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Right There

Alone in the desert, plumbing depthless silence

Peter Tyson



IF YOU WERE TO DRIVE WEST ACROSS THE UNITED STATES FROM the eastern seaboard, turn left when you hit the wall of the Rocky Mountains, and follow that wall south all the way to where the Rockies cross the border into Mexico, you would find yourself in the spot I call the Core. The Core of Silence. It's a circular zone roughly 10 miles across that is not marked on any map and that only I know about because it exists only in my mind. I created it, or rather it arose of its own accord out of the exquisite silence I discovered there. Five times between 2003 and 2013, I have camped by myself at its center for a week or two, out to plumb that depthless silence.

Where the Core is precisely doesn't matter, and I don't want to reveal it anyway. But I will say it lies in the Chihuahuan Desert of Big Bend National Park, in west Texas. If you look at a map of the continental United States, Big Bend, named for a broad turn in the Rio Grande, is that other south-pointing part of Texas, like a second horn to the big horn whose tip is at Brownsville on the Gulf of Mexico. Mariscal Mountain, which pokes north into the Core within Big Bend and south across the Rio Grande into Mexico, is the southernmost extent of the Rockies in the United States.

Henry David Thoreau called silence "the communing of the conscious soul with itself." The chance to commune in such a way is why I have returned again and again to the Core. I won't get into what the soul is or isn't; theories about that could fill the Core itself. Let's just say I go there to commune—with myself, with nature, with deep time, with silence. It's a one-sided conversation. I ask questions, and the desert answers with silence. In silence, whether within oneself or within the vastness of the desert, lies mystery, and mystery is what I crave. Here in the 21st century, we believe we've answered most questions that matter. But many of the most fundamental ones—why are we here? what becomes of us after death? what exists on the far side of the universe?—remain unanswerable. The most fruitful way to contemplate such impenetrable enigmas, as thinkers from the Desert Fathers to Thomas Merton maintained, is through silence.

My problem, and maybe it's yours too, is that whenever I enter silence I bring noise with me. The Core is the quietest place I know, yet it can do nothing, at least initially, to silence the noise I carry with me in my head. The noise of society, of worry and stress, of self-doubt.

"The Core," the author's silent refuge, lies somewhere in the Chihuahuan Desert of Big Bend National Park, in west Texas. PETER TYSON



Peter Tyson by a fossil tree deep in “the Core.”

PETER TYSON

On my most recent trip, in May 2013, I entered the Core planning to do nothing but hearken to the silence. (Once a colleague in the office asked me what I did by myself way out in the desert. “Nothing,” I said. That sent him, wide-eyed, into disbelieving guffaws. As if someone would spend his precious vacation time doing nothing.)

But I didn’t succeed. If I were made of stronger stuff, if I were Thoreau perhaps, I could

have just sat on my pumpkin and communed all day long. But I’m antsy. I like to explore. I want to have my cake and eat it too. And on this trip to Big Bend, as on all four preceding it, there came a time when all the noise I was trying to suppress came crashing to the fore in my brain. Even long-suppressed thoughts of my father’s sudden death three decades ago crept in. It was nobody’s fault but mine. The noise shredded the psychic fabric of silence I had carefully woven over my first days in Big Bend.

But forget that for a moment. What is it about the Core? What is it that draws me there, to that one spot, like the Devil’s Tower coaxes Richard Dreyfuss in *Close Encounters*? The place I go is flat, thorny, head-poundingly hot desert. I call it the frying pan. On that trip in May, it was in the neighborhood of 100 degrees for three days straight. The only shade is the marginal shadow of a prickly pear cactus or one of the squat, tiny-leaved mesquites or Texas persimmons that pass for trees in the Chihuahuan Desert. From about 1 P.M. to 6 P.M., you don’t want to be out in the sun if you can help it. The Park Service recommends you drink at least a gallon of water a day while at Big Bend; I sweat so much, I drink two. I bring all my water with me to the camp, because the nearest spring is five miles away across the frying pan, and the park’s inhabitants—from wasps to brown-headed cowbirds to mountain lions—rely on that water.

I come, of course, for the silence. It’s not like any silence I’ve ever experienced. It’s not pure—there are birds, bugs, wind. Who would want pure silence? No one. Faced with utter soundlessness, we would surely agree

with the seventeenth-century mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal, who, musing on the inconceivable vastness of the universe, declared, “The eternal silence of these infinite spaces fills me with dread.” But it’s as deep a silence as I’ve known on Earth, particularly when the wind drops, as it can on a dime, and stillness rejoins its cousin silence in fashioning an atmosphere of tranquility that is literally breathtaking.

