

## *Senses of Place—y de Placer—in Baja Arizona*

GARY PAUL NABHAN

I am out before dawn on a late August morn, chaotically wandering around like a senile naturalist lost in the midst of a city. But Tucson doesn't exactly seem like a metropolis to me; it feels more like a patchwork of neighborhoods, barrios and colonias packed tightly into the same desert valley like so many sardines jammed into a greasy tin.

The more I walk the summer streets of Armory Park Neighborhood, Barrio Viejo and Barrio Anita—their *quelites* and Bermuda grass and *verdolagas* growing out of every sidewalk crack and every pothole—the more I feel like I am crawling around the aging, disheveled body of a former lover, a woman I have not seen since her youth, but whose exaggerated curves, dimples, and curls I vaguely remember.

And yet it is not her shape so much as her fragrance that I remember more deeply than words can call forth. Even before I turn a corner onto a pathway I have not trod for decades, I inhale her aroma. There is a faint but lingering perfume emanating from a night-blooming cactus down the pathway, which I could smell even before I could see the thorny succulent itself, its limbs all akimbo from years of homeowners building fences of different heights to serve as its props. After spotting the source of the nearly spent fragrance, I stand on my tiptoes to take a good gaze at its still-withering blossom. It is luminously pale and at this hour, sort of ragged, like an old nightgown that has endured far too many midnight frolics. And yet it remains so sensuous—I dare say, *erotic*—that the whole lot of negligee designers working for Victoria's Secret could never surpass its skimpy elegance. The mere sight of a night-blooming cereus flower is enough to send me off into those pollination dreams that punctuated four entire summers of my life nearly a decade ago.

With a whiff of that blossom, I realize I am back living in a Sonoran Desert city for the first time in eight years, and that I am once again

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hopelessly in love with this place. I am older and crankier, mind you, so I am also aware that I am much more frequently irritated by Tucson's tackiness than I was when I first arrived here more than thirty-five years ago. And yet, even my irritability does not last too long any more. I can forgive my lover for trying on an outfit or two that really doesn't fit her.

The difference between then and now is that back then, I was in love with Tucson as both an abstraction *and* as a physical entity; that is to say, I was enamored with the *idea* of being in love with a desert place. I don't care much for abstractions any more. As poet-doctor William Carlos Williams famously scribbled in chalk in the bottom of his rusty, rain-soaked wheelbarrow, *No ideas but in things*. I have belatedly come to realize that all this talk about gaining a *sense of place*—as if such a thing were merely a concept—simply misses the mark. What I am feeling today is a deeply visceral yearning for—as well as a hedonistic pleasure from—the *senses of place* embodied in Tucson, which come to me through my sensory organs long before reaching the synapses in my brain.

What I am saying is that you could blind-fold me, spin me around for a half day in a centrifuge, drive me to any one of dozen cities on the continent, and I could still tell you which one was Tucson solely by its aromas, or by its sounds, or by its textures and its flavors. In the least, I would know I was back in Baja Arizona. I would not have to read a sign or take in a single visual cue at all. The senses of place that this desert city emanates are not at all intellectually crafted indicators of this city's distinctiveness; they are subconscious cues that most of us automatically respond to within months of calling this place *home*. They trigger what goes on in our sympathetic nervous system, in our *pleasure* center, hence the deep etymological connection between *placer* and place.

Now, I don't think I can rationally convince you that such subliminal relationships exist, so I won't even try. Instead, let me simply lead you down the arroyo, through the barrios, and into the *centro*, until your senses become as engaged as mine have become the last few weeks.

On my first night of living back in Baja Arizona after an eight-year hiatus, I found my pick-up's steering wheel turning in my hands, and the entire truck veering through the intersection at Grant and Campbell into the parking lot of one of the best used bookstores in the entire world. It dawned on me that my trusty pick-up truck—just like a devoted horse—*knew* that I was ready to re-read some of my old favorites from Arizona authors. Perhaps a *Yes Is Better Than No* by Byrd Baylor, or a

*Bean Tree* by Barbara Kingsolver; then again, I might need to re-read an historic essay by Lawrence Clark Powell, an archaeologist's reminiscence by Julian Hayden, a mystery by Brian Laird, a poem by Ofelia Zepeda, some hair-raising border reportage by Chuck Bowden, a quirky cowboy novel by J.P.S. Brown, a Yaqui deer song by Felipe Molina, or a spray of *polvos milagrosos* by Pat Preciado Martin. Perhaps my pick-up veered toward the used bookstore imagining that I could find a used vinyl copy of Petey Mesquitey singing zany songs back in the days of the Dusty Chaps, or even better, some vintage Lalo Guerrero, Travis Edmondson or Summer Dog. Maybe I could find a VHS cassette of *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, or *Pocket Money*. In any case, when the pick-up truck came to a halt, I climbed out and walked right into the bright lights of the almost-never closed *Hissing Mouth of the Gila Monster Bookstore*.

