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## Encounters

Today we are riding the motorcycle on a dusty trail in central Montana. A large bird circles overhead, her eyes following some activity that we can't yet see. We stop, get off the bike, remove our helmets and climb a small hill for a better view.

Perched on our rock, nature's movie unfolds. Focused on her prey, the circling golden eagle zeroes in on her target. With no movement wasted, she quickly descends. But a badger is after the same lunch. The eagle grabs the prey and rises, talons extended, clutching something small. The badger, slightly late, disappointedly scurries off in search of other, uncontested opportunities. Circling victoriously above us is the golden eagle, with the four tiny wiggling feet of her catch spiraling, higher and higher.

Back on the motorcycle we follow the narrow path-like road. It's just the two of us, the motorcycle and miles of scenery to be inhaled. And so I breathe deeply, face to the wind, savoring the scent of the dry air.

Riding on a motorcycle makes encounters with nature more intimate. With no electronic window controls to protect us from the environment, or thermostatic devices to alter the experience, I tentatively stick out my tongue and taste the air we are riding through. It's delicious to be so present in my surroundings.

The narrow road curves and winds up the hill toward Buffalo Jump. This is the cliff where the Shoshone Indians routinely drove the buffalo off the bluff to kill them. Before the Indians got guns from the white man, or horses from the Spaniards, they had no other way to kill the huge buffalo. So, the young Shoshone chased the buffalo off this hilltop. We look over the precipice and envision the women and elders below, skinning the buffalo and hauling the meat and hides to camp. We wander the pathways where the buffalo stampeded and we sit in the grass at the base of the hill, visualizing the tipis and the huge, hairy carcasses.

I examine the horizon. There is no sign of modern day man, just this centuries old pathway that served as a conveyor belt to the slaughterhouse. Lying on my back in the matted grass I watch the birds overhead. They fan their spiked tails and glide: up and down, right to left, changing partners as they dive and soar. I'm enthralled by the intensity of the dance.

The sky seems to go on forever. Montana is Big Sky country, and now I know why. The horizon stretches for 360 degrees, white streaks merging with fluffy cotton balls in an intricate pattern. The variety and magnificence leave no doubt that somebody big is in charge here.

Back on the bike, riding slowly, we take time for long gazes from left to right. Dusty gray sagebrush, blue-berried juniper and tufts of bright yellow daisies with chocolate brown centers all whisper, "look at me."

Now we see something in the road. As we approach, I can see that it is a buzzard, eating road kill. The flattened meal has been driven over enough times to resemble a dinner plate; it is simply fur and red meat.

We've never had to slow down for a buzzard before and I'm certain he'll lift off clumsily as the distance between us gets smaller. But the old buzzard simply turns his head and looks at us. He stands up on his big legs. Rick brings the bike to a complete stop in the road. There we are, just the three of us, if you don't count the flattened fur and meat as a viable being.

We stare and wait. This massive creature slowly spreads his wings and with a whoosh, he lifts himself into the air. I can feel the wind from his wings. The huge red talons are the same size as Rick's gloved fingers on the handlebars. When the diner is at eye level with our helmets, he turns his head and gives me a long look with those deep dark eyes. Then he spirals into the sky with surprising grace. And disappears.

"What are you doing here?" his glare said. When we finally ride away I feel smaller. All day we have been the ones observing nature. But now I'm thinking that it does us all good to get looked at now and then by a wild animal.

