

Matthew Suh Salesses

Stone

From up here everything is under our feet. Central Australia surrounds this rock like a ruddy areola of desert, the one road an endless bra strap as if you could never get anywhere and never get back. Behind me Sasha finishes the climb and stands at the marker for Uluru's highest point, 348 meters up. I have turned around just before reaching the top. I know Sasha is running her fingers through her hair, from the tip of her scalp, wondering. She'll run them over the marker once and follow me back down.

On the ground below a crowd swells. From both directions—down Uluru's slope and from the parking lot—tourists are sucked into the gravity of the mob. Something has happened, pulling people out of the desert with its afterbirth.

"What is it?" Sasha will ask when she catches up with me.

"I don't know," I'll say.

We'll climb back down in a hurry. It took us hours to get up. Back on the ground we'll know who won, between the rock and us.

Bless me father for I have sinned. It's been seven years since my last confession.

We got to the resort two days ago, and spent the first night in bed. In the morning we went down to the counter to sign up for one of the shuttles to Uluru, two more people for the constant ferrying in and out of this Purgatory. At the counter an Aboriginal woman of loose skin said like a recording: "We do not like it when you climb," then decomposed. Her face fell off. Her voice grew bare from her jaws. When she thought she wasn't understood she repeated herself, angry and skeletal. She waved her pamphlets in our faces and shook off her skin. In my face, mostly, as if she knew of a crime I hadn't yet committed, as if to cover me up with all that flesh.

(When I get down from this ancient monolith I'll write: *Anangu—the local Aborigines—own the only place to stay by the rock. It's called Yulara, which means, "weeping." The Australian government has recently given control of Kata Tjuta Park back to them, but still retains by contract some of the rights. Anangu would like to shut down the climb, but the government keeps it open for tourists.*)

I'm working, I told her. This is a job so just give us the tickets.

"We understand what it means to your culture," Sasha said, trying to sew up her dripping pieces, saying we'd *reason* it out. She flipped through the pamphlets and listened. Sasha the Listener, Sasha the Sweet, Sasha the Most Patient. The spaghetti strap on her shoulder kept falling near my arm like a snake.

I'm climbing it, I said. Climbing or not going.

What an angry pity the Aboriginal woman put into the tilt of her head and the dimples she made without smiling, which only made me surer. It was the first passionate thought I'd had in a while. I stared back, the globes of my eyes conflagrant with their lids. I could feel them reddening.

"Read the information," she said. She piled it in front of us, telling me to visit the Cultural Center. Sasha the Understanding said we'd talk it over in private.

Bless me father for I have sinned. I started this traveling after college, not knowing what to do with myself. I saw Korea, the country from which I was adopted. I saw the great cathedrals of the world, scattered across Europe, with sex on sale down the street. I took communion at first, and then lost my childhood.

Bless me father for I have sinned. The desert was supposed to be the job I took to get away from the thought of sex. (I write articles for airlines, telling people where to visit. About Uluru: *At night the rock looks like the shadow of some deformed sun, never-quite-set, scarcely lit on the horizon.*) In the end I couldn't leave Sasha behind.

Bless me father for I have sinned. I've fucked hundreds and thousands of girls. They used to fuck me back harder and harder, on the road between articles, yanking and gasping until they'd explode. Now I hold every last drop of myself inside of me—my body won't let it out. I try to place what happened along the way that failed me; in college I often had the urge to cover a girl's face as she slept beside me, cover her naked body with her clothes and keep her out of view. Afterwards those nights—those mornings waking with the sweat of another's skin—had made me aware of my religion. *As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end.*

In our room in Yulara we laid the pamphlets out. We read about what the rock means spiritually, about their request and their responsibilities. All around Uluru are shopping plazas, I pointed out to Sasha. Shopping plazas by the rock they ask you not to climb.

We argued, and she took me in her mouth. I sat back on top of the pamphlets. When she'd given up I pleased her instead. When she was done she said she would make me come one day.

I told her the Aborigines' own ancestors had climbed the rock and so would I. I told her I'd come here to climb it and I wouldn't waste the trip. You can stay on the ground, I said, if you want. You're not obligated to follow me.

"I'm not your girlfriend," she said.

No, I told her. You're not.

