DEEP WILD

Writing from the Backcountry

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

VOLUME 7 - 2025

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Cover Art by Julia Buckwalter
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"Distant Treasure"
Oil on canvas, 30 x 40"
This painting features the landscape of Canyonlands, looking West from Dead Horse Point State Park with Schafer Trail's zig-zag descent in the distance.

Interior Art by David B. Such
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"Wild Ink"
Ink on paper, primarily with dip pen and bottle of black ink.

The drawings listed below previously appeared in the following publications:
- "Barberry Geometer" first published in *Silver Blade Magazine* in December 2019
- "Fox in February Snow" first published in *Clever Fox Literary Magazine,* March 2022
- "Ravenhead" first published in *Magpie Zine*, February 2025

See Artists' Statements on pages 174-175.

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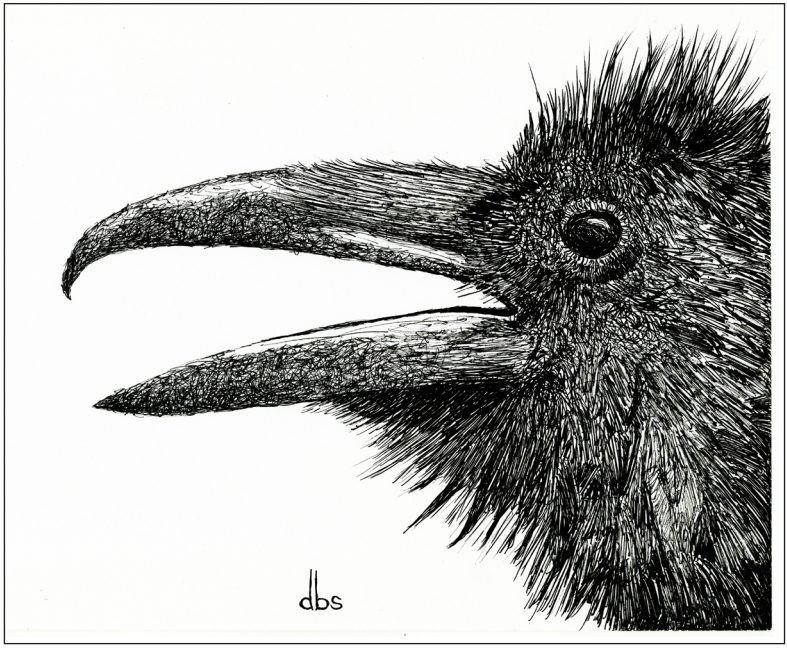

Ravenhead

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.

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Foreword

Whenever I have sense enough to turn sideways from the paved path and enter the "green cosmos," in the words of poet Julia Travers, I am immediately—body and soul—different. There's a short period of lurching and stumbling about, while I learn to walk again. Soon I regain balance and begin to look around. For "one who has been long in city pent," as Wordsworth put it, the moment is revelatory. In the course of my career, I have lived it over and over again, each time with the same joy and gratitude. *I've saved myself again!* I think, or maybe even shout.

"Wilderness is my whetstone," Tricia Friesen Reed wrote in her essay "Listening," in the very first issue of *Deep Wild Journal* in 2019. I haven't found a better phrase to express the transformation that takes place when we reconnect with the wild. The experience belongs to everyone. I'll let the poets of *Deep Wild 2025* tell it, beginning with Michelle DiSarno, in "Why I Go to the Woods":

> I can hear again the drips
> of leftover rain on leaves, light
> and soft and sweetened
> with sunlight, like the language
> of birds, who are hidden
> in the chandelier of branches…

For once, we can tune in to something other than our own noise! We become gloriously short-sighted as well—none of this furrowed-brow business, peering past the horizon after some dumb thought. Jacqui Somen, in "On Not Conquering Mt. Sneffels," sees far more than those who summitted: "thank you to the bright blue alpine lake, / to the sharp rocks at its edge, to the icy bite of its filling, // thank you to the chipmunk skittering, /to the lavender subalpine daisies shivering"—and, she adds, "for not having cell connection." Hers is one of many pieces in *Deep Wild 2025* to speak the language of gratitude.

Those whose wildest places are closest to home see the deepest. Lisa Napolitan, in "My Hillside," writes with reverence of her "all-living, all-breathing, all-functioning" friend who wears a "quilt of many colors… made from coreopsis, phlox, and lavender, cornflower, lupine, and forget-me-nots," and who offers herself as a haven for all: the "chrysalides of black swallowtails" who have "taken up residence in our parsley," the garter snake who slumbers beneath the stone steps all winter, to emerge in the spring "alongside the crocus, and before the daffodils," the black-capped chickadee who stops at the feeder on her way north.

Our relationships too, displaced from their familiar quarters, assume a startling, if sometimes painful, clarity in the wild. We become released from "our busy little lives, the hard hold on performing our roles," as Emily Benson puts it. What's left is what matters. For Benson, gathered with her family around a campfire, it's the knowing how "we were each of us our own selves—alone in the quiet woodland night, together." Edmond Stevens, on skis on a late winter day in the backcountry where he is most at home, acutely feels the absence of his lost daughter and can almost, in that rare and solitary atmosphere, conjure her presence: "Standing on the ridgeline, I felt like I could tap the stilled air with a tuning fork, and it would resonate at a high C. 'Hello out there,'" I spoke in a normal voice. 'It's me. I haven't given up. I love you. I miss you.'"

