DEEP WILD

Writing from the Backcountry

"The most alive is the wildest."
Henry David Thoreau

VOLUME 5 - 2023

Deep Wild Journal is published once a year in the summer.

Subscriptions are $20 for one year, $35 for two and $45 for three, postage paid anywhere in the United States. Student rates are $12/year. Contact us for international rates. Selected back issues are also available at discounted rates. Please see *deepwildjournal.com/subscribe* or email us at *deepwildorders@gmail.com*.

Submissions are open in the fall for the following year's issue. Please see *deepwildjournal.com/submit* for details on how, when, and where to submit your work.

Community: To stay in touch, follow us on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram, or on our blog at *deepwildjournal.com/blog*. Correspondences should be addressed to the appropriate editor and sent to *deepwildjournal@gmail.com*. We value our contributors and readers and would be glad to hear from you.

This volume was printed on FSC (Forest Stewardship Council)-certified paper by All-American Printing, Petaluma, California.

ISBN: 978-1-7372874-4-5

Cover Art by Kat Manton-Jones
© 2023 Used with permission.
Front: "Ce:wi Duag Starry Night"
Back: "Painted Rocks"
Medium: Watercolor
Location: Ancestral Lands of the Hohokam

Interior Art by Margaret Pettis
© 2023 Used with permission.
Drawing on the Utah Wilderness
Eternal ink, watercolor wash, and Sakura Pigma Micron pens

DEEP WILD
Writing from the Backcountry

Joshua tree near Castle Cliff, Beaver Dam Mountains

The mission of *Deep Wild: Writing from the Backcountry* is to publish the best work we can find in celebration of and in defense of places where there are no roads.

Contents

Essays

Stories

Hiking the Escalante

Foreword

"The most alive is the wildest," Henry David Thoreau declared in his essay "Walking." His words have been the touchstone for *Deep Wild Journal* from the start, as the editors, wilderness-wayfarers all, have sought out poems, essays, stories, and art infused with the vitality that comes from wild places. In the first five years of our existence, over two hundred writers have given their personal meaning to Thoreau's words.

We are most alive, many would attest, when we are alone in the backcountry, awake and alert, animal-like. "Here, I expand / to blue, bold hills," writes Rebecca Nelson, winner of our Graduate Student Poetry Contest for her poem "Coast Range." "[I] cup the power of past / rivers between my lips." Bo Jensen, huffing along in ungroomed snow in the Alaskan bush, is stopped short by the sound of "some animal panting," only to realize it is the beating of their heart resounding in the still center of all that vastness. "All these years," they marvel, "and here is something about my own self that I've never experienced before."

We shimmer with aliveness when we push ourselves beyond our known limits, as Rebecca Williams does when she leaps off Looking Glass Arch into a "free fall of terror" that becomes an exhilarating "joy swing" between earth and sky. And Katherine Michalak, having lived through the terror of a seizure suffered in the backcountry, reclaims, on a return trip that starts out tentative but becomes triumphant, her most precious possession, "inner stability." For each, the enticing possibility exists that maybe we *have* no limits, or at least none we have ever found.

To be fully alive means to grow, and for all who have ears to hear, the wilderness will whisper its truths. Kaila Young, second place winner in the student poetry contest, finds her lessons for living on a riverbank: "teach me, river // to be easy as your water / tumbling over rocks, / gliding, never attaching / to one place, / never worrying / where to go next, // only going…"

To hone your senses on the whetstone of the wild is a form of aliveness that has no equal. The job of poets has always been to reveal the world to us, whether by coaxing our eyes downwards to the "tiny white flower / on a narrow stem / standing and growing // from solid rock" (Robert Tremmel) or upwards into the lodgepole pines where the "small, yellow-orange sun / of a western tanager / blazes between the branches" (Jenna Wysong Filbrun) or outwards on a "moonless winter night" into a sky "as dense as a blizzard" (Susan Marsh).

There are less idyllic kinds of aliveness too. As just about every hiker will, if honest, admit, we come to know a particularly indelible version of it when we are lost. Several writers in this issue tell sad versions of the tale; Jenkin Benson's "Some Cousins Get Lost in the Forest of Pine Lake State Park" is the gruesomest: "the stubbed toe / trail goners / our gory ounces / nourish the mire // muck beckons / we gulleycrawl get / loused in sap-suck / snacking on clover."

There is another way in which wilderness does its work on us, one that would not have occurred to Thoreau. It is the bell jar in which our relationships with fellow travelers are crystallized, the laboratory in which they are tested, the crucible at times in which they are transformed. It serves not just as setting for our human dramas but as participant. The writing in this issue of *Deep Wild Journal*, as in all the preceding ones, encompasses a rich and varied range of relationships.

Wilderness is the ground where we bring our deep sadness at the loss of loved ones and seek relief, as does William R. Morris in "Mourning Grace": "I yearn to share one more sunny Alaska morning / With the one who yet rises / Into the forest canopy of my heart." It is the ground upon which seeds of new love are sown, as in Chelsea Catherine's short story "The Lightkeeper," where a solitary woman who keeps company with foxes is coaxed back into the human realm by a special visitor. It is where the bonds of friendship and mutual caring are made unbreakable, as in Bill Sherwonit's "Old-Timers Find Hidden Arctic Magic," an account of four friends on an epic Alaskan adventure.

Most wonderfully, it is the ground where families, removed from the complications of modern life, can forge a special kind of unity. The stories are told from all points of view. Rebecca Agiewich's narrative of her father leading her mother, sister, and her on an annual hike to a lake in the high Sierras holds a good deal of humor—because families can be full of that—and also her reflections from adulthood on her father's legacy: the love of adventure and thrill of discovery and above all, the gift of presentness. Margaret Sartin's "Encantada" recounts a mysterious midnight journey by kayak through mangrove swamps to a hidden realm of bioluminescence, where her young family sits spellbound in a "liquid and luminous world"—an experience they will each hold as a treasure for all their lives. Family bonding includes the unborn too, in Cate Brooks Sweeney's "Prokaryotes," as she shares intimate moments with the baby inside of her on her daily swims in "emerald-green water… under the watchful care of the live oak trees that surround us." These are heartening stories to read, where the passion for wild places is being

passed forward, for the health and survival of wild places depends on the efforts of us all, present and future.

Journeys of many other kinds as well await readers. Among them: Rebecca Lawton's "The Night the County Supervisors Met to Sell the Mountain" depicts a bad dream that is too often all-too-true. Nicholas Crane Moore's "To Whom the Kingdom Belongs" tells of a landmark 1972 Sierra Club lawsuit to stop a Disney Corporation resort in Mineral King Valley in the Sierras that still rings with relevance fifty-plus years later. Edmond Stevens puts us in the death zone on Everest where, for the love of a haircut, bad things are happening. Talley V. Kayser invites us to another realm altogether in "As a Kayaking Guide, I Always Describe Oyster Sex with Particular Care." And John Davis' poem, "To Backpack and Wear the Woods in Shawls of Moss," puts us in that still place we long for whenever we are city-bound.

I close, as one must, with gratitude, that *Deep Wild Journal* is five years strong and moving forward; for my fellow editors and assistants, who have freely given their time and energy to the cause; for the many hundreds of writers and artists who have entrusted us with their work; for our readers, who give meaning to this enterprise; and for the plain good luck I enjoy, that I am able to experience and explore wild places, both on foot and through the medium of these wild words.

Rick Kempa

"The Three Gossips," Arches rocks

Pregnant Forest

Robyn Sykes

The forest whispers *Welcome* as I start,
a ripple shadow flutter-waves and weaves,
soft rhythms pulse to sync and slow my heart,
my boots crush musty tang from rotting leaves.
An Illawarra flame tree sheds her pods;
they curl like lovers snuggled close in sleep.
A fiddle-headed fern frond dips and nods
while thornbills tizz and finches chitter-cheep.
When atoms date, divorce and date once more,
the forest floor recycles life and death.
As air snaps to attention, stirs my core,
the fern frond stills and finches hold their breath.
A presence swells with spirit-peace so strong
the pregnant forest whispers *You belong*.

Saxifrage

Robert Tremmel

Wind and rain
splatting on the brim
of my hat

tell me
what I need
to know: dark

clouds, snow, blinding
blue sky ahead, all
the way down to Milner Pass

feathers cutting wakes
in thin dry air, leaving
no trace

vapor trails flowing
from deep
moist lungs

tiny white flower
on a narrow stem
standing and growing

from solid rock, also
trying to teach me
the secrets

its real name
and mine, what
it takes to live

to live even a short
life, here in the sky, close
to what still remains.

Stranded

Ed Brown

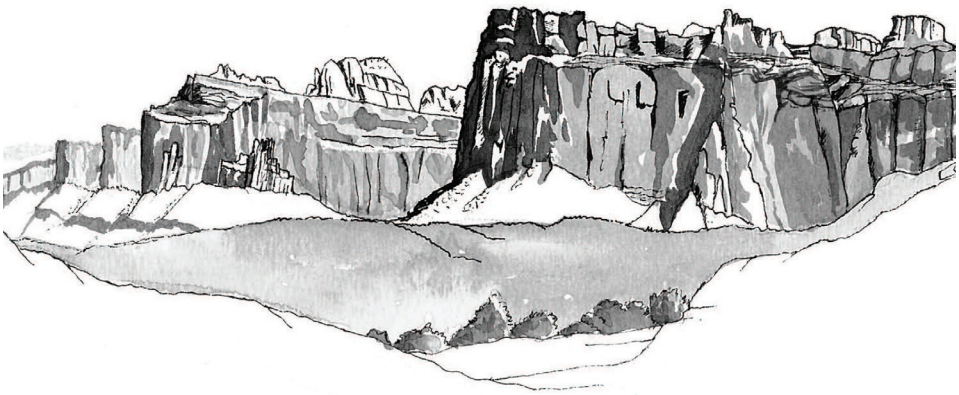
The sun, not long up over the ridge, slips between skinny aspen boles and filters through furry tips of fir trees to glisten in a profusion of filaments strung randomly before me. Unidentifiable stalks, leaves already given up to cold or late season foraging by cattle and elk, are festooned with impossible, shimmering rigging running in all directions. Hands wrapped gratefully around a cup of hot coffee, I watch glimmers flow along other garlands in the low, spreading canopy over me. With growing astonishment, I am soon noticing the phenomenon everywhere in the bowed, brown grass carpeting the slope up toward the young light of a new day. What legion of beings could be responsible for this extensive, delicate filigree? And to what end: aerial pathways? To capture prey on these single but multitudinous strands?

A scant breeze plays each filament, and reflected sunlight moves along them like electrical pulses, like coded messages. “Winter is almost upon us.” “Snow lies on the ground only 500 feet higher.” “It’s been a year like no other.” “We had a good run.” As underground networks of fungal mycelium are believed by some to facilitate so-far-unfathomable communication, could this nearly invisible tangle serve a similar role above ground? What is known or felt or remembered here on this side of the mountain, this blessedly intact drainage, barely protected by a natural firebreak above treeline and only a couple of miles from the charred patchwork of the state’s largest-ever wildfire? Is healing involved?

Sunlight reaches my tent and I see it too has been hooked up overnight, fine guy lines supplementing nylon cords. I marvel at the Lilliputian engineers behind these extensive works, then realize the gnat hovering in front of my face is not hovering and is not a gnat. It is one of *them*, dangling from the brim of my hat, offering, as long I continue to sit on this stump in the early morning light, to draw me in, make me part of this iridescent landscape. In fact, I see now that my knee is bridged to the tree on my left. Without knowing it, perhaps to a degree greater than I’m aware, I’m being woven into a tapestry of unknown extent. I find myself recalling glimpses of these ephemeral, backlit traces in almost every environment I can think of, indoors and out. The words ‘world wide web’ come to mind with new possibility.

There is an impending dilemma. To get up, to move at all across this terrain, is to wreak mostly oblivious destruction on this fragile art.

I notice another tiny rappeller tethered in space a few feet away and try to imagine such an existence, having no plan beyond surrender to where the wind takes you. Their numbers and determination reassure me. Rips left behind as I make my way through the sparse fabric will be soon erased, rewoven. But a sense of mystery persists. What subtle design and intelligence might possibly be represented in all this behavior? So many questions without answers, and only so much capacity to wonder. I rise to follow my own thread of intention for the day, newly aware of the space I inhabit and move through, of being one among a throng of critters, and like them, of being alive in the moment.



Capitol Reef National Park from Cuts Canyon

Western Tanager

Jenna Wysong Filbrun

The small, yellow-orange sun
of a western tanager
blazes between the branches
of the lodgepole pines.

Don't get me wrong,
we still have our problems.
But as we watch
that little bird

in breathless stillness,
we forget we have bodies
that are not that body,
as it takes wing and alights.

We do not think about
thinking about it
until later,
when we remember.

For a few sacred seconds, we
blaze through the branches.

Encantada

Margaret Sartin

Floating on an ocean of ink, in darkness so deep that only sound, motion, and the briny spray of the sea reach my senses, I lose the feeling of physical space. Waves break in the distance where coral busily strain the caressing current. Free-swimming marine creatures bob, sway, glide, and float in absolute silence at unknown depths below us.

My young daughter, Emily, her paddle poised in midair, sits mesmerized in the bow of our kayak. Her head is tilted to the riotous glittering bowl of stars overhead. Her breath matches the rising and falling aquatic rhythm as the kayak rocks ever so gently in the interim between uplifting swells.

Earlier, on this moonless and steamy Puerto Rican night, we had launched near Las Croabas. Our strokes revealed a certain level of anxiety as we, feeling tiny and vulnerable, paddled our kayaks quickly through a maze of silent, anchored giants. Not a soul standing on those decks high above would have been aware of our minuscule forms on the surface of the water below.

My husband Gary and youngest daughter Grace followed in their own kayak. I could hear Gary, with infinitely measured patience, directing nine-year-old Grace's uncoordinated attempts at tandem paddling as we struggled with determination to clear the oncoming surf.

A desert dweller from the American Southwest, I suddenly had frightening visions of our little family drifting out to sea in this endless blackness, disappearing forever. Crazy second-thoughts manifested themselves, too late, as doubts of our ability. We were a young family. We had left the safety of shore...*in the middle of the night*. What in the world did we think we were doing?

The liquid muscle of incoming waves slid beneath us, and soon only silence and darkness surrounded our little pod.

We bobbed. We breathed, our pulse slowing as we synced with the wild ocean in this formless space. My toes, marinating in the seaweed slosh in the kayak's hull, had only a moment to register a tiny stowaway wriggling past. This is the greater reality of our planet, where we terrestrial creatures make up only a small sliver of the biomass. That little tickle was merely the first ambassador, reminding me that the ocean is not simply water, but water alive with more life forms than most of us can ever imagine.

We rested briefly before delving into the next challenge…to pivot north and paddle full speed, cross-current, toward a red mangrove forest in Las Cabezas de San Juan Nature Reserve. This aquatic jungle would soon appear before us as a barely-discernible "cliff" of interstitial blackness somewhere between the diamond spray of stars and the liquid glimmer of ocean. Our immediate objective was to align ourselves with a "darker than dark" opening in this aquatic arboreal mass and shoot into the narrow channel which would guide us to a secluded lagoon beyond.

As the mangrove jungle absorbed us, we began paddling blind through a nocturnal world from which strange whisperings seemed to emanate. This unique habitat exists solely because of the red mangrove which encircle and protect it. To be sure, these trees deserved our respect and care. Yet with our vision limited, we risked cracking into their chaotic half-submerged root systems or being swept overboard by a twisty overhanging branch. We proceeded forward with as much caution as possible. The mangrove were merely blacker shapes in a very black world.

"If you sense a branch coming at your head, put your paddle up in front of your face to block it," a veteran nighttime paddler had advised.

Black on black. Thicker black? Thinner black? Was that something coming directly at me? There was no discernible dimension here…my eyes were useless. Every cell on the surface of my skin grew keenly alive; my ears super-tuned to ambient sound. Every non-visual sensory organ was suddenly called into active duty.

My paddle skittered off the spindly latticework of mangrove prop roots overlaying robust anchor roots which plunged into salty anoxic depths. I could hear Grace and Gary in the distance…peaceful watery notes of paddle blades dipping and slicing, punctuated by an echoing *thwack* now and then as they clattered off roots and redirected. It was an unnerving initiation.

Just as we began to feel more confident in sensing the invisible trees along our dark journey, something strangely magical began to happen. A current gently picked us up and began pulling us effortlessly forward through the channel. Mangroves still solidly lined our path, but no longer interfered with our progress.

Above us, the stars, a billion trillion strong, sprinkled across our visible slice of sky like jewels on an indigo river of velvet. In my disoriented state, these stars seemed to be flowing over us at an accelerating speed. In reality, our own kayaks were simply picking up

momentum in the current, causing the undulating silhouettes of treetops to ripple past our peripheral vision.

My eyes drank in as much starlight as my widened pupils could absorb. Scorpius waited menacingly, claws spread wide, red heart pulsing deep in its stellar being as we swept along.

At a half hour in, our paddles began to glow. "Emily, look!" I whispered. Each time we dipped our blades into the water, they lit up an alien green. The neon splash in their wake melted into darkness as we paddled forward. Soon the entire the kayak was limned with an unreal blue-green halo.

We were entering the realm of *Pyrodinium bahamense*. Each agitation of the water sent these microscopic single-celled creatures into shock waves of pulsing light. At the height of their fluorescence, the dinoflagellates of this area are 750,000 strong in a *single gallon* of water, one of the most dense occurrences in the world.

The channel widened as the current delivered us into the placid waters of Laguna Grande.

Truly a sanctuary of marine wilderness magic, every life form in this environment is sugar-coated with tiny glowing phytoplankton. Here, startled fish dart like shooting stars on meteoric paths away from our kayak, then jump from the water in explosive sprays of light. Manta rays glide past in silky grace, pulsing a rippling, eerie green. And shrimp strolling the bed of the lagoon flash electrically in response to any percussive sound our paddles make against the hard shell of our kayaks. This is bioluminescence in its finest hour.

We respect this ecosystem by keeping ourselves sealed away in our kayaks. No swimming. A dropped piece of jewelry, sunscreen, the residue of detergent in our clothes, the slightest alien substance from elsewhere… could cause harm to this very fragile environment. Even flippered feet in these shallow waters could stir up the nutritious sediment on the bottom and unbalance the natural elements that keep this enchanted microcosm alive.

Few places on Earth are known to display marine bioluminescence with such intensity. Three of those sites are in Puerto Rico, my husband's birthplace and source of our daughters' island heritage.

I dip a hand gently into the water and watch an elegant sequined glove form. Raising a salutation to the stars, I let constellations slide down my forearm and drip into the lagoon. In the serenity between starlight and biolight, our little family is suspended. There is no time, no tangible space. We drift silently…in the center of everything and nothing, cradled in the heart of an ecological marvel.

We know the blessing of rain back in our high desert New Mexican home, the joy of seeing the first hummingbird of spring, the peace of walking through ancient piñon-juniper forest. We have raised our girls to respect earth's natural beauty in its many forms, to be conscientious stewards of a planet filled with wild and exquisite mysteries. Yet, suspended here between sky and earth, we float as a family on the very substance which defines our ocean planet's uniqueness in the solar system. Like no other time in our lives, we are allowed a moment in a mirror to the cosmos. And in this liquid and luminous world, we are held absolutely spellbound.

Laguna Grande's bioluminescent glow reflects on our daughters' faces and we realize our time here is precious in so many ways. As our children grow swiftly into adulthood, the health of the world's most delicate ecosystems continues to wax and wane. We hope that our girls will return as adults, perhaps bringing their own children, to find this most enchanted of all places still vibrant. On this night, as true magic enters our hearts, we renew our vow to go softly and protect fiercely the only planet we will ever know.

Elkhart Cliffs

Paddle

Emily Benson

The lake is the evening sky
Inverted
Still as a held breath
But for the rings rippling out
Where damselflies kissed the water
Where drops fell glistening
From the blade of my paddle
A thread of concentric circles
Slowly widening
behind me
Vireos call from the darkening spruce boughs
Their bright song like sparks in the gloaming
The clouds are rose gold and black-bellied
In the white air
Leaves susurrate over a rustling in the briars
I am little sounds
Water
Breath
Sky
I am
So small and still

The Lightkeeper

Chelsea Catherine

Her boat is already cresting the rip tide when I first notice it. She appears shrouded in mist and sea spray; it's cloudy today and windy. The waves are brackish. She struggles against the tide, jerking the small single motor while cupping her eyes with her hand. From the top of the lighthouse, I scan over the boat. It's a single engine, a metal floor with a waterproof trunk resting on it. There are no identifying marks on the boat. She isn't Coast Guard. Maybe part of the National Forestry?

I put the binoculars down. My hands are cold. I blow on them for a few moments, rubbing them together before picking up one of the walkies. The tide brings her into the small wooden dock.

"Norm?" I ask. "Norm, this is Hannah at Fox Lighthouse. Do you read?"

There's some static and then my supervisor's voice filters through. "Bit early for a check-in."

"There's a bogey," I say. "One woman, single engine." I watch as she manages to tie the boat off and then climbs onto the dock. The water whips up around her. She has to lie flat on her stomach to retrieve the dry case, then sets it down next to her and looks around at the shoreline. She covers her eyes with her hand again and traces the tawny sand, covered in seaweed and foam from the angry tide. She traces all the way around the U-shaped beach before her gaze lands on the lighthouse. She looks up.

I move out of the window. "Norm?"

"She's got clearance," he finally replies. "National Geographic sent her."

"For what?"

"How the hell should I know? Looks like she'll be visiting for a week or so."

A week. The woman heaves her dry box up and starts making her way up the shore towards the recreation shed. She climbs through several feet of dense underbrush, the yellow thorny flowers from the summer long gone now. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Came up last minute."

"I don't like random people wandering around my island."

"It's not your island," Norm says.

The back of my neck prickles. A few weeks back, Norm had the nerve to call and tell me that they were cutting my position, even though

I've been here for five years, longer than anybody else. Budget issues. The lighthouse can basically run itself now. Why would they continue to pay me to watch it? "I don't just change the light," I say.

He sighs. "You've done good, Hannah. But the job is over now."

The woman finally makes her way to the plateau, heading for the recreation shed, which is open to visitors. I lift the binoculars. She's breathing hard. She looks like she might even be crying. It's hard to tell from this angle. While part of me wants to let her suffer out there alone, part of me thinks that this might be an opportunity. A way to get them to let me stay. "This lady is going to freeze to death if I don't help her," I say. "I'll check-in later."

I place the walkie on one of the charging stations and grab my rain jacket. The cold from the storm front feels humid, unlike the brisk cold that's lingered in seasons past. I slip on a beanie and gloves before making my way to the spiral staircase.

The wind stings my face as I head outside. October is a fickle month here, plagued by changes in temperature and alternating calm and severe weather. By the time I get to the recreation shed, my eyes are watering down my face. I shut the door behind me and stand there for a moment, just trying to blink my way into clear vision.

"Hi," the woman says. "Are you Hannah?"

I refocus. The light in the recreation room is dim. She stands on the other end, next to a wooden picnic table. She's taken her hat off and is running her hands through her brown hair. It's curly, the tight kind of curls I could never manage. They shine in the light. "They didn't tell me anyone was coming." I head to the fireplace, kneel, and place some old firewood in on top of kindling and newspaper. The wood is so dry, it's almost brittle. I light the newspaper. It catches quickly, the tender flames curling along the wood.

"My apologies," the woman says. "I'm Fern."

I turn to find her next to me, her hand extended. Fern is probably in her early fifties. She has a stern-looking face, but not an ugly one. Dark freckles, the kind of lips that are perfect without lipstick or filler. I stare at them for a moment before she catches my gaze. I look away. "It's poor weather for observing the fox colony if that's what you're here for."

"I figured," she says, smiling. "But my supervisor said I might be able to do some work around the mussel bed in the interim."

I eye her. "They let you come out here by yourself?"

"I spent five months in Antarctica. This isn't my first rodeo."

She doesn't look like an intrepid explorer. She looks like a lawyer or some kind of businessperson with her North Face jacket and leggings. I look at her shoes. Sneakers. "Do you have hiking boots?"

"I do," she says, still smiling. "Should I change?"

"Change and meet me at the main house. You'll need to put your things in a backpack, so your hands are free."

"I don't have a backpack."

"Bring your stuff to the main cabin and I'll lend you one."

The fire crackles behind us, the larger pieces of firewood catching, consumed by heat. I build them up and place a blackened grate in front of them.

"Is it okay?" she asks suddenly. Her voice sounds different than before. "That I'm here?"

I hesitate. Usually, I don't get along with the people who come here. They are always looking for something and expect me to give it to them. They remind me of the mainland where everyone is so busy, but none of them see anything. Like Norm. But Fern isn't Norm. There is something soft and curious in her that makes me feel at home. "It's fine," I say. "Go on and change. I'll see you in a bit."

She shows up at the main house with her things bundled in a tan scarf. After coming inside, she places them gently on the kitchen table, her fingers smoothing over the side of her camera bag. "It's nice and warm in here," she chirps. She seems perkier than she needs to be, like maybe she is scared of me. I watch as she glances around the space, her gaze flitting over the couch and circular table where I work.

"Should I bring food?" I ask. "Will you require a break for lunch?"

Her gaze falls back on me. She blinks. "I brought a protein bar," she says. "But thank you."

I give her a spare backpack and finish packing my own things. It's close to mid-day by the time we begin our hike to the eastern edge of the island. Fox Island is about five square kilometers. The interior is mostly dense pine and oak. The exterior is riddled with jagged, rocky cliffs. The foxes are the biggest animals here, but there are rabbits and voles, too, some squirrels and mice.

The sun has come out and by the time we approach the mussel bed, it feels much warmer. The wind is strong, though, so I set up a small camp in the shelter of two large boulders towards the edge of the beach. They lean to the side, held up by smaller boulders at the base so they block the wind. It looks like they could fall at any moment, but their bases extend deep beneath the ground, keeping them steady.

We don't talk. Fern deposits her things and goes almost immediately to the mussel bed. She steps delicately around them, her face lighting up. I grab a bag from my backpack and follow her. She takes pictures while I pluck some of the mussels from mossy rocks and place them in the bag. I get it nice and full before returning to the boulders and sitting down on a rubber pad I've brought along. I take a sandwich from my pack and bite into it.

Fern continues her pictures. She squats, stands, kneels. She plucks a mussel free from a bed and holds it up close to the camera. She follows this procedure–plucking and shooting–for a long time before returning to me. She sits down on the sand with a great sigh and reaches into her pack, pulling out a small protein bar and biting into it.

"Want the other half of my sandwich?"

Her eyes smile at me. She chews, the chocolate smearing the corner of her mouth. "I'll eat when I get back this evening."

"They want you to come and go every day?"

She nods.

I think about the riptide. The waves. The mainland is not terribly far away, but far enough that it would be risky for her to make this journey each day. "Why not just stay here? Go back today and bring whatever you need for the week tomorrow?"

"You sure? I was told daily trips were feasible."

"By who?"

She pauses to chew. Swallows. "I'm surprised. They told me you weren't very friendly."

"To men," I say. "They come in here like they own the place."

She laughs. It's been about a month since I last made the trip to the mainland for groceries. At the store, there was this young girl bagging my groceries, and she kept looking at the cashier and laughing. It was the first time I realized how little laughter there is here.

"Five years is a long assignment," Fern says, finishing her bar. She motions to the sandwich.

I pick it up and hand it to her. "It's because I'm good at this."

"Lots of people are good at their jobs," she says.

"Maybe," I say. "But this is my calling."

Fern decides she will boat back to the mainland this afternoon and return tomorrow with what she needs for the week. I watch her leave from the top of the lighthouse, in the same spot where I watched her arrive. The sun is still up, and the sky is free of clouds. The tide is strong, but not as harsh as it was this morning. She'll make it back fine.

I spend the evening preparing for her arrival in the morning. I put clean sheets on the pull-out bed in the living room. I store the mussels in the fridge and make a loaf of sourdough bread. It's so strange, to prepare for someone. I find myself humming as I move around the kitchen. I'm excited, I realize. I want her to like where I live. I want her to find it as interesting as I do.

The next morning is crisp, the way I like it best. No clouds in the sky, but there is a coldness on the air. It snakes through the pines and oaks as I meet Fern at the dock. She's brought several dry boxes this time, and we make two trips to get them inside the main house.

When we've finished, she says, "Open that one."

I hesitate, then pluck the top open. Inside are a gallon of milk, a carton of orange juice, two boxes of sugary cereal, and cheese among other things. I take out the cereal. Reese's Puffs. I buy a box of Cocoa Pebbles each time I visit the grocery store, but they never last long. "Thank you."

Her face looks like it's smiling at me again, even though her lips remain in a line. She seems much more real now than when she first arrived, when her smile felt like a farce. "You're welcome," she says quietly.

We leave for the fox colony just before noon. My belly is full of fresh milk, and sugar but by the time we make it to the height of the island where the den is, it's all been burned off. Up here, the rock sits exposed due to the strong winds. It's a bald spot on the hill. "You can see all the way to the mainland," I tell Fern.

She lifts her camera. "Let me take a picture?"

"You don't have to ask my permission."

She laughs. "With you in it. This is your space."

My chest warms. I hesitate, then move to the top of the boulder. The fox colony is hidden deep in their den, sound asleep beneath me. The cave is hollow and dark, impossible to see into. I stand tall above it. It feels awkward at first. My smile is forced. Fern takes a few photos and then motions for me to come down.

"When do they come out?" she asks.

I jump down from the boulder. Dust rises. "Sit down," I tell Fern.

She hesitates, then sits cross legged on the ground.

I peer into the cave. Taking my two fingers in my mouth, I exhale a long, low whistle. I stop. For a moment, it's just the sound of the trees– the branches creaking and the leaves pricking up. Then I hear a soft mewling. Baby Fox hustles out of the darkness. He sniffs around me, then bows so I can scratch his ears.

Baby Fox was born around the time I started my post here, the first baby fox I ever saw up close. He was such a strange looking fellow at first with his sooty black fur and yellow eyes. Now that we are heading into winter, his fur is a snowy white. He stands just above my knees, almost like a pet. Or a child.

"You can take pictures," I say, "just don't move around too much."

Fern sits there, motionless, staring at Baby. He doesn't seem to care about her. I pat his belly as he flops on the ground. A few moments later, his mate, Princess, comes out of the den. She cackles at me a few times, then looks at Fern. Whines.

Baby rises to his feet. I rise, too, and move closer to Fern. I sit so we are just a few feet apart. Then I take my backpack off and pull out some pieces of cubed cod. I throw one to Princess. She leaps forward, snatching it up. I reach out and hand a few pieces to Fern. "We're not supposed to do this," I say, "but I want her to feel safe around you."

"Why her?"

"She's the alpha female."

Fern tosses a piece of the fish out. Princess pauses, sniffing. When Baby tries to move forward to take the piece, she shrieks at him and then lunges forward to take it herself. When she's finished, Fern throws another one. This time, Princess doesn't hesitate.

We sit there for a long while. The fish is consumed quickly, and eventually the rest of the pack ventures out, all twenty-one of them. Princess's two babies stay close to the entrance of the den, cackling and shrieking their joy as the rest of the pack swarm about. I point to a scruffy looking fox at the mouth of the den. "That's Benny. I'm pretty sure he's the oldest."

"How can you tell who's who?" Fern asks.

"It's mostly how they move. Some have distinct markings, but they all have a unique gait."

Fern goes quiet again. One of the younger foxes approaches her, sniffing and wagging his tail slightly. She takes some pictures of him and then the rest pool in to investigate. She takes more pictures. They are all wagging their tails now. That's when Fern begins to laugh.

It's such a sweet sound. The foxes' voices are so sharp and hard, but Fern's laugh is soft and full. High and distinctly feminine. It makes me feel warm all over.

We stay at the colony until darkness falls, and we hike back by lantern. It's cold with the sun gone, so Fern spends several minutes in front of the fire warming up. I heat up some of the bread in the office and stick it on

the table with butter. Then, I prepare baked potatoes with some of the oysters, a salad with the fresh greens she's brought.