As I climb down now I reach the valleys that were such a relief to us coming up. Slight grooves in the rock where full rivers would flow in a rainstorm. The high banks of their beds hide the jumble I am sure I saw on the ground—farther down, I think, we'll be able to hear the screaming.

Just minutes ago we scrambled these downs and ups quickening our pace, and some woman ran by us. Her athletic shorts were rolled high enough to catch a glimpse of her panties as she lifted her leg and smiled.

Now the sweat on our shirts and underwear is a layer of ice—the wind is almost strong enough to blow me over. I slip off, unbalanced, spinning down the mountain like a helicopter leaf.

As I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.

That morning, after another failed attempt, Sasha opened my shell to the air conditioning, dragging the covers with her from the bed and kicking up the stench of sex that had crusted into the folds, all mold and pickles. It sticks around whether things are finished or not—in every follicle, in every old and new wrinkle of skin, in every opening. We dressed with our backs to each other, ran out, and caught the bus to Kata Tjuta Park. We breathed heavily. We had to get it out of our lungs. I was waiting for the right moment to tell her my mother had died.

Through the windows, in the dark before sunrise, the desert couldn't have been mistaken for any other place. Except for the monolith and the small half-dead brush close to the ground it was a world of unbroken shadow. Around the red stone the dust is always rising, the brittle plants never move in the breeze, the clouds avoid days too hot even for them, but still the desert is no wasteland. A nobility I can't place beats somewhere in the redness and the dryness and the way life survives here at all.

On the bus Sasha slept for a while on my arm, and then, waking, threw her accusations at me—random and disconnected—as if she had dreamed them. She must have been burning for this forum, guilty with her imagined part in my failure.

“It’s like me telling this bus about your problem,” she said. “Don’t you ever think about anyone else? Do you want me to tell them?”

“You want to climb this rock even though it’s against what you know is right. Fuck it, you think, why not?”

“And not even that—you bastard—it’s all some childish game to you, where you still have to prove yourself. What do you care about me or them? You’re just trying to make up for your own deficiency, you Catholic. You fucking crazy Asian Catholic.

“And you know all about it, too: your baggage, your shit. You’re weak—and this is your great triumph. Because you’ve wasted everything else.”

I know it, I told her. I’m going to conquer that rock. I’m going to climb it and feel like a man, feel it beneath me, stand on its highest point with my arms out like the crucifix of a church. And you’re not going to stop me, I said, you’re going to climb it with me, like a rat behind the pied piper. Because you need to conquer something too; because you feel as weak as I do.

“You impotent fucking bastard,” she said.

The frame of the bus fell away into the sand, the engine disappeared, and everyone followed the driver, feet deep in the desert, walking as if nothing had changed. Eyes to the front, hands over your ears. I was happy we were being so obscene. I was happy they knew. I was the star of the problem show; even the aborigines had a problem with me climbing their rock. I wanted to climb it and fuck her on the top. She needed my problem as much as I did; solving it was what kept us together.

(Come fuck the unfuckable Asian, finish what can never be finished—I used to make it a line. They’d sit on me and jerk at me and suck me red-tipped, in Havana and Mumbai and Basseterre and Reykjavik.)

There’s a difference, I said.

“Fuck you,” she said. “I know there’s a difference. It’s all the same.”

By the time we get to the ground the crowd will have spread and dissolved like fireworks; it’ll be crackling and booming, unintelligible but on fire. Looking back up the monolith we’ll see them climbing again, lining a methodical trail—up to heaven, down to hell—we’ll make a hundred metaphors for them. Now the kaleidoscopic shards of men and women grind backwards and forwards, shifting around a center that from so far up isn’t yet there, and all we know is something must have happened.

Sasha, I’ll say when she catches up. Really, I’m sorry.

“What is it?” she’ll ask.

You were right, I’ll say. I was against this from the beginning. Maybe sex is just about empowerment, I wouldn’t know. I was an altar boy. I adopted my morals, the church, Infallibility, Judgement Day. *In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit*, no meat on Fridays, no profanity, never masturbation.

When we got to the rock the sun was rising and Uluru was virile with a purple glow. Cameras recorded everything, and I was reminded of something I said to my first girlfriend: that every Christian is the eyes of God, watching every other Christian sin.

Sasha, I whispered. Sasha. I kissed her on the neck and she cried into me. The clouds were fleeing the sky, dropping streaks of pink like cotton candy unraveling in the rain. I’m sorry, I said, you’re lovely; you know I have to do this. Sasha. I manipulated her.