Beyond clarity, many of the contributors to *Deep Wild 2025* feel a need—at times almost an urgency—for a deeper connection to the wild world. It's as if, in a human world beset by falsehoods and rife with competing "alternate realities," we crave that which is indisputably real. Margaret Pettis' encounter with a bison, where they hold each other in their eyes, is that of "two beasts in the forest, / alone." Cedar Koons feels "kinship" with the whale who lingers long beneath her touch. Colleen Alles, winner of our 2025 Student Writing Contest, "decides to believe" that the doe she encounters "took no hint of danger," but rather felt, like her, "the unity of two females / quiet together at dawn." And the lonely woman in Sophie Hoss's story finds connection of a more intimate kind with the "Little Beast" who comes to her door.

Encounters with fellow humans in the wild can also give us the grounding we seek. Dian Parker meets an old monk in a "crumbling monastery" on a mountaintop in Sinai, filled with "holy joy" and "lit within by his faith and solitude and kinship with the mountains and the birds." Donna Mendelson, climbing the steep slope to the granaries above Nankoweap Creek in Grand Canyon, "arrive(s) / a thousand harvests late / to meet a woman climbing // to save behind stacked stone walls / squash seeds corn / to plant for her next year's meals."

Thus does the whetstone of the wilderness hone the blade of our awareness. If we stay out long enough, we might garner something more. Eric Paul Shaffer, listening hard to his companion creatures, is rewarded with lessons for living:

"Be bold," says the robin.
Bounce, bounce, stand.
"Be so common no one sees you."

...
"Raise your limbs to the sky," says the fir.
"Be compassionate. Start here."
...
"Keep your feet on the ground,"
says the spruce. "From roots in darkness
rises everything that loves the light."

To be party to such secrets is to be empowered. For many women in particular, wilderness is the place to seek empowerment, not as a pastime, but as a matter of life and death: to confront fears, reject impediments, claim freedom. The characters in Rebecca Young's "The Mountain Goat" and Talley V. Kayser's "Caught" set out on solo trips to do exactly this, with dramatically different results.

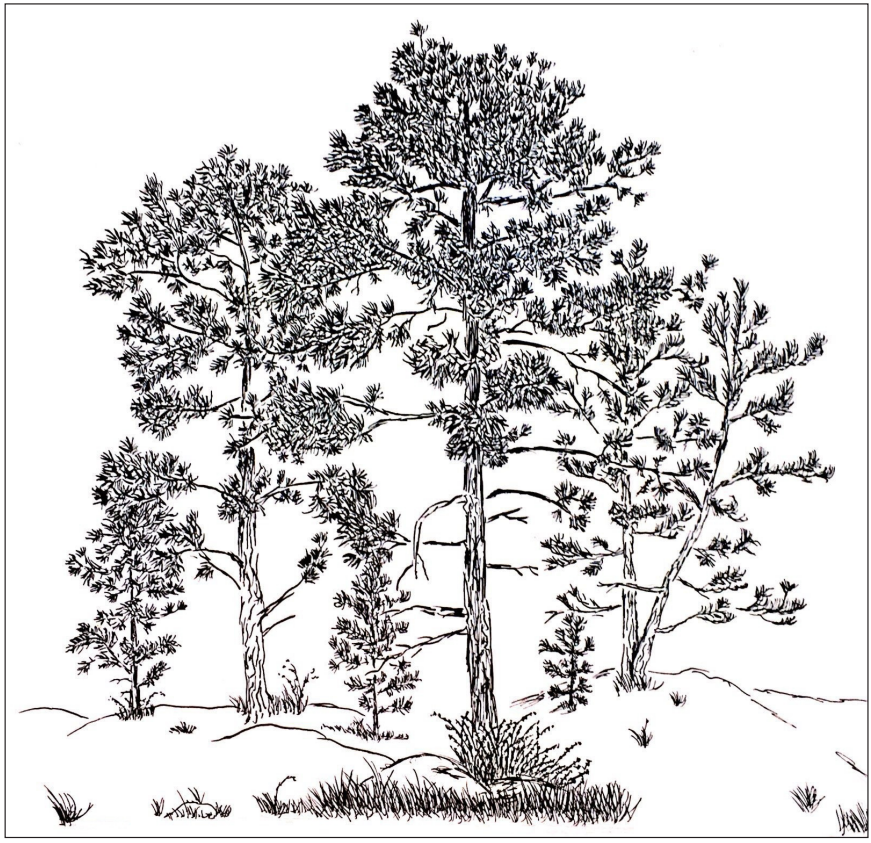
Reveling in my own good fortune in the backcountry, I am too often guilty of forgetting that the world which gives so much to me needs much in return. Cooper Smith reminds us of the grim realities: "We are backpacking through / An arriving Armageddon, of / Failing ecosystems and the / Buckling of whole biospheres." In "Selling Off the Sacred Groves," Rebecca Vincent beats back the "dark images" that assail her of "an impoverished world bereft of song birds and wild creatures, a world stripped of biodiversity" and instead peers through "the tunnel of time" toward the "bright sunlight pouring through the shallow water of my favorite river," the "kaleidoscopes of color, of light, of water." This is not mere escapism; rather, it's a return to her well-spring to build resolve for the work ahead: "All life calls us to preserve what wilderness remains." When the poet Andrew Alexander Mobbs asks, "What kind of world will greet me / when I wake?", we have to believe that it's an open question, one we have a say in answering.

