

Superstitions

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When I first heard the word “Sinagua” as a kid, around seven or eight years old, it sounded made-up, the kind of word you might find in a fantasy book as the name of a far-off city or a mysterious wizard. The context didn’t help: I was standing in a quiet, wooded canyon with my parents, sleepy little sister, and a small group of other tourists, all of us staring, agape, at the cliff dwellings surrounding us on all sides. “The Sinagua Indians built these pueblos over seven hundred years ago,” the guide told us, gesturing to the walls of reddish stone and adobe bricks tucked neatly beneath the canyon’s limestone ledges, just out of reach.

I had no concept of how long seven hundred years might be, but I remember looking at the Sinagua pueblos and thinking it couldn’t really be that long. They looked old, but not *that* old. You could have told me that people lived in them fifty years ago – as old as my family’s little ranch house in Phoenix – and I would have

believed it. Some of the walls were crumbling; many were not. They had doorways, windows, even alcoves that could be beds or tables with a little imagination, and I wasn't short on imagination when I saw Walnut Canyon National Monument for the first time.

Some pueblos were enshrouded from our prying eyes, and unless the sun touched them at just the right angle, the doorways led to small pockets of total darkness, hidden in the safety of the canyon walls themselves. The longer I looked at these homes, the longer I walked down the meandering canyon trail and caught glimpses of more doors, more bricks, more worlds tucked just out of reach through the trees, the more I began to believe two things: seven hundred years was a very long time, and this was the most unreal place I had ever stepped foot in. I didn't have the words for it then, but I felt like a voyeur in Walnut Canyon, peering into empty houses, breathing in the scent of dusty Ponderosa pine and wondering what happened here. The guide kept telling us they didn't know where the Sinagua went or why they left, like it was some big mystery to be solved. I wasn't so sure they had left at all. I kept looking at those black doorways, only to walk quickly past when I got close, cold sweat sliding down the back of my neck,

half-convinced that if I looked too hard, I might see someone looking back. I kept looking, anyway.

Sinagua,” I whispered to myself in the backseat on the drive home. Saying it beyond that entombed canyon felt like a curse, or maybe a promise, although I suppose that’s what curses are. I had a fondness for words as a kid, but I didn’t know what to do with this one. I didn’t write it with the others, but I didn’t forget it, either. Maybe it didn’t let me forget it.

It was only in my first Spanish class in seventh grade that the actual meaning struck me: *Sin agua*. Without water. I laughed as I put the pieces together: not a name of intrigue and magic after all, but a gross inaccuracy. The Spaniards, baffled by mountains without rivers, named them the Sierra Sin Agua, now the San Francisco Peaks. But their first name is from the Navajo (the Spanish thrust names upon people and places alike – their self-given name is Diné, the People): *Dook’o’oosłííd*, or “the summit which never melts,” the highest point in Arizona. These mountains, like all of the mountains encircling the Verde Valley (Yavapai name: Matk’amvaha), are volcanic. They are quiet; just sleeping, not dead. Beneath their perpetual snowcaps lies ancient fire, but the Spanish were wrong – they hold water, too.

Without the water in the aquifer beneath Dook'o'ooslíid's caldera, the neighboring city of Flagstaff would be just another of many ghost towns, lost to boom and bust. Unlike the Sinagua, the people who built those doomed towns didn't understand the vital rule of the Southwest: water is life.

I learned this early on. Heat stroke sets upon the human body with deceptive slowness; you don't realize what's been taken from you until your vision blurs and your skin grows clammy with the precious water wicking off of you. Even then, our brains don't easily grasp dehydration. We live on the Blue Planet, our bodies are sixty percent water, the damn stuff falls from the sky – how can it ever run out? This is what I would have thought if my brain had any water left to think when I almost died in the Superstition Mountains. It wasn't dramatic, the way it happened. I just sat down on a rock next to a saguaro old enough to remember the prospectors, tucking myself into its lone strip of shade, and told my family to go on without me with all the urgency of needing to tie my shoe. I only remember this vaguely, like the echoes of a dream right after you wake up. What I remember most is that big blue sky, cloudless and even like an ironed sheet strung between the

clotheslines of the horizons. In my desiccated haze, I wanted to sit there and stare into that blue sky until I joined it. Maybe it looked like water to my parched brain. Then my mom shoved her water bottle into my hands and made me drink.

If they had left me, I think I'd still be there, staring. Under the Sonoran sky, it's hard to tell if you are mortal or eternal, but the sun will always remind you in the end. Water is life.

Water is also death. Walnut Canyon's neighbor is another National Monument, the Spanish misnomer Montezuma Castle. It is neither a castle (more like an apartment complex), nor built by Montezuma (most likely the work of Sinagua women). The Castle was grand to me in the way I expected monuments to be, not tucked a mile down a canyon, but proudly on display ninety feet up on the side of a sheer cliff. As incredible as this was, I was a curious child who liked to wander off and read signs, hungry for new knowledge, new pictures to draw, and always more words to write. So I found a sinkhole.

To be precise, I found directions to the sinkhole and convinced my disgruntled parents to drive there. Located eleven miles northeast of Montezuma Castle,

Montezuma Well (also unrelated to Montezuma, also not a well) can only be described as bizarre. It is a four-hundred-foot wide pool of deep green-blue water formed by an underwater spring, bounded by cacti and creosote on bare limestone, and so prone to overflowing that it has to be regularly maintained. A charming collection of species call the Well home, including a leech found nowhere else, but there is a marked absence of fish. This is probably because the water is carbonated, with a generous dash of arsenic. Yet there are familiar homes around it, those stacked stone bricks and perfect doorways that say, *The Sinagua were here*. It was a conundrum. If I had a better grasp on arsenic poisoning then, I might have theorized that this was where the Sinagua met their doom, making their name all the more ironic. The signs didn't answer my questions, but when I visited the Well years later, now with my iPhone at the ready, some deep-dive Google searches did: the Sinagua didn't drink the water, but used the Well's overflow to irrigate their crops.

So the saying holds: water is life, even when it's death. You can't afford to be picky in the desert. That bubbly arsenic water's not gonna drink itself.

The lack of fish would have been a red flag. But maybe they were too desperate to notice, or care. Or maybe they just had faith that this water could, in its own way, be life too. The Sinagua had water, until they didn't. Maybe they did run out one day and had to leave all of their hidden homes behind, their poisonous, life-giving sinkhole and their not-a-castle, seeking a kinder oasis. Even if that's true, their name is of their end. It's like naming you after the worst thing that ever happened to you.

Because that *is* the worst thing that could ever happen to you, here. It's already happening to us. Sometimes I wonder how long we have until we start looking at wells of death with new eyes, abandoning our drought-stricken canyons of suburban streets and skyscraper castles, and leaving them to the sun's mercy. Maybe that's the pessimist in me talking. Or maybe it's just the child in me, running past doors too full of the past to stand and face them.

Sinagua. This is the first time I've ever written it down. I still wonder what they called themselves. I wonder what they'll call us.