

“Is this real?”

By Kevin Dwight

Setting: Frenchman Springs Coulee.

I drive the speed limit into the coulee, busy talking of friends and family. Time seems to slow as the walls of the coulee deepen. I find myself drifting in and out of my own conversation as the rusty red walls of the basalt begin to whisper their story each trip. The sun is just above the roof of the truck and not quite in my eyes. Turn-out ahead, I pull into the gravel strip on the roadside and dawn my climbing pack. Time still moving slower than normal; the blanket of sagebrush fills every corner of my vision. Pack on, moving slowly at first, sore from sitting; anticipation. Faster now, climbing the talus slopes to the clean rock below the lip of the plateau. Time seems to slow again with each new vision of the coulee as I pass higher and higher up the coulee walls. Sounds of the afternoon breeze make what I can only imagine as the sounds of waves on an endless ocean. I see a rabbit make note of my presence, not minding my intrusion, but simply smelling my scent and going on about business as usual, keep a mindful eye as I pass. Snakes give an occasional reminder of who runs the show along with busy beetles ignoring all; reminding me that I am only a guest for an afternoon of fixated fun.

The sun drops deeper in the sky and the rusty walls seem to turn the shade of paint that I can only imagine in my head, never on a paint swatch, regardless of how hard I might try. The breeze settles and the rock beckons. We begin the exploration of every nook and cranny this labyrinth of rock has to offer. The fine edges of a fin, the blunt top of a big hold, the cut of a razor crimp. All features seem similar but somehow to possess a story as unique as the next. The rock seems to ask: How did I form? What explains my crystal structure and why am I different from my neighboring basaltic brother? I often find myself moving over the stone staring into the rock waiting for this magnificent feature of the landscape to begin telling me the story again.

Eventually, through the sounds of silence, I begin to hear the story all over again. The walls were carved by catastrophic events I could only dream of but never imagine. The soils formed only after the mayhem settled. The plants found suitable homes and the animals a welcome invitation to eat.

The sun is lower now and I am tired. Weary of my frivolous activity, I pack up, wanting sleep, but not wanting to leave. I am comforted by the knowledge that anytime I want to slow down and listen, the coulee will tell me its story. All I have to do is be willing to accept that if I do my part to protect it, it will be there to love and cherish for those who come after me, long since I have turned into the soil itself.

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