Gratitude, connection, renewal, empowerment, resolve... It's no wonder these have been the thematic threads running not just through this issue of *Deep Wild*, but through all seven years of the journal: They are the values we cultivate to guide our lives in response to and on behalf of the wild places that we love. And underlying all that we say and do is the bedrock truth, expressed here by Marybeth Holleman: "Say what is true: that you are not just you, / you do not exist except within all this."

With this issue, *Deep Wild Journal* will enter a hiatus, hopefully for just a year, while we seek a new team of editors who, while embracing the journal's wilderness-centered ethic, will take it into new territory according to their vision. My fellow editors will agree, I know, that

our commitment to the journal has been immensely rewarding, most especially the opportunity and the privilege to engage with a community of like-minded persons, lovers of wild places and good words. But it's time to redirect our finite energies towards other creative projects that the *Deep Wild* commitment did not allow. I am filled with thanks, which I express in greater detail on the last page, for all who are and have been a part of the *Deep Wild* community.

Rick Kempa



Ponderosas

Why I Go to the Woods

Michelle DiSarno

1.
It's not that problems disappear,
but between the trees
there's space to breathe. The leaves
are gentle. The sounds
are soft. Somewhere a deer
walks. Somewhere a squirrel
hides its food. Somewhere
an owl sleeps, worrying
about nothing.

2.
I can hear again the drips
of leftover rain on leaves, light
and soft and sweetened
with sunlight, like the language
of birds, who are hidden
in the chandelier of branches,
readying for flight, praising
the persistent promise
of the earth.

3.
And don't I wish
I could be
like the trees?
Tall, steadfast,
rooted. Thankful
for both sun and rain,
their arms always open
to the sky.

Eight Points at the Navajo Bunkhouse

Eric Paul Shaffer

"Did you hear that?" The buck stands,
head raised, ears erect. "Listen."
And he turns to the earth for nourishment.

"Be bold," says the robin.
Bounce, bounce, stand.
"Be so common no one sees you."

The mountain says, "I am light radiant
with light. Watch this."

"I'm taller than the mountain," says the pine
to the walking man.
"I'll show you. Come closer."

The creek says, "My rush is the patience
of ages. At my heart is the way
the salmon walks home."

"Raise your limbs to the sky," says the fir.
"Be compassionate. Start here."

In my open pack, the spider weaves a web.
"I'm at home wherever I work."

"Keep your feet on the ground,"
says the spruce. "From roots in darkness
rises everything that loves the light."

By the River's Edge

Zishou Li

The river—
not a road,
but a vein.
It coursed through the land
as though the earth itself
were alive,
its pulse steady, deliberate.

I traced its edge, my shadow
merging with its flowing body.
Each bend became a choice,
each choice, a confession.

"You are constant," I said aloud,
as though the water could answer.
"You never look back, never stall."

The river whispered back,
its voice a hymn not for me,
but for the stones it cradles,
for the roots it grazes in passing.

I knelt to feel its coolness on my fingertips,
a bond that dissolved and renewed at once.
The water carried secrets,
smoothed sharp edges,
wove moments into liquid memory.

The sky, reflected,
shimmered in the ripples—
infinite.

"Is this the secret?" I asked.
"To drift, to let time carry us,
to let the edges fade, and
to dissolve into something vast?"

Skiing Into Storm

Marcia Wakeland

I stepped into my cross-country skis and heard the familiar click of the bindings. Slipping my gloves through the loops on the poles, I checked the grip, flexing fingers already feeling the seep of cold. The five-mile ski ahead through wilderness to our remote cabin was a familiar one to me—forty-two years of familiar. I knew the trail not just in my head, but with the sense of etching in my bones. As the years passed, making it to the cabin on skis was my mark against aging, my inner rallying cry. I could still do it at sixty, then sixty-five, then seventy. But now at seventy-one, I wasn't sure; the ski ahead held a new challenge. Surgery three months prior was almost brutal. I wavered there at the trailhead, realizing I no longer trusted my body, was no longer as strong. A girlfriend would ski with me. It wasn't unsafe. But could I do it?

The ambient air crinkled with cold, and I knew when I moved out of the shelter of trees, the north wind would not feel friendly. Pulling my ski cap down and my neck gaiter up, just a slit of skin showed around my eyes. I adjusted my jacket and slid my skis back and forth a few times.

"Ready?" said Barb.

I nodded. "Let's go."

The winter trail is a serpentine path that winds up hills covered with old spruce and thick birch, yielding then to vast flat swamps now frozen—clear save for patches of emaciated black spruce, looking like drunken soldiers, sticking up at random angles out of the snow. As I came up and over the first rise through trees and slid down carefully to the open swamp, I felt my legs respond to the rhythm of the skis. I relaxed a bit. I knew this feeling. It was the same. As I crossed that first swamp, road noise faded behind. The quiet settled in. I was on my way.