And yet before I had even a moment to glance around for a paperback novel, a 33 rpm album or an eight-track tape, I smelled something that made me stop dead in my tracks. A middle-aged Mexican-American woman with a smile full of silver and gold sat inside the entrance to the bookstore, a towel strewn across the basket in her lap, and a few aluminum foil packets shining up out of the uncovered corners.

"*Tamales!*" she cried.

I sniffed. "*Tamales de elote?*"

"*Seguro que sí. Es la temporada...*"

I swooned. "*Una docena, pues, dos docenas, por favor...*"

It was the summer smell of chlorophyll, the sweetness of a cool desert evening, the mouth-watering texture of a steam-roasted mass of creamy corn kernels and cheese shaped by crumpled corn husks and caring human hands. If God had ever imagined creating a food that could embody the glory of the summer rainy season, She must have made it manifest in green corn tamales. They are as close to Sonoran Desert manna as mortal beings will ever be enabled to taste.

One morning after a long night of gentle rains, I meandered over to El Tiradito, the historic shrine on Simpson just south of Cushing Street, on the edge of Barrio Viejo. I was not there to read the interpretive signs or to light a candle; I was there for a laying-on of hands. I opened my palms and stroked the wax-covered walls and benches left smooth and greasy by the burning of prayers candles. Sweethearts and mothers had stuffed photos of their loved ones in every available open niche between the old adobe bricks. Red-hot candle wax had spilled its story out on every horizontal surface, and some of it had dripped down the ledges to

form stalactites that offered a dull sheen to the entire scene. That shrine became my *touchstone*, my tactile means of feeling all the souls who had prayed and hoped and wept in this place over the centuries.

Fragrances and flavors. Textures and tempos. These things linger, lodged in our memories, dormant like Sonoran mud turtles lying deep beneath the dry, cracked clays of drought-wracked *charco*. And then, suddenly, they pop up again through the mud and slime and turbidity of everyday life, to remind us that we are *home*, not permanently exiled in Alien-Nation.

The most obscure but rooted sense of place, by my reckoning, must be *tempo*. How, during the heat of the summer, the desert slows down, down, down, near to the point where *social* life seems non-existent. Old-time Sonorans had the perfect minimalist response for the newly arrived who would greet them and ask them what was going on there during that particular desert summer:

*“Puros guicos en la calle”*....No one but whiptail lizards are dumb enough to be out on the street in this heat....

And yet, when the desert picks up the tempo, there is much to be had. One glorious fall years ago, after the heat had dissipated but everything in the desert remained in bloom, I decided to visit the San Agustín Cathedral for a Sunday morning Mariachi mass. The music was good, but the homily was hackneyed. My eyes started to drift around the cathedral so that I could see just who it was that I was among. Some of the oldest, wealthiest Spanish-speaking families of the Old Pueblo filled the front pews. Behind them were the harder-working immigrants who had arrived in Tucson just one or two decades ago, but had already become owners of tortillerías, carnicerías and cafés. And behind them was a hodge-podge of Jack Catholics, tourists from out-of-town, Refried Christians and the like. But the Truly Faithful, I noticed, lingered by the backdoor—dark-skinned men with slicked-back hair, wearing thread-bare, shark-skin suit coats and faded guayaberas from the Salvation Army. These men crossed themselves at the beginning and end of every prayer, went down on their knees with every confession or admonition, and shouted “amen!” or “aleluya!” with every priestly proclamation. And yet, I could see, they were treading water at the back door, as if they were saving up their energy so that they could begin swimming furiously as soon as the frontal wave of a spiritual flashflood washed down upon us. I was not sure of the form in which this spiritual catharsis might come, so I watched and waited to see.

And then the priest announced that it was time for the Kiss of Peace: “I give you Peace, Peace I give you; go out and share the Kiss of Peace among your neighbors.”

I saw that this elderly man—one who had hovered close to the back door throughout the entire mass—was suddenly on the move. He slicked his hair back on last time, secured a button to close his sweat-stained suit jacket over his protruding belly, and then he began moving up through the rows. As he approached a family, he would first shake the father’s hand, wave to all of the children, and then kiss the man’s wife right on the lips; he would move on to the next family, and do the same. He quickly moved from pew to pew, kissing dozens and dozens of women as he went. Some look stunned, while others grinned, offering him a brief hug or a wink of recognition. Even among the wealthiest families in the cathedral, he was embraced and kissed by every woman, from pregnant beauties barely twenty years of age, to octogenarian grandmothers bedecked in sequined hats that shimmered and sparkled like crowns. And then, when he reached the end of the very first row, and stood before the priest, he genuflected, crossed himself, and exited, stage right, out the cathedral door and into the desert garden once more.

That anonymous elder taught me something about pacing one’s self in a desert city: Move slow as a desert tortoise during those hot dry spells, but always ready yourself for something more, for some wet luscious kiss may suddenly come your way. ❖