People spilled from the parking lot, people climbed over the thin ropes to get better pictures, people balanced like eggs on the wooden posts, people grew like pyramids on other larger people’s shoulders.

I told her I was falling in love with her. I told her she’s the one, that she could cure me. I told her she’s the best lover I’ve ever had. I used those words: lover, love. Please, I asked her, come with me, Sasha, I need you with me. I need you there at the top, to tell me I’m not the bastard I am. She lowered her head into my raised hand. She wanted to believe me.

Lamb of God, You take away the sins of the world. Have mercy on us.

"I can't love you," she said.

I know, I said. And you're not my girlfriend, I know.

"It's so high up." She pointed to the path I could only just make out. "That's not even the top," she said. "Right there, before the chain, is chicken point: a lot of people turn back there because it's too hard." It was about a quarter up on the part we could see. She'd read those pamphlets so well. "I'm afraid of heights," she said.

I touched her hair, came up close to her ear. So am I, I told her. And I don't think I believe in sex before marriage.

She sighed and escaped with me. I locked the door to the bathroom stall and felt her breasts under her shirt, kissed around them. She made long sighs and went down on me. I tried hard to give her what she wanted, but it was useless. Stop, I told her, and went down on her instead, thinking about how my mother used to say, "You kiss me with that mouth?" and hit me when I cursed or took the Lord's name in vain, and finally, as Sasha came, how I used to say back, You're not my real mother.

The comb of the sun roosted on the windowsill, red flesh and yellow feathers invading the bathroom, and she gave the all clear, squirming. I rinsed my mouth, and we went on. She shivered. A sexual after-quake maybe, impossible in the sun.

When we got out Uluru was swollen red, turning shades quickly, and at its edges people went about their plans, up the rock or around its ten-kilometer circumference. From farther away, and in the mouth of a binoculars' lens, Uluru looks like the tongue between heaven and earth.

Sasha put her arms around me and held on. "People die from this climb," she said.

I watched the loitering crowd at chicken point sitting with their hands scraping the smooth rock, drinking whatever water they had; I imagined them panting and worn out and more than a quarter dead already.

I don't have any water, I said.

"Seven people a year," she said. "They close it down on windy days. The Aboriginal lady at the desk said they feel responsible every time."

They wouldn't have to confess it.

She let go of my shirt and stepped in front. "Nevermind," she said, shaking out her arms. "Let's go." Her tendons stretched, standing up, and then relaxed. "I brought water for both of us," she said.

My sweet little baby.

For Anangu the illustrated history of their race is etched on Uluru's skin: the north face where the Mala were chased out of Central Australia by the evil spirit Kurpany; holes in the rock where a Kuniya python woman laid her eggs after her tribe arrived years later; pockmarks on the southwest side that are scars left by the spears of the Liru snake warriors that attacked the Kuniya; the deformed face of Mutijulu Gorge of a Liru warrior defeated by a Kuniya woman wielding a stick; two boulders to the east that are the transformed bodies of the Kuniya Ungata and Ingriti. The path is worn into the rock like an Indian sunburn—too smooth, too used, too pale and pink-violet—and it's the same one the ancestors took the first time. Maybe I thought it was a paint-by-numbers. Maybe I thought it could be my illustration, too.

(When I get back to the room I'll write: *Ultimately we are all subjects to the rock. It is ruler of this area, the largest monolith in the world, formed of sediments deposited in a valley by a great ocean that covered Central Australia, which, when the water receded, were heated by underground lava until they were one rock. At first it was flat on its back but over time, as the mantle and plates moved it, Uluru rose to see his kingdom. He wears his moods on his tall sleeves. As the day goes on he grows angry in deep maroons or*

playful in bright yellow, tranquil orange, purple in a storm. His moods become the moods of us all, the moods of the earth and sky and clouds and we its peons.

I'll take the check then and the skymiles out of here.)

"What is it?" Sasha will ask when she catches up to me, and I'll tell her, Dorian Gray is the King of the Desert.

We'll crab-walk down the steeper parts of the monolith. On the ground the crowd will clump or disperse. Tonight, after they are gone, the shadowy legs of the rock will fill their million footprints like phantom limbs after an amputation.