In part, that incomparable silence results from Big Bend’s isolation in west Texas, where it lies largely off flight paths. Over the course of a week, I will typically hear only one or two high-flying jets and one single-engine plane (usually the park’s own on patrol). The rest of the time, I neither hear nor see anything human-made, except that which I have brought myself. No engines, no voices, no electric lights at night. Just wild nature and that immutable silence. Have you ever found a place where you can face the natural world directly, in the primordial silence that pervaded Earth before we evolved and that yet pervades nature where we’re not? No matter how remote I’ve traveled on the planet—the Amazon of northwest Brazil, the North Slope of Alaska, the Rajasthan Desert of western India, the Antarctic Peninsula—I’ve never experienced silence as profound as what I’ve encountered there, in the Core.

How to describe that silence? Obviously, it’s quiet. But it’s quiet like the ocean is large or the moon round or the Himalaya high—a silence of epic proportions. As *loud* as jet engines are during a flight is how *quiet* the Core is. Its soundlessness takes over everything. It’s penetratingly, far-reachingly, all-encompassingly silent. It’s oppressive in the most pleasurable way, pressing in comfortably from all sides like an old sweater. Discrete sounds—a cactus wren singing on a nearby ocotillo, a bee zooming past on seemingly urgent business—only remind the listener of the density of the enveloping hush.

Thoreau talks about “a harmony inaudible to men.” That’s the one I’m always listening for when I’m in the Core. When I’m not distracted, I attend to the surrounding silence as to a symphony, with complete attention. I breathe shallowly, keep my head still, my eyes unblinking. My ears feel like those of the black-tailed jackrabbit that darts amid the desert’s cacti: giant sails in full billow. Something—what is it?—seems just out of reach of our ears, our conception. It’s *right there*, within that thundering silence. If only we could just . . . we can’t. It’s inaudible to us. But that makes it all the more worthwhile to listen for. Would we listen only for what we can hear?

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter . . .

Keats's unheard melodies, Thoreau's inaudible harmonies, remind me, in case I've forgotten it, of the humility I should feel being just one more living thing on planet Earth. Today, by standing on the shoulders of giants, we humans believe ourselves to be on top of the world, whether we consciously acknowledge it or not. But steep yourself in that magnificent silence for a time, and you realize that, comparatively speaking, you amount to nothing. That silence has been here for billions of years; you've been here for how many? That silence permeates the universe; how far does your influence reach? "Our noisy years," wrote William Wordsworth, "seem moments in the being/Of the eternal Silence."

I did a thought experiment once during a hike in the Core. It came unbidden, as philosophical musings often do out there in the supernal quiet. I imagined an omniscient observer standing before me in the desert. There I am, life-sized. The observer starts to rise off the ground, keeping her eyes fixed on me. I stay put. As the observer rises higher and higher, as if in a hot-air balloon, she watches me down below getting smaller and smaller. Soon she's a thousand feet overhead, and I'm just a speck far beneath her. She keeps rising higher and higher, till I disappear out of sight below. She floats into the stratosphere and through the ionosphere into space and out past the moon and the outer planets one by one and across the boundary-less edge of our solar system and into the endless scatter of stars that make up the Milky Way and out beyond *them* into the infinite emptiness of space, millions and billions of light-years away.