At the base of the next hill, I bent down to snap off my skis, not sure my arms were strong enough to herringbone my way up this steeper slope—another compromise to what my body could now do. Puffing hard when I reached the top, I took my time clicking back into the bindings of my skis. I was a little nauseous. As I glided out of the cover of trees, the wind shoved against my shoulder, the trail already starting to blow in. I shoved back.

I kept assessing my body, feeling a few strange aches and pains, but they all murmured for a while and then too became quiet. The surgery had left long scars that tightened my chest and had pulled my mid-back

spine out of place so that it felt stuck. But I was skiing, the kick and glide, reach and pull bringing back a sense of balance. Wilderness, wildness all around me, the deep quiet holding me, the wind rousing me.

The trail stirred up so many memories. As I crossed the next wide swamp, the trail took a sharp turn to the north. I remembered skijoring behind the eager pull of our two Huskies here, I half terrified, half thrilled at the speed we were going. As they turned this corner, I was careening, nearly out of control, leaning hard to one side. Then it seemed at the last moment I rocked back on my skis, in balance. The fall would have hurt badly. Instead, I was laughing, brimming with being alive. Smiling, I put my head down and pushed ahead. No stopping in this wind.

Ahead was a series of three challenging hills with steeper slopes and tricky descents. I felt myself aching as I started up the first one. I was getting a little uncoordinated and sloppy with my skis, crossing them randomly and slipping back at times. I stopped and took a breath. I looked around at the old birch, the branches gnarled into strange shapes from years of wind. I nodded to them, felt their willingness to be where they were. Waiting in time, enduring the cold. The recovery from surgery was taking much longer than I anticipated. Could I be so willing? I took a long breath and I skied on.

The next hill took me down what I called Ligament Hill where I once caught a tip in a hidden bent alder branch, and as it whipped me around, I felt a sharp, sickening pain. Being a physical therapist, I knew immediately that I'd torn my left medial collateral ligament. But I wasn't sure how bad it was. I was alone, so I had to keep going to keep warm, finding if I kept my skis pointed straight ahead, it didn't stress the ligament too much. But I wouldn't try my luck today on this hill. I would be reasonable. I unsnapped my skis and walked down, digging in my heels to avoid slipping. Yet I was tired of being careful. Sadness and frustration simmered inside me with each step—another letting go.

We crossed Trapper Creek over the bridge my husband had made. It was nearly smothered by the heavy snow that tried to fill it in, yet a foot-wide center of the stream still flowed open, resisting the freeze. I listened to its little song, saluted its resilience.

The last big hill was fifty yards ahead. We called this one Heart Attack Hill. No one has had a heart attack here, but it's work. I stepped out of my skis again at its base and dug in the best I could on the narrow trail. Deep moose tracks scored the trail as well, another being looking for footing in this deep snow.

My breath was ragged now, but I fell into my habit of counting as I climbed. I trudged up slowly, awkwardly carrying the skis and slinging the poles, but never stopping, taking smaller steps instead and muttering numbers.

The terrain leveled out at the top, and then we skied to the edge of the last long swamp. It was a half-mile across and then another half-mile to the cabin. I was almost there, but the hill had exhausted me. I felt a little shaky and chilled in my core. We stopped and got out our water bottles. My old identities of being a tough Alaskan and a strong Iowa farm girl were in shambles. What was I now without all my body? Who would I be?

This last swamp is my favorite part of the trail. It is my ritual to stop midway across and turn my body north to savor the view of the Alaska Range—from Moose's Tooth on the east to Foraker on the west. And there in the center, the highest peak in North America—Denali, the Great One. I would drink it in, all that majesty and shimmering white purity and power. The memory of another friend came to me: that day a few years before when in the glistening sunlight we had stopped, flinging our arms out wide, facing Denali full on, and Linda saying, "I open myself to the grace and freedom." We had felt giddy with the joy of it all.

But this time the mountain was eclipsed by clouds, and the trail ahead was obscured by a horizontal crosswind coming off the mountain. This time if I turned midway to metaphorically bare my chest to all that power and majesty, it would be different. My friend Linda had died the year before of cancer. And now my chest was literally bare. The surgery had taken my breasts, my former sense of myself as a woman, and any meager belief that I wouldn't one day die. I swallowed, felt the scars and the tightness and my fatigue. Maybe this was my new normal. I was close now to the cabin. No turning back.