"I never thought about how you survive here without a grocery store," Fern says.

I turn to find her leaning against the refrigerator. "I stock up when I go to the mainland," I say. "And then I eat the fish I catch here. There's a lot of bluefin tuna and cod. Mussels, too."

She moves from the refrigerator to the table, placing some water in old glasses at the corner of each of our table settings. I had all but forgotten them. Now, watching her, I feel a small bit of anger. Anger at the mainland for not being what I need it to be. Anger at this place for making me leave.

She finishes setting the table and then pulls out a chair for me to sit. "I can't believe I'm here right now," she says. "They told me you'd try to run me off."

"So, why'd you bother at all?"

Her eyes catch mine. They are shining and brilliant in the light. "I guess I was as curious about you as I was about the foxes."

Fern talks while she eats, telling me about how she learned photography. After dinner, we look at the pictures she's taken. She shows me the ones of the mussel bed first. There are a few from the hike out there. One is of me walking in front of her. My back is to the camera and my head is tilted down at the softly treaded path. My hair is caught in the wind. The long grasses slant at a steep angle.

There are more pictures of the foxes than anything else. She's taken a range of them, some up close, some from further away. There's one of me and Baby. I'm seated with my legs crossed, and he sits with his paw on my knee. My throat begins to close up. All of a sudden, it feels like I can barely breathe.

The island is my home. Moving forward in the world without a fox colony to sit with or a light to keep, without fish to reel or mussels to pick, feels like an empty life.

"What is it?" Fern asks.

I force it back. No use in crying over it. The only hope I have is to change their minds. "Nothing," I say. "You're very talented, you know."

Fern follows me on my chores for the next week. She says she is going to document my life here. I allow her because I think maybe the photos will inspire my bonehead boss into reconsidering my post here. It feels strange at first, like it did with the foxes, but eventually I forget she is even taking pictures at all.

We trek through the woods, looking at the plants and trees. I show her my favorite fishing spot, and we sit there for three hours, casting and reeling, watching the slim silver herring dart around underwater boulders. She asks which wood I use for fires and takes pictures as I touch the bark on the peeling birch trees.

On our fifth day, we have dinner by candlelight. Fern makes poutine, and we drink from a glass of white wine she stashed in the cupboard. I haven't drunk anything in years, and after one glass, I'm feeling a slow, sweet lull. She brings the bottle with her as we move to the couch. I sit on the floor to tend to the fire, and she sits with her legs stretched out across the cushions. "Were you nice in the beginning because you thought I was going to make you famous?" I ask.

Fern pauses, looking down at her wine glass. "Maybe. A little bit."

The fire pops in front of us. I try to imagine Fern out in the real world with her fancy clothes and her even temperament. She fits there. I can see her going to stores, talking to people. As much as I try, I just can't envision myself the same way. "You're not married," I say. "You don't have children?"

"No. The job makes it hard."

"Then why do you do it?"

Her eyes flicker over to mine. She searches me, then falls back to her glass. "It's what I love."

I shift, placing my arm on the sofa. "What if you couldn't do it anymore? What if something happened and you couldn't take a single other picture for the rest of your life?"

The wind picks up outside. I know the fox pack is nestled deep in their cave, tails tucked around one another, all pressed together. This week sharing them with Fern has felt happy in a way I didn't expect. It has made everything I've done here feel more meaningful, somehow. "I've been doing this for two decades. Lately I'm just…." She waves her hand. "Instead of traveling around everywhere, I'd like to stick close to home for a bit. See if I can see the city in a different light." She cocks her head. "What will you do if they don't change their minds about the post?"

I try to smile but my face is tight. "I really don't know."

We sleep in late her last day. The sun is already high in the sky by the time I help her pack the boat up. It's cloudy today but the wind is still. Better for her to navigate in. When the boat is packed, we stand there on the dock, swaying slightly, and look at one another.

"I want this," she says. "What you've created here. I want it, too."

"You can have it," I tell her. "That's the kind of person you are. You can make anything happen."

She hesitates, then reaches out and pulls me into her. It's awkward with all our layers on–I can barely feel her body. But I can smell her shampoo, and after a few moments, I feel her place something in my jacket pocket. She places a quick kiss on my lips, then pulls back. "You are lovely, Hannah."

She climbs into the boat. For a fleeting second, I want to climb into it with her. But where would we go? My world here is so small. I remove the rope from the dock pole and hand it to her. "Be safe," I tell her.

She starts the engine. The waves slap against the metal. Diesel plumes. She turns around, then faces the open water. Not long later, the boat slips out of view. I want to cry, but I don't. I take the piece of paper from my coat pocket and unfold it. She's written her phone number, and there's an address in Newfoundland. Her handwriting is flowery and large. It feels warm in a way I can't describe, which is how I felt when I first looked at her all those days ago.

I didn't tell her, but last night when I was checking on the lighthouse light, Norm radioed to tell me he'd seen some of the preliminary pictures she'd taken. "Brilliant," he called them. "But you still need to be out by November first."

While Fern slept, I forced myself to come to grips with it. In three weeks, I will leave this place forever. I will return to the mainland and try to find another job. It will not be easy. There is no one left in my family, and any friends have long faded. But I think maybe if I find more people like Fern, it won't be all bad. Maybe I can find something else like this. It won't be the same, but it could be good.

I stuff the piece of paper back into my pocket and make my way up the hill. The sand crumbles under my feet. It smells faintly of diesel from the boat, but after I get deeper into the woods, the smell fades. The trees sway overhead. My shoes crunch on fallen leaves. I walk all the way to the fox den where Baby is waiting to greet me.

Deep Wild Journal
2023 Graduate Student Poetry Contest Results

The editors of *Deep Wild Journal* congratulate the winners of the 2023 Deep Wild Graduate Student Poetry Contest, whose work was selected by contest judges Rebecca Lawton and Margaret Pettis. The First, Second, and Third Place poems are published here, while the Honorable Mentions will be featured on our website this summer. Bios of the top three poets and of the judges can be read in the Contributors' Notes. Our gratitude and encouragement goes out to all the student poets—nearly a hundred, from throughout the United States and far beyond—who sent us work. We wish we could have honored more.

First Place, $300.
"Coast Range," by Rebecca Nelson
University of California Davis, Ecology Studies

Second Place, $200.
"teach me, river," by Kaila Young
Western Colorado University, MFA in Creative Writing

Third Place, $100.
"Night Hunt," by Rain Hastings
Western Colorado University, MFA in Creative Writing

Honorable Mentions:

"The Bolton Potholes, Vermont," by Mary Simmons
Bowling Green University, MFA—Poetry

"A Fish—Tenkara," by Jarrett Ziemer
Western Colorado University, MFA in Creative Writing

Comments by Judges
Rebecca Lawton and Margaret Pettis

"Coast Range," by Rebecca Nelson, First Place

Rebecca says: In "Coast Range," Rebecca never strays from simple discovery of place. Her landscape does not balk at being itself, as she experiences herself in it, feeling as expansive as its hills and skies and wild lives. With uncanny alchemy, she's created a clear-eyed look at unique wilderness, captured in its own sparse language.

Margaret says: Pine needles. Yerba santa. Watching and listening teach the poet the nature of the wild land she traverses and honors. Naming life forms in the dry creek beds of the far Western range, noting burned bark and scrub jays, dust and bear tracks—"Coast Range" is a portrait of a place powerful in memory. It is our fortune the poet carried the images home and shared them with the rest of us .

"teach me, river," by Kaila Young, Second Place

Rebecca says: Looking to a great artery in the wild for lessons, Kaila gives us more than the rock and clay of a streambed in "teach me, river." She helps us connect to the master-teacher river, finding a fluidity that can instruct, guide, and move us through life with greater ease. These open-hearted lines connect without guile to earth and water.

Margaret says: Speaking directly to the river, the poet intimately bares her desire to let go of worry, of judgment, of stubbornness. Her willingness to be taught by wildness is her first step in accomplishing just that. "teach me, river" is an honest, sincere expression from one whose humble nature can teach us all.

"Night Hunt," by Rain Hastings, Third Place

Rebecca says: It's hard to imagine a more elemental experience than Rain has portrayed in "Night Hunt." Full of immediacy, painted in quick sounds and sensations, the scene leaves us not knowing exactly what has happened out in the wild on that dark night.

Margaret says: This poem captures a marvel of wildness in action, suspense, good luck, and mystery, moving all with the staccato of the pursuit into the remaining silence.

2023 Graduate Student Poetry Contest
First Place

Coast Range

Rebecca Nelson, University of California Davis

No landscape without
the body to define
its edges, skin against
rough, fire-scarred bark;
feet sore and damp with pine
needles. Prickled lichen
brushes hands, rocks.
Scree clatters.

A woman alone
with clouded sulfur butterflies
and scrub jays,
I follow the dry creek bed.
Wind rattles low and silver
over Avena grass, stalled heat.

Here, I expand
to blue, bold hills,
cup the power of past
rivers between my lips,
smoothed stones I carry;
I ramble into sun-sharp thistle.
Bear tracks press into green-gray soil.

The spine of the mountains
shuffles yerba santa
sweet air, brightness.
I bathe in sunlight and dust.
Exposed roots snake past me.

2023 Graduate Student Poetry Contest
Second Place

teach me, river

Kaila Young, Western Colorado University

sweet swell of a riverbed,

your rocky skin
your clay flesh

your tree-veiled waters
catching glimpses of sun
running your veins
to steeped shallows–
that soft, slow opening.

how I want to be that water,
rolling its tongue in sun.

I'm too stubborn to be fluid,
acting more like a glacier.

teach me, river

to be easy as your water
tumbling over rocks,
gliding, never attaching
to one place,
never worrying
where to go next,

only going,
never stopping to ask,
is this right?

river, as you keep
Mother Earth dancing,
teach me to unravel.
teach me
to let go

2023 Graduate Student Poetry Contest
Third Place

Night Hunt

Rain Hastings, Western Colorado University

Somewhere near sleep and dreams
wrapped in my bedroll –
down comforter, woolly blankets,
unfurled on earth
of early-summer mosses,
flowers, and fragrant herbs,
a rush at my feet
rustling, cracking,
a stag gathering for a last-minute leap
the length of my body
whooshing—flight-for-life careening—wind on my face
alerting me to night-life
beyond stars glimmering between leaves.

Before even a question forms,
another silhouette launches
from my feet, claws-tucked, lithe and massive
a mountain lion in silent pursuit
filling my entire sky with silky heat.
Stars flash dark, and I feel this lion
touch down beyond my head—
paws to earth to spine.

I never hear a scream,
do not know how it ends,
but I've been there to witness life's thrills

left to no end
with the silence of icy galactic scrawls
turning orchestral.

Kin to the Stars

Susan Marsh

The year released its last frosty breath with a week of forty below. When I stepped outside for a bundle of firewood, the packed snow squealed as though my footsteps caused it pain. But the extended cold snap did not prevent three friends from driving over 700 miles from the mild Pacific Northwest to celebrate New Year's with my husband and me in Montana.

We planned a memorable evening: in place of fireworks exploding over town, we would bask in the glow of candles. In place of champagne that would likely freeze on the way to the Forest Service cabin I had rented, we would pass around a four-ounce flask of brandy.

Skis waxed and backpacks secured, we set off from the trailhead on New Year's Eve. Breaking trail through feathers of surface hoar, we swished along to the rhythm of tiny crystals shattering with a soft hiss. They sparkled under the low sun, delicate prisms flashing red and green and blue. Mesmerized, we skied in silence.

From our route along the surface of a frozen lake, forests stood as if rendered in black and white, the peaks above in shades of pearl and midnight-blue. A thicket of willows at the lake's far end stood in a smudge of warm burnt orange, a welcome contrast to the icy scene. A moose nibbled the bronzed twigs in a pocket of shadow where the creek emptied into the lake. There lay the coldest air. I marveled at her fortitude while I tilted my face like a sunflower to catch its fading warmth.

The lake behind us, we climbed into a stretch of old-growth forest. A band of chickadees accompanied us, gathering in the trees overhead before shooting out in front, showing us the way. We followed the faint trace of an old ski track, left over from a race the week before. The friend who had flagged the course advised me to use his trail, not the regular one I was used to taking. "It's much more interesting," he said.

I might have picked up on the chuckle that wrapped the word *interesting*. The race course climbed and dropped and wound into gullies, offering unexpected challenges on what appeared from a distance as a consistent slope. The blue flagging veered up and beyond our destination and we had to backtrack. The sun slipped over the rim of the canyon, removing all illusion of warmth in the still blue air. In our haste to find the cabin from an unfamiliar direction, we nearly skied right past its four-sided form tucked into the trees.

Relieved and chilled, we kicked off our skis and dropped our packs on the porch beside the door. I pulled the permit from my pack and read the combination for the lock to Dale. "Four-three-three-six."

"Uh . . ."

"Want it again?"

"I don't think so," he replied. "This lock doesn't have a combination. You need a key."

"Oh great." I worked for the Forest Service at the time, and thus I happened to have a key. That necessary item was at home. Why would I bring it if the cabin had a combination lock, as indicated on my permit?

Darkness was descending. I plunged through the snow to try a window while Dale studied the padlock. A double-bit ax rested against the rounds of firewood on the cabin's porch. He picked it up. With precision, having swung an ax for ten years on a trail crew, he aimed for the screws that held the latch plate onto the door. A couple of blows sheared the screw heads clean, and the brass plate dropped away.

We hurried in. I found matches to light candle stubs stuffed into empty wine bottles, while my husband Don started a fire in the cook stove. Flames began to leap under the gaps in its iron top, and we all hovered close. "This is what we'd be doing if we'd stayed home," he said.

He continued to coax more heat from the stove, and I went out to fill a pail with snow. I scraped it into a wide steel wash pan to melt on the fire and returned for another. The pillow of snow in the wash pan dissolved into an inch of water dense with twigs, spruce needles, and shreds of lichen. It would take a few more trips to melt enough to wash dishes and make tea. Jeannie and Patty sorted through their packs and piled food onto the table: pre-cooked corn chowder, whole-wheat rolls, and mounds of chopped onion and shredded cheese.

The growing warmth nibbled at the frost on the cabin's logs, making them glisten. With nothing to do but wait for the chowder to warm, I stepped away from the stove to have a look around.

The candlelight illuminated old photographs. In one, a cheerful, Depression-era forest ranger stood in rawhide snowshoes with a furry black dog at his feet. I imagined man and dog newly arrived from a snow survey. The man grinned for the camera, the dog's tongue lolled. Both were glad to be home at their cozy cabin.

Other pictures captured rangers on horseback, their backs straight under pressed uniform shirts and chins jutting forward, gazing across grand landscapes to horizons cut by mountains. The men and their mounts, now gone for decades, posed in the exuberance of their prime.

This cabin, unchanged from the days when it sheltered their evenings as it now did ours, brought them alive.

"Dinner!" Patty called.

We feasted as twilight deepened into night. Snug against the cold, we raised a toast: To the mountains! To the moose in the willows! To old friends and a new year!

Long after midnight I woke and slowly became conscious of what had roused me: I had to pee. I lay still for most of an hour, torn between the warmth of my sleeping bag and the inevitability that I would have to leave it. This was the bane of camping, inconvenient enough in summer when one could scurry out of the tent and return while the bedroll was still warm. In winter, a night visit to the privy required suiting up as if for an expedition.

Resigned, I pulled on my down booties, parka, and heavy wool hat and slinked toward the door, my footfalls as light as I could make them. The floor boards answered, and in the stillness they cracked. Loudly. If I woke anyone, they didn't let me know.

As I closed the door behind me and stepped off the cabin's porch, I checked the thermometer hanging there. I wished I hadn't—in the faint starlight I could read it well enough: thirty below. I hurried to the outhouse.

On the way back, I paused, drawn by the mountains and sky. Massive volcanic cliffs stood on the far wall of the glacier-carved canyon, their chiseled facets washed in a thin spray of starlight. The Milky Way stretched overhead in a broad curve, bright enough to cast shadows. Far from the lights of town, eight thousand feet above sea level in the middle of a moonless winter night, the sky was as dense as a blizzard.

With the night came silence. It was not the close silence of a cave, where sounds are instantly absorbed by a bunker of solid rock. Instead of the absorption of sound, I experienced its absence. No breath of wind to stir the spruces, no gurgle of water in the creek, no noise from me as long as I held still.

The universe drew close, the ultimate wilderness an arm's reach away. A weak diurnal creature yearning to surrender to this moment of enchantment, I lingered as long as I could, defying the penetrating cold. How many nights like this had I missed, trading a glimpse of the sublime for the comfort of my bed? Without the tea with brandy, I probably would have missed this one.

Again I thought of the moose we had seen that afternoon, resting somewhere under the cliffs and stars. She belonged, along with roosting

chickadees, hibernating marmots, and the bare, dormant willows, to a fundamental existence from which I had insulated myself.

A sense of deep kinship washed over me like starlight—kinship with the moose, the cliffs, the stars. At the same time I felt small and insignificant, in that good way that comes when you witness the night sky and realize your great luck at being alive and conscious of it. Delicious as the feeling was, I was becoming seriously chilled. With a final glance skyward, I shuffled toward the cabin door.

It took a while to fall asleep again, not because of the cold as much as the images that remained with me after I closed my eyes. Those cliffs in the starlight, the great speckled sky, a window into the realm of mystery. The images remain like a tattoo in my memory, years later.

The night sky has never lost its mystery, but most of us rarely witness it these days. In much of the developed world, we have nearly obliterated the dark. The International Dark Sky Association exists to address a problem that would have left our ancestors perplexed: light pollution. The glare of misdirected and unnecessary light now contributes to an ambient glow that far outshines the Milky Way over much of the land base on earth. In photographs from space, you can easily pick out major population centers and follow the traces of populated coastlines. In comparison, the central Rockies are noticeably dark.

Light pollution is more than an annoyance. It has been shown to pose a health risk for humans, causing sleep deprivation and reduced production of melatonin. The night is alive with nocturnal organisms whose habits depend on darkness. The range of creatures harmed by artificial light includes birds, bats, amphibians, sea turtles, fish, fireflies, and zooplankton. Trees in gardens and parks are affected by street lighting, which depresses the formation and maintenance of chlorophyll and promotes lengthening of the internodes of the branches, making them weak and spindly.

While science provides a glimpse into the measurable harm light pollution causes in living beings, we don't yet have a metric for the loss of spiritual benefits, gifts from the long dark nights. Humans once gathered together to retell stories about the birth of the world, other beings, and ourselves. Some still do, but what we call civilization is rapidly encroaching on their cultures and dimming the stars in their skies.

The night once brought people together as we sought safety and companionship. Instead of sitting in front of a backlit screen wearing earbuds, we held ceremonies, and shared songs and sacraments as the

mystery of darkness surrounded us. Our faces glowed in the honeyed light of campfires, rendering us beautiful to one another. I believe this is why modern campers want a fire, even on summer nights when the cold is not a factor.

We still yearn for the night's mystique. How well I remember certain summer nights when I was growing up. Neighborhood children waited in bed for the appointed hour when we slipped in silence from windows and back doors to rendezvous in the dark. Those innocent raids were part of the great adventure of youth, the discovery of a world that had been hidden and now stood with its door ajar, inviting us to visit. Our delight at getting away with small forbidden forays faded as whispers fell into silence and we lay on our backs, feeling the dampness as the ground gathered dew, our gazes fixed on the spectacle of stars.

We would have gotten into trouble for feeding our youthful wonder. Our culture values productivity, not mystery. In addition to whatever work we may be paid for in exchange for hours per day of service, we must keep up with news and email, run errands, raise children, and check off the myriad items bulleted on our to-do lists. Who has time for star gazing?

Sometimes the opportunity comes in unexpected ways. I recall a news item a few years back about a power failure, during which people took to their front yards instead of staying indoors on a summer night. One lady told the reporter, "The whole neighborhood sat talking by candlelight or just listened to the crickets. We should have power outages more often."

The music of crickets brings to mind that other gift of the night. Even in cities, things quiet down once the bars close. In natural conditions, the night holds a deep quietude in which sounds that go unnoticed become dominant. When I stood outside the cabin in Montana, at first I could hear nothing. With time and attention came the faint, muffled sound of a distant waterfall. As I strained to its whisper, I held my breath, for the noise of my inhalations was distracting. So was the pulse behind my ears and the scratch of hair against the collar of my parka. A cricket would have sounded like an explosion.

Quiet belonged to that night in a way that felt right and proper. A variety of natural sounds would fill other days and seasons: squirrels chattering, storms blowing, warblers singing, creeks running, elk bulging. My knowledge of their past and future presence came to me like an echo and somehow intensified the quiet. Their reverberation in my subconscious mind brought reassurance that while I stood alone

with stars and silence, it wouldn't always be that way. In a day or two we might hear a prefrontal wind sweeping out the cold air. Chickadees or nutcrackers might accompany us along the trail as the creek burbled under layers of ice. The sound of my breath would once again go unnoticed.

Like the light from stars, natural sounds are part of a place. We instinctively relax in their presence. A study conducted by the University of Colorado found that over three-quarters of Americans ranked the opportunity to experience "natural peace" and "the sounds of nature" as very important among the reasons for preserving national parks. But parks, as anyone who has visited one during peak season knows, are anything but quiet. Loud music, aircraft, miscellaneous shouts and hollering, the hum of vehicles and noisy generators are more likely to be heard in a national park campground than the call of a chickadee.

Some years back I read an article in Smithsonian Magazine* about nuisance military flights over California's Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks. Park officials decided to take the commanders on a backcountry pack trip so they could experience for themselves the effects of military jet noise on visitors—a source of many complaints. The experiment was declared a success after the military base received radio traffic from irate commanders riding spooked horses on narrow mountain trails. "In that context," observed the author, "human cursing is generally regarded as a natural sound."

What we call the "wee hours" are those of deepest sleep. Lying awake is especially unwelcome then, for these are the hours we dread. They bring our demons out—all that worries us or causes remorse or gives us nightmares. In some parts of the world, this part of the night is called the hour of the wolf—a time that brings fear.

I was not in bed on that long-ago night during the wolf hour, but outside, under the mountain cliffs and stars. A touch of fear hovered just outside my consciousness, the kind that accompanies true awe in the presence of beauty. Along with it came a sense of privilege: I had been invited into a scene where I did not belong.

There is a reason why I remember so well one winter night in 1983. When one spends a good deal of time in wild places they come to seem like friends, and it's easy to feel more comfortable than awestruck. While I might marvel at a multi-layered lenticular cloud hanging over the mountains, the brilliance of the first buttercup nudging through the snow

in spring, or the magnificence of a mature bull elk emerging from the forest in the fall, I see clouds and wildflowers and wildlife regularly, most often during daylight hours. They are familiar.

In contrast, that winter night did not offer comfort or familiarity. It stopped me in my tracks. *Look*, it said. *Listen*. And I did.

*Garret Keizer. "A Battle Against Noise Aims to Save Our Natural Soundscapes." *Smithsonian Magazine,* August 5, 2008.

Old juniper and boulder

Bend

Marybeth Holleman

the bend in the river
is where the stillness lies.
I am that eddy

where the water flows
back towards where it came,
as if to say, wait, no, not yet—

and yet—
there is this stillness
just between the two flows,

and this is where truth lies,
this is where time bends,
where the river in its beauty

sings the song of now.

The Unmarked Trailhead

Bo Jensen

Saturday is calm, no wind, so I set off from King Salmon, Alaska, for a Thanksgiving weekend hike. This is bush Alaska. The Alaska Peninsula Highway is the only paved road; it's just fifteen miles long, an icy two-lane track across the tundra, ending at the frozen coast. I ease onto a snow-covered gravel road toward Lake Camp, where the Naknek River slowly pours from Naknek Lake, the beginning of the end of those waters as they flow away toward Bristol Bay and the Bering Sea.

Or maybe it's the end of the beginning.

For all the salmon born farther up, past the lake in the tumbling streams of the jagged Walatka and Kejulik Mountains, this is where they leave the beginning of their life behind. Spring turns to summer and finds them heading from one wilderness to another, from the mighty volcanic peaks out to the deep open ocean. They're young and strong then, and easy prey. But they're ready, heading out to risk it all. There's no stopping them. I remember those days. Maybe Lake Camp just signals a natural change. Maybe this is the point.

I turn off the white winter-packed road and take the snowier single lane access uphill to Pike Ridge, turning a circle at the road's end and parking on the low, exposed hilltop. I shut off the truck and open my door, swinging my legs out to strap on my gaiters over my hiking pants and boots. The ripping sound of the wide Velcro straps breaks the stillness as I adjust the fit. I step out, make sure I have my knife and bear spray, hitch on my daypack, then swing the door shut. I pull on my gloves as I cross to the unmarked trailhead.

It's one of those hidden local places I have come to know and love on my Alaskan adventure. Three more weeks and I will be traveling back home to the Southern Rockies. By the time I step onto that Alaska Airlines flight, I will have been here exactly five months. A few weeks in the Lower 48, and then I'll be right back here again for another half-year. Making a big circle, just like the salmon, visiting and revisiting this idea of home. Maybe reframing just exactly what that means.

No trailhead, and no tracks. I am the first one on this route since the recent snow. And yet it's no problem to follow the dual ruts of the ATVs that have driven this way all summer and fall. A couple of weeks ago, I was out here picking berries in a drizzling rain. Now I crunch over perfectly sculpted snow, the muddy mess beneath me frozen and easy to navigate.

I move forward, winding through alder thickets, curving down to the left and then uphill to the right, watching for the last of the season's bears. Listening. As I emerge from the trees near the top of the next rise, I suddenly stop.

It's just about noon. But in Alaska, as the earth's tilt shifts us away from the sun, daylight itself changes, takes on new meaning. These are the days of soft light and long shadows. Midday, the sun still hangs low in the sky, its golden rays stretched across the landscape, just barely reaching over the hill. The perfect, unmarked snow around me sparkles and dances, dazzling in the sunlight, glittering in hints and winks of varied colors like tiny shards of a thousand rainbows, each reflection unique in that moment. It is stunning to behold.

The frozen trail, the slanting low sunlight. It's funny how what we dread, or what we are told to dread—the arctic Alaskan cold, the bear trails, the short days of winter—often helps us find our way, and adds a whole new beauty to the journey.

I pick up a traveling companion, though I remain solo on my trek. The footsteps of a red fox trot along in one of the ATV tracks as I hike in the other. Maybe it had come by this morning; the tracks have pretty fresh edges, though not as clear as mine, I think, looking behind me at my own boot prints. Still, fresh since the snow, so last night at the earliest. I take care not to step on these snowy greetings from another traveler, from another time.

Repeatedly, I cross the squiggling burrowed trails of mice that ventured forth well after the fox. Likewise, every so often, tiny birds have hopped directly across the trail afterward, absolutely straight across, for reasons I cannot see. I can't find the rhyme or reason, mice or birds sometimes moving toward frozen berry bushes and other times headed into what looks like nothing at all to me. But I am not a mouse, and I am not a bird. They seek what they sense, what they believe they need. I step over their traverses carefully, wondering.

The bounding patterns of snowshoe hares crisscross the lower trail. I have seen not one rabbit, though. Maybe because of the fox, or rather, the foxes: soon a second set of tracks joins the first. I take great pleasure in walking in the middle between my two invisible fox buddies, my new prints added between their earlier ones, imagining us hiking up this trail together, the surprise of someone coming the other way, finding me walking among the foxes.

An hour in, I stop to catch my breath. The silence of the tundra is complete. I sigh, satisfied. No planes, no highway noise, not a dog barks in the distance. The wind remains completely still.

Without any other sounds, I can hear something: some animal faintly panting, as if at a short distance. *Fox?* I think. *Wolf.* Straining to listen, I look all around me, slowly closing my mouth.

Then I open it again.

That wasn't some animal panting.

I was hearing the beating of my own heart in a pulse within my own breath, the faintest *huh – huh – huh* puffs of sound rising up from my lungs all on their own as I exhale smoothly, breathing like normal.

I am the animal. I close my lips, and the sound is immediately gone. I open my lips, and again I hear my heartbeat *in my breathing*. All these years, and here is something about my own self that I've never experienced before. Each time I stop for a break, I do this listening experiment, over and over, both amused and amazed.

I think I am finally meeting myself on the distant trail. I mean, how can we recognize who we are, unless we step away from the noise of this distracting world, open our mouths in the moments of our exhaustion, and hear the sound of our own blood, our own breath, rising up to startle us into paying attention. We believe the threat to our lives is out there somewhere, some wild beast we must face. But in the still, quiet moments, we find that it is we ourselves we must confront—our ignorance of ourselves, of our breath and blood, of our own senses, our own needs, our own miraculous lives, running straight as an arrow or squirrelly as a mouse tunnel, revealed to us in the middle of nothing and nowhere.

What a gift, that edge of fear, that straining to listen; and then the breakthrough, a glimmer of recognition, and…wonder. I looked for what I feared, and my understanding changed. If only the foxes had been here to see it.

As I climb the steeper part of the trail into the high country, I can see farther, down into the winding Naknek River. Ice floats lazily downstream, here and there flashing in the sun like a mirror. Moose cross my path, or have and may again: one, two, three four, five six seven, eight separate sets of tracks have walked across the trail, heading straight for the river. One set is small, a calf. The last set is massive.

Huh – huh – huh.

Do they return this way, too? I muse. *Or do they take a different loop around?* Whichever way, they return. They're often up here; I've seen their hoofprints before. They seem to be thriving this far out.

All these tracks point toward the river. We all want to survive… moose seeking water, salmon out to sea, all of us once young and now

older, wiser, considering. I want to see moose, but at the same time, I'm nervous of running into them. Still, I look for what I fear, scanning the hillsides and the river's edge, listening for their movements. They are so huge, so powerful. I realize I'd rather see them and tremble than miss the moment.

But the moose are off somewhere wild and free, as elusive as the rest of the wildlife. Myself included. I feel like I, too, am nothing but tracks in the snow, marks we leave that fade and melt away into the great river.

Before heading back, I reach for my water bottle, pulling it from my pack. The water is frosty cold on my lips. I hold the bottle up in front of me: while I've been hiking, ice has formed, floating in the water. Today's high will only reach twenty degrees; yet somehow, I am plenty warm, content, and happy. I raise my bottle toward the edge of the steep bluff, drinking a toast to the icy river: *To leaving the beginning of your life behind.*

Home is where the heart is, beating within every breath we take, panting for the life it is seeking.

Beehive domes, Parowan Creek

Elegy for My Granite Body

Julia Rudlaff

my twelve-year-old self
never went to the mountains

but their body
belonged to the peaks

wind-worn and hailed on,
tenacious in a fragile alpine zone
home to unpredictable weather
and endangered plants

that kid
would've hid from Search and Rescue

slack-kneed and hungry
wafting through the fog
without a single cairn
leading the way down,
their body
laying to rest
in a rock crevice

they would've talked
with the lichen
and the fungi,
told stories to the
tart alpine cranberries

they would've promised
the rocks, the plants,
even the spruce trees wrapped around
their shaky, landsick legs,
that they would survive,
they would be happy,
they would find their way home
all by themselves

As a Kayaking Guide, I Always Describe Oyster Sex with Particular Care

Talley V. Kayser

Some fathers object to the mention of semen
in front of their offspring. Some mothers remark
that "the girl oysters have life much harder," and we
who have vulvas nod sagely. A bro in pink glasses
once boomed, "it's a clusterfuck, dude!" and I used
that same joke for all subsequent bros. But what blows

people's minds isn't how shellfish sex slicks the creeks
in late spring, or the wild odds that each thrashing larva
must face, or that some spawning females release fifty
million or more eggs per day—but the way oysters
change. Protandry, simultaneous hermaphrodites...
I explain. Middle schoolers who giggled at sperm

all clam up and avoid that one kid with their eyes—
or a red-cheeked man quickly intones, "God be praised!
His creation is wondrous!"—or maybe a grayed
pair of women share wide grins and laugh. Oh, so strange,
what goes on in this water we cross. Boys grow up
to be girls. Girls can also be boys. Never mind

that for seventeen million years oysters have thrived
through such change—it's a slippery space. So I say:
"what amazing resilience." I say, "great success
under pressure." I marvel at oysters, who bear
hurricanes on rough shoulders, who shelter the weak
of the sea, whose strong stomachs cleanse impurities

from each last drop of marsh, every day. I call out
to all kayakers, raise high my water. Together,
let's toast *Crassostrea virginica*'s honor:
all praise to the oyster, robust clusterfucker,
both mother and father, essential.