At chicken point I couldn't help stopping to rest, squatting and holding Sasha back by the ankle. I forced myself to breathe, not speak and not gulp when she offered me the water. To sip it like the blood of Christ. *My God, I am sorry for my sins with all my heart. In choosing to do wrong and failing to do right, I have sinned against You, Whom I should love above all things.*

I was the one obviously in worse shape. Sasha the Intrepid: she'd been moving with her eyes open. Orgasms are good exercise. I tried not to blame her for her sure movements, tried to remember she used to play tennis, she likes it on top. I'd been climbing on all fours, scrambling for grip, sweating and hoping the moisture didn't make my palms slippery, holding on as I looked up. I could see the rock grow steeper just ahead, see it disappear and reappear again steeper still, and I knew more sections lay beyond that. The trick was to forget. Elijah would have been charioted up the slope by horses of fire.

As we climbed on we looked like the posters of evolutionary man: Sasha walking mostly upright ahead, looking back mockingly as I held on to the chain. I'd take the pain and the folded position for the comfort that I could stop myself from falling if I needed to. Farther up was the worst part. I could hear the heaving, syncopating breaths: a climbers' orchestra. I didn't say anything when Sasha finally gripped the links white-knuckled and slowed until I was just behind her, making me an airbag of flesh. I couldn't breathe enough to speak. The slope dropped like an empty seesaw until it was vertical and she fell into me, and I sucked her down into my lungs with my last sigh and floated up the rock like an angel. I would keep her there wet and safe until we reached the top.

Now all the people who passed us on the way up are still gathered around the pillar, looking out over the desert: the seven-year-old boy and his father; the college kids who ran up; the line of Japanese tourists traveling together; the middle-aged Australian couple who said they climbed every day for exercise; the German man with the camel pack humped on his hunched back, the water level rising and falling in the dangling straw, from the reserve to his lips like communion, as he warned us of so much more to go. *Lord I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed.*

As we get closer to the ground we'll see the crowd is more of a thick ring, bloated and floating over the sand like a plastic pool tube about to pop. An ambulance will come and go and when it does the scraps will explode from the circled body back up the mountain and into the desert where they came from. When we get down we'll ask everyone but no one will tell us: they won't know, they couldn't see, they've gone back to something more or less real, or they're guarding their secrets. Finally one of them will say, "It gets you whether you climb it or not."

Doesn't it, I'll say.

"What is it?" Sasha will ask.

I'll say, I had religion as a child. Not truly, but I have it in me.

She wants so much more than I can give her, but at the bottom of a dry well is a full moon of desert. We evaporate, and if we fall back to earth chances are we fall into an ocean.

I look back now and see her just as she reaches me, and I wait for her to ask. But she says nothing; she does nothing. Then she puts one hand to my cheek, and I can feel how cold my skin is, in comparison to hers. The crowd is still growing but she doesn't mention it; she doesn't look. She only cups my face in her palm like a cradle rocking in the wind.

Someone died, I say.

“No,” she says. “Everything’s fine.” She kisses the hand over my cheek, she leans into me, and I know where I went wrong.

Marry me, I ask.

“I don’t think you mean that,” she says. “This morning you said you didn’t even love me.”

Marry me, I say again. Never so sure of anything in my life.

She shrugs. She offers me the water, wiping her hands on her hips. The mark of fingerprints around her waist.

“I don’t accept,” she says. She brings the water up to my lips and turns away to smile. I don’t say anything, don’t think anything, just swallow. The desert laps at our feet, eager for a drop to fall. *Amen*.

Matthew Suh Salesses is currently in Korea, the land of his birth, with his fiancée. His fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Mid-American Review*, *Hobart*, *Monkeybicycle*, *Boston Literary Review*, *Quick Fiction*, *Glimmer Train*, among others. He has received awards from *MAR*, *Glimmer Train* and IMPAC. He will return to Boston in ‘09 to get married, edit *Redivider*, and finish work on a novel.

“I don’t have much recollection of front porches, which is a shame. My family was always more the deck type. I remember, during the expansion of our family home in Rhode Island, playing in a vast geography of sand under a plank of wood that would later become our deck. I lived in that magical dirt for centuries, traveling to kingdoms in sore need of heroes, and growing up—either into secret animal forms, or, in my more far-fetched imaginings, into an adult. But front porches . . . yeah, those are cool, too. I wish I had one.”