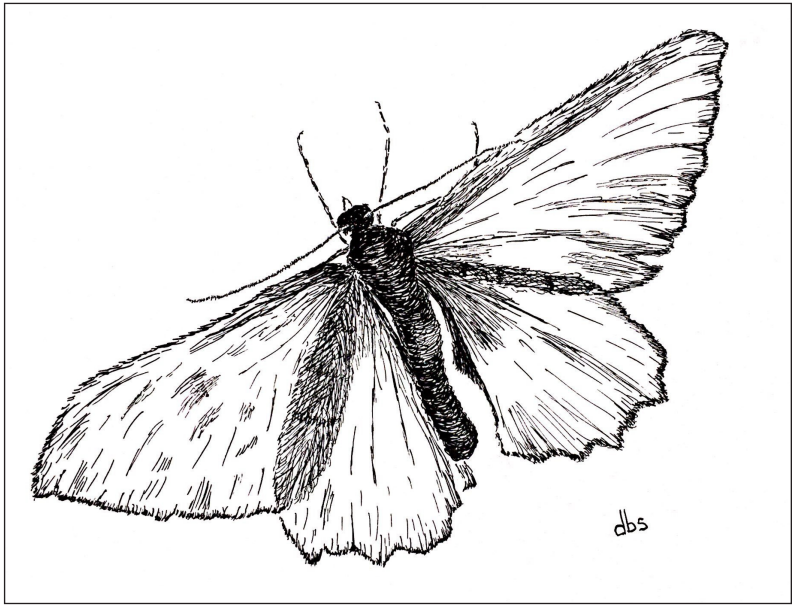
Barb led the way, but as the wind picked up, it was hard to even see her light green coat ahead of me. Soon it was just her ski tracks. Snow cocooned me as I skied into the cloud, just sliding, right hand, left foot, left hand, right foot, bent into the wind, remembering, grieving, alone.

And then it felt as if I wasn't making any effort at all. The realization startled me from my thoughts. The snow was perfect; my skis glided as if being pushed along from behind, yet the wind was still a biting crosswind. Strange. It was so easy. My body relaxed and responded. I was smiling behind my neck gaiter; what had changed? Everything was simply exactly as it was, free and light. I was not separate from the crosswind, the snow, or the sense of Denali forty miles away. I felt my

body moving—or being moved. Nothing was wrong. An overwhelming feeling of euphoria welled up. How could it be that I felt whole and beautiful and well? Tears stung and froze on my eyelashes. The soft *shush, shush, shush* of my skis felt like an ethereal benediction from Denali. I never wanted this moment to end.

But then it did. We hit the next line of trees at the far end of the swamp, blocking the wind. My skis slowed. I stopped by Barb, both of us laughing at that wild ski. I was here. All of me. And just a *half mile* downhill glide to the cabin. I would make it. Yet now that didn't really matter. I had already made it. There was more healing ahead, but I had received what the wilderness had to give—its silence, its waiting, its willingness to just be.

My friend turned, "Ready?" I nodded. We headed into the forest. Lightly, full of grace.



Barberry Geometer

The Way Inward

Ahrend Torrey

Of all the ways one can exist,
this is the way inward, to see

not heartbreak, not the fight on the train,
or screaming among family.

This is the way beyond through the trees across the river—

Run with me among the trees
until we come to the edge of the embankment.

Leave behind everything you carry.

Look across the water, into the deep eyes
staring back at you from a distance, before
he flicks the white flag of his tail, and leaps

over fallen branches into the thicket—

Little Beast

Fiction

Sophie Hoss

You scared me at first.

I don't know how long you watched me, but when I noticed you, a gasp hitched in my throat. We stared at each other, still as fixed stars. The dark stretch of grass yawned between us.

Amber eyes, unblinking. Matted fur and pointed ears. You cocked your head.

Your move.

Barely breathing, I slid off the porch and lifted my arm towards you.

"Hi," I whispered. "It's okay."

Your nose twitched. There was a terrible nakedness as your eyes prowled over me. Whatever you saw made you slink forward, head ducked low, and snuffle at my hand. You were roughly the size of a teddy bear.

There was no collar, no name tag. No other houses in sight. A one-stoplight town a half-hour drive down the mountains.

"Where'd you come from?"

Don't remember. What kind of question is that, anyway?

Your skin stretched tightly over your ribs. I inched back inside and left the screen door propped open behind me. When I returned with a bowl of water and a piece of canned chicken, I kept my eyes lowered, dreading looking up to find you gone. But there you were, waiting.

At the time we met, it had been a few months since Willa passed. I found that she was even louder in death than she was in life. People still called the house from time to time, and whenever they did, I promptly fell back to my role of her assistant. I had been hired as a live-in nurse, but over the years, the medical and personal meshed until they were indistinguishable.

"Hermia Aldrich residence," I greeted. Most people only knew Willa by her penname.

The caller would say they had an opening for a book signing, an available position as a workshop instructor, a pitch for a new series, or some other pressing opportunity. For all their supposed interest, they didn't seem to be up to date on her current predicament.

"I'm sorry to tell you this, but Ms. Alrich is no longer with us. This is her estate manager speaking."

A click on the other end. I stood, clutching the phone like a lifeline as dust motes sighed past.

Those calls were really the only time I spoke. But once you came into the picture, my voice, hoarse with disuse, found its lilt again. I scolded you, I called after you, I chattered incessantly. You were so skittish, and you cried whenever I left your line of sight. Your claws dug into the bathroom door. You flung your body against the windowpane when I stepped outside to grab the mail. At night, you slept curled on my shoulder.

Being needed felt good.

It was odd to fall into to some semblance of a routine, and odder still to start looking after myself with regularity. Ever since the morning when I woke up and Willa did not, I hadn't brushed my hair. Eaten only when I forced myself to—a spoonful of peanut butter, maybe a few saltines. I went days without sleeping and days without getting out of bed. Even as a kid, I was always a bit peaky-looking—mildly anemic, chronically underweight. I don't want to know what I looked like during my time as a living ghost.