Once More to Wire Lake

Rebecca Agiewich

It is half an hour into our first-ever family backpacking trip and things are not going well. My little sister, age six, is crying. On top of her pack, her decrepit stuffed elephant Freddie bobs around with a little stuffing poking out of his pink, earless head.

"What's the matter?" says my father, as if it isn't obvious. Since leaving the trailhead, we have been hiking upwards at a suicidally steep angle with heavy packs on our shoulders. It is hot. It is dusty. On a normal Saturday, Erica and I would be living the high life: roller-skating, reading books, or watching Brady Bunch reruns. Now, inexplicably, we are being tortured.

My father crouches down next to my sister, his pack towering above him. Tall and lean with a red bandana tied around his longish black hair, he looks a little like Neil Young (though he wouldn't know who Neil Young was if Neil Young hit him over the head with a guitar).

My…my p-pack is too heavy." Erica is too out of breath to even cry properly. But she makes a valiant attempt. Freddie looks at us with the blank stare of the damned. Horseflies buzz around his head.

I'm not feeling so hot myself. Seeing Erica cry, however, immediately makes me feel more perky. Plus, it gives me chance to flop down on a rock and catch my breath.

My mom says nothing. Instead, she watches the dramatics with an expression on her sweaty face that says, "Your father got us into this mess; let him fix it."

Ever since he'd first read John Muir in his early 20s, my father dreamed of exploring the high Sierras on foot. Of experiencing, like Muir had, the "white beams of the morning streaming through the passes, the noonday radiance on the crystal rocks," and the "flush of the alpenglow."

As a family, we'd day-hiked and car-camped. But those experiences didn't provide him with enough Muir-like ecstasy. There was no alpenglow to be found in a crowded car campground.

After a heart attack nearly killed him at 33, my dad decided it was time to make his Muir-inspired dream a reality. The doctors had told him he would never hike above 5,000 feet again, but that just added fuel to the fire. He never liked being told what to do.

So, after his triple bypass surgery in 1976 (a new and frightening procedure back then) my father set about transforming himself. He stopped smoking, cut back on the cheeseburgers, started running. He grew fit and slender.

Then he bought a copy of *Hikes in the Northern Sierra*. From its shiny pages, he picked out a backpacking trip for his unsuspecting family. The multi-day trek to Wire Lake involved 24 miles of round-trip hiking over rugged terrain in the Emigrant Wilderness. It led to a remote Sierra Lake, filled with rainbow trout and surrounded by granite. It topped out not at 5,000 feet, but at 9,000.

In other words, the perfect hike for a group of novice backpackers that included a six-year-old, an eight-year-old, a chain-smoking mom, and a father recovering from a colossal coronary.

"Would it help if I carried something for you?" my father asks Erica in a gentle tone. Sometimes he is impatient with us, but not today.

My tearful sister nods. Her wavy golden-brown hair is tied into long pigtails that cascade out from under her red bandana. Her tummy protrudes in a tight yellow t-shirt that says, "Webster Realty," the name of her soccer team.

Dad stares at her Kelty pack for a moment. It's orange and identical to mine. My father's pack, which he hasn't even taken off during this interlude, must weigh 65 pounds. It makes our tiny packs look like toys.

"What if I take your sleeping pad?" he says finally, in a cautious voice.

Erica looks at him suspiciously. Even at six, she's aware that she might be able to get a better deal if she plays her cards right.

The Sierra sun beats down on us. Dust shimmers in the dry air.

Maybe we'll turn around and go home, I think hopefully. *Maybe we'll get to go back to the Pinecrest Motel and eat biscuits and gravy in the diner. Maybe she'll get in trouble.*

"OK," says Erica at last, wiping away a few tears. Dirt streaks her damp face.

"Good girl!" says my father. Erica brightens. I droop.

Dad takes Erica's sleeping pad off her miniature pack and transfers it to his own gigantic one. Freddy nods his faded head in approval.

Sighing, I peel myself off the rock. I will not complain. On principle, I am not against complaining—loudly if necessary—but right now I'm trying to prove that I'm superior to my wimpy sister.

"You know," my dad says to me conspiratorially, as he helps me put my pack back on, "you're one tough kid."

My spirits rise. I envision the extra Milky Way bar I might receive as a reward for my toughness.

We keep trudging upward on the arid, rocky trail. Dust fills my nose. I breathe heavily; we are already at 8,000 feet. Horse poop scents the rarefied air. There is nothing to look at except a few patchy trees.

Do adults really think this kind of thing is fun? My dad looks excited and alert, seemingly unaffected by the weight of his giant pack. But my mom looks miserable and red-faced. She's puffing harder than any of us. No doubt she desperately wants a cigarette.

Erica, meanwhile, has a new swagger to her step. As we toil upwards, she now chatters enthusiastically at my father, describing in great detail the latest episode of "Lost in Space."

Brat.

That trip was the first in a string of wilderness adventures that stretched over the next nine years. Our family took up cross-country skiing. We hiked in the Alps, climbed the highest fells in Wales, and trekked the trails of the Lake District in England. And every summer, we returned to the Sierras.

Throughout these wanderings, my dad's heart served him well. He bounded over trails, carried heavy packs, and bravely brought bickering children with him on all his best escapades. Often I'd forget that he'd ever been sick. I stopped worrying that he might one day be sick again.

Lunchtime. It's our second day of hiking, the day after my sister's meltdown. We are in a place called Salt Lick Meadow, and it's bigger than any meadow I've ever seen. Purple lupine and yellow larkspur dance across the green grass.

My parents are sacked out on a rock soaking up the sun. But Erica and I, with the entire meadow to ourselves, are chasing butterflies.

They are everywhere. Landing on flowers, flitting through the air in flashes of yellow, black, and orange. I've never seen so many butterflies. We rarely catch them. If we do, we're shocked by their frantic fluttering in our hands and instantly let them go.

But we are completely absorbed in this game. The toil of the last 36 hours is forgotten. The heavy packs. The endless walking. My sister's incessant chattering about her favorite TV shows. Triscuits, which are gross.

Now there are only butterflies.

A few hours later, we've labored along windswept ridges and sweated through lunar landscapes of granite and scrub. Occasionally Erica and I are distracted from our pain, for example, when we pass by small, unnamed tarns and we fight to name them.

"That one is Becky Lake!"

"No, it's Erica Lake!"

"NO! Narnia Lake!"

Up and up we go, breathing fast in the thin air. My parents ply us with lemon drops and trail mix when we get whiny (which is often). Milky Way bars are only for dessert.

Then, suddenly, we arrive at a junction. The air is still. Flies buzz around us. "Wire Lake, ¼ miles" says a beat-up wooden sign with white lettering. An arrow points off to the right.

For a moment, no one speaks.

"A quarter to the first kid who sees it!" says my dad. Instantly, my sister and I are re-energized. We race ahead of our parents.

I want to win! My boots kick up dust as I run down the trail. Erica is right behind me. It's not fair! Her pack is lighter!

I plunge forward. Her footsteps recede. I'm gasping for breath. Where is the lake? All I see are trees!

Something flashes silver in the distance. I move faster. My pack bounces on my back. Ouch!

Then a patch of sun-struck blue shows itself through the trees.

"I see it!" I yell. Erica nearly crashes into me.

Together we zoom toward the lake. It gets bigger, bluer, and more dazzling with every step.

I feel like a butterfly suddenly, light and free.

The trip to Wire Lake became our family tradition. Erica and I loved the lake. There were rocks to jump on and trees to hide in. We raced leaves in the water, rode horseback on logs, and played never-ending pretend games on the lake's granite-studded shore. And every year, we competed for that quarter.

My parents had a different relationship to Wire Lake. They didn't run around and play there like we did. Instead, they sat still and looked at things. (Boooring). They also took endless pictures of the lake at sunrise or sunset. Dad was always trying to capture alpenglow on film.

Often my father and I would fish for rainbow trout. We'd do it at dusk, just the two of us, as a soft pink light descended over the lake and the trout rippled the calm water in their hunt for flies.

We hardly ever caught anything more than a few inches long. Even so, when we did, it was exciting and horrifying all at once. The slimy fish would heave and flop, its rainbow scales shimmering as I struggled to get it off the hook without hurting it—a task that fell to me because my father was allergic to fish and wouldn't touch one for fear of breaking out in hives.

When I finally threw the trout back in, adrenalin pumping, dad would congratulate me on a job well done. I'd bask in his approval. Its glow suffused me just like the setting sun bathed the lake with hot pink and orange.

Eight p.m. Our family sits around a campfire, encased in down jackets. It feels like we are the only people out here. A few other backpackers are camped nearby but we can't hear or see them.

A distant wind blows through the trees. The lake slaps against the rocks. Around us, the night is very black except for our fire.

I scoot closer to my mom. She stares into the campfire. In its amber glow, her face looks mysterious. Erica, on my mom's other side, is blabbing about how Freddie needs some kind of "operation."

I glance at my dad. He is looking up at the sky. So I look up at it too. My mouth falls open. A minute ago there were just a few stars. Now there are more than I have ever seen in my life.

"Did you know," said my dad, "it would take millions of years to reach some of those stars?"

My mouth falls open a little more. I try to imagine getting in a spaceship and traveling for millions of years. I can't imagine it. I feel very small all of a sudden. My heart starts to pound.

No one speaks for a moment. I don't want to look at the black sky full of stars, but I can't look away. I shiver inside my down jacket.

"Everything you see in the sky is part of the Milky Way Galaxy," says my dad.

The words "Milky Way" distract me. "Did they name the galaxy after the candy bar?" I ask.

My parents laugh.

"What?" I am indignant. But at least I've stopped shivering.

Finally my mom says, giggling, "The galaxy was there a long time before the candy bar."

"It's billions of years old," says my dad.

"Oh," I'm disappointed. Yet when I look up at the immense night sky it seems much friendlier now. Then I look away, eyes dazzled. I warm my hands over the fire and listen to my sister's soothing prattle.

My dad will sleep outside tonight, with the bears and the stars. But I'll sleep inside the tent squished between my mom and Erica, and that's just fine with me.

Years later, the moment of weightless discovery I felt as I raced toward Wire Lake for the first time still drives me forward. The love of adventure born in the high Sierra has taken me from stormy ridges in Patagonia to frozen peaks in the Cascades.

Erica, too, has become a world traveler. Freddie, however, disappeared under mysterious circumstances. (One theory is that our golden retriever Samantha ate him). My mom stopped smoking long ago, and, at age 65, hikes everywhere from the Himalayan foothills to Italian hill towns.

My father had a heart transplant in 1986 and died in 1998. He hiked until the last few years of his life.

In 1999, my mom, sister and I scattered his ashes on a ridge above Wire Lake. Though grief made that trek plodding and tearful for us mortals, my father's spirit now roams unencumbered in the Range of Light.

As an adult who often flees to the mountains, I now understand something my dad said to me as a kid. "The reason I like backpacking so much," he said, "is that you don't have to think about anything except putting one foot in front of the other and what you're going to eat for dinner."

Back then, I couldn't relate. To me, the walking part was the least tolerable. The fun part was chasing butterflies, playing cards in the tent, or fishing for rainbow trout. And Milky Way bars, which we never got at home.

I had to acquire my own adult cares and worries to "get it." The mountains helped Dad to live in the present moment. My father was more aware of his mortality than most, but in the Sierras, his uncertain future receded. He could lose himself in the beauty of the wilderness—just as I do now, and just as John Muir did before both of us. From his essay, "My First Summer in the High Sierrra":

"Our flesh-and-bone tabernacle seems transparent as glass to the beauty about us, as if truly an inseparable part of it, thrilling with the air and trees, streams and rocks, in the waves of the sun,—a part of all nature, neither old nor young, sick nor well, but immortal."

Ashes & Snow

Erin Hall

Sunlight pools into the dimples of fresh snow that cradle dad's ashes—charcoal flecks glinting as if once-wayward embers from the lodge fire. We've scattered them at the top his favorite ski run—Hemlock—where he insisted we start our days. But now we're holding ceremony in the tree line where we used to bury flasks to keep cold, trading quiet swigs of blackberry brandy to wake our limbs.

Every winter, we came here to joke and race and huddle together in a cramped hotel room at day's end, peeling layers of clothes from our sweat-wicked skin. Here dad was more a boy than a father, giddy with speed, as we'd chase after him. It's where mom and he met with the shared yearning for new experience, and taught my brother's and my toddler legs to slalom before they could skip or cartwheel.

The chairlift squeals behind us as it grinds people forward, shrill, punctuated, like an alarm sounding through a hospital hallway. The double scoop seats still caked in layers of thick, green paint, cushions flat and tattered from years of welcoming riders like ourselves when I would claim the spot next to my father. I became his shadow as we soared through the cavities of Northern Michigan, just us two, dropping his hips, keeping his shoulders forward and pulling his ski tips tightly together as he led, our paths unspooling like ribbons as we bonded in our love of the thrill.

Bolstered by brandy, I turn downward into the belly of the hill—the womb of my making. My edges dig into the soft powder that billows like cotton, slow, tepid, like dad's chest of shallow breath. My mother and brother follow, and we split the Earth bare at every turn until the slope weeps with soil, the snow spreading like a cancer behind us. I drag my poles to steady myself, carving lines with them, clean, precise, like a scalpel removing something foreign. We consume the hill descending together, let it fill us.

The ice cackles beneath our skis as we stop at the base, breaking ourselves open with swallows of sharp air, and look back. Our tracks web across the trail's expanse, woven together, like fresh stitching. It's later in the comfort of our cabin when mom finally relents. "You ski just like him."

The next day, I don't go back to dad's ashes. Instead, I drop my hips, keep my shoulders forward and pull my tips tightly together, hum into

dad's rhythm with ease. Snow is tossed at the lip of my ski in this wake, freed, like ashes coming home.

Someday this snow will melt, and dad's ashes will become one with a stream that muddies the ground, communing with the rest of winter's dead, and join in spring's new beginnings.

Wapiti

Mourning Grace

William R. Morris

On a sun-soaked morning in southeast Alaska
The temperate rainforest drips and breathes,
Musky smell of earth and evergreen.
Parallel to the trail lies a tall Sitka spruce on its side.
A line of tiny seedlings rises from the moss-covered bark,
Growing gracefully,
Supported by the generation below.
Biologists call this a mother-tree,
But I think differently.

Natural cycles:
Downfall, decay, then new life, maturity;
My brain understands.
Yet as I grieve my father's death,
My spirit echoes the paradox of that spruce father-tree,
Rotting gladly to make way for the young.

He is gone.
He was the seedbed of my life.
I share his name, his roots, his breath, his invincible love,
But I yearn to share one more sunny Alaska morning
With the one who yet rises
Into the forest canopy of my heart.

My Godfather Ben

Hugh Gabriel

Beneath my feet the cold damp mud of the lakeshore squelches,
like the squeezing out of a sponge.
The air tastes of mist that rolls across the lake,
which could be entombed in amber for its stillness.
I admire the green rushes and search in vain for a shivering frog
cold enough to catch,
before an echoing splash raises my head.
Across the lake a canoe drifts along the shore, a teal sweater gleaming
bright against the dull gray morning.

What I've never understood is how my godfather Ben
can wake up so goddam early.
For him to be here at this hour means a 5 a.m. solo portage,
getting down on his knees and hoisting a canoe
onto a leathery back too old
for manual labor and young enough for a solo portage
alongside the beavers and fishers and sedges who, like him,
own the morning between lakes.

Ignoring the pristine silence, I raise my hands to my mouth,
letting out a wild rendition of an eagle's screech that
bounces across the water like a panicked water-strider,
at last reaching Ben's canoe.
He looks up from his fishing pole
as I jump up and down, waving, my feet making
little squish sounds on the shoreline,
and his canoe turns my way,
guided with arms old enough to read the amber-clear water;
godfather of the frogs, the fish, and me.

Prokaryotes

Cate Brooks Sweeney

It is in the open water where we grow, under the watchful care of the live oak trees that surround us. The sun filters through their leaves and we luminesce. It begins each time my feet let go of the limestone shore below me, and I stretch my body into long strokes of movement. As I do, the unrelenting nausea abates.

Laying belly down in the water, in absolute submission, I feel quite right for a spell. Fluttering my feet, your kicks quiet as mine pick up. I picture you exhaling the bubbles that trail behind me as I rock you to sleep. Splash, pull, breathe. Splash, pull. Splash, pull. Splash, pull, breathe. A lullaby I sing to us both.

The emerald-green water cradles my growing body on every visit. As the temperatures drop into the winter season, I picture you warm inside, clinging to me like a starfish. In the dense fog on the water, the necks of cormorants twist up towards the sky overhead. For a moment, I wonder if they are human arms lifting from another swimmer, stroking through this fantastical scene. But soon I recognize, it is just us: me, you, and the cormorants.

It is not only the weightless feeling I seek on these ritualistic visits. Or the euphoric shock that comes from plunging into cold spring water. It is watching the eel grass answer my movement by bending into ecstatic dance. The way small pockets of air rise from the deep: the reminder of how much life is being lived out of sight at all times. Innumerable breaths taken in the few moments between me lifting my head above water for a gasp. These images ripple towards me. A truth I often forget on land: life and living comes from water.

I imagine your growth within me as I watch my own nine-month time-lapse. Out of sight, your cells multiply exponentially. Once microscopic, you grow in weight each day. Your features come into shape, the early beginnings of your profile. Organs form and your heartbeat begins to *whoosh* at a speed that makes me breathless. I am an ecosystem.

My circulation, like branches in a dense forest, sends life breath to you. Our roots tangle together. My bones soften and ligaments loosen to make room for your growth, a landscape expanding under the duress of dramatic weather.

Rolling onto my back, I allow my body to sway in the subtle current like a swollen aquatic plant. I picture you, floating in the eutrophic pond

I have created. And in that brief, buoyant moment, I feel a full gravity of sorts. We are a microcosm of life and Earth itself. Us, a small fleck of being in the vast open water. And yet with each breath in this space, we become infinitely larger, as we connect to the teeming life that surrounds us.

One great day arrives when swells surge through my body to bring yours to shore. Soon the waves become white-capped and begin crashing upon me with blinding force. I find myself diving deep. My hands outstretched in front of me, letting out long, relaxed exhales that allow me to go deeper still. Bubbles rise from the dark, and I search with an urgent panic for you. And just when I think I have no breath left, my hands find yours, and we both kick back towards the surface.

You lay there on my chest as I picture us like drifting otters blinking in the soft morning light. Just a mom and her pup. And I think of the eons beyond the nine months it took to bring you here. An infinite number of beings, working webs of natural and uncontrollable forces. All starting from a scattering of molecules in the open water.

"The Witches," Echo Canyon

Learning to Parent from the Trail

Emily Shoff

It is already late in the day, gun-metal clouds pressing heavy in the sky and a storm grumbling in the distance, when I realize we are lost. In hindsight, I shouldn't be surprised. It is the summer of 2020, the height of Covid, and I am trying to hike and bike the Colorado Trail, a 500-mile long path that slumps like a giant 'S' across the state from Denver to Durango, with my 10- and 13-year old daughters.

We're taking on the trail in sections and in the few days we've been out, nothing has gone as planned. Not the Indian Creek alternative start, designed for expert mountain bikers and full of "hike-a-bike" rock gardens, a trail we took because Denver's city trails were closed. Not the girls' enthusiasm which is tentative at best and now diluted after encountering a black bear on Day One and a crushing heat wave on Day Two. And certainly not my left leg, which has endured three knee surgeries and a bone graft in almost as many years and is wondering what's going on.

Still, when I look at the GPS app on the phone, indicating we are on the wrong trail, I am reluctant to believe it.

"There's something wrong with this thing; it doesn't show us anywhere near the CT," I say, handing my phone to Siri, my oldest, who was named before the iPhone *doppelgänger*, but who like most teenagers loves technology. She is the reason, in fact, we have this app instead of just a map and compass, one of the thousands of ways I've tried to compromise in an effort to get my kids excited about the trip.

"That's because we're not on the Colorado Trail. We're on the…" Siri turns the phone sideways. "Roaring Fork Trail."

"Can't be."

"See for yourself," she says, pointing at the picture of us flashing several miles south of the actual trail.

At this point, the storm, which has been threatening to descend all day, unloads. In an instant, the rain transforms from a misting, refreshing variety to a deluge that sends us all huddling under a tree. I am so angry at myself that I refuse to meet anyone's gaze. I know exactly how this happened. At the start, I was chatting with the friend who ran shuttle for us, not thinking that there might be more than one trail branching out of the parking lot. Then, rushing to "beat the rain" and compensate for our late start, I didn't take the time to double-check the

map, which given my poor directional sense, I should always do. Yet, my knowing how the mistake happened doesn't make it easier to bear.

"Maybe we should just go back to Bailey?" Quincy, my youngest, squeaks.

"No way," I say, breaking into an almost run. Including the biking days, I've driven out to Bailey, Colorado four times. If we don't start putting down the miles, we are never going to make it all the way to Durango.

In the tent that night, finally on the correct trail (though miles shy of our planned campsite), I lie awake long after the girls fall asleep, wondering if we can actually do the thing we've set out to do. We are scarcely in the first mountain range; there are seven more to come, the highest of which tops out at over 13,000 feet, a whopping elevation change of 89,000 feet. We will be susceptible to the whims of mother nature, which include but are not limited to violent thunderstorms, intense heat, dry creek beds, impassable rivers, torturously hard summits followed by bone-shattering descents. There are several high-alpine sections to come, including one in the San Juans that stretches for 35 miles, unprotected. What if we die on one of those sections? It's one thing to be the mom who took her kids on the trail for the summer, quite another to be the one who killed them in a storm.

Little do I realize that getting lost is just the beginning. Nearly two hundred miles later, I forget to detach the stove from the fuel canister, which drains our fuel supply and forces us to cook over fires every night. On that same section, I don't pack water, which leads to walking eight miles without water (see dry creek beds above). Barely 30 miles beyond that, I pack the empty bottle of purification tablets rather than the full one, so we have no way to purify water on a 20-mile bike ride in full sun. And I get so excited about being up early in camp one morning that I make myself a second pot of coffee which means I need, but do not make it to, a place where I can dig a hole.

My girls love to tease me about these mistakes: "Mom pooped her pants!" "She started us on the wrong trail!" They also love to say I dragged them across the state. But the truth is that while hiking through waist-high wildflowers and cooking out under the glitter of stars, we had one of the best summers of our lives. Siri, who's almost 16 now and has written about the trip, says that sleeping on the ground for close to 50 nights made her realize that the outdoors is her safe space. Quincy, who is dyslexic and struggles with academics, says the Colorado Trail taught her she's actually good at a lot of things, namely rigging a bear hang,

fixing the tent in a rainstorm, and asking great questions on the trail so we wouldn't lose our minds from the monotony of walking.

On the trail though, I never would have believed they'd feel this way. The girls complained enthusiastically, even when the mountains were their prettiest. Meanwhile, in my head, I couldn't stop listing everything I'd done wrong, comparing myself to others. How could I have turned the wrong way? My husband wouldn't have gotten lost.

It wasn't until we'd finished the 500 miles that I realized it didn't matter that the adventure hadn't gone perfectly. That going outside, like parenting, like anything in life, is not about how seamlessly you pull it off, but about how well you recover from the mistakes you make. I've spent almost half a century chiding myself for my imperfections, wishing I were a bit more like the imaginary people I compare myself to because then I would be satisfied with my life. That summer, when I finally shrugged my backpack off, I realized I'd been carrying around a lot more than week-old trash and squished granola bars. That my pack, like many people's (especially those of women) was crammed to the brim with the wrong things, mostly lists of the ways in which I fail. That for the next 50 years, should I live that long, I'd like to walk around with a lighter pack, one that's filled with all the ways I win. To have children and a husband to love. To have access to wilderness. To be able to live in a time and place where a woman and two almost-women can walk alone safely. I hope that by traveling this way, not only will I move more easily, but my girls might too.

Wild Night

Eliana Franklin

I was so small the last time my family
went camping, every creek looked
like a river. We used to spend hours
under swaying pines with moths
spinning in the air around us.
But that was before my sister
had surgery and we couldn't pay the bills.
Before I stared out my window
at the bright city-horizon, wishing
I could get away, outside.
Sixteen years later, I make it back
to the same campsite. I learn to start a fire
and I read poetry under the light
of a lantern. How prized this time,
in a place with no streetlamp in sight.
My mother is still at home counting
the dollars and I'm out here
counting the minutes I have
with these shaking oaks, this starlit sky.
The taste of mountain-wind
is bittersweet—a blend of spruce
and cricket-song, an echo
of memory, fading into wild night.

Remaining Springs

Jan Minich

We prefer living only with family,
no longer in cities.
We watch the sun
move down the canyon wall,
a turn that shows the way forward
or back, defensible in a way
the future can never be.

We need distance and time alone,
the quiet we have in these canyons
elevating into cliffs
an absence of sound, the stream
running even in the hottest times.

We meet halfway,
exchange encumbrances,
embrace the sky
like an unknown face
that comes to us at night
but disappears by morning when dawn
awakens the birds and that part
of our lives fills with song.

Evenings, we watch the sun
going down, a ritual climb
to the top and then to our place
at the low part between mountains
that rise from the desert,
where the trees
we were taught as children are sacred
and wise because they outlive us.

Before the Alarm

Alan Caldwell

I've always been a damn poor sleeper. As long as I can remember, I've awakened every hour or two. I don't require the clock anymore. For many years, I would light the lamp and check the hands. Now, I pretty much know what time it is all the time, day and night. Since I suspect that it is a result of a man overly cognizant of his own mortality, that instinctive time-telling is not a skill I employ with pride.

It's about a quarter after five, fifteen minutes before the alarm sounds, no need to wait anyway. I banked the fire before I slept. The coals hide under the ash and require only a breath and a few shreds of tinder to blaze. I set the pot on the back edge near the flat stone that holds the heat all night. I should have time for two cups before enough light edges over the ridge to make travel possible. I don't like to walk by flashlight. I am prone to physical and moral stumbles and backsliding. I seek morning ground evinced by sufficient light. I have no real preference as to climate, and gauge well what type of cover I will need for the day. I am more careful when the leaves are wet or icy, but it doesn't really matter. I am a natural egalitarian of weather and of men.

I carry a gun, a single barrel 12-gauge. I bear it because walking without would seem like so much absurdity. My people were hunters, and a man who patrolled the forest without a firearm would have justly earned derision. My ancestors would have laughed at the notion of mere hiking as a rich man's foolishness. So I carry a gun because I can justly claim productivity. I walk slowly along old trails and abandoned logging roads, along creek bottoms, and atop ridges. I pause, survey the wind, and proceed. I continue until the light fades. I am not a very efficient hunter, particularly by modern standards. The current technologies and practices confound me. Either I lack the competence, or they lack the aesthetics, or maybe both. I opt for the old rugged because of ancestral peer pressure. I simply can't do otherwise.

I am neither vegan nor pacifist, but with each graying season I find the actual killing harder and harder, as if each new death now foretells my own. I refuse to employ the word "harvest." We can lie to a carrot, but we owe sentience and sapience more than empty euphemisms. We kill animals, sometimes by design, and sometimes by our mere modern

existence. Nature finds little sanctuary in our current age. We may owe a collective apology for this killing, but I am certain we owe a debt of reflection and respect. As a boy, I placed my hand on the chest of a dying stag. His eyes studied me with obvious fear. His heart fluttered, and he averted his gaze from me and towards the fading forest, as if to see it one last time, or maybe to remember his place in it. I wanted to jostle him awake and urge him to flee, but it was too late, for both of us. Something in his passing death process suggested immortality, either mine or his, but probably not both.

Despite my reluctance, I do, on occasion, if the time is right, kill nearby game. I don't employ all-terrain vehicles, but I pass no judgment on those who do. They simply are not commensurate with my imaginations or illusions. I envision Hugh Glass sitting atop an imaginary model se450 Quad Master fleeing from a grizzly and an indigenous war party and chuckle. I readily admit that I am no Hugh Glass, but my cosplaying is as valid as the next guy's. So, because of this, I don't kill distant game. My knees necessitate relative proximity. I gauge weight, distance, and daylight before I pull the trigger. I will still sling a portly gobbler across my shoulder and walk for miles, but more than one fair buck has survived because the math no longer worked out.

The circumference of my portage range shrinks. I am not ok with this, and I sometimes lie to myself and foolishly entertain a momentary notion that I am more than a shadow of the outdoorsman, or perhaps even the man, that I was just a decade ago. I suspect that my shrunken range may be a blessing, for if I traveled too far and discovered a subdivision or a Dollar Store where a silent copse of hardwoods once stood, I'm not sure my heart could survive it.

Anyway, the light across the ridge is sufficient, and I have places to be.

Below the Grand Mesa

Sandra Dorr

When the lake moves, gentle,
one long wave into the bay,
home of land, small moons breaking
on dark water, leaves fountaining
into the wind, I understand
that when I disappear,
nothing will be missing.

In the Wind Rivers

Sandra Dorr

In the night come signs of his
blood cancer, its fingers ready
to grasp my beloved, curled up.

Instead we throw open the tent
to red sun blazing on Haystack Peak,
and in the velvet shapes of dawn

is a doe, head down, biting an apple
we left out on the ground, her
dun body thin as a child's.

She turns, tries to make us out,
then bends her perfect curved head,
new as the sun, back to the fruit.

We stay mute to hear her chew
in the cold half-dark that moves like
a heavy soft blanket we're sharing,

until I turn my face towards her
body emerging in the light– she startles,
leaps, and flees into the trees.

What loss, what wonder in us,
stepping into her air, sensing
how infinite small motions we make

will alter a wild life and its place.

The Pause Between

Ken Craft

Only May but the wasps and yellow jackets are anxious
as October afternoons as their hum and buzz
bend toward the sweet rot of last year's garden.

Inside, the ants scribe picaresques along the painted cracks
of old floorboards. Everything is leg life and antennae riddle.
Everything is secret restlessness and hidden destination.

One day the dragonflies appear sudden as the sun.
Speed and softness, they lash sky to air in silent seams.
One's barred wings and abdomen are pressing

to the warm dock slats. Another lights on the Chekhov book
you bought me, not realizing, like everything, it is a short
story, too. Two fishermen sit in a boat across the lake—hunched

specks, tired voices carrying over the water, reminding me
of winter mornings, scrambled eggs in the iron skillet,
you coming up the hall in my flannel shirt. There's a north

wind off the back of the island and a noisy kingfisher on a dead
branch, each fashioning cold presence out of your absence.
A pine needle falls on my thigh. A loon looks across

the water, garnet-eyed and open-beaked. You said, after a loon
calls, it always waits for its mate to call back. You said
the pause between is the loveliest, loneliest hollow in the world.

The Brightest Thing Under the Moon

Maria Kochis

When the old lady I was traveling with threw her boots into the lake, we were nine miles away from the main trail. The last part of our trek, up the steep slope, was treacherous, the pine needles glistening like ice in the sun, and she had leaned on me heavily. It took us the best part of the morning to get here, to this lake she had come to so long ago, and how we would get back now, with the old lady bootless and the day turned, I just didn't know.

I had been watching some pale-winged hawk circling above the pines, when I heard what sounded like two fish jumping, or maybe two frogs. Plop, plop.

I turned around, hoping to see them, whatever had made that lazy summer noise, but all I saw were spreading ripples, and then noticed that the old lady's legs were now dangling in the water and that her boots were not beside her, or anywhere to be seen.

"What the hell are you doing?" I yelled, fear making me slow-witted, behind the times, because it was obvious she had already done it.

