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Potsherds

*A woman follows Willa Cather's inspiration
to a remote New Mexico park*

Judy Benson



IN MY MID-TWENTIES, WORKING MY FIRST FULL-TIME JOB AT a weekly newspaper in Connecticut, I fell in love with the writings of Willa Cather, first devouring *My Ántonia*, then *O Pioneers!* and *Shadows on the Rock*. Her prose was simple yet emotive, rooted in a sense of place and how people both shape and are shaped by it. Hers was the kind of writing I aspired to whenever the opportunity came in telling the stories of the small towns and people I was covering. Then I read *The Song of the Lark*. Cather's story of a girl who grows up in a small town in Colorado in the late 1800s, then becomes an opera singer on the world stage (inspired by the real-life story of Olive Fremstad), moved me more than all of Cather's other books, thanks to one passage late in the novel. That passage stayed with me through the next two and a half decades of marriage, motherhood, and daily newspaper reporting, always calling me to one day go west, to the setting that had stirred me so deeply. The desire for that quest lay dormant for many years, then was rekindled on a visit to the Art Institute of Chicago while my daughter was in college nearby. The Jules Adolphe Breton painting *The Song of the Lark* that inspired the book's title hangs there. It depicts a young peasant girl, scythe in hand, caught in a moment of transformative beauty when birdsong calls her to look up from her chores. In Cather's story, the character Thea Kronborg visits the Art Institute of Chicago while a struggling music student in that city, and she sees herself in that image of art flowing out of life.

Thea's revelation of herself as an artist reached its climax in another place entirely, far in distance and sensibility from the sophisticated urbane Chicago of the late nineteenth century. Yet Cather made a connection that leaped over centuries and cultures. On the cusp of her singing career, Thea takes a trip to a Panther Canyon, which represents the villages of the ancient cliff dwellers that dot the American Southwest's Four Corners region. Cather herself had taken a journey to the Southwest as she embarked on a quest to devote herself to fiction writing and to leave her career as a magazine journalist behind. In 1912, she visited Mesa Verde National Park in Colorado, Walnut Canyon and the Grand Canyon in Arizona, and the pueblos and deserts of New Mexico. For a writer who had spent her childhood in the settled lands of Virginia and Nebraska and her early career in Pittsburgh, the combination of raw natural beauty and ancient ruins was transformational. By getting away from the familiar, she found her own voice in the connection to the past and to nature

Finding a shard of decorated pottery from long ago, just as Willa Cather had, put Judy Benson in Cather's shoes at Chaco Culture National Historical Park. JUDY BENSON

that would ground her fiction for the rest of her life. Three of her novels, *The Professor's House*, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, and *The Song of the Lark*, include significant portions set in the Southwest that describe characters who change profoundly because of their experiences in these arid lands, as did Cather herself.

This scene in *The Song of the Lark* penetrated my being: Thea is wandering the cliff alcoves among the ruins, experiencing a sacred place where water from the nearby stream sustained the life of the ancient ones on a high, precarious perch overlooking the canyon. Finding shards of decorated pottery that once held the precious liquid leads her to an epiphany. "The stream and the broken pottery—" Cather wrote,

what was any art but an effort to make a sheath, a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining elusive element which is life itself—life hurrying past us, too strong to stop, too sweet to lose? The Indian women had held it in their jars. . . . In singing, one made a vessel of one's throat and nostrils and held it on one's breath, caught the stream in a scale of natural intervals Nearly every afternoon she went to the chambers which contained the most interesting fragments of pottery, sat and looked at them for a while. Some of them were beautifully decorated. This care, expended upon vessels that could not hold food or water any better for the additional labor put upon them, made her heart go out to those ancient potters. They had not only expressed their desire, but had expressed it as beautifully as they could.

That passage still takes my breath away, as it did the first time I read it. From that moment, I felt I had to wander in these ancient dwellings one day, too, and let them speak to me. I learned about one of these places, Chaco Canyon in northwest New Mexico, and somehow fixed in my mind that I needed to go there. When or how that would happen, I didn't know. But years passed without its pull disappearing.