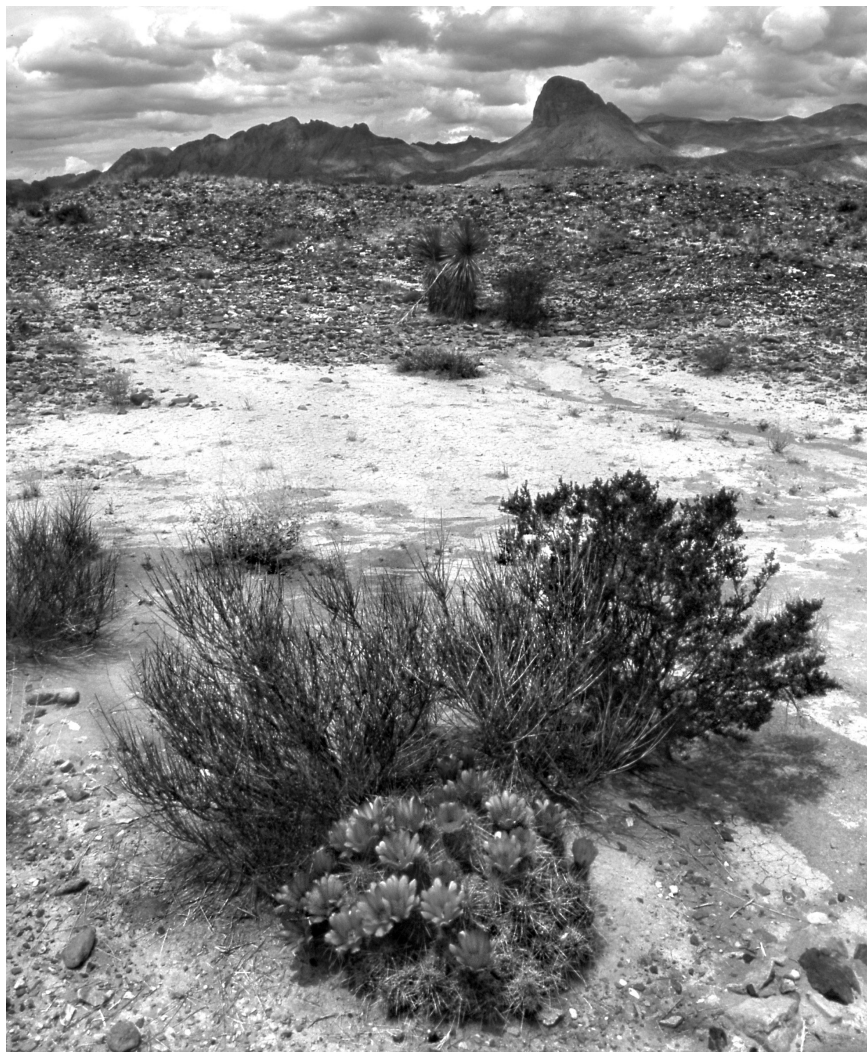
She looks back. Am I something of significance from that vantage? The silence reminds you that you are a mote of dust in a universe teeming with them. And that's OK. That's as it should be.

SOMETIMES, HOWEVER, THE SENSE OF HOW INCONSEQUENTIAL I TRULY am deserts me—even in the Core. The noise I've unwittingly brought with me overwhelms the silence that I've been trying my best to absorb through osmosis. One day on that May 2013 trip, rather than just sit and contemplate the silence, I decided to have an adventure. On a previous trip, while returning from a three-day jaunt to climb a mountain called Dominguez, I'd noticed a cave high up on another peak. Its dark, round maw was perhaps 20 feet across—very inviting. I was too exhausted to investigate it then. How about now?

I left my camp at 4 A.M. I hoped to reach the cave in four or five hours and return before the worst of the heat kicked in by early afternoon. Somehow

I'd forgotten that just to reach the base of the mountain with the cave, Backbone Ridge, would take four hours; then I had to get around to the far side where the cave was and climb hundreds of feet up to it. Already I was abandoning that sense of humility. *I know what I'm doing* was the incipient conceit, and it only grew stronger as the day went on, to my detriment.

The predawn darkness as I set off was invigorating. Big Bend lies so far west in the Central time zone that even in May it's not light enough to see by



To reach a cave he wanted to explore, Tyson had to hike for hours across the “frying pan,” a flat, thorny, shadeless expanse. PETER TYSON



Backbone Ridge held the long-sought cave, but first he had to climb up it. PETER TYSON

until about 7 A.M., so I had three hours of night-walking. The temperature was in the 60s, with the refreshingly cool air only occasionally aquiver with a barely perceptible breeze. Overhead, the stars that would have reminded me of my insignificance but for my mindset looked like a million grains of rice scattered across a black carpet. I carried a small but powerful flashlight that illuminated its own 10-foot-diameter core of the desert floor ahead of me. Good thing: Not long after striking off I almost stepped on a diamondback rattlesnake coiled right on the trail. Its tawny scales blended in with the sandy desert soil. The snake was modest-sized, no bigger all coiled up than a dinner plate, and immobile from the relative chill of early morning, but I gave it a wide berth. Soon after, also in the trail, a tarantula the size of my outspread hand. The spider stood paralyzed on its eight hairy legs before the concentrated blast of light.