A little smile played on her lips. "They were bothering me."

And then I was stripping off my clothes, just like she suggested I do, not five minutes before, and running into the lake, falling in and stroking towards the nearest circle of ripples, diving and kicking with all my might, my hands stretched out in front of me.

I had met the old lady one week ago. She was the fifth and last driver to pick me up if you don't count the stinking trucker from the Poconos who took me forty mountain miles in the wrong direction, which I didn't. She picked me up just outside of Lander. I was clutching my thermos of coffee in one hand, my cardboard sign in the other. A few seconds after her battered pickup passed me by, I heard it crunch through the gravel of the shoulder. I watched it reversing for a full minute, then picked up my pack and ran.

"Today's your lucky day," she said, when I opened the door.

"How's that?"

"We're both headed to the same place." She nodded, but didn't smile back. To be honest, I was a little shocked to see how old she was, her hair whiter than dry shell and her face a patchwork of delicate lines. I was still playing with the seat belt, which had one of those old fashioned kinds of buckles, heavy in the hand, which you have to manually tighten, when she put the truck into gear. Bobby McGee was on the radio, and soon the

old lady was singing. She had a singer's voice, or used to. You could hear the loveliness in certain words. Harpoon, for instance. McGee. But in between it cracked and rasped, like harbor ice in the spring. Why didn't I take that as a warning? Me? Who had spent his whole life around quays? Instead of nestling into the bucket seat of that truck that smelled like a hundred old cigars and watching the sunrise, coming fast over the plains, paint the mountains.

We had our first conversation in a diner in Dubois. Only then, our steak and eggs in front of us, and two steaming mugs of coffee in chipped enamel mugs, did she ask how long was I on the road.

"Eight days. Counting the day I started."

She speared a forkful of eggs, chewed and regarded me. "Your first time out West?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You're from Baltimore?"

"Richmond. That's in Virginia. But I started hitching in Boston."

"I think I know where Richmond is, son."

Her eyebrows arched, and I half believed the conversation was over, and maybe my free ride as well, so I ducked my head, which in my family is the way you ask for pardon. This only helped to amuse her, the very ends of her mouth tightening up, and her hand with its mug freezing on its way to her mouth, as if she could laugh or move, but not both at the same time. The old lady's eyes were a very intense shade of blue, somewhere between the color of a jay's wing and a certain weedy, star-shaped wildflower that grew up along the roadsides of Virginia (although I now know, having hiked the Yellowstone, that they're more like the blue of mountain gentians). The whites, as they often would be, were faintly bloodshot, which I mistakenly thought came from too many hours on the road.

What about you? I wanted to ask. Where are you from? But didn't. Not then or later. Although I found out a lot of other things. That she'd been married and had once owned a ranch. That her truck–Old Blue–had belonged to her husband, a copious smoker and a poet, that she'd lived with him in China, Cambridge, and Wyoming, not necessarily in that order, and that this trip had been on her mind, if not in the works, a good long while.

Not so with me. The idea first spoke to me the morning after I got fired from my job as a caddy. I was lying in bed at the time and thought I smelled something sweet. Not candy sweet or pie sweet. More like cut

hay, a field deeply familiar with horses. Virginia sweet. Country sweet. I closed my eyes, expecting to dream of home.

Less than two hours later, I found myself straddling the median of one of Boston's busiest intersections. My sign–red magic marker on cardboard–said Lamar Valley, Yellowstone. I didn't bother to write Wyoming. The odd person who didn't know where Yellowstone was could just pass right on by.

Cars honked. Drivers waved, grinned, shouted, and gave me their thumbs up. The whole thing had a festival feeling, although that may have been due to the alcohol still juicing my veins. LeRoi Jones and I had had a night on the town. Given all that traffic, and all that approval, it took me a long time to get picked up, but that was ok, because the driver who did was fast and purposeful, and before the day was out, we'd crossed four state lines, and I'd had my first ride ever in a Lamborghini.

After we left the diner, the old lady told me she wanted to nap for a while and I would have to drive.

"There's a map in the glove box. Just head west on 26. When you hit the Tetons, wake me up." She pressed the keys into my hand and then tucked up into the passenger seat, resting her head on a pillow folded in two.

No one had ever asked me to drive before, not the zombie eyed trucker in Iowa, whose words, when he made any, seemed to leak out of his mouth. Not the school teacher from Kentucky even after she got stoned. The last time I drove an old truck was on my Uncle Pete's twenty-acre farm, when the tobacco was coming in, but that was on dirt with a full bed. I didn't have a car in Boston. Every time I went home I took the train, so this was new, this felt special, driving Old Blue on that open range highway, the old lady snoring beside me. I sang under my breath, soft and low.

If you need to assign blame for what happened next, blame the mountains. My attention began to waver, to bounce back and forth from the road to the spires playing hide and seek above the pines. The road made a sharp turn to the right.

The next thing I knew, I was jerked back into the seat.

"What happened!?"

"There was an animal in the road!"

"Did you hit it?"

"I don't…I don't think so."

"Well did you or didn't you!"

"I think the only thing I hit was that tree."

The old lady nodded, and even though she was still trembling and breathing hard, her shoulders dropped down a bit. Neither of us said anything for a full minute, just watched as steam started to rise from the hood. When she got out to inspect the damage, I thought about grabbing my pack and running.

The first person to help us was a tourist from New Jersey. He and his family, a wife and three pig-tailed daughters, were on their way to Old Faithful. I saw the imprint of his daughters' noses on the windows, the muddy smears of their fingers, and it helped to anchor me.

Under the old lady's direction, the tourist and I put the truck into neutral and pushed it a quarter mile up the shoulder to an old turnout, weeds punching through the asphalt. The man kept telling us he didn't have service but that he would call in help for us soon as he did. The old lady told him not to bother, we didn't need it. She tried to give him twenty dollars as he was leaving, but he just thrust his hands in the air like she was pulling a gun on him, backing away at the same time, and repeated what he said about help. She handed me a tarp to spread on the ground, then went to the back of the truck and began rummaging around for her tools. A screwdriver, wrench, pliers, ratchets, a scraper, and a drip pan. Coolant, distilled water, a bottle of epoxy.

"First thing we do is disconnect the battery cable. This protects us from shocks. Then we drain the coolant." She handed me a wrench and pointed at the valve.

"What are we going to do?"

"We're going to fix the crack in that radiator. If there's more than one, we'll fix them all. Then we're going to see about that tire."

The whole time we were working, I kept looking across the road, into the thick forest on the other side, wondering if that animal was going to come out. It looked most like a deer but with bent horns and a mask. A black mask, the kind bandits wear, or Venetians. I wanted to ask the old lady what it was, but I also didn't want to show my ignorance. And what if it hadn't been there at all?

I did all the actual work, but the old lady talked me through everything, pointing things out in great detail, as if this was a certain stop in my future: doing a radiator repair job in the middle of nowhere with my own two hands and the tools I had with me.

Afterwards, we ate a supper of ham and cheese on a Kaiser roll and set up our tents. I wasn't crazy about staying there overnight, but we had

to, in order for the epoxy to cure. Her tent was green canvas and smelled like camp smoke and mothballs and pitch, and my tent was orange and brand new. They looked cozy enough, lit from inside with our flashlights. The old lady turned hers off first. I stayed up reading *The Big Two Hearted River*. I thought I was done making mistakes for that day.

"Peter?"

"Yes, ma'am. I thought you were sleeping."

"You're not eating in your tent are you?"

I didn't say anything, just stopped mid chew.

A minute later, she had unzipped the door of my tent, taking everything in. The well endowed mermaid on my shoulder; the Snickers bar in my hand, the second of two.

"Son, are you stupid?"

She didn't wait for an answer, just snatched the chocolate and hissed at me to get out. There was no way I could sleep there anymore, not in grizzly country, and did I want to be eaten alive? Was that my preferred way to go?

I had two choices: sleep with her or sleep in the truck. I said I was fine right where I was. Normally, I wouldn't have argued, but she put me on the defensive, taking up all the space in the door like that and me buck naked, the sleeping bag pulled to my chin.

Finally, she left, but not before kicking my boot into the trees. I picked up my book again. It was a good place to pick it up, with Nick on the verge of landing his first trout, but the story was closed to me now, my attention given over to the sounds of the forest: the hoots and woos and snaps; the dark rustlings and the sudden, spooky silences.

In the morning, tire fixed, Old Blue started right up. We drove through the Tetons and entered Yellowstone from the south. The old lady was going to drop me off at Slough Creek, one of the campgrounds of the Lamar, but first she had to stop by the ranger station to pick up her permit. This seemed strange to me, that you had to make a reservation to be in the wilderness, the way you do for a hotel, but the old lady said that's the way it had to be now; otherwise the backcountry would all too quickly fill up with people.

The ranger station was in a dinky little building, a cabin with a roof that needed repairs, but the ranger behind the desk looked official enough. He had a creased, button-down shirt, a sharp handsomeness. The old lady gave him her permit number, and he pulled up her reservation on the computer.

"Penelope Jackson? You'll be hiking thirty four miles, from the Lamar River Trailhead to Pelican Valley, starting today and finishing on the fourteenth." There was a map of northern Yellowstone under glass on the desk, which faced visitors, and the ranger traced the route with his finger.

"Is that Heart Lake?" The old lady tapped the glass.

"No ma'am. That's Bobcat Lake. Heart Lake is over here. If you're planning on going there, I should warn you: that trail is no longer maintained."

"I was there years ago. With my husband. Fifty years! We took horses, our own." Her head stayed bent, as if she could see their figures winding up the trail with their horses and saddlebags, her with young long hair and her husband with broad shoulders, a horseman's way of leaning back in the saddle.

"Ma'am?"

"Mmm?"

"Do you have any way to communicate if you get into trouble? A Sat phone or PLB?"

The old lady's head snapped up. "No I don't. Is that required nowadays?"

"It's not required, no."

"Good. I'd like my permit now please."

"Ma'am?"

"What!"

"Are you sure you're able to make this trip?"

I sucked in my breath. Now he was in for it. But instead of flashing her eyes at him, getting taller and fiercer and bigger, the old lady seemed to shrink, her very bones dwindling beneath her coat.

"If only you weren't going alone," the ranger said.

"But she's not going alone." I had been loitering by the field guides, but now I stepped up to the desk.

The ranger frowned. "I didn't think the two of you were together." He looked over at his computer. "And there's only one name on the permit."

"Well, we are together," I tell him. We've been together since Lander." I didn't realize it until I said it out loud, but that didn't make it any less true.

We made a fire and baked potatoes in tin foil and ate them with smoked sausage that the old lady cut up into slices. I had found a bottle of brandy

wrapped in an emergency blanket at the bottom of my pack–the old lady had snuck it in–so we drank that as well. After we finished eating, she took out a pipe. I think the first question she put to me was if my parents were divorced.

"No ma'am. They just celebrated their silver last August."

"Any brothers or sisters?"

"No. But I have seventeen first cousins living in the county."

"That's a big family."

"I guess. The funny thing is they're all women."

"Really?" Her laugh was like the sharp bark of a fox.

"Yeah. My father sent me to college in Boston to get away from their influence. I have one male cousin. Squirrel. But he's only a second cousin and lives all the way down in Oxford. I mean Oxford, Mississippi, ma'am."

"Girlfriend?" The old lady inhaled, and the tobacco in her pipe glowed and crackled. She looked at my slyly. "The girls must love you."

This is the kind of thing I've been hearing all my life, the last from that schoolteacher from Kentucky–the third driver to pick me up, if we can forget about that trucker from the Poconos. I ended up telling the old lady about her, how she had stopped for me up outside a Dairy Queen in Erie, Pennsylvania. She was on her way to Des Moines, Iowa, to visit her father, afflicted with cancer. At some point we pulled off into an all-night truck stop and shared a joint in the parking lot, and I felt as close to her as I'd ever felt to anyone. Just before sunrise, she said she needed to sleep and found a motel. She wanted me to stay with her, just snuggle on the bed, but I knew that's not how things would go. She went inside the office to book the room, and I walked back to the highway. Not five minutes went by before I was picked up by a long-haul trucker from Sacramento, who carried me all the way to Lander, over one thousand miles of conservative talk radio interrupted by heavy metal.

"Do you like boys?" The old lady asked quietly, when I was finished.

"No, ma'am. Not the way you mean."

"So why didn't you stay with her? Show her a good time? This teacher from Kentucky who probably bought school supplies with her own money?"

It wasn't that she wasn't pretty, because she was. She had on a blue and green checked blouse with a low neck, her breasts puffing out and a tiny gold cross hanging between them, a giggle as light and free as blowing bubbles.

"I figured we would never see each other again, that's why. And I think she might have been over thirty."

The old lady took the bottle by the neck and walked to the edge of the river, leaving me alone to mend the fire, and even though I worried she would slip and fall on the rocks and it would be my fault, I knew better than to go after her; the look she laid on me had been so cold, so full of contempt.

Our second day out, we had a close call. The old lady stopped suddenly and held up one hand.

"Do you hear that?"

"What?"

"Ravens."

Soon we began to see even bigger birds, vultures of some kind, rising and falling in their spiral of doom. The wind blowing with us, and strong. We climbed a hill so long it felt like a pass, but it wasn't, because on the other side the land leveled out. A hundred yards away, just off the trail, a hairy hump, where some beast had met its own tipping point. One raven perched on top of it, the others puddled around its legs. The stink of the thing hit us then, and the old lady turned and gave me a great push.

"Go!"

We left the trail and followed the river to camp. To our surprise, it was occupied by four women. They had come from the direction we were headed, and the first thing the old lady did was tell them about the carcass, so they knew to walk the river out. One of the girls had billows of soft brown hair and the other dreads of blond, her eyes sparkling like the winter Atlantic. We ate around a common fire, drank Scotch, and played rummy and bullshit. All day I had been turning it over, this idea that I was honor bound to please women, and that even young women, which these were, just a few years older than me, and no deviants, like my cousins, deserved to be pleased. Under the stars of that rare night–a night in the Yellowstone backcountry–I was solicitous to them all: pouring their drinks, paying them compliments, laughing into their eyes. And when they encouraged me, after I had drunk a good bit of Scotch, calling attention to my own exploits in a way I had always been too bashful to do. Standing up and telling my stories, letting the light of the flames lick my face. The old lady, from her place in the shadows, smoking her pipe and nodding.

In the pale morning, I crawled out of my tent intending just to piss and saw the old lady frying bacon near the ruins of the fire. I got dressed,

jeans over my thermal underwear, my hat with the furry ear flaps. The stump I sat down on was hoary with frost.

"Listen," she said. "I have an idea."

"What's that?" I picked up my thermos. The old lady liked her coffee the way I liked mine: no cream or sugar and so hot it burned the tongue.

"You should go with those girls. Back down the Lamar. You can drive Old Blue to Pelican Valley, pick me up at the trailhead. That way we don't have to scrounge for a ride when we're already tired."

Her eyes watered in the cold. A pink wool scarf wrapped her head like a turban. I wondered if she'd lost her hat.

"Better yet, forget about me. I'll take a page out of your book. Hitch back to Old Blue. You stick with those girls. It might be the trip of your life." She cackled softly.

That she could let go of me so easily.

"I'm going with you."

And then, because I couldn't sit there any longer, I walked back to my tent and started to pack.

Soon after the old lady and I broke camp, we came across a bison head. Where the eye should have been was a pure black hole, but patches of tough, leathery skin still clung to the skull. The old lady, guessing at my fear, told me not to worry. That bison had died a long time ago, all the meat gnawed out. Nothing was coming for it now.

At the end of the day, the trail unfurled into a mile-long meadow–a meadow so beautiful it seemed like a mirage. Golden grasses and russet sedges and the dark firs framing it. The meadow was longer than it was wide, and on the other side of it was Mist Creek Pass, and over the pass, Pelican Valley. We cut over towards the east side of the meadow, where the land rose up and the forest began. On our way, we met a stream. The stream was so narrow I could have leapt across it and only maybe fell in. Instead, I threw my boots across, hitched up the cuffs of my pants, and stepped off the muddy bank into the cold, knee-deep water where moments ago golden fish had been lazing, lipping insects. The old lady's hand, trembling as I took it, felt dry as bark.

We set up our tents just inside the trees, to avoid the morning frost. Afterwards, the old lady spread out a blanket, sitting down to glass the meadow for hawks and sandhill cranes, and I went exploring.

The meadow fluttered with birds. It showed me its bones. Most of them were deer skulls or elk skulls. I couldn't tell the difference.

Sometimes they only went as far as the nose holes and stopped, which made them look like masks, as if death were something that could be tried on. One radiant skull still had its antlers attached and was such a thing of beauty, I took the other beautiful things I'd been carrying in my pocket–two crystals, blue violet at the base, which I'd found one day near the river when I went to relieve myself–and set them down where its eyes used to be.

I also came across the leg bone of a much bigger animal, like something out of a cartoon about cave men. I picked it up to feel its heft. The bone was yellow, not white, and rust-colored around the knobs.

That night, the campfire spitting up sparks in the dry cold air, the old lady began talking about her long-ago trip to Heart Lake. Her husband fished and wrote poetry, and she collected plant life and wove it into baskets. One of the baskets was shaped like a deep pocket–like the elaborate nest of an oriole. She made it out of grass and ephemera, threading some of their hair into the weave, and fragile though it was, the basket stood the test of time and still nested in her bedroom today.

Halcyon days, and what made them even better, what made them really special, was the fact that the trip hadn't come at the beginning of their marriage, but seven years in, after they had known each other for a right long while.

Afterwards, when their marriage had gone wrong in several ways a marriage could go wrong–but never enough to break it–she would remember Heart Lake. She had always thought they would return.

"Don't go alone into the dark of old age," the old lady said to me, the last clear thing I remember her saying, before the drink got hold of me completely. It was our final night camping, so the remainder of the brandy had to go.

Close to dawn, I had a dream. In my dream, I saw the old lady's bowed back hurrying through the mists of the forest. I wanted to go after her but felt paralyzed, the way you do in dreams, and could only watch her grow more remote.

Then I woke up. It was still dark, and I needed to take a piss. When I was done, I went over to the old lady's tent and bent down, so I could hear her snoring and feel comforted. She was an all-night snorer. Sometimes I heard a rusty saw, coming from her tent, and sometimes the soft snuffle of an animal.

This time, even though I was holding my breath, I heard nothing, so I walked around to the other side of her tent, where she normally kept

her boots, just to reassure myself, and found her boots missing. That's when I saw it: the white flash of her miner's light. There and then there and then gone.

It took me a long time to catch up with her. When I did, I only followed her from a distance. Respecting her privacy, I suppose, or because I was scared she would send me away. The night paled; the trees took on their dark shapes. She wasn't just stumbling through the forest blind, she was keeping to a trail: the ghost of one anyhow. But it wasn't a crisp trail anymore, plants fuzzed the edges, and newer trees, felled by rot or storm, hadn't been cleared away. The old lady stayed on course, neither pausing nor backtracking, which was merely astonishing, since if I stared too hard at the trail, it tended to disappear.

Around midday, I found her sitting on a rock at the edge of an avalanche field. She turned and looked straight at me, and I realized she knew I had been there all along.

From then on, we hiked together. As the day wore down, she used me more, so that by the time we climbed the last steep slope, she was leaning on me heavily, and we were slow as molasses.

Here was the spot where they gathered mushrooms, and here was where Henry set up his hammock. Between these exact two trees. Here was where they set up their kitchen, far away from where they slept. Grizzly sign all around and they didn't want to get eaten. Here was the mossy idyll where Henry read her his poetry, and here was the spot where he said he loved her more than the moon. The tree branch where they hung up their clothes before entering the water, night after night. In telling it, her eyes glittered, and her laugh was the soft, high titter of a girl. Finally, she sank down onto the stony beach and was quiet for a time, only once in a while suggesting I take off my clothes and go for a swim.

I surfaced, gasping and empty handed. Her old leather boots must have sunk like two stones. On shore, I brushed the water off my body with my hands and dressed quickly.

"Don't you move from here," I said, my voice shaking, whether from anger or fear I didn't know. "I'm going for help. Probably, they'll send horses."

Right before I left to scramble down the mountain, I turned around. How was it that not just the old lady's hair, but the long planes of her face looked so bright? Were they lit up by the sun? The cloudy light of

the aspen, ringing the shore? Even the flowers of her eyes had been swallowed.

My hand flew up, and I waved, one of those big arcing waves people leaving on a ship give to their loved ones on shore, but the old lady just sat there so still, and eventually I had to leave her.

At camp, I packed quickly, only my things. The old lady's tent I left alone and didn't look at. When I reached the main trail, I knew I'd been had. No decision of mine had ever really mattered. I could turn my back on every one. But the choice upon me now, whether to tell what had happened or do nothing, let the old lady decide her own fate, would stain me in a permanent way, mark who I'd become. I didn't want that, wasn't ready for that, and the shock of this discovery filled me with a two-fisted anger, so that I didn't see him until he was nearly upon me, the ranger with his flat brimmed hat, the buttons of his grey shirt sparking in the setting light of the sun.

Red-tailed hawk and Ponderosa pine

What if the World Pulled You Up by the Ankles

Ronda Piszk Broatch

described grief on a scale of Planck length* to planet?
Perhaps I need a hot drink, or a down jacket
under my pillow. In our tent,

our bodies wander from our Therm-a-rests
to rest on tilted, rocky ground. Or maybe we've dreamt
the canyon's steep angle, width

of the road to the trailhead
rated *white-knuckle* in our guidebook, and I,
the passenger, my foot pressed to the floorboard.

A cougar screams beyond the rip-stop tonight,
coyotes sing to their meat.
Tomorrow I can't wipe away last week.

Some nights I walk amongst my dead
and sometimes I mistake the dandelion for the billion
suns beyond our sight. What if the whole world

sank, antlers and all, and we still had no idea
how deep or how high we've yet to go?
Maybe this whole time I've been asleep,

my feet sticking out of the tent flap,
dowsing dirt, aching to learn
the mythos of roots.

* This is the 'quantum of length', the smallest measurement of length with any meaning

Pitcher's Thistle

Tim Moder

I woke, between here and there, in a remarkable world, almost morning, low fog gossiping with water and kissing the sand. While we slept, a freshwater dream destroyed the landscape, shuffling the puzzle with a storm that grasped and pulled the reaching waves. In rhythms such as this my heart unbreaks. Up the beach, a man with anchored calloused feet arrests his step to bend on dark, receding sands. He reaches to inspect a rock, with eyes that see the sugar in the leaves. It drops into his pocket. A fawn with spots stays hidden a web's breadth away, folded in the braided grass among the Pitcher's thistle.

Wandering & Pondering on the A.T.

Martha McSweeney Brower

Within our first hour of hiking, a signpost read, "2,000-mile marker of the Appalachian Trail." Then it took the rest of the day for the three of us to hike five miles north from Stratton into the Bigelow mountains of Maine. We clambered over the pocked and pitted massive boulders with thirty-pound packs, some half as big as my house, crawling over them on hands and knees.

Whenever a hiker passed us, I was in awe that they chose to walk these 2190 miles. Story after story tramped by, and I wanted to know why from each of them but didn't ask. They were in a hurry now. They had already hiked over 2,000 miles north from Georgia. They were coming from behind us one second and completely gone the next, like a vision. Most would gasp a quick hello and continue without a pause. And they always passed us. I'm a slow hiker who marvels at every mushroom and patch of moss.

Although we saw people of all ages, most were in their 20s and 30s and had been hiking for four to six months. Most were solitary young men, some with hollow desperate eyes and some with eagerness, rushing to get to Katahdin, the end of the Appalachian Trail. They want to be free of their names, because everything else you did before the A.T. doesn't matter out here in the wilderness. It only matters that you can walk and sleep in the woods, so they give each other fictitious names for their stint on the trail.

The three of us were over sixty years old when we set out to hike for ten days. We mailed four days of food to Caratunk and carried six days of food with us, along with our tents, stoves, and sleeping bags. At the end of each hiking day, our rustic campsites were covered in rocks and roots, so if we each found a tent site the size of a baby crib mattress, we were lucky. Otherwise, we positioned our tents so our hips and backs wouldn't get poked. It's not always peaceful to sleep in the wilderness. At times the wind was so loud I dreamed I was lying on a tarmac at an airport or getting washed up on a beach after a hurricane.

One night after darkness fell and we had settled into our tents, a tribe trooped in. First, a young couple was whispering, murmuring, and laughing, then more came. Then, even more. The group set up their sleeping bags on a wooden platform near us. They were carefree merry elves in the deep woods.

"Are those rocks or tents?" I heard one ask as they passed us.

That was me forty-five years ago; I might have been annoyed by their disturbance in the dark if I had not remembered that fact. But the soft chatter brought me back to times when I did the same thing, coming into a campground or hostel late at night, trying to be quiet but tripping on something or bumping into someone and busting into a giggle. They had so much life ahead of them, but they were friends with made-up names camping in the woods for now. Their only care was following a white painted blaze on trees to guide their way.

Finally, after half an hour, the smell of pot wafted toward us, more soft chuckling and talking, and peace descended like a blanket. Then the gentle sound of a ukulele lulled us toward sleep. We were deep in the wilderness, all of us, with nothing but each other, trees, and a stream for miles around.

As the morning light brightened the woods, we saw our sleeping-bagged hobbit neighbors lined up on the wooden platform like multi-colored sausages on a grill. One of them lifted a head, so I smiled and waved.

"Good morning," I said as softly as I could. Again, a reciprocal wave and smile. One by one, the Frodo-types gradually came to life. Then, again, the smell of pot drifted over to us.

"Smells good up there," I said as I stuffed my sleeping bag and tent into my pack.

"Yep. We like our Sativa pot to get us moving. But at night, we like our Indica to unwind," he said.

This memory of being breezy in the woods before the reality of jobs and responsibilities kick in will someday make them better adults and parents who understand what it is to be wild and free for a time. In the days ahead, we would see more tribes with bandanas over frizzy hair and dogs leaping from one rock to another, disappearing as fast as a goat or a deer. Their physical shape was impressive. A few I worried about, such as a guy about fifteen years old struggling to keep up with his buddies, who would have cried if he let himself. There were young women entering the forest alone for "just a few more miles" as the darkness descended.

"Where you headed?" I asked one wearing a headlamp as she hiked into the black woods. Without hesitation, she answered, "Pearce Pond," which was still miles ahead. Another wanted to catch up with her friends two miles up the trail as the golden sky spread behind the trees, making shadows and silhouettes of pines and mountains.

The most heart-rending was a young woman of about 25 who was all alone. If I had to guess, she might have been a scientist or a computer

geek who had been working in a dead-end cubicle somewhere. She had a hole on the seat of her pants patched with a piece of duct tape. She was tall, peaceful, and wore glasses. We asked if she would be camping in the spot where we found her sitting on a rock by the pond, surveying the glassy water.

"You setting up camp here?" I asked.

"No, I'm headed north a few more miles," she said as she lifted herself from the rock. It was getting dark, and this young woman headed into the woods on a trail covered with roots and rocks. What if she got lost? Or tripped, fell, and hurt herself? My soul ached as I watched her walk off into the descending twilight, all alone with miles of wilderness in every direction.

As I stooped down by the pond to fill our water bottles, I reflected on how painful it had been for me to find my way. I was that solitary girl, afraid I would always be alone. I wondered if this was her last-ditch effort to make some changes in her life, to shake things up for something different. Was she like me? Desperately lonely, almost to the point of becoming unhinged and unable to find a purpose? The young woman walked on, but I couldn't get her out of my mind as I sat by the pond collecting water.

A dragonfly landed on my shoulder in the setting sun. The wilderness was altering me. In every direction were ferns, brown earth, rocks, roots, pine needles, and worn rocks where millions had probably stepped on an exact stone that I had. Mushrooms in red, yellow, gold, and white. Purple asters and every imaginable shade of moss. Gray bark hung like shingles on king-sized trees. Each day we stepped over sticks, leaves, stones, and pebbles. Then onto giant boulders of mammoth proportions with inclines that seemed only Spiderman could climb. But we did it. The trail showed us abilities we never knew we had, and everything was growing and growing around us. The trees, the moss, the tiny creatures we couldn't see. The clouds bloomed huge, then drifted on. How could this not be changing us, too? Emotion bubbled up and out of me with the thought of the girl trudging alone and the desperate face on the young men.

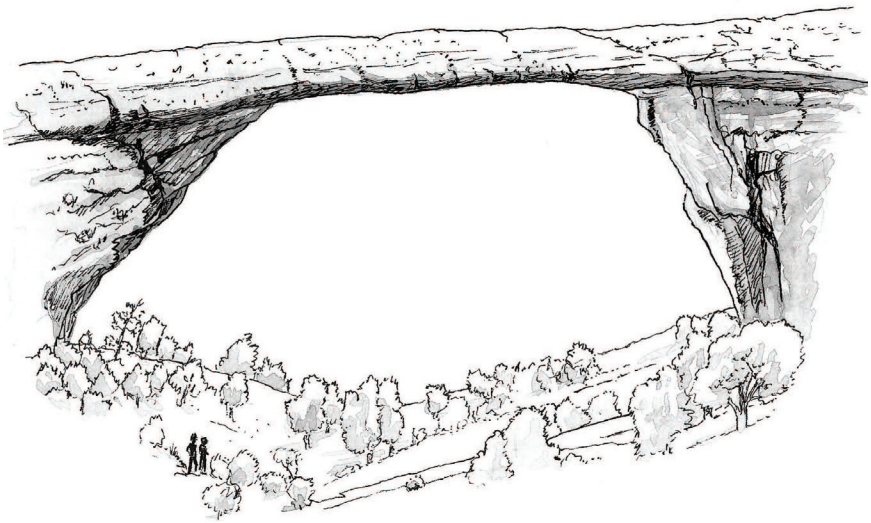
When a butterfly breaks out of its cocoon, its wings strengthen from the effort. So do we too pulse, push, and struggle to find our way in our own time. That's what empowers us to become who we are intended to be.

Watching others strive to complete this demanding journey cemented my conviction that being badass is not easy. To reach a goal, you must be uncompromising and tough to get there. Hiking the A.T.

could very well be the University of Badass. For one person, it might simply be a few months of adventure. For another, it is a Herculean effort of grueling hiking while hungry, tired, and depressed. The lessons of the A.T. are like getting a tattoo on the brain, impossible to forget.

We left the trail after six days. Unfortunately, one of us wasn't feeling well, and another had gotten into a pattern of insomnia, causing her to trip and fall twice while stepping from rock to rock. All it took was to hear a forecast of two inches of rain that night for us to alter our plans and get off the trail before we didn't have access to do so.

After returning home, I didn't want to see or talk to anyone for three days. There was something extremely personal about marinating in nature the way we did, eliciting a feeling of getting peeled like a potato, all the layers scraped off until only the flesh is left. We become another animal, with all traces of humankind wiped off, leaving us equal to deer, bears, and owls.



Owachomo Natural Bridge

In Reflection

Michael Colonnese

Half the time I can't
tell up from down
or how a hawk
can glide beneath
the surface
of this calm stream
where I wade,
fly rod in hand
as the years
go drifting past me
like dead leaves.
Deeper in, the bottom
is a cold
inversion,
and in the slant
of afternoon sunlight,
the golden clouds
below me rise
like boulders.

Agulukpak Morning

Wood-Tikchik State Park, July 2022

Matthew Dickerson

In the morning, a moving ceiling
of clouds cuts off the peaks, creates
a gray-green, one-walled chamber
of Lake Beverly. Wind off the water
makes mosquitoes disappear, hands
feel colder, coffee in the mug
seem hotter, heart more grateful.

Human anglers will soon appear,
but now a hunting osprey hovers,
mergansers dive, caddisflies dance
to a soundtrack of splashing sockeye,
the river rolling glacial gravel,
and the softer sough of a morning
breeze stirring branches on the shore.

A bald eagle, chased by crows, cruises
below the treetops, clenched talons
bearing breakfast back to the nest.
A dead salmon, nearly decayed, drifts down
the Agulukpak. A gull, afloat, pecks
at this feast too fine to pass up,
but too hefty to haul away.

