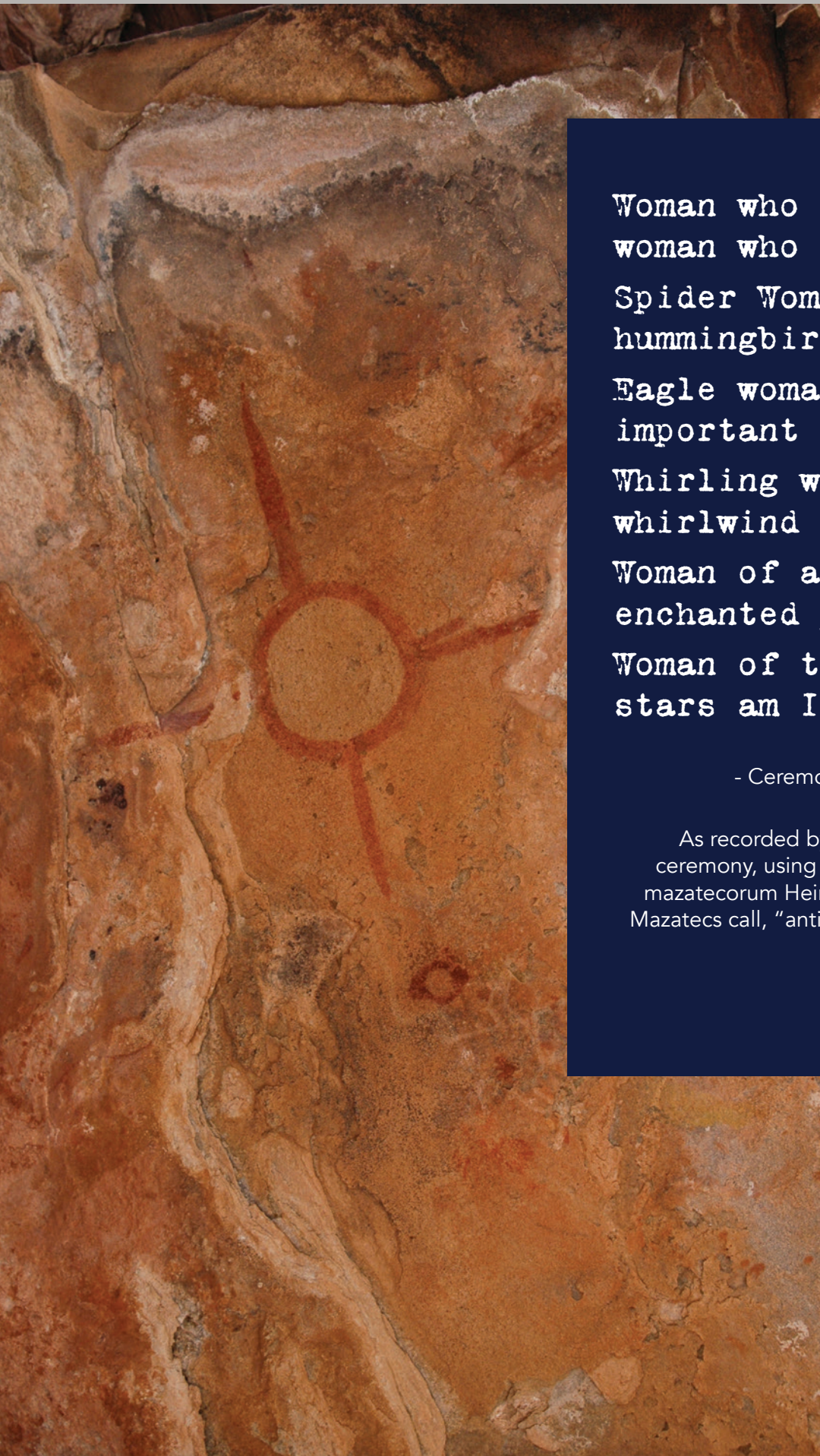




TRANSCENDENT

The Painted Caves of Shalmirane

by Toby Herbst



Woman who thunders am I,
 woman who sounds am I
 Spider Woman am I,
 hummingbird woman am I...
 Eagle woman am I,
 important eagle woman am I
 Whirling woman of the
 whirlwind am I.
 Woman of a scared
 enchanted place am I.
 Woman of the shooting
 stars am I.

- Ceremonial Declarations of Maria Sabina,
 Mazatec Curandera, (shaman)

As recorded by Gordon Wasson, during a curing
 ceremony, using *Psilocybe caerulescens* Murrill var.
mazatecorum Heim. A halucinogenic mushroom the
 Mazatecs call, "anti"xi" tho nti'ki xo" which translates
 as, "Landslide Mushroom."

Oaxaca, Mexico, June 29th, 1955

◀ Zia Symbol on Ceiling

Every once in a great, great while like a rare cosmic event, We of the 20th/21st Century are confronted by the supernatural, the transcendent.

