple hours, the scheduled “Post-Dawn Desert Walk”. I’m not tired at all, I’m just drunk, but I do sleep somehow. I do not expect Calvin to be on time, in the sense that if I was him I would not be on time. But Calvin fools you easily, and he’s not a drunk. He studied communications, remember?

Pericles

Calvin is about my height, a formidable man with his feet squarely on the ground. His people have always lived in the desert. “I’ve studied what they say about the Bering Straight,” he tells me, chuckling lightly. “My people don’t believe that. We have our own stories. Why would somebody else try to tell us where we come

from? Our stories say we come from this desert, right back here,” he gestures over his shoulder. Living in the desert you acquire a sense of theater and spectacle. You can point to your whole world. Without seeming to be purposeful, he leads us just out of sight of the casino, to a spot on the side of a hill looking out over the open desert toward Clark Mountain, toward the pale cliffs that are soaking up the rising sun. It’s the spot Pericles would have chosen.

He stands uphill facing out, and talks about how he lives, what kinds of challenges he faces, and how he responds to them. He’s showing without lecturing. He keeps circling back to repeat an important point. People start asking him questions. Occasionally he suggests we might be done, but there are always more questions. He hints that he’s got a powwow to go back to.

After a couple hours we naturally drift apart. I walk back a little toward the resort and then wait for Calvin, Ann, and Eugenia to catch up. We stop and talk together for a while, about movies, science, work, family. Calvin mentions that the powwow he’s going to is for Paiute veterans. He says they consider him a veteran because he fights for his people, but he doesn’t quite agree. His type of fighting is not the same, he doesn’t feel like a warrior. He mentions movie stereotypes and describes a film he saw recently. I tell him the story of Jim Jarmusch’s *Dead Man*, reconstructing it on the spot in a way I hadn’t thought of before.

Dead Man

“This story started in Arizona in the 19th century, it’s a historical drama. A young white boy from the East comes to a mining camp seeking work, but nobody knows him there and nobody will help him. He stumbles into somebody else’s quarrel and kills a man in self-defense, and he runs away into the desert with a bullet wound in the chest. He knows he’s dying and he’s all alone in a strange place.”

“An Indian comes along. He’s also an outcast from his tribe so he wanders all the time. He tells the white boy, ‘I know what you need, you need to go back home, and I’m going to take you there.’”

“The Indian takes him north and west across the desert and into the Pacific Northwest. It takes a long time, the whole movie. They float down a river to the ocean, where he knows people who make boats. He tells the people on the coast, ‘I need a boat to send this white boy home.’ They give him a beautiful carved boat and the Indian sets it in the ocean and lays the white boy in it. ‘Now you’re going home,’ he says, and he pushes it off, and the white boy goes back home across the ocean.”

We walk back together, talking, then we shake hands and he gets in his car. Myself, I’m already thinking about the Desperado, the World’s Tallest and Fastest Roller Coaster.

Vikings

When I get back to LA there’s a news story on the radio about a skeleton found by the Army Corps of Engineers in the Pacific Northwest. Scientists say it’s 9000 years old, and its racial type is European. They’re all excited to study it because it may lead to a new paradigm for human migrations or racial origins.

The local tribal people say it’s their ancestor and must be reburied, not studied, according to the new laws regarding native remains. Hundreds of archaeologists and anthropologists have signed a petition and filed suit against the Indians, saying the Indians have no proof that the skeleton is related to them. It reminds me of the engineer in Pennsylvania earlier this century who tore apart dozens of Indian burial mounds with bulldozers trying to prove they were iron foundries built by Vikings.

Guns

Across the interstate, deep in the bowels of Buffalo Bill’s casino, we take breakfast in the buffet while other Americans ride past us in little log boats through a canal lined with plaster desperados. Children and adults alike are equipped with big toy guns with which they shoot the bad guys. Michael says any ride that includes guns is fine by him.

Well

It's time to wrap up this Chance happening. Enough is enough - although I hear several people wishing it could go on much longer. We're skeptical because the program says the "Round Table Discussion" will be chaired by somebody we know to be the most arrogant and uptight theorist here. But the tribe seeks closure, so everybody presses in around the remaining speakers. Mercifully, we're told this session has to be brief because we're up against the casino's deadline.

Sheppard kicks it off - he's been asked to throw the I Ching. And of course, divination crystallizes and summarizes the weekend for us in a beautiful, concise image: a deep well symbolizing the resources we've tapped into, resonating with the depth of the actual aquifer here, and connecting to Calvin's concern over groundwater contamination by nuclear waste. Sheppard says we must be careful to lower the bucket deep enough so it reaches the water. "Your enduring meaning forms the world," he reads.

Beaudrillard says something which is typically opaque, even through an interpreter. Diane responds. "I'm not a theorist, I'm just a poet. But I know we shouldn't leave here confused or unclear. There are simple things we've discovered that we can use in our lives."

Sandy takes the microphone and begins from her seat like everyone else. "When I'm sitting here talking like this, you know I'm talking from theory." Then she gets up and prowls across the circle, gesturing and speaking slowly and forcefully, her eyes bright with excitement. "When I speak to you like this, I'm doing something quite different."

"We are all the children of Beaudrillard in some way. And like children, it's up to us to take what we've been given, and carry it farther, make it our own. Our task is to make our own theory, our own sense of the world." Marcella suddenly looms behind me to repeat her suggestion that we dance with the patterns of Chance, rather than against them. Then Chris thanks us all for coming - and there it is: nothing now stands between me and the Desperado.

Fall

All weekend the weather has been perfect - mid-seventies, crystal clear sky, light breeze. Looking up at the track, there seems to be nothing to hold the cars on. A string of cars approaches and rolls into a turn far overhead, people screaming. I make some calculations in my head. As an engineer, I'm not convinced it can work.

We end up in our seats, buckling belts and lowering bars, very quickly. Then we're off, and the cable is pulling us slowly up the vertical rise toward the highest point. The tall buildings of the hotel sink below us. Peering over the edge of the car, which only comes up to my waist, I can't see the track at all. Now all I can see is the sky and the mountains, everything painfully sharp. It's like being thrown into space.

Nearing the top, rattling over the joints in the structure, slowing ominously. So flimsy and delicate, it feels like something me and the neighborhood kids would build as an experiment. As an engineer, at no time am I convinced I will survive. Then there's the fall.