I'm tempted to wade this quiet water,
casting flies of elk hair and hackle
to rising rainbow trout, but instead
I watch winged fishers hunt from high,
a bear sow with twins prowl the shore.
I leave the wild for a while undisturbed
as I listen, look, and breathe. Breathe.

Below, the river reflects cedar and birch
in charcoal-sketch smudges of blue
near patches of lacy parsnip
dotting a field of fireweed
in impressionistic brush strokes—
a carpet beneath the cloud ceiling
sheltering me in this room.

The Joy Swing

Rebecca Williams

It is still morning in the desert, and I am already on top of Looking Glass Arch, a creamy-yellow pile of 325-million-year-old sand, one of the dozens of outcrops in the high desert south of Moab. It is not some jagged crag. Drops of rain in untold numbers over untold years have coalesced on its surface, and with a little help from the wind, have rendered it smooth and low-angled, like a looking glass, and therefore easy climbing terrain: a long tongue of wide slab can be walked up in a pair of sticky-soled shoes.

From up here I can see out onto an unbounded ocean of sagebrush, blackthorn, prickly-pear, and juniper clinging with arthritic roots to the insecure sand. I could believe for a moment a story I had been told: that once, not so long ago, this place was an actual ocean: a sea, teaming with trilobites, corals, and tiny fish, the sand rippled in response to the movement of the prodigal waters above it.

The floor of that sea has disintegrated into the sand all around the arch; it collects in little pockets that I am careful not to slip on as I make my way over to a hidden opening: a small, sandpapered cleft that is big enough for a person or two to get down into. I have climbed up here just so I can go back down with two eighty-meter ropes. Most climbs are descended by sliding down a rope in a rappel. Most rappels are short, 10 or 20 meters, and happen along the face of the rock; you can use your feet as you go along, which gives a sensation of security. Looking Glass, by contrast, has a free-hanging rappel. It is fifty meters long; there is nothing to touch for 160-odd feet. Just you, a rope, and the insecure air.

For nearly our whole lives, some part of our body is in contact with something large and solid—the ground. We take that feeling for granted because we are always feeling it. When we're not feeling it, our deepest mind knows we must be falling. Falling results in death or close to it, so we religiously avoid the sensation. And unless you're being airlifted into a helicopter, skydiving, or perhaps doing a free-hanging rappel—all of which can easily be done without death or injury—your brain is correct: disconnection from the ground is unsafe. In these intimate encounters with the air instead of the ground, the feeling of extreme insecurity conflicts with the knowledge of one's actual safety, and the mind tries its best to cope.

Sometimes I don't care for it at all. Other times, I enjoy the rush of increased adrenaline and endorphins. On this particular rappel, I

find myself in a slightly different space. The mix of fear and adrenaline generates a heightened sense of my surroundings and a focus that shakes my mind loose of distractions and wanderings—it opens to a form of awareness that is akin to what I think yogis and monks talk about in their books and podcasts. Pema Chodron calls it "groundlessness," and well, this is it.

Through a small slot in the roof of the arch, I rappel down, down, down 165 feet; my one link to ground of any kind through two strands of an eight-millimeter-thick rope that is threaded through a pair of bolts next to the edge. The sandstone is ten shades of yellow. The loops of my harness press into the backs of my thighs. I feel the grit of the sand in the breeze as it sticks to my hair and in-between my teeth. The breeze is all around my body, in my face and hair, across my back, and at the bottom of my feet. This is as close to floating in the air as I may ever get in this world, and I am doing it against a backdrop of a massive sandstone amphitheater on one side and a broad desert that yields to endless blue sky on the other.

But that's still not the best part. The best part is the swing. My partner puts me on belay and I top-rope climb back up the inner rib of the arch—a careful scramble through shards of birdshit-covered sandstone debris that had been part of the arch until some front of ice or rain sent them tumbling into choss. This unsteady heap leads to a small ledge about halfway up the grotto. On that ledge, a body can turn around and look out again at the stone-framed desert, but I don't. Mostly, I look at my feet and cycle through an anxious loop of how my body and brain are going to proceed.

"Folks jump off this ledge, it's fun," says my mind to itself. "Sure, they do," I reply to myself, "but you're not gonna."

"But there's a rope. I just used it. And the bolts are good, I just used those too."

"Sure, but what if they don't work this time?"

"Not likely."

"How do I know it's not likely?"

"Because if it were likely, folks wouldn't do this. People fall onto bolts like this every day—you've fallen onto bolts like this a hundred times!"

"What if this is that one freak time the bolt rips? And do I know this rope was manufactured properly?" Round and round I go for I don't know how long until something shifts, and I ask myself: "How's your partner down there? Do I trust her?"

"With my life." I jump.

I scream. I go off that anxious edge into a free-fall of terror. The rope and the anchor and my belayer all do the job I trust them with my actual life to do: they catch me. And when I feel the solidness of my weight in my harness, the fear gives way to something else. A feeling I had not known enters: an altogether new and different cocktail of hormones and dopamine and serotonin floods my nervous system.

I swing out between the vastness of the desert and the closeness of the rock. I swing in, past the rock's orange edge, smooth and curved like the bone of some bygone leviathan. An earth-bone—this pile of petrified sand that was once above the ground, then buried under the ground, and now above the ground again. The whole of its aeons of silent existence now, in the pinprick of this moment, include me.

As I swing out, the sky comes closer. The land before me is no longer a still and silent vista, but a space I can move into—with every swing into it, it catches me and with each swing back, calls me toward it again. I can respond to its beckoning, its siren song that commands everyone who has ever stood on such a cliff: *Jump. Try to fly.* The desert calls out insatiably in our hearts: *This world has room for you. All you need to do is come toward it.* There is room for my little body, my little slice of time.

I am telling you something important: I am telling you what is on the other side of fear. The fear that we don't belong. That no one wants us. That we aren't worthy. This fear, which kills even the most joy-giving of souls, can be denied all its credibility on the end of a rope at Looking Glass Arch. At least it was for me. What is on the other side of fear is joy.

Wilderness Holiday

Erin Robertson

sagebrush scent wakes our noses
puts us in wild mode:
eyes and ears open
feet ready to trek
hair ready for woodsmoke
hands ready for soot

the sky is bluer against salmon slickrock
and we suck on pine nuts for the spice of sap
all around us the air is
        silent
not even the hum of a distant road

when the pinyon jays talk
        we listen
when the moon rises
        we notice
instead of politics we discuss
how the moon's path and Jupiter's
have changed in the sky

at home, the crystal stays boxed
the mail unopened
the decorations untouched

but here, in timeless desert,
we're doing god's work:
being thankful
being humbled
being whole

Pasque

José A. Alcántara

They showed up after the slog
after the three miles of marching
in the fresh footsteps of bear
after the scramble and the bushwhack
the spines and thorns
the steep slow ascent to the ridge
after the half-mile straddle
after the uncountable piles of scat
then down maybe twenty feet
on the west side
there they were
just as it started raining
between the scrub oak and the sage
in a clearing about hundred feet around
in pairs, trios, small clusters—
purple chalices
glittering with rain.

Turnaround Point

Katherine Michalak

When the seizure happened, I was halfway up a short local trail near my home. As a fellow hiker came down the trail toward me, I moved aside to let him pass and within the span of that simple act, something changed. It felt as though I were stumbling from one world into another, and everything became dreamlike.

Compelled by an unexplainable urge, I began to climb a rock outcropping on the right side of the trail, peculiar images of greenery flashing before my eyes. With the nonsensical conviction one often experiences in dreams, I became certain that this rock would shelter me, although from what, I didn't know. Then nightmarish fear surged through me, and I realized I had tumbled off the rock outcropping and was lying face down, pressed into the ground with my legs twitching violently. *Stop moving*, I willed myself, but my legs kept thrashing.

When I regained control of my body and the dream state began to fade, I found myself supine on the trail, two kind faces looking down at me. "Does anything hurt?" the man asked, and I tried to explain through brain fog that my upper spine was being jabbed by a rock.

The woman slid her hand under my shoulder blades. "I don't feel anything on the ground," she said, "no rocks."

Unable to hear what they said to each other after that, I stared without thought at the lattice of tree branches above me until a Search and Rescue team arrived and I was littered out to a waiting ambulance.

Just like that, I found myself stripped of the independence that had always defined me on the hiking trails I loved.

In the ER I learned that I'd sustained a spinal compression fracture due to the convulsions, and I spent the next six weeks unable to exercise or lie down without pain. I was told not to drive for three months.

"You've had what's called a general seizure," the neurologist explained at my first appointment, "which is what used to be termed a grand mal." The MRI didn't reveal a cause, and although medication could reduce the probability of another seizure, it offered no guarantees. From here onward, my state of consciousness was an unknown quantity.

My partner Mike and I left the neurologist's office with awareness of my new vulnerability floating between us like some frightening pollutant.

This weekend was the first time Mike and I had gone camping since the seizure, and we'd agreed to keep things moderate in case the incident had been triggered by stress. No sleep-deprived predawn starts or sketchy ridge traverses. No summiting Mount Sopris today, despite the fact that under normal conditions it would have been the perfect adventure to embark on from our campsite near Redstone, Colorado.

The peak's original Ute name is *Wemagooah Kazuhchich*, or "Ancient Mountain Heart Sits There," and although its twin summits don't quite reach 13,000 feet, the mountain's dramatic upsurge from the western valley floor makes it one of the most prominent peaks in Colorado. This hike had been on our bucket list for some time, and I was frustrated that we had to forgo the six-plus miles and 4,200 feet of elevation gain that constituted the slog up to the first summit.

We'd purposely relaxed in the morning, sleeping in and lounging about camp in an effort to prioritize my health over our usual adventures, and all we planned on for the afternoon was a casual walk up the first part of the Sopris trail.

When we reached the trailhead it was nearly three p.m., and we knew we'd need to stay below treeline and turn around within a couple hours. Shouldering daypacks (mine heavy with more food and water than we needed), we started up the path from the parking area, making our way past a ponderous ebony cow resting in the grass. It was hot for September, and I began sweating as we climbed a hillside of young aspens and bore left, reaching an open grassy area punctuated by gambol oaks and more black cows. Every few minutes another group of hikers passed us on their descent, having gotten a much earlier start than us.

Anxiety had plagued me ever since the seizure, and today was no different: a panicky feeling rose in my chest as we passed a group of people laughing about something, and I focused on my breathing until the anxiety subsided.

A quick weather check (we still had cell service) revealed a minimal sixteen-percent chance of rain dropping to almost zero later in the evening. Monsoon season dogged most of our summer hikes, so a report like this was outstanding, and I felt disappointed that we couldn't take advantage of it by summiting.

Just ahead, Mike walked with a springy step. Dark curls escaped from his "Got Bluegrass" baseball cap, and his daypack bulged with camera gear. *We're well-matched*, I thought, my mind drifting over the fistful of adventures we'd done in our three years together. Both of us were suckers for adventure, always eager for new backcountry challenges.

Or at least we used to be well-matched, before the seizure.

An hour and a half into the hike, we reached an aspen grove full of dappled sunlight. "Stand here," Mike said, gesturing toward a thick tree trunk and lifting his camera. Leaning against the powdery bark, I arranged my hair over one shoulder and smiled, but my heart wasn't in the pose. What if I never again had the privilege of normal risk-taking? What if the seizure had caused me to devolve into a husk of my former self, someone who had lost the vitality and freedom of trusting her own body? Cringing at the possibility of relaxed afternoon hikes becoming Mike's and my new normal, I pined for the days when we felt confident enough to climb the fourth-class steppes of North Maroon Peak and backpack into the Utah backcountry without cell reception.

"It's crazy how blue the sky is," Mike said as he snapped the lens cover onto his camera.

So clear, you could almost justify a late-afternoon summit of the peak, I thought.

As we climbed higher, we stopped seeing other hikers. Late afternoon brought a tender brilliance to the light slanting through the aspens, and Mike quickened his pace ahead of me. After another forty-five minutes of hiking, we reached a pair of nondescript lakes cupped in the bowl beneath the peak and pushed past them up a scree slope to gain a view of the roughly north-to-south trail we'd just hiked.

"Let's eat here," Mike said.

Settling onto a flat rock, I opened my pack. It was already six-thirty and once we ate it would be time to turn around.

Gazing at the lakes below, I wondered if I would ever again be able to swim without someone to guard me. A friend of a friend had told me he'd started having seizures in his thirties, and they'd ended his career as a wildfire fighter. "You and I will never have the opportunity to scuba dive," he'd told me, and even though diving hadn't been on my bucket list, his words haunted me.

"The peak looks so close," Mike said as he peeled an orange, dropping the rind into an empty plastic bag.

I glanced at him, wondering if he too had fantasies of summiting. "We do have plenty of food and water," I said in a deadpan tone. Although turning around was the prudent thing to do, I couldn't help hoping that the seizure had been a fluke, and that I could push the envelope today without repercussions.

Mike scrutinized the peak above us, which looked much closer than it had thirty minutes ago. "I feel strangely energetic, like I could hike forever," he said.

"Same," I agreed. "Getting to actually summit would be so amazing."

"We could probably make it back to treeline by dark."

Was he really open to hiking farther? I scanned his face and saw a flicker of excitement mixed in with the accepting attitude he'd had all day.

In that moment, I knew my partner would support whatever I decided. Throughout the aftermath of the seizure, he'd been both caring and respectful, always ready with emotional support while also honoring my autonomy. The chances of my having another seizure were anyone's best guess, and all along he'd supported my right to choose how cautious I wanted to be.

In the back of my mind I recognized that we should calculate mileage and evaluate time until sunset, but Sopris's eastern peak appeared to be just a quick push away, and I jumped to my feet. "It's like the stars are aligning," I said. "It's warm, the sky is clear, and we've got headlamps and layers." Our cell service was holding and we'd both had a good night's sleep.

In no time, we closed the distance between us and treeline and then pushed for the spine of the mountain's eastern flank, where we traversed a narrow section with significant exposure on one side. "We'll have to be careful on the way back," I said.

Cresting the spine as the trail curved southwest toward Sopris's twin summits, we saw where the land dropped away down the mountain's backside. In the distance to the southeast, Capitol Peak (Ute name unknown) glowed salmon-colored in the reflected sunset, glimmering like some fairy tale castle. Mike scrambled to pull out his zoom lens, saying, "This is so lucky," as he switched lenses and crouched behind the viewfinder to get the right angle. "Five minutes later and the light would have been gone."

"You'd never see this, hiking in the morning the way most people do," I said.

Of all the Colorado Fourteeners, Capitol is one of the most dangerous to climb, having an exposed traverse called The Knife Edge and a reputation for climber deaths. "Promise me you and Mike will never attempt Capitol," my mother had begged last year, before the seizure, and I'd reluctantly given her my word.

The air was calm and warm, soundless. Beneath us the mountain lay powerful and restrained, like some giant dozing beast that regarded us through half-lidded eyes. As Mike became silent, absorbed in capturing the moment, I stood rapt. The fear that had been gnawing at me ever

since I'd had the seizure dissipated, replaced by calmness, and for a moment I felt like my old self, capable and full of clarity. As I watched the ephemeral interplay between light and rock, a new level of understanding crystallized inside me: What I had lost in the fallout from the seizure, and what I needed more than anything to regain, was confidence in my own agency. There was simply no way I could go through life distrusting my own body at every turn.

As Mike put away his camera and Capitol sank into shadow behind him, I realized that it would be sensible to make this our turnaround point. Pivoting on this moment that balanced between moderation and reckless adventuring, we could make it safely to the car at a reasonable hour. Yet turning back now would mean giving up more than just a summit—it would mean acquiescing to a limited conception of myself, and I couldn't do that.

I had to try for the peak, to reach for an experience that would renew my self-trust. Glancing at the periwinkle sky, I caught Mike's eye and we started hiking upward.

The next four hundred feet of vertical gain were a loose jumble of rocks with no visible trail, and we used our hands to scramble upward. To our right the mountain dropped away in a massive bowl sectioned by fingerlike ridges, the easternmost section cupping Thomas Lakes. Though the bowl was impossibly steep, we were positioned at a distance from the gradual lip, protected from exposure. The light was fading, and everything around us flattened into a graphite monochrome. To our left the immediate slope appeared moderate, but beyond that the terrain was a mystery, for there were no trails on the peak's southern aspect.

What we didn't know until later was that a hiking party had been rescued from this very mountain just one day earlier. "Two women from the Denver area called the county dispatch at about 4 p.m. Saturday saying they were 'cliffed out,' cold and scared," read an article in *The Aspen Times* the day of our hike. "Members of Mountain Rescue Aspen were mobilized and a Flight for Life helicopter out of Frisco was dispatched." The hikers were unharmed and made it safely home, the article explained, but it took twenty-one volunteers to complete their rescue.

Oblivious to this alpine emergency that had occurred just hours before, we scrambled upward, dusk thickening until we succumbed to headlamps that created garish shadows across the rocks.

Along with daylight went the afternoon's warmth, and my hands stiffened with cold. Gloves were the one layer we hadn't brought. By the

time I stopped to replace my waning headlamp batteries, my fingers were too clumsy to open the housing. Mike changed the batteries without trouble, but his manner was brusk, and I felt a stab of unease at my sudden dependence. I hadn't expected the temperature to plummet so quickly.

At least I wasn't worried I'd have another seizure; the calmness I'd experienced at sunset still permeated my consciousness.

As we continued pushing upward, I remembered that I hadn't brought the right adaptor to recharge my phone. Last I'd checked it was at forty percent, and I could only hope it would last until we made it back to the trailhead.

Is that the summit just ahead? I wondered. I'd feel less reckless if we could reach the top with a hint of light in the sky.

But, no, it was a false summit. "You've got to be kidding," Mike said. "We should have known it would be farther than it looked."

We stopped for water and then forged onward, moving as fast as we could without losing our footing. *A twisted ankle would be disastrous*, I reminded myself.

Breathing hard, we scrambled up another six hundred feet of vertical gain and reached the true summit at eight-thirty. We'd been hiking for five and a half hours. The exertion had kept us warm, but we started shivering the moment we stopped. How could it be this cold on a warm summer evening?

I realized then just how dark it was. Our headlamp beams disappeared as soon as we lifted them from the ground in front of us, and there was no moon. We couldn't see the twin summit to the west, the false summit we'd climbed, the drop-off to our right, or the lakes below. Only the distant glow of Carbondale helped us to orient. With nearly all our landmarks gone and no path to follow back, I suddenly understood that there's a world of difference between navigating in the dark with a trail and without one.

As I stood there on the summit, my puny headlamp useless against the blackness, whatever transcendent vitality I'd longed to experience eluded me. Even though I was freed from the seizure anxiety, I felt no rush of empowerment. This formidable mountain, along with its attendant weather systems, had been kind to me tonight, providing conditions in which I could test my limits and persist to reach a challenging destination. Yet rather than feeling elated, all I could think about was getting down safely.

Mike seemed similarly deflated. Trying not to blind him with my headlamp, I glanced at his face and saw that his earlier excitement had drained away. "Let's get off this thing," he said. "I'm getting cold really fast."

"Yeah, me too."

Adjusting his pack, Mike took off like a person late for an appointment.

I was about to follow when I realized that he was deviating from the route we'd ascended, striding toward unknown and probably perilous terrain.

"Mike!" I called when he was about thirty feet away. "You're going the wrong way."

My headlamp revealed his figure in an eerie yellow hue, and I could tell by his reluctant posture that he didn't believe me.

"What are you talking about? This is the route we came up." He started walking again.

"Babe! I mean it! You're going off trail." I kept my feet planted, determined not to lose our starting point as reference.

"You're scaring me," he said, still not retreating.

"You're scaring *me*."

We both froze.

"Let me try the GPS," I said, fumbling for my phone. I'd always had a bad sense of direction, so I couldn't trust myself right now.

"Hurry up. I'm freezing."

I was unpracticed with the GPS app and slow to figure out what I was looking at, but when I finally made sense of the map, it felt as though I were spinning. In an instant it became obvious that my mental orientation had been forty-five degrees away from reality, and I was the one on the verge of descending into untracked, treacherous topography.

"I'm sorry I scared you."

"Seriously. We'll never let you navigate again."

Mike resumed walking, and this time I rushed to follow him, nervous about losing my way down the mountain. Why had I thought that mountaineering in the dark was a good idea?

We didn't talk much as we made our way downward, perhaps because we were both thinking about just how long it would take to reach the trailhead. We still had the most exposed section of trail ahead of us, and I worried it would be dicey to navigate by headlamp. Would the route around the lakes be difficult to follow, where black bears moved unseen through the womblike darkness of the trees? I wondered how many

hours we'd have to spend walking with Mike's phone playing music, so we wouldn't startle a mother bear with cubs, and whether his phone battery would even last that long.

Calculating in my head, I realized that the roundtrip hike would probably take us around ten hours and that we wouldn't reach the trailhead until one in the morning. From there we'd still have a forty-five-minute drive to our campground. I remembered we were low on gas, and I couldn't help thinking how easy it would be to make a wrong turn on one of the unmarked gravel roads near the trailhead and run out of gas far from a station in the middle of the night. So much for the stars aligning for this hike.

But there was no point in second-guessing our choices now. Pushing aside my worries, I peered at the GPS and saw we were approaching the saddle before the false summit.

This landmark felt reassuring and I paused. "Let's turn off our lights," I said.

Mike groaned. "I just want to get back to the car."

"We'll never be here again so we might as well take a moment."

And that's what we did. At 12,385 feet, we stood in the keen chill of the night with no buffering lights to distance us from the exhilaration of the wilderness. There was no wind, not even a breeze, and the only sound I could hear was my jacket shifting with my breathing.

As our eyes adjusted to the darkness, silhouettes appeared. First I saw the false summit, and then the hulk of Sopris. It became obvious that the near-distance luminescence of our headlamps had been hindering our ability to see critical landmarks, and I shook my head at the irony. It was a relief to be able to perceive our surroundings, and some of the tension in my neck and shoulders drained away.

Above us, the stars seemed so sharp and close that they made me shiver, the intimacy of their distinctness almost too intense. Rather than a flat smear across the sky, the Milky Way appeared domed, three-dimensional in a way I'd never seen before.

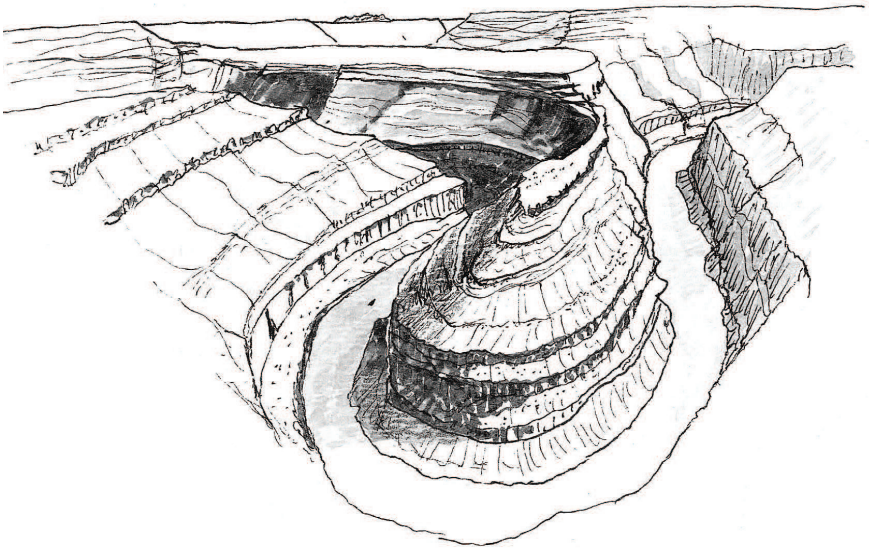
I glanced at Mike. I had to admit that coming up here at night had been a ridiculous idea: the thought of telling people how we'd traipsed around cliff edges in the dark without a trail, for no good reason, made me flush with embarrassment.

Yet in my heart I didn't know if I would do it differently next time. Despite the hazards of the hike, I felt calmer and less fearful than I had in months, as though I'd finally gotten out from under the seizure's thumb. It felt wrong to let myself smile, like I had snuck something forbidden by

coming up here tonight, but the truth was I did feel a flicker of pride. I'd made it to this point, after all—to an immense nighttime view rarely seen by humans—and my body felt sturdy, trustworthy.

Inhaling the clean bracing air, I realized the seizure had dominated my awareness so fully that I'd begun orienting to it like it were a false summit. Now, in the undistracted stillness surrounding us, I was able to perceive it as just one element of a greater topography. What I really needed to orient to (no matter what happened with my health or anything else) was the inner stability I felt right now.

Finally, I'd found my turnaround point.



Goosenecks of the San Juan

Letter from a Mountain Poet: Spring

Ray Cicetti

After three days of hard rain, the storms have passed and the sky is a blue mirror. Even the birds' dark songs lighten in this new air. Today, as I climbed a twisted mountain trail something arrived, simpler than thought, like a clearing without shadow. Before and after fell into intimacy even as the moment changed–direct like an impatient kiss. And part of me unfolded. I could walk again through the green world; touch the boulders' open chests, free as sunlight through the unknown day. There was bird song, there was music.

June Morning in Hells Canyon

Tim Raphael

Hells Canyon wouldn't have that name,
not if it was named at sunrise in June,
where Salt Creek meets the Snake

upriver from Two Corral, the bitterbrush
and sage silvered in dew. I want
to know what this creek was called long ago—

before it was named Salt,
a sprint rumble over broken basalt,
stirred by stone & drop as if

someone up on the canyon rim spills
great burlap sacks of it over the edge
for the joy of the serpentine fall.

What is the Nez Perce word for salt?
They wintered beside this creek
and call themselves the *Nimiipuu*.

What did they call the day the settlers arrived
with their mule-hauled & dented heirlooms
scattered in the bear grass,

fir planks hammered into a kind
of home—hands catching splinters
like memories?

I don't know the discarded names of so many things,
starting with my own hometown
& the people who shaped the Clovis Point

in that mosquito-loaded lowland
13,000 years ago, or lakes
paddled in the Adirondacks,

or footpaths trampled to highways
through middling, mined-out states
scraped from nations.

Settler is an odd name, inclined as we are
to stir things up & move on,
like a cloud worn out by last night's rain

or a creek that already had a name—
Salt Creek—& the bleached churn
of its cold cold current.

The Night the County Supervisors Met to Sell the Mountain

Rebecca Lawton

I arrive late to a dream where ushers fold arms across their chests at theater doors. A man, line-backer big, waves a county pass, rushes by the box office, parts the ushers like the Red Sea.

You're too late, says an office clerk, though he can sell me tickets to *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. It's the one where Charlie finds the last real tree on the lot. He gets back to town with his dying fir or spruce, only to be mocked by children with black holes for mouths.

Of course Charlie is depressed.

I shake off the dream and the clerk's hungry eyes. Wide awake, I follow the mountain's middle path, empty of hikers and cyclists and dogs, who are all at the real-life meeting. I climb on, as chickadees buzz in oak branches. Jays scold. Red-tailed hawks scream.

The meeting will go past midnight. Citizens will pour out their hearts, some to keep the mountain wild, some to sell it and clear forests and fields for a town. Everyone's dogs will grin with hope. The supes will handshake folks on both sides of the room, pat poodles and retrievers alike.

Meanwhile I will walk the wooded mountain that saved my life twenty years ago.

Back then, nursing a bruised heart not far from here, I raised my daughter alone. I rose at dawn to work long days in the woods, gauged the mountain's creeks and springs, stood knee-deep with staff and stopwatch in chilly flow. Owls called, resting in shadows. Muddy deer trails bore lion prints the size of tea-plates, mixed with hieroglyphic scrawls of turkey and heron.

Ducks flew up from Mexico to winter here. Gulls strayed in from the coast. One hot day, a baby vulture hid in a stump while raucous woodpeckers relayed along a shaded creek. Wild lilies, shell fungi,

orchids no bigger than dandelions pushed up through leaf litter. I took my girl to see them.

It was all there. It is up there still, though the meeting went the way such meetings go.

My friends say they'll chain themselves naked to trees and rocks when the backhoes come, when the supes sell the mountain to a high bidder, as they'll do. Like that clerk, they've got to hawk it, get tickets moving for a show we've all seen many times, about a boy who longs for nothing more than a full and living tree.

Thousand Lake Mountain from Holt Draw

To Whom the Kingdom Belongs

Nicholas Crane Moore

Near the southern boundary of Sequoia National Park, 7,500 feet above sea level, lies a deep, narrow valley known as Mineral King. Colorful in the striking palette of the Sierra Nevada—silver in its rocks, sapphire in its waters—the valley is home to an abundance of life, from the lupine to the black bear. In early summer, snowmelt races down from the high peaks, becoming melodic streams that wind through the cool shade of stands of aspen, pine, and fir. But for all its natural splendor, Mineral King is most prominently associated with what was ultimately a highly procedural legal dispute. The basic question its participants asked—who has the right to sue on behalf of the environment?—went all the way to the Supreme Court. Fifty years later, its answer still guides us.

Owing to this history, my first trip to Mineral King was something of a pilgrimage. My journey began in earnest with a drive along the infamous Mineral King Road, a winding, vertiginous route that has changed little since the nineteenth century silver strikes that drove its original construction. Its serpentine path mirrors that of the river far below, diving in toward the trees, soaring out over the gorge. I was aware, as I navigated steadily upward, that the condition of this dilapidated road had been central to the fight over the valley to which it leads. When the Walt Disney Company submitted, and the Forest Service accepted, plans for a massive ski resort in Mineral King, it included a dramatic expansion of the road needed to support planned visitation. It was not lost on the resort's opponents that without a new road, there would be no resort.

The Sierra Club's lawsuit, which challenged both the road and resort, was novel for its time. Running to the courts was not yet a reflexive response to unwelcome environmental policy, in part because there were, in 1969, few laws under which to bring such claims. That would soon change, but the Sierra Club's lawyers did the best with what they had. Their arguments were prosaic to a degree that seems almost incongruous, even ignorant of the beauty of the place they were trying to protect. The wisdom of developing Mineral King—replacing 80 acres of subalpine meadow with a sprawling resort complex containing ten restaurants and accommodations for more than 3,000 overnight guests—was not asked of the court. There was no discussion of the spiritual or moral value of leaving the valley, then a game refuge within Sequoia National Forest, as is. The plaintiffs simply asserted that the Forest Service had violated federal law by granting Disney permits for a project

that exceeded applicable size restrictions. On that basis, the Sierra Club asked for an injunction that would temporarily halt the project while the judge more fully considered the arguments of both sides. To even the Sierra Club's surprise, the injunction was granted.

Admittedly, these events were not at the forefront of my mind as I pulled into the small dirt lot beside the Mineral King ranger station. I was too focused on the sight of sunlit granite, the sound of the flowing river, the scent of cedar and pine. Despite my enchantment, I did not linger. It was already afternoon, and I had a climb of more than 3,000 feet ahead of me. I hitched up my pack and made my way through the trees, which soon gave way to a meadow in full bloom. On either side of the trail, bees went about their business among wildflowers of gold and violet. But the predominant color was green, more shades than I could name. Once across the meadow, the trail turned to the east, and I began my ascent into the granite kingdom of the High Sierra. Alone on the trail, I felt the breathless elation of being back in a wild, beautiful place.

The litigation responsible for the valley's current condition lasted many years. After winning the preliminary injunction—which the Forest Service immediately appealed—the Sierra Club lost in front of a court of appeal that doubted its right to have brought the lawsuit in the first place. The central question then went before the United States Supreme Court: Did the Club have standing to sue?

The principle of legal standing is notoriously convoluted, but the basic idea is ultimately a simple one: You can only sue a person or entity that has done you personal harm—whether economic, physical, or, in rare cases, emotional. The need for this restriction is clear when you consider that if courts did not require a plaintiff to have standing, I could conceivably sue my next door neighbor for an offense that does not harm me in any way—for instance, neglecting to pay his phone bill. Under the limitation of the standing doctrine, however, only the phone company could sue my delinquent neighbor. Standing, in other words, amounts to a legal right to sue. As such, its interpretation and application by the courts has profound implications for a free society.