Then, last summer came the opportunity for a trip West between a visit with relatives in Colorado and a family wedding near Yosemite. My husband, Tom, and I talked about the trip, but I found myself almost afraid to express the hope of realizing my long-held desire to see Chaco. Maybe it would be too far out of the way. I didn't want to get too attached to the idea and make the trip all about my quest, rather than a journey together. We began planning but left the middle part, between the two family events, spontaneous. We'd spend a few days with the relatives in northern Colorado, hiking

Rocky Mountain National Park, then drive our rental car to the southern part of the state, to an Airbnb near Mesa Verde, and make the rest up until we got to Yosemite.

At the end of July, our journey began. From our first hike at Rocky Mountain, on the tundra, I felt overwhelmed by the beauty. Like Cather, I had left behind the familiar—the East Coast of my upbringing and my adult life—and felt astonished and alive to my own voice. But so much more would lie ahead.

After a daylong drive through Colorado, we found our lodging in the small town of Dolores and settled on visiting nearby Mesa Verde the next day. The exalted setting of those cliff villages occupied

some 1,000 years ago, and the amazing history of the Pueblo who had lived there, left me feeling humbled and incredibly lucky. It also whetted my appetite anew to see Chaco. One of the first guides we met at Mesa Verde mentioned Chaco, without my asking, as the context for Mesa Verde. Settlements at Chaco predate the cliff dwellings of Colorado, part of a thriving pre-Columbian world I could only glimpse at Mesa Verde. In the museum there, pottery vessels styled with black geometric motifs over sand-colored clay reminded me of the pottery shards Thea had found. I had to see Chaco.

The next morning, we set out early on the three-and-a-half-hour drive to Chaco Culture National Historical Park, crossing stretches of desert pocked with fracking wells. We followed a long, rutted dirt road to the park entrance. I could hardly believe I was here. The now-remote canyon where the park sits was a city and trading center from about 850 to 1250 CE, with a dozen excavated grand structures of brick sandstone that confound comprehension. Why would these ancient people have built here, in a place so dry and inhospitable to farming that nearly all of their food had to be brought from elsewhere? How is it these rock walls were literally carved out for better acoustics



Willa Cather at Mesa Verde in 1915. Her Southwestern travels inspired her fiction.

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across the canyon? What did they know about the seasons that caused them to make petroglyphs aligned with the solstice and to erect buildings aligned with the four directions of the compass?

We wondered where we should begin. Thankfully, a park ranger offered to help. Noticing my husband's camera gear, he suggested we hike a trail through a narrow crevice in the canyon once used by the original inhabitants. It goes to an overlook where Tom could set up his tripod for some shots of the grand view. We signed up for an afternoon tour of one of the biggest structures, then headed to the overlook, making sure we had plenty of water for time in the noonday Southwestern sun. The trail first passed one of the smaller structures, Pueblo del Arroyo, where I spotted a rabbit hopping along the outside wall, a simultaneous encounter with nature and the past. From there, the dusty path headed into flat, high desert matted with rough grasses, to another structure called Kin Kletso that once stood three stories high with 65 rooms. We stopped to wander around the perimeter.

Then I saw it. In one of the outside rooms, a potsherd lay in the dirt. Its light-and-shadow pattern, like the ones I had seen in the museum at Mesa Verde, remained vivid. Immediately I thought of that passage in *The Song of the Lark* and what finding the shards had taught Thea. For me, happening upon that fraction of some bowl or cup or pitcher once used for the food and drink of the men and women who dwelt here made me tremble, like I was encountering a sacred object that held some message. Maybe these ancient people with no written language but a rich and still mysterious culture have something to tell me, something I must take home to Connecticut and share.

I left the shard, as Thea had, taking only photos. In that act, I was respecting the rules of the national park but also giving the potsherd the chance to speak to someone else. Still breathless from that moment, I followed Tom back onto the trail and up through the canyon, scrambling up steep sections of barren rock to reach the flat mesa top and the overlook. There, we lingered to take photos and marvel at what we saw below—remains of semicircular courtyards, round kivas and angular rooms of brick, with the soft crunch of the visitors' footsteps on the gravel floor echoing off the canyon walls to reach our ears. Later, after a fascinating tour of the second-largest structure, Chetro Ketl, Tom told one of the rangers about finding the potsherd and showed him a photo. The ranger told him shards surface there whenever it rains. Though rain is seldom, potsherds turn up regularly enough to seem almost routine. This didn't dampen my enthusiasm for my find. It just meant that

potsherds are essential to appreciating this landscape. But I also wondered why the National Park Service displayed no potsherds or other artifacts at the Chaco visitor center, as it does at Mesa Verde. Archeologists took them out of Chaco more than a century ago, the ranger said. The park is working on creating a museum and getting back some artifacts from the places keeping them, including the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C., and the American Museum of Natural History in New York City.

