
Rebecca Lawton
Beautiful Shards
Chris Harris

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The Little Colorado River incises my right hand. An S-curve of scar begins near the deep crease of my life line, just west of the mound of flesh near my thumb. The river continues across the head line in the center of my palm. A branch of the weal that could be the mainstem Colorado flows in from the north along my marriage line. The confluence of rivers lies where that line meets the crinkly fold of my heart line. From there the main river turns west toward the webbed saddle between my middle and third fingers.

The faint, peach-colored scar meandering over my palm was once a jagged, ugly wound that lay open my hand in deep flaps of tissue and free flow of blood. Now a ridge of flesh resembling a map of the Grand Canyon memorializes the cut that might have killed me.

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My 95-year-old father lost his second wife last winter. One morning she didn't get out of bed. Her caregiver couldn't rouse her, then found no pulse. I lived five miles away at the time. I hurried over to sit with Dad while the man from Duggan's Mission Chapel wheeled Marge feet first out the garage.

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Screenwriter Charlie Kaufman suffered writer's block when tasked with adapting Susan Orlean's nonfiction book *The Orchid Thief* for film. His protagonist in the resulting *Adaptation* is blocked as well. When Kaufman did find a way through the material, he anticipated resistance to his approach. He showed his work-in-progress to no one. "I just wrote it and never told the people I was writing it for."

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In the Japanese practice of *kintsugi*, artists repair broken pottery with gold-infused lacquer. Flaws are not hidden. Instead they are highlighted and stitched together with precious metal. The repaired vessels gleam with spider-web streaks of burnished gold. The new seams across the reconstructed exteriors appear molten, even fluid.

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Over the days and weeks following Marge's passing, as family and caregivers stayed with Dad, he lived through the hours in a daze, called for his wife, clattered over linoleum floors in his walker. He'd ask the same questions several times a day—several times an hour. "Where's Marge? How old was she when she died? How long were we married?"

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I cut my hand when I slipped down the face of a knee-high boulder. The rock was dry but slick from years of river erosion and sandblasting windstorms. Instinctively, I reached to break my fall, forgetting the bottle I carried. My palm shattered the glass into sharp, curved shards. Squeezing my right hand with my left to stop the bleeding, also from instinct, I didn't look for fear I might faint. Dark-red drops splattered the sand and streaked my forearm as I held it high and ran for help.

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Before and after I cut my hand, I guided full-time, leading groups of 20 to 30 people down the river. Often we'd climb into wet, shady sidecanyons like Havasu Creek, North and South Canyons, and Matkatamiba. Once, when shimmying up the narrow gorge of Matkatamiba with our passengers, we heard soft flute music. As we ascended the quiet stream into a limestone amphitheater dotted with trees, the music played on. We found the source, the lead guide from another trip. Bearded and monastic, he was sitting cross-legged on a shelf of stone. He stopped playing to greet us. One of our people asked if he lived there. He said yes, like most Colorado guides, he considered the Canyon home.

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Oregon visual artist Susan Rochester stitches together images of the U.S.-Mexico border. She recombines satellite photos of the land on either side to create a seamless meeting of two nations. "I keep altering these images, recombining them into digital collages. To me they evoke indigenous weavings of the Southwest."

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Kaufman's director Spike Jonze had known of the screenwriter's struggle with the material. Presumably he left Kaufman to sort through the fragments of story, to see what emerged.

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Before she passed, Marge had dozed on the couch in the T.V. room while Dad solved crossword puzzles, sorted junk mail, and watched reruns of *Gunsmoke, M.A.S.H.,* and *Andy of Mayberry*. She'd hold his hand and smile when he said he loved her, which was several times a day and then several times an hour. Outside, Anna's hummingbirds and house finches came to the bird feeders. A swimming pool sparkled in the California sun.

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Rochester's compositions take me back to ten seasons of shuttle drives to Lee's Ferry, the put-in for the Canyon. We would descend the mountain from ponderosa pine forest near Flagstaff 3,000 feet to the red rock and rusty soil of the Colorado Plateau. Navajo women in colorful velvet blouses would appear out of nowhere, on foot, beside belled herds of sheep. The wool from those animals became the dyed rugs sold along the highway and at trading posts, where handcrafted weavings hung on display like ribbons.

Tradition says that every rug contains an imperfection pieced into it on purpose. The natural dyes come from sagebrush and ephedra and other flora of the arid, windswept plateau. Similarly, Rochester's hues evoke scrubby, spiny Sonoran desert plants.

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My oldest brother Timothy lived for decades in New Mexico near the U.S. border. He and I talked by phone a lot while arranging care for Dad. One of our calls pre-empted the president's 2019 State of the Union address, but Tim, calling from a time zone ahead, summed it up for me.

"Basically, he's got to have his wall."

He tells me of a small state preserve, the Santa Ana, on big looping meanders of the Rio Grande, where more species of butterflies can be found than in the rest of the U.S. combined. The Santa Ana is a tiny, lush slice of rich, green riparian ecosystem where the endangered Mexican jaguar and other secretive species live.