In *Sierra Club v. Morton*, the Supreme Court was asked to decide whether the commercial development of Mineral King represented an injury to the Sierra Club and its nature-loving members; otherwise, the Club lacked standing, and the case would be dismissed.

The Supreme Court issued its decision in April 1972, three days before the third Earth Day. The Club, held the Court, did not have standing. Not only did the Club lack a financial stake, but it had "failed

to allege that it or its members would be affected in any of their activities or pastimes by the Disney development." The Club's basis for standing—that members of the public have an inherent interest, which the resort threatened, in the enjoyment and ecological health of their public lands—was insufficient. Had the Club owned property in the vicinity, perhaps a competing ski resort, whose economic value the Disney project could conceivably impair, there would have been little doubt of its standing to sue. But the Club's claim to an "aesthetic and conservational interest" failed to move a group of judges largely unfamiliar with such notions.

But if the Sierra Club had lost, then why, as I hiked up the sloping valley walls, did I not pass beneath the black cables and support towers of the planned chairlifts? How had I crossed the meadow without encountering Disney's "Alpine Winter Wonderland," given the resort's intended size? The answer lies, as many a law professor warned me it would, in a footnote.

In rejecting the Sierra Club, the Supreme Court held not that it was impossible to establish standing on environmental grounds, only that the Club's lawsuit, as written, had not done so. And in a now-famous footnote, it gave the Club a way to fix it. Acknowledging that "the Sierra Club has conducted regular camping trips into the Mineral King area, and that various members of the Club have used and continue to use the area for recreational purposes," the Court pointed out that such evidence was absent from the Club's lawsuit and formal testimony—and thus could not be considered. But, said the Court, nothing would prevent the Sierra Club from amending its lawsuit.

The Club took the hint. It started over, amended its lawsuit, re-filed at the lower court. The revised lawsuit detailed the enjoyment the plaintiffs derived from the wild character of the threatened place and the harm they would suffer from its destruction. In the half century since, virtually every successful environmental lawsuit has done the same. The Supreme Court, it turned out, had provided a blueprint for establishing standing so enduring that, as environmental advocate Vawter Parker wrote in *Natural Resources Management by Litigation*, "almost all environmental litigation involving the management of our public lands rests on this footnote."

So as I paused for a breath along the trail, surveying a timeless landscape in which young trees grew from ancient rock, I stood in what can credibly be described as the birthplace of the modern environmental movement. Indeed, the explosion of environmental litigation in the decades since *Sierra Club v. Morton* is the basis for Mineral King's legal

and historical significance. (It's also the reason I became a lawyer.) But the valley's alpine grandeur, its humble silence, and the attachment many felt toward both proved to be its strongest defense. As the Sierra Club's revised lawsuit commenced another slow march through the courts, public opposition began to grow. Longtime visitors to the valley were joined by many who simply disliked the notion of converting a public wilderness into a private playground. What the company and its late founder had envisioned as a clever expansion of the Disney brand was becoming a blemish on its public face. With no end to the legal wrangling in sight, Disney eventually abandoned the project. Mineral King was added to Sequoia National Park in 1978, ensuring its permanent protection.

By the time I finished hiking, it was late in the day. The climb out of the valley had led me into a large cirque, an amphitheater of rock boasting a pair of crystalline lakes. I left the trail, scrambling over talus until I reached a reasonably flat piece of granite, bordered by a patchwork of leafy shrubs. I would make camp here. But first I rested against a boulder and watched as lower Franklin Lake, and the alpine world around it, slowly drained of daylight.

A few tents were visible along the rocky ledges across the lake, but I was alone on my side. I could hear the singing of a nearby stream, full of snowmelt from stubborn patches of winter clinging to the cliffs above. A quarter mile to the east, on a gentle slope above the lake, a stand of reddish conifers absorbed the fading sunlight. I suspected these were the same as the strange tree I had seen alongside the trail earlier in the day—the rarest of Sierra pines, the foxtail. Standing alone, its thick trunk and broad, uneven canopy suggested it was hundreds, even thousands of years old. It had surely been alive when Justice Douglas opined that the trees of Mineral King should have standing to sue.

For many people, the true significance of *Sierra Club v. Morton* is not the famous footnote, or the wave of litigation it presaged, or even the preservation of Mineral King; it is the dissenting opinion of Justice William O. Douglas, which came closer to granting legal rights to non-human life than any document before it. By the time he wrote it, "Wild Bill" Douglas had established himself as the nation's best-known defender of wilderness. He had publicly advocated for the creation of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, the protection of Olympic National Park, and the preservation of Kentucky's Red River Gorge. His personal habits, including his professed love of solitude, his extensive hikes, his travel writing, his tendency to speak his mind, and, less endearingly, his

succession of much younger wives further distinguished him from the other men on the court. He was an iconoclast and, for a justice of the Supreme Court, a genuine eccentric. No one else could have written the Mineral King dissent.

Douglas's words were characteristically bold. Relying on a recent law review article by legal scholar Christopher Stone titled *Should Trees Have Standing?*, he began by pointing out that "inanimate objects are sometimes parties in litigation." A ship, for instance, has long been able to stand on its own in court, and a corporation is treated as a person with its own unique legal rights. "So it should be," wrote Douglas, "as respects valleys, alpine meadows, rivers, lakes, estuaries, beaches, ridges, groves of trees, swampland, or even air that feels the destructive pressures of modern technology and modern life." In the following paragraphs, he would outline a vision that only a lifetime of outdoor adventure could produce—one in which nature itself, rather than the members of the Sierra Club, would be represented in court. The trees, he declared—and the rivers, the meadows, and the valleys—should have standing:

> The river...is the living symbol of all the life it sustains or nourishes—fish, aquatic insects, water ouzels, otter, fisher, deer, elk, bear, and all other animals, including man, who are dependent on it or who enjoy it for its sight, its sound, or its life. The river as plaintiff speaks for the ecological unit of life that is part of it....
>
> The voice of the inanimate object, therefore, should not be stilled. ...Before these priceless bits of Americana (such as a valley, an alpine meadow, a river, or a lake) are forever lost or are so transformed as to be reduced to the eventual rubble of our urban environment, the voice of the existing beneficiaries of these environmental wonders should be heard....
>
> These environmental issues should be tendered by the inanimate object itself. Then there will be assurances that all of the forms of life which it represents will stand before the court—the pileated woodpecker as well as the coyote and bear, the lemmings as well as the trout in the streams. Those inarticulate members of the ecological group cannot speak. But those people who have so frequented the place as to know its values and wonders will be able to speak for the entire ecological community.

Being a dissent, Douglas's opinion had no force of law. But for fifty years, it has captivated those who hope to change our relationship with the natural world. Some believe we are on the precipice of such change,

of a dramatic shift toward embracing Justice Douglas's proposal. They point to recent developments in places like Ecuador, where the national constitution now contains what is widely viewed as the first "declaration of the rights of nature," or New Zealand, where the Whanganui River has obtained legal personhood. The rights of nature—"to exist," "to be protected against pollution," and to "flourish and naturally evolve"—now appear in the legal codes of several cities and counties in America. Though these declarations vary in form and function, all share an overdue acknowledgment that members of the natural community have value independent from their utility to human endeavors; that non-human life, and the land and waters it inhabits, is more than raw material.

The ideas embodied by this movement are, I believe, necessary to slowing our degradation of the natural world. And because the rights of nature rely on a simple, equitable notion—that if a corporation can have personhood, if a trust can protect a dead person's possessions, then why shouldn't the law also recognize the forests, streams, and valleys on which all life depends—I expect they will continue to spread around the globe. But no matter how many rights we award it, the fate of the natural world will remain in human hands. The rights of the woodpecker or the river will be weighed in court cases, decided by judges; legislators will define their scope. Industry will have more money for lobbyists and for lawyers; as things currently stand, they will more often win. Little by little, or perhaps in large chunks, any rights of nature will be qualified, narrowed, undermined, until they've all but disappeared. I base this prediction on five hundred years of evidence—the history of marginalized, exploited, and enslaved people in America—that legal rights are worthless unless those in power are willing to acknowledge them. What we need, then, is more than a change in the law of standing. What we need is a change of heart.

A place like Mineral King has the power to transform our thinking, to bring about a greater awareness of the needs of the natural world. As I sat above lower Franklin Lake, watching the alpenglow retreat up the face of Rainbow Peak, I reflected on the enormous effort it had taken to protect this vital place. The many people who participated—the lawyers, the activists, the ordinary people who wrote letters and went to protests—were fighting for more than their own enjoyment of the valley's wonders. They were fighting for the living community of Mineral King, so that it could persist and flourish without too much interference. They were fighting for their children and grandchildren, for people they knew and

loved as well as for strangers. They were fighting for all those who might someday seek the joy of wildness in Mineral King. They were fighting for me.

Darkness drifted into the basin, and the first of the night's innumerable stars appeared over the ridge. The leaping of small fish subsided, restoring the stillness of the lake. Birds hidden in the shrubs chattered and sang as they, too, finished their evening meals. I pulled myself up off the granite, still warm from the day's sun, and prepared for bed. Though the night would be cool, I left the cover off the tent. I wanted to see the stars for as long as I could. I fell asleep to the sound of running water and the song of sparrows.

Beaver and moose

A Fighter Flies Through the Gorge

Les Brown

I watch the fighter stab the sky below the rim
of the mountain-bound Linville Gorge Wilderness,
navigating the turns of the cascading river below.

Bobcat and bear in the old-growth forest
search for a kill. The fat raccoon ambles
in her slow pace among the green laurels.

The pilot-in-training answers to brass epaulets,
war seasoned men in granite buildings,
who never walked the untrammeled path beside

those boulder-bound clear water pools.
The air trembles. All below look up.
The wilderness shudders, loses its salience,

ceases for a terrible moment—
before the creatures
continue their ancient cycle.

Quiet Please

Yolanda Hansen

I couldn't say to you that
you could only hike with me
if you were silent—that's
too rude
        even for me—
so here we are, tramping down
the Elk Trail, and
your chatter batters
my ears like the neighbour's
lawnmower at 8 a.m. on a Sunday.

I imagine cotton batting, DayGlo orange
ear plugs, a vault's metal doors swinging shut
        (*silently*)
to block your questions,
the stories of people I don't know,
your need to fill this forest air.

I push my mind out into the trees,
untether it like a hot air balloon,
rope slipping through unclenched fingers.
Like rain water seeking cracks in the
boulder, I am searching for something,
        anything—
a glimpse of dun hide between trunks,
a flash of wings in the canopy, the snick of a twig
snapping underfoot—to make you
mute with wonder.

Fear and Roaming on the P.C.T.

Scott F. Parker

The plan was simple. After dropping us off in the early afternoon at Mount Hood's Timberline Lodge, the WPA project most familiar as Jack Nicholson's residence in *The Shining*, Sandy's parents would drive down and meet us at Ramona Falls. Reading a map that was a relic from my parents' younger hiking days, I calculated that it would take four hours to hike these twelve miles of the Pacific Crest Trail.

Sandy, by this time, had been coerced into more than a few of my (mis)adventures, and was joining me on this one under the auspices that it was "only a hike." And a downhill one at that: 2,500 feet down the mountain. All things considered, three miles an hour seemed awfully conservative.

Mount Hood was named by British Lieutenant William Broughton after Admiral Samuel Hood. Prior to that it was known to the native Multnomah Indians as Wy'east. At 11,200+ feet, it is the tallest mountain in Oregon, fourth highest in the Cascade Range that runs like a spine through Oregon and Washington, extending into California and British Columbia. Hood is the Oregon mountain most likely to erupt, and even though this likelihood is low, memories of Mount St. Helens suggest what an event it could be. Eight thousand years ago, Mount Mazama was the tallest mountain in Oregon. When it erupted the mountain lost a mile of height and left us with Crater Lake, the deepest lake in the country.

But as long as it remains intact, Hood is damn-near Platonic in its mountainness. Its even slopes, its lovely snowcaps, and its monolithic emergence from the surrounding forests make it the iconic image of Oregon.

I assured all parties involved of the soundness of the plan: drive up, drop off, hike/drive, meet back up, dinner. Easy. "We'll probably be there in three hours. Four is just to be safe," I told them. Characteristically, it was with anticipation of future regrets that I offered such an assurance. And yet I gave it, adding also a quiet assurance to myself that the world this time would conform to the expectations I had for it. Part of me, though, hoped that things wouldn't go smoothly. I wanted to be tested so that my triumphs, when achieved, would be more substantial. I'm that kind of character in this familiar story.

In retrospect, our inability to find the trailhead looms ominously. At the time it was amusing. The sun was high. Our water bottles were full

and our stomachs were stuffed with donuts as we passed fifteen minutes wandering behind the lodge.

When we eventually found the sign for the trail, which had been knocked to the ground, Sandy seemed willing to agree that we'd gotten the trouble out of the way early. And for a while we were right. It was a clear and expansive July day on the mountain. The sky was blue like it can be only when you're right up next to it, not close enough to touch, but close enough to feel the urge to try.

We kept a leisurely pace through the first miles, stopping to take panoramic photos of the thick green forest below, breached only by Mount Jefferson far off in the southern horizon and the occasional clear cut, or to inspect wildflowers and curious patterns of moss on rocks. At the first stream crossing, we took off our shoes, waded across the cold mountain runoff, and then allowed our feet to dry in the sun before putting our socks and shoes back on and continuing. We had time to spare. A couple miles later we stopped to eat. We hadn't brought much food—just a granola bar for each of us—but we had a nice lookout over a crater, sloping sand and rock curving into a valley below, trees and the next river crossing and maybe another hiker down there. We stayed put until the sweat on our backs began to feel cool in the breeze.

And then we got lost. The single-track trail became narrower and narrower until it wasn't a trail anymore. We were on the edge of the canyon, close enough to the edge that the trees were several yards removed and only smaller shrubs flourished waist high. We fought our way through the shrubs, looking for, and periodically finding, other hikers' footprints. Because the grade was steep and we were now concerned with making it to the falls in the allotted four hours, we decided not to backtrack and look for where we lost the trail but instead to keep going until we found it again. We knew, because the canyon was on one side, that the trail had to be on the other. And we thought, reasonably, that if we kept going downhill we'd have to come to the trail eventually. There was no way to confirm our deduction, as I'd left my parents' map in Portland. Our reasoning worked, though, and we did regain the trail, but the slow maneuvering through bushes had cost us time and we realized we would be late meeting Sandy's parents.

We also realized that the steepness of the mountain was taking a toll on our quads.

"How much farther do we have to go?" Sandy asked.

"Six miles, maybe. I think we're halfway."

Sandy's response here, which I'll delicately elide, suggested to me that hiking would not feature prominently in what remained of our relationship.

We found the trail falling down the mountain for another two leg-pounding miles, the forest around us thickening along our descent, before it flattened out at the next small river crossing. We took our shoes off and crossed. With only thirty minutes left of our four hours we didn't have time to dry our feet. We put our cold, wet feet in our socks and hoped the trail would stay flat.

Quickly, though, our hopes for the trail became more dire. More concerning than the trail's properties became the question of its existence. This section of the trail (we would later determine) had been washed out in a landslide the previous winter. Had someone not tied little pink flags in the trees to mark a path for hikers, we would have had to follow the river down the mountain. Noticing the pink flags, and eventually realizing their function, allowed us to think for one last time that we would meet Sandy's parents at a reasonable time. But like our thoughts about the trail, those of meeting Sandy's parents soon went in my mind from temporal (*when?*) to existential (*will we?*). I didn't let on as much to Sandy, preferring to maintain the facade of control as long as she'd allow me. I am the kind of person who prides himself on believing he knows the difference between things that are a big deal and things that are not—and understands that most things are not. Given this orientation, I was less than eager to admit that the situation might be getting away from me. Sandy well knew this about me but understood that either we'd be fine or taking her frustration out on me wouldn't help.

The ribbons were spaced intermittently. We had a nice trail-blazing rhythm going, keeping our eyes two and three pink points ahead, until we came to a point from which we could not see the next step. We followed a straight line from where we'd just come, keeping the last point in site. When we did not discover the next ribbon by this method, we returned to the last and tried one new tangent and then another until we found our way. Needless to say, it was slow going. By the time we reached a trail sign pointing the direction toward Ramona Falls we were an hour late and didn't know how much farther we had still to go. But this trail was intact. We decided we needed to move quickly. It was Sandy's idea to run. Not that it was ever expressed as idea; it was expressed only as a physical need: the body and mind one thing reacting out of fear and instinct. I followed close behind.

Without my noting the moment, we had passed the time when I felt it necessary to withhold my worry. I was ashamed of having orchestrated this fiasco and scaring Sandy's parents, I could only imagine, from ever returning to the mountain—the exact opposite of what I had hoped would result from our trip.

Sandy kept up the pace. I stayed right behind, letting her dictate our movements. We spoke only to wonder where her parents were, somehow reassured to keep repeating the worry. They were just ahead, waiting for us, we thought for turn after turn after turn in the trail. *Just ahead, just ahead. Only just. Really, any minute now we'll be there—Or are we going the wrong way?*

We were headed toward the falls itself, but was there a chance that Sandy's parents would be waiting for us in the Ramona Falls parking lot, which was in the opposite direction? We had never established this crucial detail. I hadn't known we needed to.

As you rightly assume, everything comes out okay in this story, though the remaining mishaps strain probability. There will be the two of us alone at the falls. There will be a washed-out bridge. There will be the sight of Sandy's parents' car at a dead end, unattended. There will be dangerous river crossings. There will be hitchhiking. There will be drunk locals with aggressive dogs. There will be a stoned hippie crawling around in the dark looking for his phone. And, before the day is out (barely), there will be a rendezvous with Sandy's parents at the Subway restaurant in Zigzag, where we will eat sandwiches and recount the day. All of that is ahead of us.

But I want to stay here awhile, with the mountain and the Pacific Crest Trail that happened not to be there that summer, Sandy and I running with animal purpose.

It seems a crucial moment, humbling to any would-be hero. There was no triumph here, merely continuing. We did only what we could. We reacted to the situation before us moment after moment until it was over. Feeling generous, I'd say we were like water running down the mountain. We didn't know where we were headed, but we weren't going to stop until we arrived. Less generously, we were desperate. The fragility of our circumstances was revealed to us—the line between control and chaos eminently porous.

Either way, we were not stopping.

Above us, the sky was what under better circumstances would be called luminous. Behind us, Mount Hood was an invisible menace, nothing like the mountain we'd started the day on. Ahead of us, the sun was fading as we chased it west, west, west, and away.

Some Cousins Get Lost in the Forests of Pine Lake State Park

Jenkin Benson

no omnivorous
starved searchlight
or burning wood pop
orange-grey pastel

peevish cousins
their squinny knuckles
punch like love
togethered

sinewy twinesummer
dirt-blistered dusk
all possums and
nettles and taut

humidity then showers
cussing along the
horizon oh fuck oh
shit the ivy itch

the stubbed toe
trail goners
our gory ounces
nourish the mire

muck beckons
we gullycrawl get
loused in sap-stick
snacking on clover

our two-ways dead
we're ashbored
deeper tendrils deeper
in the mite den

remember the scab
of mud the mantisful
thrum of boxelders
pointing and chortling

Wildes Volk

Joseph Aultman-Moore

"There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle."—*Albert Einstein*

"It's a family business, this hut *Pfitscher-Joch Haus*. Five generations. These mountains—this is my home. All the *wanderers*—hikers; the border here of *Österreich* and *Italien*." A smiling man with deep lines on his face like a topographical map brings us our *speck nudel* soup and *bier*. The mountain hut is nearly empty, and he swings a chair out and sits. "This is *Alto Adige*, or we say *Südtirol*. English you may say South Tyrol. Most beautiful place in the world. We are our own. In Italy, yes, but we speak our own *Deutsche*. Language does not often recognize borders. Neither does culture."

"*Wanderers*," Ben says. "Same word in German and English."

"Stories in these mountains," our host continues. "Wars. Maybe you are walking the same path that Hannibal took. Who knows? Stories on stories."

"Any mythical creatures in these mountains?" Ben asks.

"No unicorns or dragons. Only real mythical creatures."

"Like what?"

"Like the Goldenhorn, the steinbock that guarded a great treasure in the Alps. Wild mountain goats with twisted horns. You may see them. Then there are the *Uomo selvatico*, the *wilder Mann*—the wild men of the mountains."

"Wild *men*?"

"Wild women too, *Wildes Fräulein*. They go by different names in different languages."

Ben looks incredulous, "And—they're real? You've seen them?"

The man laughs, "I've seen many strange things in these mountains. Enjoy your soup! *Guten appetit!* Oh, and use caution for the next couple of days, there is heavy weather coming in."

Ben and I are brothers, on our first trip together out of the States. We chatter happily about girls, about the journey ahead, about the weather. The first drops of sweat trickle in the green, still air of the forest. The trail runs from Munich to Venice, winding up over the Austrian Alps and the Italian Dolomites, with little mountain huts placed along the way. The guidebooks to the trail, *Trampfaud München—Venedig*, are published

only in German and Italian. Though we have a German guidebook, we can't read it; though we have a map, the marks are too small to be of much use if we get lost. We head into, for us, *terra incognita*. Explorers. Observing the world unfold around you, yourself unfolding within it, is a kind of exploration. The buzzing excitement of a foray into the unknown. How beautiful, how mysterious that we should put one foot in front of the other, laughing in the dappled green-gold light of an Austrian summer.

A word: *alpine*— originally fifteenth century, of or relating to the Alps. The Alps are the *definition* of alpine.

The trail blazes are painted stripes, red-white-red, on fence posts, trees, stones, barn-sides. The trail goes up up up, and the forest becomes patchy and scraggly. Then over the first major ridgeline, *Friesenbergscharte*, the Alps stretch stark and panoramic. Ridgelines beyond ridgelines. That night we camp in a grassy flat spot out of sight of the hut. The light moves up the mountains, turning blush against the stone, until we are in the shadow. Chill alpine air descends. The paths of glaciers are all around us, their bulldozed valleys. Glaciers flayed the flesh off mountains, left them gaunt and brutal; they carried the boulders, scoured the rocks. We follow their wake.

The sun is high by the time it wakes us, shaded by the sharp ridge. I unzip the tent fly and sit upright blinking into another world. The wrinkled surface of the world spreads before us, sparkling with chilly dew. Off in the folds, the edges of Innsbruck, gray in the green. Before us, sharp peaks—we're still in the foothills. The trail is thin and rocky now, depressed only an inch into the delicate alpine soils before it turns gravel. Tiny wildflowers and lichens delicate as stained glass. I know none of them; my eyes are infants here. Little birds flit between rocks, my brain scans for similarities and comes up blank.

Bells. *Denk denkdenk* sound of bells wafts over the mountains. An ancient sound. The tiny footpath snakes between boulders to rough peaks. Early dew and fog burn off, sun prickles skin. *Denk denk denk*. Finally, we see the bells; they're attached to *cows*, a small herd, half a dozen, wandering the steep mountainsides on thin grasses. They watch us passively. Smallish, agile, with thick shaggy fur—they might be wild animals but for the cast bronze bells tied around their furry necks with thick leather bands. Who do they belong to? Peter Matthiessen writes in *The Snow Leopard*: "The mountains have no 'meaning,' they are meaning; the mountains are. The sun is round. I ring with life, and the mountains ring, and when I can hear it, there is a ringing that we share."

The bells ring, the mountains ring, the air rings. Clouds seem alive up here. They swirl, boil, tear like cheesecloth on the sharp rocks. We walk the thin gravel trail worn through delicate alpine plants and grasses. Fat sheep on the mountainside, dark-wooled. Then the mountain begins to *sing*. A clear male baritone soars across the valley. The sheep look up. Ben and I stop and stare at each other. The vast mountain expanse and that single voice. The voice crests a ridge and we squint up.

A figure, dazzling against the sun, is *sprinting* across the mountain. Singing. The figure runs down the steep ridge with two hiking poles, still singing. There are words in the song—Italian? German? A magic spell? The apparition flies toward the flock of sheep with astonishing speed. "*Ho-ah*!" the song goes. The sheep jog away and the figure herds them, "*Ho-ah*!", fast as any sheepdog toward a far ridge above a snowfield. "*Ho-ah!*", the sheep go up and over; the figure turns and, still singing, skids down a hundred feet of snowfield in boots and sprints down the trail straight toward us. We stand transfixed.

The man, or whatever it is, races toward us like an avalanche. A giant, dressed in leather, bearded and balding. He's old, or perhaps ageless; his voice fills the mountains. I'm shot by two clear, blue eyes as he passes us in a single stride and charges up the mountain. A gust of wind follows his wake, the only indication that he is on the same plane of reality.

The booming voice fades and Ben whispers, "Who...*what* was that?"

"I think that was a *wilder Mann*," I say.

The episode leaves a sheen of strangeness on the landscape. The empty mountain trails and the scarcity of other people make human encounters full of significance, as if nothing could be chance. Matthiessen again: "Then the world stirs. In the half-light, a bent figure moves under overhanging rocks across the torrent, cowled, ragged, brown, with a long stave—a mountain lunatic, a *sennin*. Though howling, he cannot be heard over the roaring water; he brandishes his stick."

A *sennin*—same myth, different place.

Then the mountain weather descends:

Just outside the tiny town of Stein, we wake to the rush of rain on the tent fly. The town through the curtain of rain is old farmhouses with huge rough-hewn beams, old stone churches with steeples and tiny circular windows. We sigh, skip breakfast; nothing to do but to get hiking, get to the next hut as quickly as possible.

Swaddled in raingear, we start up the road out of town and back into the mountains wreathed in thick gray clouds. Loud rain on my hood and pack cover. Ben and I walk in silence, plodding up the road that gets thinner and the trees sparser. My jacket holds for about an hour in the heavy rain before I feel cold water trickling through. Up the road, we finally spot a tiny turnoff and a half-faded trail blaze. Our lungs carburetors, our thighs engines. The trail squishes, creeks brim almost to the footbridges. The town disappears below in the mist and rain. The hut is at the top of this mountain, at a pass called *Gliderscharte*. All I can think about is a roof, warmth, hot *speck nudel* soup, maybe even a beer.

A peal of thunder makes us pause and look at each other. Distant but unmistakable. Flash in the clouds, fifteen seconds, then thunder. We're closer to the hut than the town.

"Let's go; we can do it."

We hike double-time. Ben's in front, bootprints leaving little puddles. Clouds thicken, and the dying light seems to cast no shadows. The trees shrink to nothing.

Then the storm hits. A roar of thunder and wall of water. Wind flails our rain covers. Rain pours off the mountainside like the storm is trying to wash it away. We're high above the trees, the tallest things on the mountainside. A swollen creek in the valley roars over the sound of the rain. Lightning rips at my eardrums, and the world below is drowning. Losing light and hiking at night in a thunderstorm—I'd throw my whole backpack into the valley if I thought it would get us to Gliderscharte safely.

Suddenly, there's no more climb; all around us are broken slabs of rock like giant tombstones. Gliderscharte. There's no color in the world. Moonscape. We look for lights, a hut, a sign. Should be close. "Where is it?" says Ben.

"Should be close…" The trail winds through the pass, shadows looking like shipwrecks. Every turn is dark stone and mountain. "Should be close…" A long dark lake, black opaque water. No hut. *No hut*, no shelter, no hot soup. And for some reason, it's the loss of the soup, the tiny shred of comfort amidst the rain and darkness, that upsets me to near despair. "The *soup*," I murmur, as if someone poured a steaming bowl into the lake. I open the guidebook in the rain, and the little hut symbol on Gliderscharte mocks me. Either the book is wrong, we misread the symbol, or we're lost.

"C'mon," Ben says. "We've got to get off this mountain before we lose the light entirely. If we try hiking by headlamp, one of us will fall off a cliff or break an ankle."

We scramble down slick black rock. Ben's right, this is getting more dangerous by the minute. Cold comes with the dusk and shivers through soaked clothes. I'm watching my feet carefully when I almost step on a bone. There's a human skeleton next to the trail. I emit a strangled gasp and shiver colder than any storm. Someone died here and rotted away and we're going to die here and rot away and all because we got lost and someone threw all the soup into the lake on Gliderscharte…

"Jesus H. Crimini Christmas," Ben says, looking at the skeleton. "Who would mess with a dead sheep?" He picks up the skull, obviously not human. One leg has two knees. "Somebody actually *arranged* these bones," he laughs. I chuckle weakly.

It's night. We have to camp, look for a spot to pitch the tent. Jagged rocks, not a flat bit of ground. There's some small yellow light out there in the blackness of the mountains, something beyond the circles of our headlamps. "Are you seeing that, Ben?"

"Yeah, a town?"

But it's just a single point, with a warm, flickering quality—is it the hut? Too small. A cabin. We'll ask to camp. The cabin is tiny, a large shed, really. It's a different world in there, a little pod of warmth and dryness. Ben knocks and there's a stillness inside and I realize there's a *person* on the other side of that door, someone that lives here on the edge of darkness. A knock on their door in the middle of a storm at night. A person, or—I have a sudden vision of the *wilder Mann*, the booming voice. The door opens. An old woman, backlit by the warm glow, surveys us. What to say? It's like we're on a ship out at sea, frantically waving at a lighthouse.

Wordlessly, she opens the door further and motions for us to enter. Wordlessly, we do. Ben and I inhale sharply, a wave of warm, dry air. A stove, a table, a cot. Cackling wood, a pot of steaming something. The woman takes a glass bottle from a tiny cabinet, pours thin, clear liquid into two glasses the size of thimbles, and hands them to us. Half a mouthful and we splutter, "*Danke*." The spirits could eat the rust off the door hinges.

"*Grappa*." the woman says in a voice like woodsmoke, the faintest smile on her lined face. "*Deutsche? Italienisch?*"

"American." says Ben.

The woman shrugs. She speaks no English; we speak no German. She goes to the steaming pot and ladles something into a bowl. Then she says the only other German words we know, "*Speck nudelsuppe*." She hands astonished Ben a bowl and then me. Tears leak out of my eyes. We sit on the floor; she sits at the only table and gives us chunks of heavy bread to dip in the soup. It's the best meal I've ever had.

She lets us stay in a small hay barn next door. Smell of hay and earth. Warmth of the soup and *grappa* and hay. No sleeping pad necessary. *Danke*, we say, over and over. For everything, *danke*.

The morning is a dazzle of sunshine. I haven't seen the sun in years. We knock on the door just to thank her once more, but the cabin is empty. *Danke*. On the way down, a massive mountain goat jumps across the trail, impossibly long horns twisting out of its forehead. A reek of musk. *Danke*.

Matthiessen on the Himalayas: "The sun is roaring, it fills to bursting each crystal of snow. I flush with feeling, moved beyond my comprehension, and once again, the warm tears freeze upon my face. These rocks and mountains, all this matter, the snow itself, the air—the earth is ringing. All is moving, full of power, full of light."

Kodachrome Basin

The Flowers Were Dark

James B. Nicola

I used to love the woods beyond the brook
where wild roots warped in welters and wildflowers
incensed the shade, alluring us to look
for deeper scents beyond the evening hours.

Insensate, spurred by sylvan mysteries,
prepared to forage like nocturnal creatures,
my friend and I continued, to expose
the forest's gnarly, hidden, inner features.

The moon was new, the sky grew overcast,
the brambles thickened, and our bare arms bled
from thorns, and a malefic midnight mist
made it so dark we could not see the red.

My foot stuck in a root. I laughed, then called.
No answer. Had he gone ahead or back?
I had no knife, no axe, no flare, so howled
for help for hours. Then everything went black.

At break of day, on either side of me
I found two flatstones sharp enough for flints
and hacked the root and worked the ankle free,
then hobbled home. The throbbing made me wince

a little, maybe curse. At dawn I went
to show the Search and Rescue where we'd gone,
but wasn't sure. The flowers smelled different
and everything looked different at dawn.

