

PROSE TO POEMS?

Can you get there from here?

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Michael Waterman

In the earlier drafts of *In the Gila Headwaters* there were two prose pieces. Of course I liked the incidents being described, one being mostly imaginary, and the prose was reasonably spare. The prose came from journals of hiking trips I had kept, and in the interest of time, I just cut and pasted them in with the poems. I always intended to convert them into poems but did not do it. Then a well-known writer told me that prose does not belong in a book of poems unless it is prose poems and I confess I cannot tell a prose poem from prose, let alone write one. She also told me that my bibliography didn't belong either and that was certainly correct. The growing list of sources for the Gila country is in my on-line collection of additional material. It was an interesting process to take the two prose pieces and convert them into poems. Here I will give the original prose and follow each by the poem that is in my book. In the first case the transformation was not too challenging and I didn't leave out much except that old airplane flying over the mesa which sparked my imagination. For the second it took quite a while to find a way to make it work and I still regret losing *Rapid Skunks* and not having more about those poor children, although the ending is stronger.

Geronimo Meets Aldo

One year doing the pull on an unmarked trail from the river up to the mesa, a dull-colored airplane droned by just above my elevation. It looked like a World War II cargo plane, I thought, and for all of modern life it might have been. My strenuous labor was not far from the hungry CCC boys in the 1930s, and but for my packframe the Apaches would have understood exactly what I was doing. Except, I thought, above the old plane is a jetliner, with someone sipping Merlot in first-class and above that satellites gather and broadcast data worldwide and beyond that is a rocket ship headed for Mars. All the while I was there sweating uphill in the 1940s.

Timewarp. Then as often in these mountains Aldo Leopold came to mind and Geronimo was already there. This was Geronimo's home country, and he repeatedly dashed back here to escape U.S. and Mexican soldiers in his extraordinary period as military leader of the Chiricahua Apache. Aldo Leopold had an original and radical notion of wilderness areas and he established the Gila Wilderness, the first in America!

As I sweated up the incline, I had an image of them meeting in this country, and wondered how it would go. After all Geronimo died in 1909, the year Aldo Leopold came to New Mexico from his Yale education in forestry, so it was almost possible to have the past and the future in the same place at the same time. The image stayed with me as I topped out onto the mesa, dropped the pack and looked down into the valley of the Middle Fork and Iron Creek, then out over the broad Gila Basin. Aldo and Geronimo, a pair to draw to. They remained with me, and I could see Aldo, having the old Apache brought with a guard from Fort Sill, Oklahoma where he was in prison. They would meet at the forks below me and head up Iron Creek. The guard would be ditched.

"They went behind a fallen tree," he would tell the tale, "and they disappeared. It was impossible but they just damn disappeared. How the hell did that old man do it?"

The two men found a small corner where they could build a fire, the old Apache impatient with the larger blaze Aldo wanted to build from wood that smoked.

"Stop that! You'll get me caught again."

They squatted by the small fire and toasted sliced salami from Aldo's pack. Aldo offered his ideas, asked about the turkeys, where deer spent the winter and he explained his way of maintaining the wild.

"It will not work," Geronimo answered, "but if you kill enough white men it could slow things down a little."

Aldo tried once again to explain his concept of wilderness, but the topic of turkeys and winter range for various wildlife took over their conversation. The fire was coals now with no smoke, and downstream far from these men the guard stumbled about in total darkness, threshing through willows, over old beaver dams and into muddy ponds, swearing at Geronimo, knowing that his job was a lost cause.

Geronimo Meets Aldo

In 1909 Geronimo died in Oklahoma.
In 1909 Aldo Leopold came to Arizona.
The past and the future just missed one another.
What if they had not?

Aldo has Geronimo brought to Iron Creek,
the influence of a well-connected Yale man.
A soldier keeps the old man in chains,
cursing mules as they struggle up the Middle Fork.
The young forester insists the shackles be removed.

The soldier: *They went behind a tree.*
And they disappeared.
Just damn disappeared!
How the hell did that old man do it?

The two go up the steep mesa side.
Aldo starts a fire from wood that smokes.
Stop that!
You'll get me caught again.

Aldo toasts salami on twigs
and explains how he'll maintain the wild.
It will never work.
But if you kill enough white men,
it could slow things down a little.