As the carpet of darkness began to roll back from the eastern horizon above the Dead Horse Mountains I changed my mind. Rather than leave the trail and cut across the desert to the base of Backbone Ridge as I had planned, I would go around nearby Elephant Tusk Mountain and approach Backbone and its tantalizing cavern from the east rather than from the south. That way I could also visit a cluster of cottonwood trees growing in a spring below Elephant Tusk. The tall cottonwoods, so surprising in desert, are a remnant of an earlier era when Big Bend was cooler and wetter than it is now. I'd been to that oasis before and wanted to walk again in that strange three-season environment: spring wildflowers, summer heat, and autumn's dead leaves all at once. I knew it would add time, but I didn't really think how much. That's dangerous when pushing limits: not really thinking.

It added three hours, and by then it was in the high 90s. I didn't get to the saddle that forms a kind of geologic smile between Backbone and Elephant Tusk until about noon. That was eight hours after I'd left camp, and roughly the time I'd hoped to be back there. I would need four hours minimum to return from the saddle, and it was only getting hotter. In the blessed shade of a shed-sized boulder, I paused for lunch—beef jerky, string cheese, crackers, apple, Snickers bar—and evaluated the situation. The cave was just 600 or 700 feet above me: close. All I had to do was ascend a ridge to a headwall, then traverse several steep scree fields to the base of the cliff that held the cave. Examining the cave through my binoculars, I wasn't certain I'd be able to get up into it, but it looked doable, a short scramble up a sheer but handhold-rich face and I'd be in.

With my back against the boulder, I asked myself a question I've asked so many times in similar situations over the years: Push on and complete the goal, or be sensible and turn back?

I started climbing to the cave at 2 P.M. So that I could move fast, I took only the top portion of my backpack, which converts into a fanny pack. In it, I placed my camera, notebook, and a Clif bar. Around my shoulder I slung my full 1.8-liter Platypus, its water hose clipped over my shoulder for easy sipping access. Moving briskly up the increasingly precipitous ridge, I reached the headwall in less than an hour. This was where the mountain itself poked out of its debris skirt. (Like Elephant Tusk, Backbone Ridge is a volcanic intrusion, lava that pushed up through existing rock millions of years ago and hardened.) The cave was off to the right around several prominences.

The thought that I could twist or break an ankle on that steep scree occurred to me. So did the dire consequences if that were to happen. How dire? If I broke an ankle up there, I knew my chances of survival might be slim. Most people, myself included, don't usually calculate the consequences, or not sufficiently, and that's why there are books like the one I was then reading called *Death in Big Bend* (by Laurence Parent, Iron Mountain Press, 2010).

Because I was alone, I had left a note back at my camp saying I was doing a day hike to the saddle on that Friday, May 10. I left another note at the boulder that said I was climbing to the cave. But I had not filled out a solo-hiker form at the park headquarters at Panther Junction. I don't do that on these trips because I don't know ahead of time what I plan to do and when, and I don't want to be tied to a specific schedule—that's part of the freedom. I did book my backcountry campsite, however, which is mandatory, so the Park Service would have known where I was each night. But unless you complete

the solo-hiker form, you are not required or even encouraged to check in after camping. The only way the park would know something was amiss is if a visitor or ranger happened to read the note at my camp after May 10, the day I was supposed to return. The Black Gap Road, on which my camp stood, is the most rugged in the park—high-clearance 4WD only—and for that reason is one of the least-driven.

What if no one happened to read my note for several days after the 10th? Visitors would have no reason to, unless they had reserved my campsite and wanted to know whose stuff was in “their” site. Once they did read it—and presumably alerted the authorities—the park would launch a search-and-rescue operation. But by the time they found me, I’d probably be dead. I had limited water—enough, if I strictly rationed it, to last me a few days. But that’s *only* if I could get down from the headwall to the boulder where I’d left my half-full 6-liter dromedary. Could I do that with a broken ankle? I assume so, despite the pain, but I really don’t know.

The closest natural water source is Salvation Spring, as I call it because of the vital relief it provided me on my climb of Dominguez Mountain in 2009. But there’s *no way* I could get there in time with a fractured ankle: From the saddle, it’s a minimum hour-and-a-half hike to the spring with no injury and lots of strength. And as soon as I ran out of water, I would run out of life.