Reading Maria Sabina's words made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I knew I was in the presence of power, the supernatural world, the divine.

Let's take the Way Way Back Machine and set the dial for the 14th-15th century, somewhere in the Pueblo world of central New Mexico. Gears grind, lights spin, the stars contract as time and the universe collapses.

We emerge, fellow seekers, in a grassy land of pinyons, junipers, scrub oaks and low rocky mesas. Occasional springs dot the landscape with slow-moving seasonal creeks, and great shady cottonwoods overshadowing clear pools of water. Wow seekers, we made it!

Up on a low, rocky, red mesa sits a stone and mud village, the same red-brown color as the mesa. Wisps of smoke and distant voices emanate from the village of maybe 500 souls. To the west snake two narrow, winding rocky canyons. Let's head up the southern canyon...

First thing I notice is a circular stone shrine at the mouth of the canyon and there is another one a little further up. They are



From Top:
 - Mouth of the Canyon
 - Remnants of Circular Stone Shrine
 - Remnants of Second Stone Shrine

loaded with Pahos, feathered prayer sticks left as offerings. Inside the shrine's circular stone walls are also bits of turquoise, shell and small evergreen branches. We are on Hallowed ground. The canyon floor quickly becomes sandy and rocky with great disgorged boulders from above. Because of its steep sides, the canyon floor is dark, shady, and cool, while the powerful sun's heat reflects off the upper canyon walls. We are in the underworld looking up at the brilliant light flashing off the canyon rim revealing the upper sky world.

The path is treacherous and difficult as are all paths



▲ Look past the grass on the left side, mid-height of the photo, you will see the head and cold, vertical eyes of the rattlesnake in striking pose

Grandfather Rattlesnake ▼



that lead to enlightenment. Up ahead I can hear the muffled sounds of chanting, the rhythmic beat of drums and rattles, and the shrill cry of eagle bone whistles calling the thunder beings. Yes, we are close - so, so very close, yet in the blink of an eye the illusion is slipping, dying away like a will-o- the wisp.

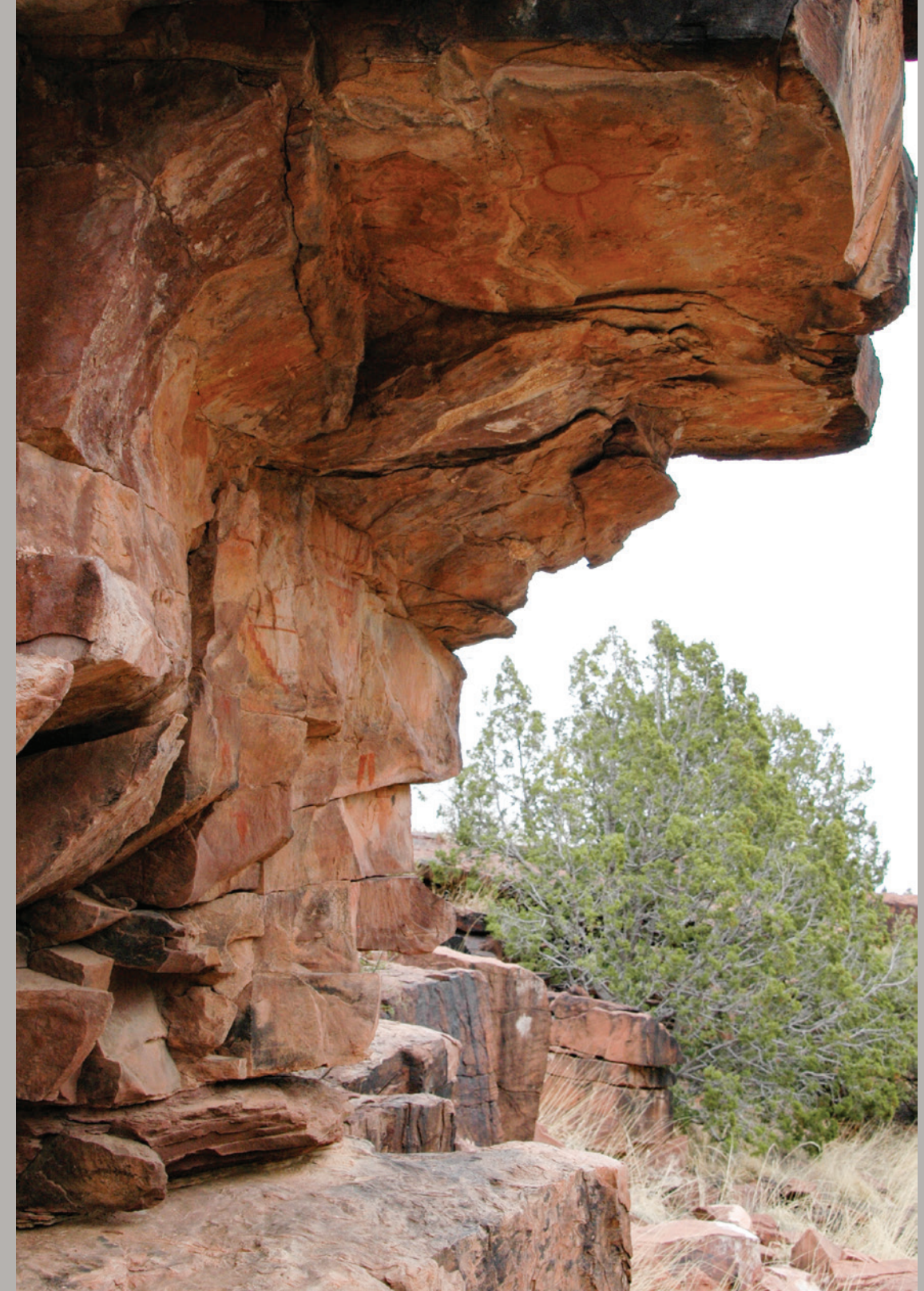
Back in my own time, the 21st Century, I am still in the same canyon and the going is very tough. It is early April 2019, about 51 degrees and I have not spotted any of the painted overhangs high up on the canyon wall. The going is so tough on the canyon floor, that my plan is to climb up to the top of the mesa, to see if the walking is any easier and look over the rim to try and find the painted overhangs.