I was a little embarrassed by the state of the house when you arrived. Willa had enjoyed comfortable clutter— "Can't stand when things are too neat," she said. I disagreed, but over the eight years I worked for her, I became accustomed to the cabin's décor. Even grew to like it quite a bit. From the seven cuckoo clocks to the framed comic book covers to the mismatched yard sale furniture, everything was patchworked and vintage, artfully worn. Soft jazz was always playing from a little silver radio.

Now with one less person, it was suffocating. The cozy disarray had devolved into a pigsty. I pretended to look away as you pawed at strewn boxes, examined crusted dishes brimming in the sink.

Finally, I relented.

"I'm getting this place in order," I announced.

You paused from gnawing on the table leg and blinked. *About time.*

"I don't know what to do," I told you as I cleaned. "She left me this cabin. And some money. But I have nowhere to go."

You're stuck.

You padded over to me, and I knelt down to stroke your head. You leaned into the touch.

The backyard went as far back as we wanted it to. The New Hampshire forest was dense and limitless, lush with wet dirt and mist and bird cries, clustered with spruce and birch and mountain maple. I knew these woods like a map of the subway. Over the years, I'd made countless routes and trails to wander down, sometimes with Willa, but mostly on my own.

You yipped at my ankles as we tramped through knotted brush. Sunlight darted between boughs. You leapt clear over rotted trunks, you sloshed through creeks, you bounded in circles around me. Your tail wagged.

How great is this?

"It's wonderful." I was surprised at the bounce in my step. Sometimes I even caught myself humming.

I started bringing my sketchbook with me. Cross-legged on the ground, charcoal likenesses bloomed on the page: weathered pinecones, veined bark, my own smudged hand. Drawing was always a meditative escape—one I had been denying myself.

Every so often, your ears perked up. You would bolt off and return a few minutes later with a dead squirrel or chipmunk clamped in your jaw.

Just a little something. No need to thank me.

"Good boy, Jack."

I tried, again, to assemble a resume. I had a nursing license from Queensborough Community and a few months' experience at a cardiologist's office. My gig with Willa was the highlight of my career. Unfortunately, I couldn't exactly get a posthumous recommendation letter.

I wasn't even sure I wanted to continue working in healthcare. Willa had died at eighty-nine with diabetes, arthritis in both knees, osteoporosis, and a stubbornly erratic heartbeat. "Natural causes" was the hospital's verdict. I rambled to EMTs about how I took her blood pressure twice a day and administered her pills and insulin injections. Every checkup I'd driven her to concluded with a clean bill of health.

"Sometimes, people just die," one of the emergency room doctors said gently.

Objectively—professionally—I understood. But I was supposed to be the line of defense against natural causes. Willa's daily medication schedule was still pinned to the refrigerator, and I couldn't make myself take it down.

On a whim, I dug out my set of paints and unfurled a canvas sheet from under my bed. Before I knew what I was doing, the outline of your face was bleeding onto the page in bristled gray brushstrokes. I felt your eyes on my back.

Do I really look like that?

"Approximately."

You nuzzled your head into my lap. I swished my brush into the pallet over and over in a mindless rhythm—a drop of paint on the tip, a skim across the paper, a dip in water, another drop. Your likeness faced me head on, somber and elegant. Your eyes blazed eagle-like. Behind you, I dabbed in swirls of dark emerald.

Nice job.

"Don't flatter me."

The more I studied the picture, the more I hated it. Within an hour of completion, it was shredded in the garbage.

I fell into bed one night with one of Willa's books—*Cordially Yours*. One of her earlier pieces, it detailed a long-distance friendship between two boarding school students. I had started it once and never finished. I wasn't much of a reader—in my initial job interview, I shifted in my seat as Willa prodded about my favorite novels.

"I like working with people who have different brains," she reassured me. "Sometimes I get tired of mine."

I woke with my face pressed into *Cordially Yours*' open pages. Some vague, unsettling dream had roused me. Your slumbering body was splayed across my stomach—your weight, once barely a pillow, now pushed uncomfortably on my ribs. Your brow crinkled, eyelids twitching. I wondered what you jumped about. I rubbed your forehead with my fingertips, and you perked awake.

What's wrong? You rolled to the floor in one languid motion.

"Nothing, nothing."

I sat up and brushed an arm across my cheek, half expecting Willa's printed words to be smeared on my skin. My hand came away clean.

It's late for you to be up.

According to the digital clock on my bedside table it was early rather than late. A slim part in the curtains hinted a cobalt sky.

"I'm going to step outside. Want to join me?"

Obviously.

Night air did wonders for me. As a kid, I savored the view from my apartment's fire escape. Light pollution bleached out the stars, but it was nice to just lean against the railing. Feel a little breeze—cold and delicious—and inhale the city's erratic pulse. I always dreaded being called back inside.

You liked night air, too.

By this point you had started to grow into your frame—your hollow sides filled out, your Twiggy legs muscled. You now stood knee-high to me. A tall quiet Sentinel.

We sat on the wispy grass and watched the blackness flicker above. Constellations blazed, snagged in the Milky Way's silver tendrils. Minutes passed, then an hour. My eyelids heavied and burned, and each blink was more strenuous than the last. After a while, I stopped resisting.

