



Source: Paul McGeough, 'The world offered unity. It was rejected', *Sydney Morning Herald online*, 11/09/06.
Tags: desert, animals, politics, plants, food
Writer/s: Ellen Zweig

© 2008 Barbara Campbell and the writer/s

Everyone thinks the desert is full of sand. They have visions of endless white sand, stretching out to infinity, shimmering in the hot afternoon sun. They think there's nothing else there, just a void of sand and maybe a camel. Where the camel is going, they don't bother to consider, since the idea of this vast empty landscape gives them such pleasure.

If you've ever lived in a desert, say the high desert of New Mexico, you know that not all deserts are made of sand. In New Mexico, living in the desert means that you can't really grow grass. My friend M was always watering her lawn. Because she was from the East Coast, from Vermont, she had this idea of rolling hills and lots of green. That was her landscape and she wanted to recreate it. Instead of letting the cactus grow, she planted grass. Each year the grass would slowly turn brown and die. Each year, she'd plant another lawn. She liked to put some chairs out on her lawn and sit there, looking far out at the New Mexico landscape, a desert of scruffy green plants, red and brown rock.

I used to visit quite often. One night I was walking out of the main house to the little cabin where I slept, when I stopped in my tracks. I gave a spontaneous cry. Sitting right outside my window was a gigantic Luna Moth.

I remembered the night I first saw one. We were living on the north side of Chicago. It was late, a warm summer night. My parents were sitting outside on the porch and my sister and I were wide awake inside. We heard the low murmuring of our parents' talk and the crickets and the whirring of the fan. I kept wondering if the neighborhood Peeping Tom was trying to see into my window. Suddenly, my mother exclaimed, 'Look!' My father said: 'Girls, quietly, come here.' And we tiptoed out to see the Luna Moth hovering outside the screened-in porch. It was as big as my hand.

After that we moved to another kind of desert, the suburbs of Chicago. I spent my adolescence walking nonchalantly down the street, hoping to catch a glimpse of the white Chevy with the thin red streak up its side. I loved the boy who drove that car. There were rumors that he was so devoted to his mother that he brushed her long hair every night. I thought that was chillingly creepy, but I loved him all the same. Her hair must have been his desert, endless and empty and brown.

My friend L is making a movie about the desert. Her desert has camels in it and plenty of white sand. Unlike those who dream of the desert though, she wants to follow the camels and see where it leads. I have an image of her whirling around with her camera. The blurred images that result, the speed of the whirling, her hard

breathing as she turns and turns again, faster and faster. This is the kind of movie she's going to make.

L makes movies that move through a landscape of distraction. There's a camel and if we follow it over that hill of sand...It's a cinema of spontaneous cries, the intake of breath that comes with surprise. You never really know where you're going to end up. Maybe in a small village, but maybe not.

At the same time as I'm writing this, I'm cooking some chicken soup. A friend of mine came back from China and brought me some special ham. She said to put it in a soup. So, I got some chicken and some bok choy and I put the ham in. Every once in a while I have to get up to stir the pot and see how it's doing.

The last time I saw a Luna Moth, I was in a small village in the Southwest of China called Shaxi. We heard about the town in Dali from a young couple who were having an argument. They thought that they could relieve the tension by talking to strangers, so they told us about Shaxi. We were determined to go there.

No one wanted to go because the road was so bad, but we finally persuaded these two brothers to take us. It turned out to be a wonderful place because the road was so bumpy and the ride so uncomfortable. Not many tourists had braved the trip. The village had amazing walls, layers of white plaster, peeling off to reveal crude reddish brick. I hoped no one was going to repair them. We in the West, we love a ruin. My Chinese friend insisted that we go to see White Dragon Pool. After more arguments with the drivers and after getting lost several times, we came upon a lake surrounded by dense vegetation. It had a strange atmosphere, spooky and deserted. An old man came out of the only building around. He seemed to be the guardian of the place, but he wasn't about to show us around.

One of the brothers was poking around in the weeds and muck of the lake. He took a stick and pulled out a totally intact Luna Moth and laid it gently on the path.

Well, that's the end of this story. I have to eat my soup. I was trying to get home to write when I was stopped by blockades on all the streets near my house. President Bush was just leaving the site of the World Trade Center. We had to wait until his police escort, his dark limousine, his secret service men, and an ambulance rushed past us. Most of us were yelling slurs and insults, but that's just the desert of politics, isn't it? Sleep well, my friends, and wake with a spontaneous cry.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Ellen Zweig.