While strolling the Rio Grande in the Santa Ana recently, looking for song and shorebirds, Tim came upon heavy equipment. Bulldozers and backhoes were poised to begin construction on the wall that would divide the preserve into incommunicable pieces.

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When kintsugi repairs are made, the value of the restored pot shifts. Individuality emerges. Mistakes are honored, even prized. An ordinary work becomes a thing of unique beauty.

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Our trip of six boats had just run Lava Falls. The river was low but rising. It was late in the day, when the entry to the falls is only a shiny rim of water, blinding in the sun. I'd swallowed my anxiety and set up my boat on the bubble line down the right side. My passengers and I hit the first drop, just beside the Ledge Hole, and bounced down with the sharpness felt at low water. We popped back up, all good, but the rebound springboarded me off the back of the raft. I went down.

Under water, all was darkness and the quiet gurgle of water. My body whipped, a flag in a stiff wind. I was held captive by turbulence, wondering for how long, then emerged into light and cacophony for a second, enough to take a deep breath and see the assistant boatman look back toward the empty rowing seat. His eyes were big and mouth wide open. He scrambled to the oars as I went down again: more maytagging, held breath, the muted world beneath the rapids.

Back up into the sunlight and roar, I saw the assistant rowing the boat through—I swam behind it. Through the roiling water above Lava's mountainous tailwaves, then under the surface one more time in a terrible shimmy. Up for another breath, then riding the peak of water. Big, wet, terrifying. Like falling off a cliff, if gravity sucked you upward.

*

Dad used to talk about his World War II service in the Philippines with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. He'd trained as an officer for active duty and arrived in the South Pacific just after V-J Day. Prisoner-of-war ships sailed north as he sailed south. He spent his time in Manila removing American wartime presence from harbors and shores. He almost brought home a woman named Pilar.

When I ask about the ships and the Army Corps today, he doesn't remember them. Instead he describes a fictional service in Europe. His reminiscences resemble scenes from *The Longest Day* and *Saving Private Ryan*. Details of storming the beach in Normandy: fighting inland with the Band of Brothers, meeting women as he helped liberate Paris, no longer mentioning Pilar.

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Kaufman handed in the first draft of *Adaptation*, bracing for the reaction. Later, he said, “I really thought I was ending my career by turning that in.” Of director Jonze, he claimed, “Had he said I was crazy, I don't know what I would have done.”

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Four medical professionals, all strangers before the Grand Canyon trip, sat two by two beside me. They commanded me to lie down and keep my arm raised. They spoke emergency-room talk, having snapped out of their roles as adventurers who’d made it through Lava. A psychiatrist, the only M.D. on the trip, took his place nearest my head. He leaned over my face, his eyes big through his glasses. He said it hadn’t been easy but they’d stopped the bleeding.

“We’re going to sew you up. First, we’ll inject painkiller around the cut.” Behind him I saw our lead guide Bob stringing dental floss through one of the sterilized needles we carried in our second aid kit. Bob was smiling but had gone pale. I felt my tears in both my ears.

The M.D. asked, “What’d you cut it on?”

I’d fallen on a bottle of Kahlua I’d been given for my birthday. Today was the day. I’d been carrying the alcohol to the main camp to open and share it.

“Good!” he said. “That’ll help sterilize the wound.”

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About ten years prior, Tim and I’d boated the Rio Grande through Big Bend National Park. We were students on Christmas break—covering the cost of fuel to shuttle across Texas and back nearly broke us. We moved constantly on the river to stay warm and make the miles. Most mornings, the boats were covered with a fine sheen of ice.

At one of our lunch stops, we sat on a rock shelf overlooking the river. Tucked away, we spotted a young man running to the south bank. He removed his trousers, shoved them on his head, and waded chest deep to the north side. He must have seen our boats. He didn’t look up. Dressing quickly, he continued into the absolute middle of nowhere at a trot.

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Orlean refused to approve Kaufmann’s screenplay at first. He’d taken her journalistic treatment and exploded it, Hollywood style, in the third act. Fragments of pure fiction: an unlikely romance between reporter and thief, a hapless protagonist and made-up twin, a murderous drama in a Florida swamp.

"No! Are you kidding?" Echoing Kaufman, she said, "This is going to ruin my career!"

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A National Park Service helicopter flew to our camp the next morning at first light. One of our guides, a private pilot, had reached a commercial airliner by line-of-sight radio. As the glass ship rose above the beach, everyone on the trip—everyone—stood among the tamarisk and willow and waved until we flew out of sight. We choppered upstream over Lava, which had come up in the night but now ran low and rocky in the cool morning. The NPS ranger who'd come in with the pilot asked how our runs had gone.

"Fine," I said, "but I swam it."

Sunlight glowed on the upper basalt layers in the dark volcanic cliff. We caught an updraft near the rock and lifted like a feather, tremulous and weightless.

At the Grand Canyon Clinic, an NPS doctor raised the bandage, inspected the wound, and slapped the dressing back down. Because the cut had been closed up, it would be weeks before a specialist could reopen it and repair it in surgery.