They blazed a trail and marked it, dredged two bogs
where quicksand was suspected, drained the ground
for safety, and to bridge the creek, laid logs,
but all for naught. My friend was never found.

All that was years ago. Today my son
and his friends hike with no cause for alarm—
though once he told me how they came upon
a brier reaching like a bloody arm

as if to trip them on the twisted trail.
A breeze rose and its brace of branches shook—
He said it sounded like a human wail....
I used to love the woods beyond the brook.

Kathmandu Clip

Edmond Stevens

In his vaporous state of mind, Bryce could picture a dozen circling witches, beating on the sides of the tent with their brooms. He hammered the twist knob of the oxygen bottle with the shaft of his climbing axe, hoping that the stunted flow was just ice in the regulator. He clubbed on the gnarled wheel, more out of frustration than any expectation that oxygen was going to flow from the spent tank.

Dutch died sometime during the night. Bryce tried once more to remove his heavy down puffy. But with arms frozen across his chest, getting it off would be like trying to remove the tunic from a Civil War statue. Even if Bryce could somehow husk the jacket, additional layers wouldn't do much good. At 27,000 feet, and the body robbed of oxygen, blood turns to sludge, unable to circulate heat from the depleting warmth of core organs. Still sufficiently coherent to piece together the broken pottery narrative of the last weeks, Bryce labored with the trivialities that had consumed him back when his limbs were working and his breath hardly labored. It was all about that damned fuss over the haircut.

Over Bryce's last days in the States, he'd flat run out of time with his checklist of items for Everest. The shots, dried food for the high camps, plus a swing by the pharmacy for Cipro and Flagyl against infections from the toxic Kathmandu air and sketchy sanitary conditions. With a midnight flight out of LAX, the final item was a haircut. But the clock ran out.

His hair overshot the collar by two inches and swooshed like pigeon wings over the ears. Passable for a Zoom meeting or Mother's Day brunch with the aunties at Macaroni Grill. But in the thin air above 20,000 feet, the glacier reflects the sun like stainless steel. In one hour, the temperature might be zero. But when the sun crested the jawbone ridge of Lakpa-Ri, everybody would be shedding puffies and mid-layers. In this unlikely heat, an excess of hair weighs down like a janitor's mop.

This was Bryce's second trip to the Himalayas, though the first on Everest, opting for the less-traveled approach through Tibet. In the early part of the last century, expeditions were forced to attempt the summit from the Tibetan plateau. But each time, teams were turned back, stumped by the summit wall just below the peak.

With Nepal opened in 1953, Hillary and Tenzing finally cracked the puzzle of the shattered glaciers via the southern route. Over recent

seasons, the route has become a conga line of catered clients, MiG pilots huffing oxygen, lined up like queues outside Apple stores for the latest iPhone variant.

With duffels stacked for the bus trek to the Tibetan frontier, documents in order, including a credit card authorization for mountain evacuation, Bryce's final priority was finding a barber to get, as his dad called it, his "ears lowered." On shopping and temple excursions, Bryce was on the lookout for the Nepali version of Supercuts. When far from home, something about brand names imparts faux security. But the only familiar brands here seemed to be Swatch and FedEx.

Nepalis come across as a largely well-groomed culture with no shortage of barber stalls, but with nothing to really recommend one over another. No Yelp reviews or health department certificate in the window. And a staph infection from a germy comb or a scissors nick could dash a summit attempt.

The second guesses heaped up like the snow against the tent. All the time pissed away on his haircut quest could have been spent Skyping his kids. But then they'd been busy with drum lessons and coding classes. Charlie, his oldest from a first marriage, thought this Everest business so unremarkable that he'd asked to skip the airport sendoff because it conflicted with his tutor appointment, prepping for his ACTs. "Dad's off on another one of his Red Bull holidays," he told his crew.

Cherise had been quiet on the drive to the airport, understandably annoyed that her husband was leaving her with the unreliable landscape guys, the broken spa, and the planning for her folk's fiftieth. At the terminal curb, she finally reached over and gave a tug at the ragged drape of his hair, the best token of affection she could manage, given her split emotions of love and annoyance.

"You missed your appointment at the barber."

"Yeah," he said. "Just ran out of time."

"And don't forget the sunblock. I don't want you coming back to your son's graduation looking like that 'Revenant' guy."

The hotel desk clerk had recommended a couple of barbers. But one doubled as a small animal vet, and the second place looked like the interrogation room from Abu Ghraib. As a kid, his dad would take him once a month down to Ernie's. With the combs pickling in blue glass cylinders, the tissue strips wrapped choker-tight around his neck, caped down to the ankles, the place seemed as antiseptic as a catheter lab.

Bryce may have been obsessing, but none of the Nepali barbershops were giving him any similar feelings of security.

Barber visits were a sacred time during Bryce's adolescence, personal time with his dad who, as a mostly full-time alcoholic, was otherwise unavailable. But Saturday mornings at the barber shop gave Bryce an hour of exclusive time with his father, and the occasional hearsay insight into his shadowed life in those confessor moments unique to the incidental people in our lives, like barbers and cab drivers.

Bryce and Dutch had trained hard. Both ran the L.A. Marathon; then, in addition to the CrossFit routines, every weekend Bryce climbed the San Gabriels with a pack filled with fifty pounds of collapsible water bladders. In fact, Bryce and Dutch felt suitably fit that they volunteered to climb with the advance Sherpas, setting fixed ropes that would guide climbers between camps and serve as safety lines on the summit face.

The true motive was that Bryce and Dutch felt some measure of peer pressure. The others in the team were a virile crew of high achievers with serious expedition cred. For them, Everest would shape out already brilliant résumés. Bartlett and Zaitsev, who had founded tech startups, sold out for hundreds of millions. Emily was a West Point grad with tours in Afghanistan and Iraq, soon transitioning to the State Department. Dutch and Bryce, as the gray beards, had never really addressed it, but both privately struggled with worthiness issues. Which is why they were always the first to unload gear or carry extra loads from base camp. This was the clear character flaw that had contributed to them being trapped and alone, at twenty-seven-thousand feet on the northeast ridge of the mountain.

Dutch amiably mocked it as his Samson complex, saying that Bryce was afraid if he lost his hair, he wouldn't have the juice to make it up the mountain. But Bryce had climbed a lot of glaciers and knew that the unfiltered sun could bake you worse than the beach at Zuma. And with his tendency to chimney body heat out his head, excess hair would turn into a sopping rug. Plus, climbing is about minimalism and efficiency. Dheeraj, from Boulder, had taken the weight thing to extremes, popping a thousand dollars for the mummy bag with its fatty gray goose feathers from the south of France. All that to shave six ounces. Maybe Bryce's haircut would only lighten his load by a few grams, but the close trim would make him feel more streamlined and efficient. And easier to shampoo when presented with those precious opportunities for a couple minutes of warm water in the shower tent.

The expedition liaison had suggested they taxi across town to the Yak and Yeti, a colonial-era, white-glove palace of Vuitton and idling limousines. It was a good thought, but also felt like a betrayal of the code of camaraderie the team was forging in the minimalism of their one-star lodging. Close bonding was imperative. Teammates would keep a keen eye for the white discoloration that was the first sign of frostbite, the lassitude and amber piss holes in the snow that indicated dehydration, or the slurred speech and missteps that are the first signs of cerebral edema, a swelling of the brain that can quickly lead to unconsciousness and death. Bryce took a pass on the Yak and Yeti option, even with the understanding that they offer an outstanding buffet for sixteen dollars American.

"Did you see Green Boots?" Dutch asked. It was one of their last conversations. Green Boots was an Indian climber from a 90s expedition who had sheltered beneath a limestone shelf. Green Boots, known by his lime-colored plastic Koflachs, is one of a number of bodies abandoned in the upper tiers of the mountain, an area known as Rainbow Valley for the proliferation of flurried down puffies and fleece that shroud the bodies. The corpses have been left, not as an exhibit to caution about the dangers of Everest, but because it's just too difficult for exhausted climbers and Sherpas to get them down.

Bryce never saw Green Boots, though the body was supposedly only a hundred yards from the shelf where the Sherpas had set up the tents and Dutch and Bryce had taken shelter after both agreed they were too exhausted to descend to the North Col camp. The weather models called for a two- or three-day window of clear weather, with only a small disturbance over eastern Bhutan that was blocked by a high-pressure bubble over the eastern Himalayas. They hadn't packed a stove or much food, but figured with a night of rest and clear skies, it would be an easy dash back down to the North Col where they could recover at the more habitable air of twenty-three-thousand feet. The Sherpas left each with a bottle of OX and told them that if they kept the flow to a half-liter per minute, they could recover and still have enough gas to get back down into the breathing zone.

However that inconsequential little swirl over Bhutan had shifted northeast with winds across the peaks reaching the equivalent of a Category One hurricane. Unzipping the tent, Bryce could see that higher up, the sky was clear and the blackest shade of blue. But immediately below, the route had completely vanished in fog and blowing snow.

With the van leaving first thing in the morning and time running out, Bryce remembered his unisex stylist back in California which led to the idea of trying a women's salon he'd seen across the street from Himalayan Java. But the receptionist seemed alarmed that he'd even set foot in the door. Was there some inviolable convention in Nepal about mixed gender hair styling?

Prospecting neighborhoods outside the Thamel tourist zone, things looked even less promising. Bryce found one barber who shared a garage with a scooter repair shop, thick with two-stroke engine fumes. In the next block, the barber's son, a good English speaker, assured Bryce that his father was a very accomplished stylist. "Very top-tier in all the fashionable Bollywood cuts," he touted. "And as a bonus, he trained in Jaipur in all ailments of the feet. A free examination is complimentary."

Bryce thanked them and assured both that his feet were in very fine shape.

Headed back in the direction of their hotel, he stopped at a pleasant garden café, possibly his last chance for an American-style burger. The manager passed frequently, pausing to mention his relatives in Berkeley and Schenectady. He had a good grasp of American current events and was very excited about the next *Mission Impossible* installment and asked if Bryce knew when it would be coming out in Asia.

Settling his bill, Bryce asked if the manager could recommend a good barber. Ahhh, his eyebrows went from the topiary of hedge to arches. He lifted Bryce and steered him across the street through the crossfire of scooter and tuk-tuk traffic into a gallery with vendor stalls spilling into the main passage. Past a tailor's stall, noodle shop, and clothing kiosks, he turned Bryce into a cave, illuminated by the same kind of lighting that seems specific to morgues. Three of the barbers sprung up from their chairs, where they had been watching a Bollywood music video on an overhead TV. But the café man pushed them aside and guided Bryce to the last chair where he introduced the senior barber, patriarch of the family business.

"Mr. Deha. Very excellent gentleman's stylist," the café manager assured Bryce.

"Very excellent," the stylist assured him again.

Deha stomped on the hydraulic lever, dropping the seat to its lowest setting.

"Very excellent," seemed to be the limit of his English as they engaged in a clashing dialogue of hand gestures around his head, like a craniologist doing some voodoo rite to purge a brain tumor.

Deha reached for a laminated card that, like an IHOP menu, illustrated all the options. Again Bryce just tried to indicate a shortened version of what was already there. But the stylist seemed to insist that they not deviate from the menu. The options seemed to be variations on Sixties doo-wop. There was the acrylic cylinder of Frankie Valli, the full-on Brylcreem helmet of Fabian, or a few modest mullets before public figures like Mark Gastineau and Billy Ray Cyrus took the ape drape to its fullest expression.

Bryce wanted to bolt, but felt like the family would take it as an insult. "What's the difference between a good haircut and a bad one?" Dutch had asked Bryce before his haircut quest. "About two weeks," Dutch answered his own question. So, with almost two months before he'd have to make an appearance before anybody other than his climbing mates, he settled on Number Six, scissoring with two fingers to indicate that he wanted approximately the same thing but an inch shorter.

One of the sons ran down the hall to fill a basin with warm water for the shampoo, as it struck Bryce as a tough proposition to run a barbershop without functional plumbing. But the water was comfortably tepid and the shampoo emitted a pleasant medicinal balm.

"Come on," he told Dutch. "We've got to go." But Dutch was still depleted from yesterday's big push and immersed deep inside his down bag. "Now is the hour, man. We've gotta get out of here."

Dutch told him to go on ahead. He was having trouble feeling his feet and wasn't sure if he could walk yet. "I'll dial up my OX another liter," he said. "An hour or so and I should be good."

Unzipping the tent flap and looking down the ridgeline, Bryce could see the purple fixed rope, like stitches in sailcloth, still not completely swept over by the drifts. As long as they could find the fixed line, it would guide them back down to the lower camps.

The gasket on the face of Bryce's altimeter watch had been slowly failing since they left base camp last week. Now the dial was embedded with ice crystals, useless. The sun had only been up for about an hour now, and Bryce figured it must be about seven o'clock. He tried to calculate how much oxygen would be left in their bottles. They had used the OX at about two liters a minute for the last hour descending to Camp Three. Then running at a half liter overnight and with a capacity of 720 liters… Again and again, he faltered with the math. An oxygen-deprived brain leaves the high-altitude climber with the processing power of a pre-schooler. Still, Bryce didn't need any calculus to know that their two bottles would run out before much longer.

Though the shop was wired for electrical, Deha preferred to saw at his hair with a serrated razor, a lot of effort for a low-maintenance taper cut. Especially with a half dozen electric razors hanging off hooks beside the mirror. Bryce pleaded to keep it simple, but Deha would have none of it. He pulled at the damp hair in strips and sawed through the plaits then patted them flat with a curt swat to the side of the head. Pull, clip, swat. It was kind of annoying, and Bryce couldn't avoid the association with his dad's tendencies to clap him on the side of the head when he left the lid off the mayonnaise, forgot to put away the lawnmower, or just as a general assertion of who was boss. Pull, clip, swat. Pull, clip, swat. Bryce looked at himself in the mirror.

"Good," he said. "But shorter, shorter."

Besides the annoying habit of swatting him after every clip, the stylist would give a sharp snap of his head to adjust for the next cut, kind of like a chiropractic micro adjustment. Bryce would have said something but only at the risk that Deha and his sons would think that Americans were a wimpy sort and not the hardy specimens fit for the hardships of big mountains.

For all his purposes, the clip already met Bryce's needs, but Deha obsessed over the shape and texture and Bryce had the feeling of his head being a quarry stone buffed and rouged to a jeweler-grade sheen. Finally Deha scooped his fingers into a tub of paste-like, pleasant smelling floor polish.

"No, no. Good. Excellent. No more."

Deha seemed wounded but passed the hand mirror so that Bryce could inspect from all points of the compass. The sons applauded as if this had been some of their father's finest work, taking pictures with their smart phones. Bryce guessed that he would be added to the wall gallery the way that signed headshots of comedians and episodic bit players show up above the cash register in delis and dry cleaners all around Los Angeles.

Bryce begged again. "We gotta go, man." He unzipped Dutch's sleeping bag and shook him until his eyes fluttered.

"For fucking real, Dutch. We're going to die if we don't get out of here and put a move on."

"I called for an Uber."

"Don't fuck with me now, man. We've got to get down."

"All the clubs are letting out. They said just order another round and try and take it easy."

Bryce realized Dutch wasn't fucking with him and was delusional from oxygen starvation. He checked Dutch's regulator, to give him a short boost to get him back to his senses and get them moving from the shelter of the tent. But the dial was already turned up to three. Either his can was empty or the regulator was clogged with ice.

Bryce now recalled how he had jerked around Kathmandu, looking for his barber, and missed the check out on the oxygen gear. He'd been SCUBA certified and logged over a dozen dive trips to Mexico and the Caribbean. He figured he knew what he needed about breathing systems.

Bryce pushed away Dutch's mask, ripping with it a circle of flesh where the neoprene had fused with his face. Pressing his own mask over Dutch's nose and mouth, he shot the regulator up to four liters. "Listen. I don't care if we've gotta crawl all the way, but we can't stay here. Our OX is almost gone and the weather's turning to real shit. This is it, man, or we die here."

Dutch's eyeballs dilated, and he jolted up onto his elbows. "What the fuck?"

Bryce twisted the regulator back down to two.

"I can't feel my legs," Dutch said.

"I don't give a shit. Crawl on your belly, but we've got to move."

"You go."

"No, we go together."

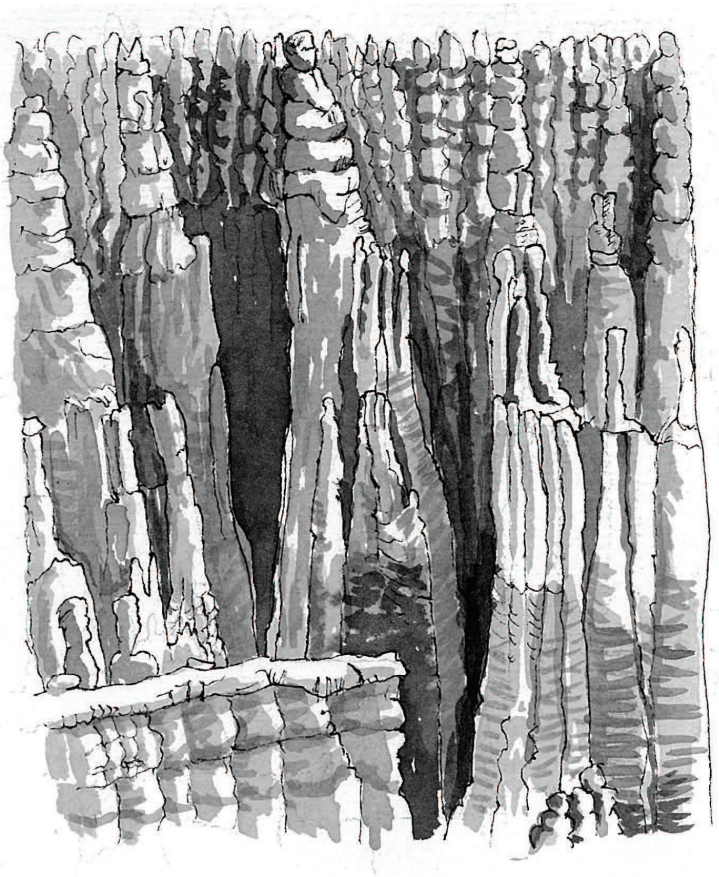
"We just gotta hang a little. They'll send the Sherpas for us."

But the wind was beating even more furiously against the panels of the tent. On the summit push, they'd fallen behind and were climbing with a group from Chile. The Chilean's camp was farther up the moraine from their own base, and it probably wouldn't even occur to them to go down and alert Bryce and Dutch's team that their mates had been left at the high camp. Only when Bryce and Dutch didn't show up at the cook tent for breakfast would they figure something was wrong. As the storm ramped up another notch and snow filled their battered shelter, Bryce knew nobody was coming for them.

That goddamned haircut. By all rights he should've never been on this trip at all. Cherise's cancer markers were back to normal and the scans had shown all her lesions shrunk beyond the best any of them could have ever hoped. Everything pointed to the reasonable prospect of graduations, baby showers, and the chance to hold her own grandchildren.

"Just go and do it," she'd told him. "You've been thinking about this for years. It's been a tough year on everybody. Go." If anybody knew

about the treasure of every moment of life, it should be Cherise. And now her hair would almost be fully grown back, and he was sorry he wouldn't be there when she finally threw away the scarves and wigs and could comb out the new growth into long, golden waves.



Bryce Canyon

Parable

Chris Dempsey

The man tried to believe
in what he could not see.

He listened for voices
which he could not hear.

He journeyed into those places
the prophets went, and came back

older but no different. He saw
large dark birds carving a slow arc

above him. These were not omens.
He slept in the shadows of cliffs,

but his dreams were not signs.
He fasted and what he discovered

were hunger and thirst. Maybe God
was not manifest in the ways

he'd been told or imagined. He looked up,
and saw only sky, the sun going down,

rising up again, clouds that came and went,
their shadows floating across the hills.

He walked a long way in empty country,
broken only by the rimrock of canyons.

In the end, all he knew was this: small seeps
of water disappeared beneath the ground

but rose back up again somewhere
down the canyon and there

he would kneel, cup his hands,
and drink.

To Backpack and Wear the Woods in Shawls of Moss

John Davis

No longer a need to cling
    to bones and breathe to soothe our blood
        we unfurled like fronds
unhinged our skin and found
    the form of earth
        reborn within the sun.
We thickened among bracken
    pared ourselves like breadfruit.
        No longer a need to limber our sins
we released them in rivers
    where they smoothed themselves
        against stones until madness dissolved.
We slept where the moon rose up
    heard the flute of falling light
        level the air, shiver across
the stream on dead logs.
    To say we lived within the heartwood
        is to say we felt the roots rise.

Old-Timers Find Hidden Arctic Magic

Bill Sherwonit

Nine years had passed since my last trip into Alaska's Arctic wilderness, far too long. I'd talked about returning there for several years, but other life events had intervened. In the meantime, I continued moving farther into my 60s. When I turned 67, it struck me that I was getting mighty close to 70. And that got me thinking about wilderness adventures—and aging—in a way I hadn't before. (Who knows why it hit me at 67 and not 66 or 68, but it did.)

Though in good health and a frequent hiker and hill climber in the Chugach Mountains that border Anchorage, I wondered—or worried—about my ability to do extended backcountry trips, at least the kind I seem to prefer: crossing miles of tundra on foot while wearing a heavy pack for at least some of that distance. The last time I'd backpacked off-trail was, well, nine years earlier.

Would this aging body still hold up? The sooner I tested myself, the better. So it became a priority: that summer I'd return to the Arctic, on some kind of overland trip.

My thoughts immediately turned toward the Central Brooks Range, part of America's northernmost mountain chain, the only one entirely above the Arctic Circle. That was where I'd fallen in love with Alaska more than 40 years earlier while working as summer help on a geology crew hunting for mineral deposits; a place that had transformed my life, nudged me toward a path I'd never imagined.

My relationship with the Brooks Range has deepened and taken on greater meaning in the decades since I returned to Alaska and permanently settled here in 1982. Now a writer and wilderness advocate, I've made periodic journeys into the 700-mile-long mountain chain, most of them to Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve, which together encompass 8.4 million acres, more than twice the size of my original homeland, Connecticut.

In my half-dozen or so trips there since the mid-1980s, I'd seen only a minuscule fraction of Gates. There was so much more to experience. And yet I kept thinking about the place I'd explored on my last visit, one known by few people, visited by considerably fewer. That unnamed valley is a mysterious, otherworldly amphitheater bounded by high, soaring rock walls, and its extraordinary nature is largely hidden until you step into it.

But why would I return again to what I came to call the "Valley of Spires," with so much other, unknown wilderness to explore? There's no easy answer, but I'll offer this: for one thing, the place seems to tug at me, beckon me back, as if I've somehow fallen under its spell; and I had long wanted to share it with others in my life.

Once I made the decision to return, I extended invitations. Despite considerable agonizing—she'd never done such an ambitious backcountry expedition and feared being a "snail" who would hinder the group—my girlfriend, Jan, agreed to go, her excitement outweighing any anxieties. We were joined by a longtime friend of mine, Dale, who years earlier had accompanied me on a trip into another part of Gates; and Sonja, more acquaintance than friend, but a relentlessly cheerful and enthusiastic woman who seemed a good fit for this adventure.

We began our trek on Aug. 4, a day later than planned. After many weeks of warm, clear weather, a major storm had invaded the Brooks Range. While drenching the landscape and raising river levels to dangerous heights, it also briefly stranded us in Bettles, the regional transportation hub and home of the air-taxi company that would fly us into the park. Though anxious to begin our explorations, we figured we were lucky to be stuck in Bettles during such heavy rains and not the mountains.

When our floatplane did finally lift off, we were happily surprised to see the sky getting bluer the farther north we flew. By the time we landed, the mountain landscape glowed in early evening sunlight. Everyone exulted in our good fortune—not only the bright sun but also the wilderness that stretched away from us in all directions and, from what we could tell, had all to ourselves.

To get to where I wanted to go, we had to backpack seven miles or so. That might not sound like much. But I was the only one who'd ever trekked that far across Arctic tundra. For much of the route we would cross soft, wet, spongy ground, occasionally through mazes of sedge tussocks: mushroom-shaped clumps of sedges and grasses that are notoriously unstable, leaning this way or that when stepped upon. They grow near enough to each other that it's challenging to step between them, the lower ground not providing much relief anyway, because it's usually wet and mucky. The challenge of negotiating a tangle of tussocks increases exponentially when carrying heavy loads. And we four hauled lots of weight. Jan, the smallest among us, carried close to 50 pounds; Dale, the biggest, lugged 65 pounds or more. Sonja and I each packed 60 pounds or so.

Two other things contributed to our challenge. In response to climate change, the mountain landscape is becoming brushier. Willow thickets seemed much larger and denser—and more maddening to push through—than I recalled. Of course, that might tie into the final factor: age. Sonja, the youngest, was 56; two others were in their late 60s; and one was 70. Not exactly in our prime of physical fitness. But determined. Or stubborn.

Besides the slow and painful labor of our journey, we got a scare when Jan slipped during a creek crossing and fell on her back, head pointed downstream while achingly cold water splashed across her splayed body. With all the weight strapped to her back, she was something like a turtle flipped onto its shell, unable to right herself. Fed by adrenaline, I rushed over, lifted Jan to her feet and helped her to firm ground, but in the process she felt a sharp twinge in her knee. Insisting she felt fine, Jan walked the final four miles without saying anything more about her knee.

It was nearly 11 p.m. when we reached the dry tundra bench that would be our camp for the next several nights. After pushing our bodies hard for close to 10½ hours, we were exhausted. And exuberant. We threw off our packs and cheered the end of our trudge.

For all my earlier worries about how we unpracticed old-timers would do lugging heavy loads across difficult terrain, everyone performed admirably and with few complaints. But there was no question we'd been mightily challenged. During one of our final rest stops, the others had agreed this was among the most demanding, "epic" days they'd ever experienced. The normally stoic Jan was blunt: "Physically, it's the hardest thing I've ever done."

Over the many years I've ventured deep into Alaska's wilderness, sometimes alone, self-sufficiency and safety have always been top priorities, as they should be. Still, accidents happen, and I've had my share, though never serious enough to require rescue. Yet twice on our trip it appeared we might have to call for help. The first time was the morning after our seven-mile trek.

Though she didn't tell me at the time, the knee that Jan had twisted began hurting soon after she'd crawled into her sleeping bag. The next morning it ached so badly she couldn't stand. In fact, she could barely move without wincing in pain.

"Hey Bill, I hate to tell you this, but I'm not sure I can get up," Jan dejectedly admitted. "My knee hurts like crazy. I don't know what I did to it. I swear it didn't hurt at all yesterday when we were walking."

My head raced with anxious thoughts. How could Jan complete our return seven-mile trip on a bum knee, even if we divvied up her gear among the rest of us? Would she have to be airlifted out of the range? I imagined the worst: needing a helicopter rescue. The good news was that Jan could rest her knee for several days before our scheduled departure. And both Dale and Sonja had brought some heavy-duty pain medications, while I had an elastic bandage to wrap her knee. A couple of hours later, assisted by her hiking poles and with pain suppressants and anti-inflammatories coursing through her body, Jan managed to not only stand, but hobble slowly to the group shelter, an encouraging sign. "I'm going to be okay," she assured us with a determined look. "You wait and see."

We'd already decided to make the day an easy one, so while Jan rested in camp, the rest of us split up and went for relaxed rambles of varying lengths. After the previous day's torturous packing, we felt like we were floating across the landscape.

The next morning, Jan was insistent. Her knee, though stiff and sore, hurt less. Aided by her poles—and more pain meds—she could do this. She wasn't going to miss exploring the hidden valley, the reason she'd come here and, by the way, had put her body through such a punishing test. As long as we didn't push the pace too much, she'd keep up.

And she did.

After hiking two miles, we stopped for a tundra picnic lunch, then headed toward a rock wall close to 300 feet high. On its left side, a shimmering waterfall cascaded loudly down blackened rocks. On the right, boulders had piled against the wall, part of an immense expanse of rocky debris fallen from the marble peaks above. That would be our path into the upper valley.

Crossing the rubble, with the immense rock towers looming closer, we talked in hushed tones. There was already a sense of entering an extraordinary realm. "It's like stepping into a cathedral," Dale observed, "and that gorgeous waterfall leaping over the rocks is the altar." Later he would name this area the "Portal of Pinnacles."

Dale quickened his pace, bounding up the incline that I've come to call the Marble Staircase. It is something of a natural stairway, defined by crude rock steps and occasional patches of tundra. While Dale rushed ahead, the rest of us climbed deliberately. The concerned boyfriend, I kept checking in with Jan. Using her poles for balance and extra oomph, she was doing remarkably well and seemed to be gaining strength.

Atop the staircase, we came to a narrow passageway through the marble bedrock. I hung back those final steps, wishing the others to have their own first encounter with the valley. Sonja's shouted reaction from up ahead didn't surprise me a bit: "OH MY GOD, Bill. Wow, this is amazing! WOO-HOO!"

Jan's more muted response also brought a smile. And a deeper satisfaction. "It's just beautiful, Bill. Beautiful."

Though I couldn't hope to repeat the overpowering surprise and wonder I experienced on first encountering this place, it remained as enthralling and otherworldly as I'd remembered. It's not only the soaring marble spires and the way they thrust so abruptly skyward from the valley bottom; it's the clear evidence—especially for someone with a geology background—that those vertical layers of rock, once deposited as limy sediments in horizontal seabeds, have across the millennia been folded and twisted and cooked and uplifted by unimaginable earth forces. Equally mesmerizing, perhaps, is the remarkable contrast between those stark, gray, ancient towers and the vibrantly green marshlands and serene ponds that form the valley bottom, so smooth and flat and lush. And there's the understanding that, for all the uplift that pushed these towers skyward, other processes have been slowly wearing them down.

I lingered awhile with Jan and Sonja. Besides gazing around us in joyful amazement, we took photos of both the place and one another, peered over the ledge where the waterfall began, and simply tried to take it all in, while imprinting the experience in our minds and hearts. Except for the initial exclamations of astonishment, we mostly remained silent.

Then, while they stayed put, I followed Dale upvalley. He eventually scrambled to the last patch of tundra, the spot where I had ended my explorations nine years earlier. Through my binoculars I watched him sitting on that small bit of green in a world of grays and browns and blacks, and recalled the thrill of my own solitary vigil.

Once Dale descended from what he would name the Cirque of Spires, he smiled broadly and confessed, "I didn't want to leave." Especially when alone in the more remote upper valley, he had experienced a strong sense of moving into a different, even transcendent realm: "If the portal to the valley was cathedral-like, going deeper into it was like entering paradise."

His experience closely mirrored mine. This entire valley seemed a kind of "lost world," distinct and yes, largely hidden, from the more open, green, and ordinary Brooks Range landscape where we'd made camp, though even that was beyond what most people would ever encounter.

Something sacred—or magical—is revealed here, something shines through in a way we rarely, if ever, feel in our day-to-day lives. And it stirs a kind of reverential response, if one is open to that possibility. Or it might simply be that a person entering the valley is overwhelmed by an unexpected meeting with some greater presence, beyond imagining.

When we travel, our experience of a locale (and later memory of it) depends greatly upon the weather. Idyllic conditions brighten both our mood and sense of place. On the other hand, unusually hot, cold, or stormy weather diminishes our pleasure and perhaps even our desire to be somewhere we anticipated visiting. This seems especially true of trips deep into the wilderness. There, miserable weather (however it's defined) may not only wreck an adventure, but sometimes become life-threatening.

Our group enjoyed ideal late-summer weather for the majority of our Brooks Range stay. A blustery wind occasionally blew through the valleys and misty rain briefly wettened the landscape, but mostly we were blessed by dry and mild Arctic conditions during our first week in the mountains, with temperatures in the 50s and 60s during the day and dropping into the 40s at night. Adding to our pleasure was the virtual absence of mosquitoes, a happy surprise.

Another unexpected delight: an abundance of blueberries, ripe for picking. The "blues" were at their savory prime, more sweet than tart, and bunches of them were scattered across the tundra. We grazed on berries during every hike and picked them for breakfast.