A gargled screech pierced the silence. I jerked awake, whirled my head to where you were: no longer crouched beside me but being clawed into the air by a ghost white owl—it hovered several feet off the ground, eyes yellow and starved.

My scream lodged in my throat. The owl's talons clutched your back and stomach, and its beak snapped out at your head. You writhed and panted. Helpless. I lunged at the owl without thinking. It skidded upward, away from my grasp, dragging you with it. I fumbled on the ground for a rock or a stick or anything to throw.

But in a flash of teeth, your jaws were latched onto its wing. You tore at the feathered flesh, slicing it easily. The great bird angled sideways and shrieked. A twist of your body, and your jagged nail punctured the owl's stomach. The two of you crashed to the earth.

The owl keened and flapped its remaining wing pathetically. A soft rolling chirp. Its eyes roved with blind fear. You pounced on the bird before it could move, ripping its skin, shredding its feathers with tooth and claw. Dark blood spattered your fur and mingled with your own fresh wounds. The crazed butcher ended abruptly—the owl went limp and still. You flung the carcass aside.

I only remembered to breathe when you nuzzled your wet snout against my ankle.

Sorry you had to see that. But in my defense, you weren't much help.

I looked down. My legs were shaking, but I couldn't feel the tremor. I couldn't feel anything.

From then on, I kept you on lockdown. I would take you out just once a day for no more than ten minutes. I couldn't burn away the image of you bloodied in the air, seconds from slaughter. How could I have just stood there?

It was hard to keep you reined in. Brief frolics in the wood couldn't appease you—energy pulsated from your skin and trembled beneath your fur. You stalked around the house, sliding against walls and bumping into furniture. I ignored you when you scratched at the door, pleading to go outside for the tenth time. You tugged on my pant legs as I drowned out your whines with busywork.

Let's go, let's go! What's wrong with you?

If I still didn't give in, you caved into a ball at my feet.

Fine. Have it your way.

When you had gone three days without eating, I drove you an hour and a half to the nearest veterinarian. You lolled in the back seat. I glanced at you in the rear view mirror every few seconds, knuckles ghastly white on the steering wheel. By the time I eased onto the examination table, you were in a fitful sleep. I ran my hands through your fur and whispered to you. Every so often, your glazed eyes winked open.

The veterinarian froze when she saw you.

"Ma'am, are you aware this animal isn't a dog?"

"Pardon?"

Her gingery eyebrows vanished into her bangs. "That is a wolf."

The words refracted off me, meaning nothing. "I don't understand."

She snapped on plastic gloves and crossed the room to where you lay. She pried open your jaw, peeled back your eyelids. "Where did you adopt him? And how long ago?"

"He was a stray puppy," I said blankly. "I took him in about six months ago."

Her eyes tightened. "And you didn't bring him in for a checkup? Or call the station to report a found dog, see if someone was looking for him?"

"No."

She waited for me to offer further explanation. None came.

"Well, what I'm looking at here is most certainly a pure wolf," she said as she checked your pulse. "Or close to it."

"What's wrong with him?" I asked.

A sharp exhale. "I don't know yet. I'd have to run some more tests. But wolves in a domesticated environment are at higher risk for health issues than your average dog. Has he been getting exercise?"

"We go for a long walk every day."

"For three to four hours?"

I hesitated. "I don't know. Maybe."

"Do you live in a spacious home?"

"Not really. It's a little cabin."

She shone a light into your ears. "Frankly, I think a big part of what's going on here is canine depression. Your friend here just isn't getting the freedom he needs."

I ignored her. "Can you run the tests so I can find out what's wrong?"

She paused. “Because it’s illegal in the state of New Hampshire to privately own a wolf, I’m going to have to call animal control.”

When I tried to speak, I found that my tongue was latched to the roof of my mouth. The veterinarian pursed her lips.

“It isn’t safe to domesticate a wolf. It makes people nervous—wolves can be very loyal to one person, but their behavior is unpredictable. They’re hunters. You must know that.”

My lips were numb. “What’s gonna happen to him?”

She rested a gloved hand on mine, eyes round with sympathy. It was the first time another person had touched me in almost a year.

“If there was another option, I would absolutely give it to you.”

“Couldn’t—couldn’t he go back to the forest?”

“He’s been living with you for too long. If he can’t reacclimate to the wilderness, releasing him is a death sentence.”

“But it already is,” I insisted.

The veterinarian rose and pulled off her gloves, flicking them into the trash can. “I’ll give you a few minutes alone.”

She excused herself. When she came back into the room, we were gone.

Tires whirred on the pavement. I had lain you in the passenger seat, and at the car’s sudden jerking, you stirred and looked up clearly.

Where are we going?

“I don’t know,” I whispered.

We skidded onto the highway. I rolled the windows down to give you some air. You tilted your snout to the wind.

“Is that a little better?”

You have no idea.

My foot was steady on the gas. Miles slipped under the tires. The surrounding trees grew denser and taller, but the mountains stayed rigid, never growing closer—silhouetted and locked in place against the sky. I didn’t know what would happen to you. But a trial by fire was better than no trial at all. I finally pulled over and wove the car through a gap in the overgrown forest.

You sat upright, nose sniffling at the earthy rot. It was dusk, and your eyes were bright in the gathering shadows. I rested my hand on your head.

