

3. SHEEP

75-Mile Canyon, Grand Canyon
October

ON A SUMMER DAY I SPOKE WITH AN ARCHAEOLOGIST who had once worked in the Grand Canyon. We stood outside her home in the mountains near Flagstaff, both of us with our hands in our pockets, looking across a large meadow of grasses surrounded by stands of ponderosa pine. The sky was a clear blue dome without clouds, a kind of sharp blue that comes to the dry skies of the Southwest.

When I told her of my interest in water, she offered this story. Not many years earlier she had escorted a number of Native Americans down the 270-mile stretch of river that lies in the bottom of the Grand Canyon. Many of these people were tribal elders from a wide range of cultural backgrounds, each of them having some affiliation with the area. The tribes of Zuni, Hopi, Hualapai, and two Paiute groups were represented, stuffed into life vests, clinging to tie-down straps through the rapids. She brought them in order to reveal a number of archaeological sites that might

have pertinence to their traditions, these often being sites she had found herself.

On the river they stopped at numerous side canyons, where they tied off the rafts and hiked up. While she pointed out various facets of what she had found, say, the shape of a granary's doorway or a type of painted pottery, the people distractedly glanced up-canyon as if wanting to keep walking. This continued from site to site until she found herself insulted by their rudeness. When she finally confronted them, the answer was clear. These sites, these haphazard, everyday remains of a lost culture, were dead. What they wanted to see were the springs.

They had been looking up-canyon because water sources were nestled up in the cliffs and caves at the far points of these canyons. Certain springs were well known, but only through stories or family names or by ceremonial kachinas, and they had never actually seen them. One person told her that the springs were entities. Such a descriptive word as *spirits* was not used. Nothing of great contextual merit was offered. The springs were simply alive. They were points where creation came to the surface and spilled out, where a hand could actually reach forward to feel the emergence. The importance of anything out here paled in comparison to the springs because this was the Grand Canyon, the place of springs, its desert interior riddled with running water.

There was an innocence in the woman's wish to show archaeological sites, to her belief that what was important was only the datable, stratified record of human events that could be questioned and classified, and that the more mysterious aspects were too sentimental for report. The woman understood her own innocence. They walked to the springs instead.