I actually thought that all out at the headwall. I *knew* it to be a fact. So why didn’t I turn back then and there?

Because the closer I got to the cave, the more I *had* to get to it. For George Mallory, it was because Everest was there; for me, it was because the cave was *right there*. For several years, I’d dreamed about exploring this cavern, and I’d hiked nine hours across the frying pan and up the ridge to get here. It lay just 200 feet away. Would I stop now?

I CAN’T REMEMBER IF I FIRST THOUGHT OF MY CHILDREN AT THE headwall or when I reached the bottom of the pitch beneath the cave. That’s the ultimate for me. If common sense was ever going to prevail, that moment was it. “Think of Olivia and Nick, Peter. Do you really want to do this?” My answer upon hearing their names—and I actually did say them out loud—should have been an instant, unequivocal, irrevocable *no*. I do remember thinking when I reached the bottom of the cliff that my loved ones implicitly expect me, on my brief sojourns into the desert, to use sound judgment, not do anything stupid, and *come back alive*. They don’t like that I go, but they

acquiesce to it, knowing what it means to me. They expect me, however, as they should, to return home in one piece to fulfill my responsibility as father, son, brother, boyfriend. What could be a fairer bargain?

It wasn't enough. I was in the vortex. I'd reached the event horizon, the tipping point, the point of no return—call it what you will. Something had me in its grip. Hubris? Pride? A foolish consistency? All I know is that all thoughts had become subordinate to a single imperative that by then had taken control of my mind: *Go for it*. The cave was not 20 feet over my head. It was *right there*.

Over the years since I had first noticed the cave, I had fantasized about what I might discover within it. The cave is situated in one of the more remote parts of the 800,000-acre park. Very few would have been there. In the Canyonlands of Utah, I once stumbled upon a rock shelter littered with broken but handsomely flint-knapped spear points and arrowheads. Fremont Indians, who had clearly used the shelter as a workshop, had discarded them hundreds of years earlier. Would I find similar Indian remains in the cave? An ancient hearth, perhaps, or a ceramic pot on a cave shelf? Maybe more recent artifacts, such as the rusted tin cans found here and there in the desert, left by ranchers who ran cattle in Big Bend a century ago, before it became a national park. Or perhaps even more recent evidence of illegal immigrants who, having successfully crossed the scorching lower desert from the Mexican border at the Rio Grande, bivouacked in the cave for a night or two before pressing on into the unknown of a new land? Would I find bats? Stalactites? Multiple “rooms” to explore?

As I began the 20-foot climb to the cave, I realized the pitch was on the edge of requiring a rope. For a seasoned rock climber, it might have been an easy free climb, and with a rope and someone belaying me, it would have been easy for me too. But I have not technical rock-climbed since my college days 30 years ago, and I had neither rope nor companion. No one knew I was there. It was stiflingly hot. And one misstep and I could quickly break that ankle or worse. I could even snap my neck on the rocks below the cliff.

What the hell was I doing?

I TRIED ONE ROUTE, THEN ANOTHER, THEN RETURNED TO THE ORIGINAL route, even though a critical handhold there was a loose boulder wedged into the face. All this happened in the course of a minute or two. I had no thoughts of my loved ones, only of getting there. Halfway up the pitch, in



Tyson was so appalled by what he had just done that he could only grab this quick image from the small cave before retreating. PETER TYSON

part to deal with that loose rock, I fell back on using my knee, a total no-no in rock climbing. But I was being an idiot generally, so why not with technique as well?

Then I was over the lip and into the cave.

I stood up, looked around. The “cave” was just a depression in the rock, a 20-foot-diameter sphere scooped out by rushing water millions of years ago, when the surface of the surrounding land was hundreds of feet higher than it is today. The cave contained nothing but smoothed stone and space. I could walk across it, in any direction, in just three long strides.

It didn’t matter. Even if the cave had appeared to be an archeologist’s dream or had extended provocatively back into the darkness, I was gone. Suddenly I couldn’t care less what was in there. I knew that if I waited, I might lose my nerve to go back *down* that cliff face. I didn’t have a moment to lose. I unzipped my fanny pack, pulled out my camera, snapped a shot looking out the mouth of the cave, stuffed the camera back in, zipped the pack shut, clasped it to my waist, and started down.