Climbing up I spot my first rattlesnake, warmed by the sun's rays hitting the cap stone of the rim he moves quickly, rattling all the way. I would guess he is about 4 ft long. Glad we did not bring the dogs.

Once up on the rim, walking is easier and further on I see a likely place for pictographs. I carefully lower my self down over the rim and I am immediately assaulted by a loud buzzing rattle.

This guy is pissed that his peaceful solitude has been disturbed. He is another 4 footer, light brownish in color with bright yellow criss-crossing diamonds, Crotalus atrox or the Western Diamondback. He is up in a striking pose and with the steep canyon sides I have only about a three feet to get around him. This was kind of crazy, but I was determined to get to that overhang. I knock the rocks in front of me with my stick and there is another one buzzing at me. I work my way forward and another one and another one.

Now it is no longer kind of crazy, this is Crazy!



▲ The Painted Caves of Shalmirane

My mouth is dry as adrenaline is coursing through my veins. I take a moment to look around and there is one big Grandfather. He is at least 5ft. long. He does not rattle. He does not move, not even a flick of the tongue. He

just stares at me with those cold vertical slit eyes. He is a beautiful red brown just like the rocks and he lets me carefully get my camera out and take his photo. I take this as a sign, the guardian of the shelter has given me permission



I suspect that because this art that I am looking at could only be experienced after a difficult, circuitous pilgrimage marked by shrines, and guarded by rattlesnakes that it has something to do with initiation, prayer and religion. It was not for everyone to see and experience. The images are certainly supernatural, probably related to ancestors, a kin to the kachinas worshiped by modern Pueblo peoples. If we had the Late Prehistoric Pueblo cosmography these images would no doubt relate to characters in great mythic tales and cycles. Even to the ignorant and uninitiated like myself, I feel their power, their cosmic pulse. In creating these images the prehistoric artists have made the Supernatural manifest. The artists are the Creators, making the

unseen, visible; the unknown, known. The artists have validated their culture's supernatural world, their culture's mythology. I wonder at the images of dancing star men, the long tailed mountain lion, disembodied feathered masks, all crossing infinite gulfs of time and human culture to fire synapses in my brain. I am transcendent, I am experiencing the divine.

Well fellow seekers, this seems like a good place to end with the words of Albert Einstein, "The most beautiful thing we can experience is the Mysterious." Cue the distant sound of wind.

▼ Feathered Headdress with Three Scarlet Macaw Feathers



to enter. As I stare up at the walls and ceiling of the overhang I am in awe.

This seems like a good place to pause and discuss a term and concept I am developing. The word is Entheogen, a term which means, "God within us". The word was created by mycologists and ethnobotanists to describe those plants that when ingested give a divine experience, (G. Wasson 1980). I will be using the word, entheogenic to describe art that when one is exposed to it, one experiences the divine. As I look at these panels painted more than 600 years ago, I am having an entheogenic experience, something greater than my being, something connected to the supernatural, an experience that takes me out of the mundane and into the realm of the sublime.

▲ Mountain Lion
◀ Bird on Rainbow





▲ Row of Five Dancers (center of image),
Dancing Star Man (upper left of image)



◀ Dancing Star Man
(detail)



Row of Five Dancers ▶
(detail)



▲ Dancing Star Man (middle-right of Image)
White Man (upper-middle of image)
Mask on Corner of Rock (middle-left of image)

◀ Supernatural with Nimbus Headdress



▲ Back Wall Panel
Back Wall Panel Detail Images ►
clockwise from top left:
Checked Mask; Feather Mask;
Horned Toad Supernatural; Red Figures



Dancing Gods and ▶
Disembodied Masks

◀ Floating Masks on
Ceiling
▼





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