All I could think was, with the operation so far off, I could have finished the trip.

*

A year after Marge died, I moved to the Oregon Outback with my husband Paul. Outback, the word, originated in Australia, but it can apply to any remote or sparsely populated area. From our small home, Paul and I overlook a playa (as geologists call an ephemeral lake): covered in shallow, briny water in winter; dry and cracked in summer. Winter Rim of the western Great Basin rises behind us in a steep escarpment. Black basalt rocks again.

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I have crossed back into the U.S. after traveling in Baja California. Re-entry was smooth compared to today's hostile border scene; still, it was fraught. The random emptying of cars, backpacks, cardboard boxes. Barked orders to pour out the hidden bottles of liqueur or drink them down on the spot. Queues of autos, engines and AC running. Temperatures rising as asphalt shone in white-hot sun. Razor-sharp tempers.

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Back in Flagstaff, I called my parents. I told them I'd severed tendons and spilled blood from an artery. My mother asked if I would recover full use of my hand. The specialist had said that if I committed fully to physical therapy, I'd get back most of it. My father let out a long breath as if he'd been holding it the entire time I'd been working my high-risk job.

"You cut an artery?" he asked. "In the bottom of the Grand Canyon?"

"Yes."

"You're lucky to be alive."

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The film *Adaptation* hides the hard reality behind the life of orchid thief John LaRoche. The man subsisted on various forms of crime: poaching on the commons; appropriating Seminole prior rights; removing endangered white orchids—ghost orchids—from a Florida state preserve. He'd taken what he "needed" (his word) from the Fakahatchee. He'd sold the orchids out from under Seminole control and closer to extinction. Kaufman had pieced together a different story, though, one that turned a justifying felon into a sympathetic, charismatic outlaw who dazzled with a life composed in a remote and romantic place.

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Before moving to the Oregon desert, I visited Dad. I said I'd been offered a job back in my home state. The television played in front of us, Barney Fife and Gomer Pyle debating who had the better voice. Dad asked, is it a good job? Will your husband go with you?

At the time, Dad was 94, jovial but disoriented. He thought he lived back in his hometown of Fall River, Massachusetts. In his mind, he went to work daily and made shrewd trades on the stock market.

I invited him to move with us. We could return to the state where we'd first lived as a family. With him nearby, Paul and I could visit a lot.

Dad patted the couch, indicating that he'd be staying put. "But you should go. Make your mark while you can."

*

Rochester's aerial photos see transactions on the ground from great distances. She calls her work *remendando la frontera*: mending the border.

Police are far smaller than ants. Money changes hands in markets we can't see. Stealth crossings, strip searches, Border Patrol in aviator glasses—all reduced to art. Bound with a line of copper leaf, the shards of people's lives become beautiful, their seams lustrous. Endless rooftops unite in mosaics. Road scars on sere hillsides are sketches from imagination, leading nowhere in particular, all compulsion gone.

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After ten years of guiding and living in the Canyon, 30 years before my move back to Oregon, I met my first husband when I kayaked into the eddy at North Canyon. We married and moved to Pennsylvania. I felt the loss of the desert and river like a gut punch. Prospective employers read the job experience on my resumé and raised their eyebrows, thinking no doubt of the great, lifeless maw of rock photographed and printed on every outdoor-scene calendar ever produced. I'd think of that same maw and know exactly which reach of river mile lay 6,000 feet below, the side canyons that smelled of sweet trees, the rapids I knew by heart.

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Here in the Great Basin, I am separated from my father by 500 miles.

Dad's caregivers help him get dressed every morning. They comb his ash-white hair, assist him and his walker out to the T.V. room, and help him settle on the left-hand side of the couch. There he spends the day. His small army of highly skilled women brings him fastidiously prepared meals they've shopped for and planned. They present a variety of breakfasts, lunches, and dinners on the turn-of-the-twentieth-century, Vista Pink china my mother collected beginning in the 1940s.

If Dad needs something he thinks a caregiver has overlooked, he calls to the kitchen: "Marge!"

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Today, hundreds of American avocets are wading the playa. The air smells of salt water and juniper. Gulls strut along shore as if hoping to be discovered by booking agents. A group of nine Canada geese exits the lake to feed on a fringe of vegetation. Some of the geese are young, waddling with bowlegs like diapered toddlers.

Sometimes at night I rise in the abject darkness of this basin. I see the same black sky I used to stare at from a different beach every night in the Canyon. There, only a narrow strip of night showed between mile-high walls. Here, the full Milky Way sweeps across the universe like a gesso wash.

The lights are off in the cabins scattered over the property north of us. There's a familiar desert quiet, people sleeping in the deep silence. My right hand is stiff. I flex my fingers.

Rebecca Lawton is a fluvial geologist and former Grand Canyon river guide. Her latest collection is *The Oasis this Time: Living and Dying with Water in the West* (Torrey House Press, 2019). She directs PLAYA, a residency program for artists and scientists in Summer Lake, Oregon.