All of that—the lovely weather, the paucity of mosquitoes, the wealth of berries, and, of course, the landscape itself—contributed to our daily contentment once we'd reached our destination. By and large, we were happy campers.

The tundra bench we'd chosen to set up camp was also ideal in many ways. For starters, it was dry terrain, with plenty of flat spots for comfortable camping. It was also large enough, with sufficient gentle dips and rises, that we could spread out, to give us privacy if we desired it and still keep plenty of distance between each tent, the group shelter, and our food cache, a safety precaution in grizzly country. The bench also afforded us sweeping views of the surrounding landscape. In Jan's words, the setting was "perfect." Or as Dale put it, "It doesn't get any better than this."

If all that sounds a little gushy, well, that's the way we felt during those days, as if we'd gotten a glimpse of paradise. Of bliss. Maybe we

experienced two different kinds of bliss: a dramatic sort of ecstasy, upon entering that magical, hidden valley; and the quieter, more subdued joy that we felt around camp.

Our seventh day in the mountains, Dale, Sonja, and Jan decided to explore farther up the main, broad valley in which we were camped. I'd visited that area on my previous trip and felt a stronger pull back toward the Valley of Spires, so I returned there to spend some quiet, solitary time. My unhurried meanderings led me to one of the rock buttresses that form the hidden valley's gateway area, and I took a position beneath its weathered eastern wall. To those who understand the language of Earth's landforms, it tells the story of how the Valley of Spires came to be. Or at least it presents some parts of that story.

Even in my geology days, I never was especially skilled at interpreting the structures of rocks; and over the past forty-something years I've forgotten most of what I once knew. Yet standing before this immense marble cliff, I could plainly see a multitude of folds, fractures, and displacements, which in their entirety spoke of the enormous forces that had shaped and reshaped the rocks that now form this extraordinary mountain landscape. Talk about mystery and magic . . . The Earth conjured up some magic here, it seems.

Rather than try to figure out how that happened—which would have been futile, anyway—I was drawn into the rocks themselves and for a short while entered something of a meditative state and experienced what I can only call a passage through "deep time."

The marble cliff and the ground immediately below it represented time on vastly different scales: first, the eons during which the calcium-carbonate sediments and rocks were formed and transformed, over and over, across time far beyond human understanding or even imagining; next, the centuries of weathering and erosion that have produced huge rock piles beneath the wall, a process that however old is still ongoing and can be witnessed by observant humans who notice the clattering of falling rocks; next, the decades—or centuries?—that it has taken to form the alpine meadow in which I stood; finally, this year's greening and flowering, symbolized by the grasses and single golden Alaska poppy that grew beside me. I suppose I can also add the instant of my own brief participation in this immeasurably larger whole.

Standing there, I wondered how our modern, western culture can be so certain that mountains and valleys and streams are not in some sense alive, or sentient, or spirited, as many societies around the world

once understood them to be (and some contemporary peoples continue to believe). Our human time scale is so tiny in the greater scheme of things. And for all we think we've figured out, our comprehension of the complex, interconnected nature and workings of the Earth and its many aspects—life forms, landforms, bodies of water, the atmosphere, weather systems, climate shifts, on and on—remains limited.

As one who's thought a lot about such matters and experienced realities the larger culture considers fanciful, I would join those who argue that modern humanity's inability to perceive, or even seriously consider, the many, varied forms of consciousness (or liveliness or spiritedness) that exist right here on this Earth is a measure of how disconnected we humans have become from the larger, wilder world of nature. And our own wild nature.

The day of our return to the pickup site began crisp and clear. Jan felt confident that her knee would hold up despite the difficult packing, while Dale's lower back (which had bothered him periodically throughout our stay) ached enough that he took pain meds and muscle relaxants. The good news was that we'd be carrying considerably less weight after eight days in the wilds. Our mood was upbeat as we took down camp and posed for pictures.

A couple of hours into our trek, we spotted a female grizzly with a single cub, both dark brown, ambling up the valley bottom. At least a quarter mile below, the bears didn't seem to notice us, so we sat awhile and savored their calm passage along the braided stream channel until they disappeared into thick willows.

Not long after that, Sonja noticed a faint halo around the sun that indicated moisture in the air. Sure enough, a light mist began to fall. The mist intensified and became a steady rain. And the air, which had been calm, began to move. We stopped to put on rain gear. By the time we resumed our journey, we were walking into a steady, pelting downpour. The storm strengthened when we rounded a bend and headed toward the lake where we would rendezvous with our plane the following day. Now we were walking directly into a fierce and chilling north wind. To make matters worse, the temperature had dropped substantially. We now faced classic hypothermia conditions: cold, wet, windy.

Jan seemed to be doing okay despite her knee, and Sonja looked strong. But Dale was fading. The combination of his aching back, the medications, nausea, and painfully cold feet and hands had worn him down. It was then that Sonja showed her toughness and leadership

strengths. She was the first to notice Dale's worsening condition. We needed to find a protected area, quickly. We settled on a grassy swale bounded by boulder piles. It was close to a mile from our pickup spot, but we needed to get out of the wind and rain.

Sonja pulled out her "serenity shelter," which had proven an excellent spot to gather daily for meals and socializing. Its true value now became apparent. We quickly erected the covered, four-sided structure, a combination of nylon fabric and netting. Sonja's shelter—and the swale in which we placed it—shielded us enough that I could easily light the stove and boil water for steaming drinks and a hot meal. Just as important, we weren't being blasted by cold, driving rain.

Huddled with the others I could sense our spirits lift. We were going to be okay. Still, I worried about Dale, whose body shivered fiercely. His queasiness kept him from eating much food, but he could sip the warming drinks.

After dinner, we teamed up to erect the tents, one at a time, keeping their insides largely dry. As far as I knew, all of us had dry clothing and sleeping bags, essential to staying—or getting—warm. And we'd sent Dale to his tent with a hot water bottle to hold against his body. Worn down but comfortable in our side-by-side bags, Jan and I drifted off to sleep while the incessant wind rattled the tent and cold rain continued to drench the landscape.

On waking the next morning, my thoughts immediately went to Dale. With the temperature continuing to drop during the night, and recalling Dale's decision to bring only a lightweight sleeping bag, I now imagined the worst: that his chilled body had been unable to re-warm. Was it possible that he'd slipped deeper into hypothermia? That he might even be comatose? Even if conscious, Dale might be too debilitated to make it to the pick-up site. For the second time, I wondered if we might have to summon help. But would rescue even be possible in this weather? Reluctantly leaving the dry warmth of my sleeping bag, I wrapped my body in several layers of clothes and walked over to Dale's tent.

"Good morning, Dale. How're you doing?"

Relief surged through me when he groggily replied, "Morning, Bill. I've been better. I had a pretty hard night, didn't get much sleep." Even more encouraging was Dale's answer when I asked if he'd like me to bring him a hot drink: "Thanks, no, I think I'll get up soon. It would do me good to get out of this tent."

From that point on, Dale rebounded strongly. When it began snowing in early evening, he even began to playfully sing, "Walking in a winter wonderland."

An exchange with Brooks Range Aviation made it clear that we'd be spending at least one more stormy night in the mountains. That dampened our mood but didn't surprise us. And no one felt like breaking camp in such wretched weather. We'd brought enough food and fuel to last a few extra days, and everyone now seemed sufficiently warm to wait out the storm.

Only after returning to Bettles would we learn that the National Weather Service had issued a warning that "an unseasonably cold, wet, and windy storm" had begun pushing through the Brooks Range. The advisory cautioned anyone planning to travel in the mountains to be prepared for "winter weather conditions" that included a cold front bringing high winds and up to several inches of snow.

We happened to step right into that tempest.

After all those benign, idyllic days at our up-valley base camp, we were getting a taste of the Arctic's bleaker side, a hint of the dark and bitterly cold months ahead. In less than an hour our experience of the Brooks Range had shifted from one of delight and wonder to endurance and alarm. Summer had ended so abruptly, it almost seemed a passing fancy.

The prospects of a plane coming to retrieve us seemed equally low the next morning, our eleventh day in the range. We'd become resigned to spending another night in the wilderness when messages from Judy Jesperson in Bettles sent to my satellite device alerted us that a plane might be sent to retrieve our group and another one in the area. We needed to be at the lake when the plane arrived; the pilot couldn't wait around. Shortly after 2, Judy confirmed a floatplane was being prepared for take-off. We had to get to the lake, ASAP.

During the next frenzied hour, I felt a growing sense of urgency. Once packed, we'd have to carry our gear close to a mile. Could we do that before the plane arrived? *If* it arrived. The weather seemed as bad as it had been all day.

We began our push to the lake shortly before 3:30, again drenched by cold, wind-driven rain. Dale took the lead, moving fast across the tundra. It was the strongest he'd looked in days. Jan was close behind him, while Sonja and I brought up the rear, everyone looking strong. Coming over a rise I spotted the other group's tent. Again I wondered if a plane could fly in this weather. It would be miserable to reestablish camp in these conditions.

Glancing back toward the lake, I noticed the other group taking down their tent. Moments later, Sonja shouted, "There's the plane! Whoo-hoo!"

Looking to the right, I spotted the plane, flying low over the valley. It seemed something of a miracle, the Otter a ghostly apparition flying slowly among the clouds and fog. How had it gotten through the pass? Still close to a quarter-mile from the lake, we had to somehow pick up our pace. We slogged across the tundra and splashed through small rivulets swollen by the storm while the plane circled once, then landed on the lake's white-capped surface.

We reached the plane within minutes of each other, shed our packs, and took turns stepping onto the plane's pontoon, then inside. Once we'd collapsed into our seats, we cheered each other, the pilot, and our good fortune. But more than anything, we felt relief, mixed with exhaustion and a kind of euphoria. We'd completed our journey, survived something of an ordeal.

The flight back to Bettles had its own uneasy moments. The low, thick cloud cover forced the pilot to fly only a few hundred feet above the ground. What would happen if the ceiling dropped, forcing us down? *This*, I thought, *is how plane crashes happen*. But we made it over the pass and gradually the terrain dropped away from us.

I looked for the Valley of Spires on our flight out, but the clouds hid it and much else of where we'd been. Later I got glimpses of familiar landmarks from other journeys into Gates of the Arctic. And somewhere along the way, the thought came to me that over time my trips into this Arctic wilderness have shifted shape. Sure, they remain adventures, but more than that they've become pilgrimages of a kind. In ways both subtle and striking, this Brooks Range wilderness touches some deep, wild, and ancient part of me more than any other place I've been, while offering glimpses of what we sometimes call the "sublime." Really, though, the experience is beyond words and human concepts, existing at the heart of our amazing, miraculous world. And that's what will keep bringing me back, every so often, as long as I am able.

Cold Spring, in Drought

Paul Willis

This thread of water spools
into a mossy cleft,
a curtain of stone
sweeping it along its way.

We snip and pluck
our broken fabric of wildfires,
bitter elections, a virus
that may rip us through.

But if a tiny creek
can remember
its crooked stitch across
the canyon, can't we too?

The blood still coursing
in its channels,
the iambic push
of our hidden hearts?

—Los Padres National Forest

Green River

Stephen S. Lottridge

Low on the horizon they show, flying
Upriver, twelve, fifteen
White pelicans, awkward,
Radiant. Over us they circle,
Wings aflash in the slanting September sun.
We lie back, oars shipped, wordless, drifting
As the current wills. They swirl,
The surge of rushing air over their wings loud
As heavy storm-blow through thick foliage
When they swing upwind.
The sound drowns the rustle of rapids, then fades
To a soft susurrus as they cross.
Silence washes around them downwind.
And over again. And slowly again above
Our raft they soar, a rising
Helix of sun-glinted life.
Wavelets lap the canvas. Yellowing
Cottonwoods gently release their withering
Leaves to the blue stream.
Higher, wider, the pelicans soar and spread.
I hear the flush of dry wind
Over their wings long after
The sound dies. I see
Flaring specks of whiteness
Even as they vanish.
We gaze and harken in silence. The earth spins.
The cerulean dome, the desert breeze,
The running, splashing, tumbling
Water, the rocking raft,
Remain.
Only at nightfall
Do we speak again.

Desert Sentinel

Contributors' Notes

Rebecca Agiewich currently finds her inspiration in the Washington Cascades and the beaches of Baja. She writes about her adventures in her blog *The Ambivalent Part-Time Expat*, where her pug Millie is a frequent comic foil. She's also the author of the comic novel *BreakupBabe*, which prominently features Mount Rainier.

José A. Alcántara is the author of *The Bitten World: Poems* (Tebot Bach, 2022). His poetry has appeared in *American Life in Poetry, Poetry Daily, Ploughshares, 32 Poems, Poetry Northwest, The Southern Review, Rattle,* and *The Slowdown*. José lives in western Colorado and wherever he happens to pitch his tent.

Joseph Aultman-Moore has circled the globe and hitchhiked just about every form of transportation (except airplane or horse), including a sailboat across the Atlantic Ocean. He lives in Southeast Alaska in a tiny cabin off-grid with two electric guitars and no electricity.

Emily Benson lives by the shore of Lake Ontario in Western New York. Her father sparked her love of the outdoors early, through family camping and canoeing trips. These days Ms. Benson can often be found hiking her favorite parks with her two sons. Find her published poems at *www.emilybensonpoet.com*.

Jenkin Benson is a 1st year PhD student at the University of Notre Dame du Lac. He principally studies the creative interchange between Welsh and Irish modernists. He occasionally writes poetry. You can find his work in *New Note Poetry*, KEITH LLC PRESS, and *Grinnell Review*.

We are shaped by rivers, mountains and deserts, says **Ed Brown**, here preaching to the choir. Stillman Creek and Utah's Uinta Mountains were early influences. Canyonlands and the Colorado River were once the heart of his universe. Today the Rio Grande and Sangre de Cristos hold sway.

Les Brown, Professor Emeritus of Biology, enjoys nature photography, roaming his mountain property near Linville Gorge, North Carolina, and lying on warm rocks beside pristine Stillhouse Branch. He has published poetry, visual art and short stories in various journals and two chapbooks. A Pushcart Nominee, he lives in Troutman, North Carolina.

Alan Caldwell has been teaching for three decades and wandering the forests and fields for five. He only began submitting his writing in May of 2022 and has since been published in almost two dozen magazines and journals.

Chelsea Catherine has lived all over the country. In 2018, their book *Summer of the Cicadas* won the Quill Prose Award through Red Hen Press. Most recently, they spent a month in Alaska at the Alderworks Artist Retreat. They are a ValleyCreates artist grantee in Western Massachusetts.

Ray Cicetti's poems have been published in a variety of journals including *Tiferet*, *Exit 13*, and *The Stillwater Review*. Ray is a psychotherapist and senior teacher at The Empty Bowl Zen Community in Morristown, New Jersey. He is an avid hiker and bird enthusiast. He lives in northern New Jersey.

Michael Colonnese is the author of a hard-boiled detective novel, *Sex and Death, I Suppose*, of a chapbook, *Temporary Agency*, and of a full-length poetry collection, *Double Feature*. He's also an avid fly-fisherman who enjoys wading tiny streams in the Blue Ridge Mountains. He lives in Hendersonville, North Carolina.

Maine poet **Ken Craft** divides his time between mountains and lakes, beaches and sea. He majored in Thoreau and minored in Frost. When not reading books or writing, he enjoys swimming underwater and hiking through forests.

Nicholas Crane Moore is an environmental attorney based in Alaska, where his work and interests center on the state's vast stretches of public lands and waters. His writing explores the relationship between human endeavors and the natural world.

John Davis is a polio survivor and the author of *Gigs* and *The Reservist*. His work has appeared recently in *DMQ Review*, *Iron Horse Literary Review* and *Terrain.org*. He lives on an island in the Salish Sea.

Chris Dempsey lives with his wife on eight acres where they've planted trees, native shrubs, and perennials to attract birds and wildlife. In his free time, he can be found hiking the remote canyons and high desert

of Idaho and Oregon, pursuing chukar partridge with his wirehaired pointer.

Matthew Dickerson has sought wild places since camping at age eight on Maine's Allagash Wilderness Waterway. He has been artist-in-residence at Glacier and Acadia National Parks, and Alaska State Parks. His books include *The Voices of Rivers: Reflections on Places Wild and Almost Wild* and *A Fine-Spotted Trout on Corral Creek*.

Sandra Dorr's favorite waking is in a sleeping bag, at altitude. Luckily, she's lived and camped with her family in Ponderosa-scented northern Wyoming, moist Oregon forests and coast, and canyon country. Her poems (*Desert Water*, Lithic Press) and stories have won two state literature awards and an American Fiction Prize.

Eliana Franklin is a sixth-grade teacher in Asheville, North Carolina, with a degree in creative writing and environmental studies. She has previously been published in *Pensive Journa*l and *Lucky Jefferson*. She can often be found outside, writing poetry about her experiences in the mountains she calls home.

Hugh Gabriel is an early career writer based in the Twin Cities. He grew up in Wisconsin, and some of his fondest memories come from time exploring the lakes and prairies of the Midwest. Hugh has been previously published in *The Great Lakes Review* and *The Tower*.

Erin Hall is a communications professional and writer in Chicago. When not writing, she's on the water in summer and on the ski slopes in winter. She has been previously published in the *Detroit Metro Times*, *Huffington Pos*t, *Multiplicity Magazine*, *TodayShow.com* and *Chicken Soup for the Soul: Believe in Angels*.

Yolanda Hansen is an emerging poet from Saskatchewan, Canada, where she lives with her active family and works with the literary community. She enjoys being outside in all seasons. Hiking in Saskatchewan's northern boreal forest is one of her favorite things to do.

Rain Hastings, 3rd place winner of the Graduate Student Poetry Contest, has spent her life in forests and is a poet activist engaged in guerilla restoration projects and community organizing toward

intersections of ecological and social justice. She has an MA in History & Culture, another in Women's Spirituality, and is nearing completion of an MFA in Nature Writing.

Marybeth Holleman's newest book is the poetry collection *tender gravity*. Her other books include *The Heart of the Sound* and *Among Wolves*. Raised in North Carolina's Smokies, she transplanted to Alaska's Chugach after falling head over heels for Prince William Sound. She's happiest in places where humans are outnumbered.

Bo Jensen is a nonbinary writer and former homelessness outreach worker who goes off-grid, flying into bush Alaska, backpacking national park wilderness, trekking the Continental Divide Trail, or following the Camino Norte across Spain. Find Bo's work in *National Parks Traveler*, *Wanderlust*, *Journey*, *Out There*, *Months to Years*, *Chiaroscuro, Longreads*.

Talley V. Kayser teaches college courses that combine literary study with outdoor expeditions. If you enjoyed her poem, she strongly recommends you look up the mechanics of slipper limpet reproduction . . . and/or read her forthcoming work in *The Gettysburg Review*, in *Alpinist*, and at *www.talleyvkayser.com*.

Maria Kochis is most interested in how interactions with wildlife and wilderness influence personal narrative. She worked as a humanities librarian for 23 years and just recently moved to Montana and began a wilderness EMT course. She is interested in pursuing a career as a professional writer.

Author, fluvial geologist, and former Grand Canyon river guide **Rebecca Lawton** writes about rivers, water, and landscapes in peril. The recipient of a Fulbright Visiting Research Chair Award, Nautilus Book Award, Ellen Meloy Award for Desert Writers, and other honors, she lives on a seasonal creek in California steelhead country.

Stephen S. Lottridge lives in Jackson, Wyoming. Trails in the Wind River, Gros Ventre and Snake River Ranges, as well as the Tetons, have drawn him for decades, as have the Snake and Green Rivers. He has published two books of creative nonfiction and has a third one in production.

Kat Manton-Jones, our cover artist, transforms passion into artistic and personal interpretation; she artistically documented each day she hiked and backpacked the Arizona National Scenic Trail from 2015 to 2021. She encourages others to turn off the lights, get outdoors sans devices, explore, and express your personal experiences through aesthetic means. *KatlasJourney.com*.

A product of the Pacific Northwest, **Susan Marsh** has lived in Jackson, Wyoming since 1988. Her writing is all about her love for the wild. Says she: "Aldo Leopold had it right: *There are some who can live without wild things and some who cannot*. I'm among those who cannot."

Martha McSweeney Brower is a late bloomer who feels most alive when camping, hiking, and breathing fresh air. She is grateful to live near both the mountains and the ocean in Mid-coast Maine where there are miles of hiking trails and plenty of others to hike with when she doesn't go solo.

Katherine Michalak earned her BFA in Creative Writing at Goddard College. She's lived in Colorado all her life and nature has been an orienting element in her writing since she was a child. She often finds the clarity to address cultural dynamics through writing when she's close to nature.

Jan Minich is the author of three books of poetry and two chapbooks. His book *Coming Into Grace Harbor* will be published in 2023. Jan lives in Wellington, Utah and Bayfield, Wisconsin.

Tim Moder is a poet living in northern Wisconsin. He is a member of the Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa. He is in love with trees and skies. He makes believe. His poems have appeared in *The Sinking City Review*, *Paperbark, Paddler Press*, *Roi Faineant*, and others.

William R. Morris, National Park Service Ranger turned United Methodist Pastor, has explored and shared some amazing wilderness parks: Denali, Grand Canyon, Everglades, and Mesa Verde. He's a lifelong world traveler, interpreter of Creation, advocate of public lands, and avid hiker. Will, Jane, and their dog, Nutmeg, live in southwest Colorado.

Rebecca Nelson, winner of the Deep Wild Graduate Student Poetry Contest, is pursuing an Ecology PhD at the University of California Davis. She researches plant and pollinator conservation in California's Coast Range. She loves birdwatching. Her writing has appeared in *Kelp Journal*, *EcoTheo Review*, and *Anthroposphere*. Her first collection of poems, *Walking the Arroyo*, is available on Kindle.

James B. Nicola has been taking walks in the woods since age three and was a published conservationist in grade five, when he wrote an editorial about saving marshlands after a field trip to Cape Cod National Seashore. Check out his eighth full-length poetry collection, *Natural Tendencies*.

Scott F. Parker is the author of several books, including, most recently, *Time Again*, an essay about fatherhood based on his time spent in the deepest canyon in North America, Hells Canyon. He is the nonfiction editor for Kelson Books and teaches writing at Montana State University.

Margaret Pettis, our portfolio artist, has been a mule-packer, wilderness ranger, kayaker, and hiker of the Sierras, Sawtooths, High Uintas, and the Great Basin. A longtime Utah teacher and wilderness activist, she cherishes solitude. Discover her *Back Roads of Utah*, novels, and poetry at *margaretpettis. com*.

Ronda Piszk Broatch is the author of *Chaos Theory for Beginners* (MoonPath Press, 2023). When she isn't working on her MFA at Pacific Lutheran University's Rainier Writing Workshop, she likes nothing better than wandering the trails in the Olympic National Park, photographing mushrooms and mountains, and looking for bears.

Tim Raphael lives in Northern New Mexico between the Rio Grande and Sangre de Cristo Mountains with his wife, Kate. They try to lure their three grown children home for hikes and farm chores as often as possible. Tim's poems have appeared in a range of literary journals in the West.

Erin Robertson teaches outdoor nature writing classes near Louisville, Colorado, where she lives with her husband, two sons, parakeet, and Muppet-like dog. This poem was inspired by the Black Ridge Canyons Wilderness. Find her work at *@bocowildwriters*, *@robertsonrambles*, in journals and anthologies, sprayed on sidewalks, and sung by choirs.

Julia Rudlaff is an undergraduate student at Michigan State University studying geology with a minor in creative writing. Julia is also a trail worker and has worked on a trail crew in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. They love rock hunting, dancing, and hiking to waterfalls.

Margaret Sartin moved to the American Southwest in 1984 to teach for the Navajo Nation and continues to live in the area today. Whether hiking, kayaking, or practicing shinrin-yoku in the ancient piñon-juniper forest surrounding her home, she finds wild places an endless source of inspiration for her writing.

Alaskan nature writer **Bill Sherwonit** is the author of more than a dozen books, including *Changing Paths: Travels and Meditations in Alaska's Arctic Wilderness*. Sherwonit's work primarily focuses on Alaska's wildlife and wildlands, but he's passionate about wild nature in all its varied forms, including the spirited wildness within us.

Emily Shoff is a writer in Telluride, Colorado. Her essay stems from her memoir inspired by the Colorado Trail, *The Trail Home*. One of her favorite recent family adventures includes a sea kayaking trip to Baja where they swam with dolphins and caught a shark on the same day.

When not anchored to the keyboard, **Edmond Stevens** pursues less-traveled destinations as physical representations of the writing process, discovering by trial and error the path to the summit. He has been involved in ascents in the Andes, Europe, and Everest's North Col. "Kathmandu Clip" is Edmond's second contribution to DWJ.

Cate Brooks Sweeney is a writer, librarian, mother, and open water swimmer. An amphibian explorer, she began trail running the Wasatch Front Mountains as a teenager and trying to convince people to "come on in, the water is fine" since she was a child, floating in New England reservoirs in late September.

Robyn Sykes is a multi-awarded spoken word artist whose poems feature in journals/anthologies inter/nationally and online. She presents at festivals and events around Australia and beyond. Robyn cares about environment, social justice, family, and building community. She loves to accept invitations from wild places to share peace, strength, and experiences.

Robert Tremmel has published poems and articles in a wide range of journals, and has published five collections of poetry, including *The Records of Kosho the Toad* (Bottom Dog Press, 2018) and *The Return of the Naked Man* (Brick Road Poetry Press, 2021), which won the Brick Road Poetry Prize.

Rebecca Williams is an artist, writer, and mother who lives in Atlanta, GA. She travels to the American high desert every chance she gets to rock climb, ski, and explore rivers. She will begin earning her MFA in Nature Writing at Western Colorado University in 2023.

Paul Willis grew up in Oregon, worked as a mountain guide in the Cascades and Sierra Nevada, and served as an artist-in-residence in North Cascades National Park. Now retired in Santa Barbara, California, he has published seven collections of poetry, the most recent of which is *Somewhere to Follow*.

Jenna Wysong Filbrun lives and writes in Indiana and loves to hike in the Colorado Rockies with her husband Mike and their dogs Oliver and Lewis. The wild is where she feels most alive—right-sized as part of all interconnected being. Find her online at *www.jennawysongfilbrun.wixsite.com/poetry*

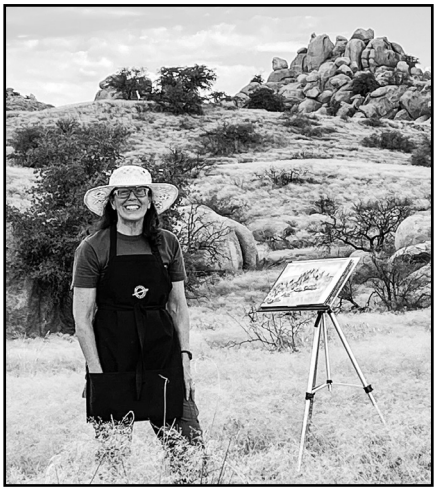
Kaila Young, 2nd place winner of the Graduate Student Poetry Contest, writes between threads of Earth, animals, and advocacy. She's a Nature Writing MFA candidate at Western Colorado University and an intern with *High Country News* and *Terrain.org*. Her writing appears in *The York Review* and *STORY Magazine*, and she appears mostly in the woods with her rescue dogs.

Credits

The following work has been previously published and is reprinted here by permission of the authors:

- "Once More to Wire Lake," by Rebecca Agiewich, in *Literary Mama*, June 2011.
- "*Wildes Volk*," by Joseph Aultman-Moore, was the winner of the *Intrepid Times* 2001 Unexpected Adventures travel writing competition, *https://intrepidtimes.com/2021/09/wildes-volk/*.
- "Letter from a Mountain Poet: Spring," by Ray Cicetti, in *A Forest in His Pocket* (Finishing Line Press, 2021).
- "The Pause Between," by Ken Craft, in *Reincarnation & Other Stimulants* (Kelsay Books, 2021).
- "To Whom the Kingdom Belongs," by Nicholas Crane Moore, published in modified form by *Dark Mountain Project* (Bristol UK), October 2022.
- "As a Kayaking Guide, I Always Describe Oyster Sex with Particular Care," by Talley Kayser in *Hawk & Handsaw: The Journal of Creative Sustainability* [online], January 2019.
- "The Flowers Were Dark," by James B. Nicola in *Natural Tendencies* (Červená Barva Press, 2023) and originally published in *The Harrow*, 2007.
- The pen-and-ink drawings by Margaret Pettis appeared in her book *Back Roads of Utah* (2021). Some have previously appeared in the High Uintas Preservation Council publication *The Lynx* and in the *Utah Wilderness Association Review*.
- "Pregnant Forest," by Robyn Sykes, published online in a list of competition winners: Second Place, Joy Chambers & Reg Grundy Awards Open Age Poetry, Ipswich Poetry Feast, 2021.

Artists' Statements



Kat Manton-Jones, Deep Wild 2023 Cover Artist

The ancestral lands of the Mogollon and Hohokam peoples inspired the cover paintings. The front cover features the marvel of the night skies I experienced on the Arizona National Scenic Trail. The Santa Rita Mountains are one of the Madrean Sky Islands where wildlife corridors, sacred practices, and vistas are currently impacted by light pollution, BLM cattle grazing, the federal border wall, and commercial mining. The back cover features petroglyphs listed on the National Register of Historic Places in Maricopa County. Petroglyphs are powerful ancient symbols that reflect the complex indigenous societies and religions of the past and present. These sites warrant protection and honor as sacred cultural landscapes.

Kat Manton-Jones is a self-taught watercolor artist and illustrated nature journalist who has benefitted from community college art courses, workshops with internationally-acclaimed artists, field institute courses, and art books and videos. The throughline of her work is experimentation, utilizing the elements of color, variety, movement, spirituality, and/or surprise. Daily, she creates personal projects in the studio, paints en plein air, or sketches on the trail. She has been selected as an Arquetopia Artist-in-Residence in Urubamba, Peru later this year.

Margaret Pettis, Deep Wild 2023 Portfolio Artist

"Learning to see, to observe quickly— then more deeply— teaches us to be an alert participant in the vibrancy of our world. Line, shape, shadow, and texture combine slowly into every portrait of the Wild. In seeing, rather than looking, we gather the details that are the essence of life around us. Through beauty, I hope to pass on respect for Gaia."

Margaret Pettis has taught outdoor drawing with found/natural stylus and ink in Audubon workshops, to Navajo middle school children, to state prison inmates, and in a senior center. For decades her illustrations filled the publications of the Utah Wilderness Association and High Uintas Preservation Council. A former Utah Poet of the Year and Utah English Teacher of the Year, Margaret taught freshman English for forty years. *www.margaretpettis.com*

A student in Penn State University's Adventure Literature class relaxes with *Deep Wild* in the backcountry. Photo by Talley V. Kayser

Thank you...

for joining us on these wilderness forays in this fifth issue of *Deep Wild: Writing from the Backcountry*. Our mission is to publish the best work we can find in celebration of and in defense of places where there are no roads. We also sponsor an annual no-fee student contest with cash awards for winners.

We are a not-for-profit journal published annually in the summer, funded entirely by subscriptions and donations. If you love wild places and good words, please consider supporting our mission with a subscription for yourself or for a like-minded friend. Subscriptions are $20 for one year, $35 for two and $45 for three, postage-paid anywhere in the United States. Student rates are $12 postage-paid. Contact us for international postage rates. Back issues are available at reduced prices. To donate or subscribe, visit *deepwildjournal.com/subscribe*.

Submissions are open in the fall for the following year's issue. We welcome the opportunity to consider poems, stories, essays, book reviews, and art that are true to our mission. See *deepwildjournal.com/submissions* for full guidelines and exact deadlines.

To stay in touch, follow us on Facebook, Instagram, or on our blog at *deepwildjournal.com/blog*. Correspondences can be sent to *deepwildjournal@gmail.com*.

Happy hiking, climbing, kayaking, skiing, rafting, snowshoeing, canoeing...*living*!