Rabid Skunks

After our year in Hawaii, Sandie and I took a holiday in the Gila, walking down the Middle Fork from Snow Lake. Iron Creek is four miles in so we camped there twice, going down river and coming back. The situation was odd: a large mysterious pile of gear at the bottom end of the meadow had moved to the upper end when we returned. And now there were people. They were from an outfit called "Vision Quest" which took troubled kids out into the wilderness and tried to wake them up. It was a trendy item at that time, 1980. There were two adults who told us they had kids up Iron Creek, I forget what they called what they were doing. They made it clear that the kids were delinquents and that this was their last chance before imprisonment. They said, "We aren't telling you not to go in there, but we want you to be aware." In other words, they were telling me not to go in there. I thought it over, and as the only fisherman to go very far up that rugged little stream in any year, I felt it to be partly my own place. Rough and wild, with small vital trout that could sometimes be caught with effort and bushwacking and a bit of skill.

"To hell with it," I told Sandie, "I pay my taxes and the Gila's not reserved by some private money-making company. That wasn't what Aldo Leopold did this for."

I headed upstream. There were three kids, 15 or 16, basically tethered to separate locations along the creek. The first was a girl put into dark shadows under firs along the steep slopes away from the water. She was scared and lonely and she would have done anything to forget where she was. Anything, I am certain I do not exaggerate. After chatting briefly I moved ahead, passed another kid, then the final one who was on a tangled patch of cottonwood blow-down which was the last flat spot along the stream for miles. He wanted a smoke or some food. I told him I didn't have anything for him and moved through as rapidly as I could. Then I did my fishing which was as satisfying as usual, having left the oddity of Vision Quest behind me. When I came out each of the lonely desperate children tried to waylay me, but I kept moving.

Later that afternoon the masters of the children came by and accused me of tempting the kids with food and god knows what else. Perhaps it was fortunate to have Sandie along as she smoothed the whole thing over. I couldn't believe the guy was trying to say I had done anything improper and would have told him to get off in blunt terms. Given the trouble this organization got into later, as I recall causing the death of a boy in Utah, it might have been satisfying to have had a set-to right there.

Years before, on my first hiking trip with my ex-wife, her father, a logger, was dead set against the idea of his little girl sleeping out in the woods. He tried many arguments, and then came to his trump card. "There are rabid skunks out there," he said in all seriousness, "there are rabid skunks and they will get you." He was a good man but a bit limited. I have always represented fear of the wilderness by rabid skunks. They are waiting out there! And they will get you!

So Sandie and I were sitting by our campfire that night, and I finally cooled off from being accused of child molesting.

“Can you imagine it up there right now?” I asked her and the fire. “Those poor kids are cold and hungry and frightened to death of the night which is making some damn unusual and terrifying sounds. They have never experienced anything like it in their lives. While we sit here toasting in the warmth and light of this campfire! They can’t go anywhere even though the night has some moonlight. The sides of this canyon are steep and rough, and they are so far out of their big-city street-smart tough-kid element that they must think they have been landed on the moon. Stranded on Iron Creek! But if I just sneak up there and yell: *Rabid Skunks! Rabid Skunks!* there will be children and sleeping bags scattered halfway up to the mesa top! They wouldn’t stop for anything!”

We laughed and laughed, and then every so often one of us would just say *Rabid Skunks!* and we would once again laugh so hard that we would almost fall off the logs we were sitting on.

Those poor sad lost children, I wonder what became of them?

Tough Love

In the upper meadow
was a large heap of gear and
two people who were not backpackers.
They were curing children of misbehavior,
giving them a last chance before jail.

The kids were strung out up the creek.
We are not saying not to go in there.
That was exactly what they were saying.
The creek, clogged with boulders and thick thorny brush,
sometimes yields a flash of Gila trout.

A girl in dark shadows under firs,
a boy among crisscross blowdown logs,
others, each there alone
with a thin sleeping bag and little food.
This experience was to enlighten them?

It was like passing the homeless in a big city.
You should do something but what?

That night I walked away from our campfire
and stood in the open
with all the noise of wilderness,
the scrapes and whispers and screams
that usually comfort me,
trying to imagine the stark terror.