Could we see them in New York? Only by special appointment, the ranger told us, because they aren't on display but kept in storage vaults. Since our home in Connecticut is just a two-and-a-half-hour train ride from New York, a visit to the museum could be the epilogue to our journey west. But more on that later.

After the long drive back to Dolores and our lodgings, I told our host, Angie, about our day. Hearing my excitement at finding the potsherd, she told me that they've come up in her garden over the years. Her neighbor has a ruin in his backyard. The entire Four Corners region, in fact, had more inhabitants in pre-Columbian times than today, according to one of the Mesa Verde rangers. Potsherds and artifacts can surface just about anywhere that hasn't been plowed over or lost to development. Angie said she and most



Shards from a private garden, an unexpected gift. JUDY BENSON

people who live in the area take this for granted, but hearing my enthusiasm made her realize this is something unique and special.

Then she bestowed on me the most amazing gift I've ever received. She reached into an old mayonnaise jar in which she keeps the shards she's found over the years and offered to let me take some. I chose two. They fit snugly in my cupped palm and bear the same black motif painted on the clay that I had seen at Mesa Verde and Chaco.

After that, our 3,000-mile sojourn across the West took us to Hovenweep National Monument in Colorado and Utah, Arches National Park in Utah, Great Basin National Park in Nevada, and finally, Yosemite National Park in California. Each held wonders that words can only approximate. But the encounter with the potsherds at Chaco, and the shards I now kept in my suitcase, had already become my touchstones of the trip.

As I settled back into my routines at home in Connecticut, I remained preoccupied with these precious artifacts sitting on my dresser. I thought about what they meant. I showed them to friends. Often I would open the little box in which I kept them, feel the smoothness of their surfaces, and notice the slight bend in their forms that told me they were once part of larger



Judy Benson in front of the walls of a former dwelling at Chaco. TOM CLARK

curved vessels. Then, about a month after returning home, my husband and I traveled to New York City to discover something more about my shards and the people of Chaco. By special appointment made possible with the help of a park ranger at Chaco, we viewed the collection of artifacts kept in an area closed to the public at the American Museum of Natural History. All of my museum experiences to date had happened in the public exhibit areas, so I was still in disbelief that I was actually being allowed behind-the-scenes access, especially at such a famous and important institution.

The archeology technician who met us, Anibal Rodriguez, seemed genuinely pleased to take us to the vaults where he'd worked the past 35 years and to share what he knew. He led us into narrow, high-ceilinged corridors lined with dozens of identical locked metal cabinets, finding his way immediately to the ones with Chaco artifacts. He opened the doors to reveal drawers full of turquoise jewelry, yucca fiber sandals, turkey bone tools, carved frogs, and dozens of pieces of pottery. Some of it was intact and others had been glued together from fragments, much of it unearthed during an 1890s archeological expedition. Among the most incredible pieces were the large ceramic cylinders that recent chemical tests have revealed once held a chocolate drink, evidence of the rich trade economy between Chaco and the peoples of Mexico and Central America.

Surprisingly, much of the pottery looked familiar, almost as if I were looking at neighbors' everyday dishes in their cabinet. Perhaps the fact that many of the mugs and bowls created a millennium ago have essentially the same shapes as the ones we use today shouldn't seem surprising. But it speaks to me of the power that ordinary, tactile objects can still hold, a notion that's worth being reminded of in this 21st-century, virtual-reality, throwaway culture. I can touch my own shards and know that other human hands held the vessels they were part of, like grasping one end of a thread that stretches back in time. It puts my individual life in a more correct context, one beyond the limiting perspective focused exclusively on the here and now.