By that point, heading back over the lip, I was completely unnerved and appalled by what I had just done. I should never have attempted such a climb, which was patently unsafe for someone of my skill level. But I couldn’t allow myself to think about that, not then. *Get me off this goddamn cliff* was my only thought. Out loud, I reassured myself:

“You’re OK.” Place right foot.

“You’re OK.” Place left foot.

"You're doing great." Lean out and look down, breathing heavily. Place right hand.

"You're OK." Place left hand, then right foot.

I was down faster than I'd gone up. I glanced back up the face, aghast. I won't repeat the language I used at that moment, but I cursed myself with a spitting vehemence that surprised even me. I wondered if I would start crying—as I did the time I woke bolt upright from a nightmare I was having of my daughter tumbling off just such a cliff—when I blurted out "F*** you!" to myself and began sobbing. But below the cave, I didn't cry. I was too enraged for that. All I felt was piercing, unmitigated fury at myself.

"Don't *ever* do that again, you bastard."

Wasting no time, I retreated along the headwall. Because I was shaken, I chose to hug the wall rather than risk going out again onto that ankle-threatening scree. The reason I hadn't chosen this route before was that gnarled desert trees, thorny and tough as nails, clung to the base of the headwall, forming a near-impenetrable barrier. I went right through them. I didn't care. It was penance. My arms and legs got all scratched up and bloodied. At one point, I realized I'd lost my lens cap. It was on a tether, and one of those stiff branches had torn it from my camera, which by then I had around my neck so I could protect my Platypus, with its life-saving water, inside my fanny pack. I had to fight my way back to retrieve the cap, opening more lacerations.

How could I have been so selfish, so pigheaded, so stupid? Why was it so important to *reach the goal*? Why didn't thoughts of my loved ones deter me? Or the danger to my own self?

Was it a dogged, boot-camp-like insistence on completing the assigned task? I had chosen my goal, the cave, somewhat arbitrarily. Had I turned back before attempting to ascend the cliff, I would have disappointed no one but myself. I might not even have disappointed myself, if later I'd had the sense to admit that I'd made the better choice by turning back.

Was it a denial of encroaching age (I was about to turn 53), a proud assertion that I'm still young and tough and can "take it?"

Was it a throwback to the years after my father's death, when I threw caution to the winds as a matter of bearing? My father killed himself when he was 49. I was then 22, fresh out of college and just entering the adult world. For several years after he shot himself—an event of unbearable noise that helped trigger my interest in silence—one question in particular of the many swirling around his death would not leave my head: *If he didn't think it was*

worth it, why should I? I pushed limits all the time in those years. But that was long ago, before I had children, and before I managed to sustainably silence that peculiarly debilitating dissonance.

Or was the noise that had taken over my brain that day in the desert simply an unavoidable counterbalance to the deeply relaxing silence in which I was immersed? The cave and those inaudible harmonies were both *right there*, just beyond my reach. But wait, the cave was reachable!

I don't know. Perhaps it was all those things. All I know is that I hope I never do such a damn-fool thing again. I can't be certain I won't because I've made similar never-again pronouncements before. But I hope I have the sense, or acquire it in time.

I was preoccupied all the way back to camp. Or nearly, anyway. About three hours after I'd left the cave, as I plodded mindlessly from exhaustion, my eyes fixed on the ground in front of me, I heard something off to my right. I was so spent I almost didn't look up. When I did, I saw the last thing I ever expected to see in those scalding desert flats: a black bear.

I knew that Big Bend has a population of black bears that live high in the Chisos Mountains, which rise more than 7,000 feet in the center of the park. But out in the desert thousands of feet lower? What was it doing out there? The sound I'd heard was the bear exploding out of a honey mesquite upon detecting me and fleeing through creosote bushes in that amusingly bounding way black bears have. It was still barreling along 100 yards later when it vanished out of sight into a wash.

By that point, I was laughing. Laughing at the sight of that loping bound, made all the more comical by an absurd white patch on the bear's rump, which gave the retreating creature the look of a gigantic cottontail bunny. Laughing at the incongruousness of seeing a bear in the middle of the frying pan, on a day when even the lizards were hiding from the sun.

And laughing from relief. It was over. I was OK. Soon the silence would work its magic, and I would be back listening for those unheard melodies and pondering those age-old questions: Why are we here? What becomes of us after death? What exists on the far side of the universe?

PETER TYSON is the publisher of *Appalachia*, *AMC Outdoors* magazine, and AMC Books. He is working on a book about silence and the desert.

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