

IF YOU HAVE BEEN TO THE BADLANDS YOU HAVE NOT BEEN TO THE MOON

On visiting the Earth for the first time:
Gary Joseph Cohen

It is no accident that I would once again find myself in a landscape full of teeth. When I was a teenager I lived in New Jersey. In our backyard was a fast moving, fresh water stream, and in its deepest cuts, bitten some thirty feet into the red clay, were sharks teeth, rosy squid pencils, awry marine evidence, all of it millions of years old. The largest tooth I found, finely detailed and serrated, its color and sheen that of soft graphite, was about the size of my thumb. I found it in the winter, after the stream had emptied its head of algae. The tooth, sharp as the day it fell out of the shark's mouth, bit me in more ways than one.

In the weeks before my residency, I *googled* The Badlands and read many personal accounts from visitors past. Most compared its eroded buttes and vast landscapes to the Moon; or they called the topography *otherworldly*. When I arrived in Rapid City, a park volunteer picked me up in her red Cherokee. It was night by the time we rolled into Interior. The buttes, illuminated by our headlights, looked like soggy grocery bags. They looked as though they would split open at the wet seams and spill out their bruised produce. They looked so of *this* world that I was ready to live like a cliff swallow and make home in those eroded sharps. *This is my first visit to Earth*, I thought, *until now I have been living on the Moon*.

I came to The Badlands hoping to quiet myself, to still the din and exit my head and enter the wide-open of the West, and write. I would be there during Passover, a time when Jews around the world relive the Exodus and wander through the vast wilderness of the Sedar table. I hiked daily through the wilderness, on and off trail, through sod tables, slumps and bumps, cuts and sharps, always with a piece of matzo—the bread of affliction—in my Camel Back packer, always with a little misery and joy crumbling on the tip of my tongue.

The first fossil evidence I found in The Badlands was, of course, a tooth: most likely that of an Oreodont. It too, like the shark's tooth, was finely detailed, sharply cusped, though olive green and thumbnail in size, and still firmly rooted in a fragment of jaw. The next day I found a 35 million year old land turtle. In the following weeks I would stumble upon fossilized jaws, scattered vertebrae, splintered femurs, ruddy crania, fractured ilia, roots and hackberries hard as cement. In The Badlands, I wasn't just bitten: I was swallowed whole. I would wake up every morning, and like a fossil, gradually emerge from my hard bed. I would come to think of myself as an extinct leaf-eater. I would kneel in the dirt and cup my ear like a meadowlark, listening for the murmurs tunneling beneath the surface.

I would come to recognize The Badlands as a kind of primeval alphabet, a mouth of sorts, shaping the world into familiar syllables and long vowels. The bison, skeins of sandhill cranes, coyote and pronghorns, the remains of mammals, mollusks, reptiles and flora past, all seemed to roll off the same dry tongue. And there I was, too, standing on the *Lips of the lonesome/And hungry world*. It was no accident that I would once again find myself wandering and dreaming in a landscape full of teeth. A year later, I am sitting down for Passover again and eating matzo with bitter herbs. I am biting into the sweetness and sadness; I am tasting the tears and muddy bricks; I am remembering the wilderness, and am bitten still.