But the making, breaking, and scattering of pottery from this region tells a larger story, too, about our country's past and our relationship to it. Ubiquitous as it is in the Southwest, this pottery speaks of a people prosperous enough to shape and fire vast amounts, then leave it behind when they moved. That would be no small feat given the long distance wood for the kilns would have to be carried in these scantily treed lands. Some archeologists believe these ancient peoples ritually shattered their pottery as part of some ceremony with a meaning lost to time, leaving behind remnants that remind those of

us who happen upon them that we are not the original settlers, nor the only ones of significance. Sure, most of us today realize that a pre-Columbian America existed, but its influence and complexity is little appreciated as a counterpoint to the Eurocentric arrogance that often pervades our viewpoint of our country's history.

In bringing my potsherds back to Connecticut, I carried on a long practice of taking artifacts out of their homelands, repeated at archeological sites from the Egyptian pyramids to Machu Picchu. Some of the first pieces excavated at Mesa Verde now lie in storage in a museum in Finland, but others were looted by pothunters who roamed the West before these places became national parks. Anibal, the Natural History Museum technician we met, said my husband and I were among fewer than 100 people who had ever seen the collection in the three and a half decades he'd worked there. That a venerable institution should keep those treasures from Chaco and other sites in the Southwest locked away, only seen by the few who find out and make a special appointment, saddens me. These artifacts represent great cultures modern Americans would benefit from knowing more about, if only to broaden our perspective and dampen our cultural hubris a bit. We asked Anibal why they weren't on display. He said lack of funds to create an exhibit, coupled with reluctance to stir resentment from American Indian groups who might claim ownership, keeps them where they are. Best not to call attention to this trove and keep it safe, seems to be the thinking. While I appreciate that the museum has protected these pieces all these years from looters with little regard for their cultural value, hiding them away for decades seems like a crime, too. There must be a way to satisfy the legitimate interests of any native groups and still showcase the collection with the prominence it deserves.

Here at home, my favorite places to hike are woodlands crisscrossed by stone walls, old foundations, and, sometimes, forgotten cemeteries. This is where nature is retaking the landscape but hasn't fully erased the human imprint. The interplay of these two elements—nature and ruins—reminds me of my mortality and connectedness with the human past and Earth in a way that restores my sense of balance.

But ruins like these commonly found in the New England landscape mostly recall the Colonial past, not the pre-Columbian world of the Southwest's great treasures. Northeastern native peoples weren't known for building great permanent structures like their Southwestern counterparts, so there are no sites like the sandstone brick monuments of Chaco to inspire our awe at

the civilization that came before ours. Of course hundreds of arrowheads and shell middens of native people have turned up here over the years, but neither the stone walls nor the arrowheads of New England inspire in me the same sense of intimacy as the dishware fragments that touched the hands and lips of the ancient ones of the Southwest. Now, when I trek the trails near home, I view a stone wall or chimney standing without walls around it through a lens altered by my encounter with the potsherds. They have moved me like a thermal lifting a hawk upward, panning my perspective beyond the present and near past to glimpse the vastness I am part of. Perhaps that is part of the message of my shards. The clay morsels I now hold dear are the created bits from everyday lives of people who learned to live and thrive in a harsh and arid land, and are certainly worthy of our admiration. No longer part of the garden soil, these potsherds are now my found gems, imbedded with an invisible magnetic coil that draws me in to gaze and ponder. I don't yet know the full message of my shards, but the mystery itself is beautiful.

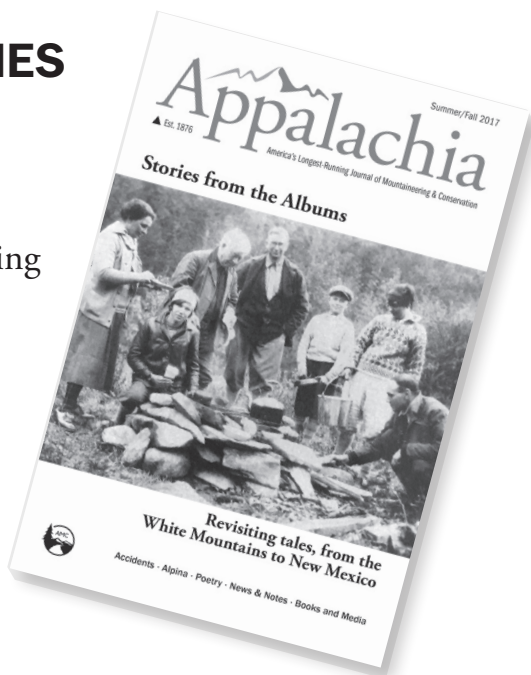
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