“I’m so sorry. For everything.”

You did the best you could.

I wasn't so sure, but I didn't argue. You eased yourself onto my lap. We held each other for a long moment—you nestled your head in the crook of my elbow, and I cradled you like a newborn. You were so soft. Beneath my hand, your side swelled with each breath.

I nudged opened the door and stepped outside. You leapt noiselessly onto the ground, and our eyes cut into each other: a familiar stalemate. You whined as I began to walk backward, but you didn't follow.

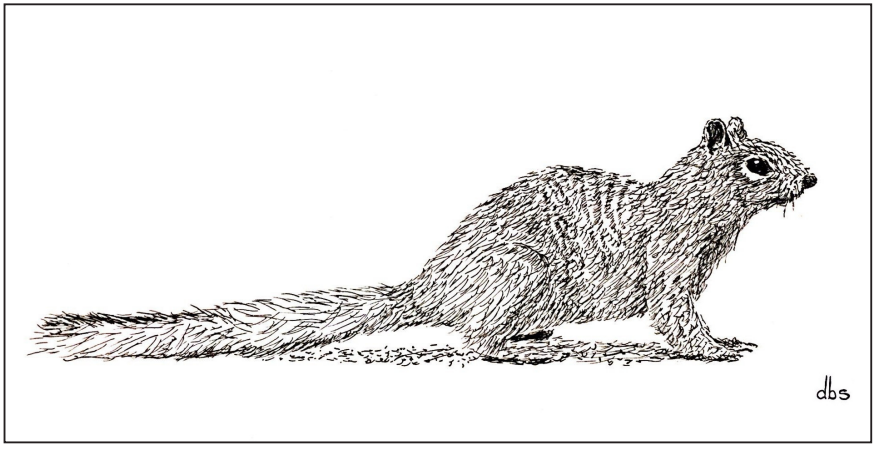
"Will you be okay?"

Your paws dug into the dirt. *Born for this.*

As I started the engine, I nearly doubled over in the driver's seat. I clenched my jaw against the dry sobs. I wouldn't cave. I couldn't. But as I backed up the car, desperation flooded in. I decided that if you came chasing after me, frightened and pleading, I would take you with me, I would figure something out, I would do anything you wanted, anything.

When I chanced a look back, you had vanished. My shameful bargaining quieted, and the car broke through the forest's hem and rattled onto the highway.

I wouldn't return to the cabin tonight. I kept heading north.



Rock Squirrel

All Hallows: rainstorm on the tent roof

Harry Owen

Let us name this downpour for what it is: sacred.
She speaks, imploring, didactic, telling the truth
that she's ice, lava, blood, breath, that she's everyone–
cat, dog, locust, lizard, sinner, saint.

She will be heard, drumming, insistent, for she's surge,
fierce and flowing, family, friend and nemesis,
scattering pebbles across your foundation's
scullery, cold tea, and wilderness.

She is home and exile, the years between
and to come. She's applause of rattling teeth,
gasp, intake of startled air, expulsion,
rockslide, erosion, scrape, slither, scratch.

She's baptism, suspension, percolation, leaching,
dissolution, growth. She is otters, kelp forests,
penguins, seals gathered up and held, sky-frogs, pilchards,
chloroplasts, molecules, and atoms.

She sings spindrift, nuclei, plasma, DNA,
wreckage, swamp, creation, each of us. She's flashflood,
music, rainbow, spirit, mist, and drench. Listen to
the sacred names of her cloud's bursting.

My Hillside

Lisa Napolitan

I'm waiting for my hillside to wake up. It's slumbering like a small giant, back wide and curved to the sky, belly planted deep in the earth; that first autumn gale signaled her need for rest. She is a quiet sleeper, my somnolent friend, though I can feel her breathing in soft, long, restorative sighs.

It is winter. A gentle heaving of the soil occurs up here when the ground freezes. The individual granules crust until they look like a million tiny snowflakes made from rich brown earth. The brittle soil then contracts, forcing the topmost layer to crack wide open to the sky in a multitude of disparate places. I could place a seed in there, I am thinking, as I step gently upon the sleeping giant's surface; plunk a shiny, black sunflower seed right into each of those freshly emerged, thumbprint-sized wells and in the coming months flowers will root and bloom. Alternatively, the seeds could be discovered by a passing jay, nabbed in the bird's long and angular beak, snapped and gobbled on the spot. She allows it, my giant, this examination of her surface, this pondering by a friend, provided of course I don't make a sound.

Were I to name her, I would call her Josephina, for she wears a quilt of many colors—so many colors!—made from coreopsis, phlox, and lavender, cornflower, lupine, and forget-me-nots, though the colors are faded this time of year, and the material coarse and shabby when I look at her from afar. When it snows, her blanket is white. She does not apologize for her state. She is a self-mender, with a hidden, uncanny sense of style. A miraculous thing to behold, really, when she throws off her rags and dresses in her finest. She is requesting I be patient, however, and wonders why I too don't sleep.

I check my newest bird houses. A stately, yellow home with a corrugated tin roof is screwed into a conifer, but maybe I placed it too low. No inhabitants. There are three smaller houses nearby, east facing, offering protection from westerly winds. Last year a tiny wren raised a family in one. It is empty now, however, and the other two, hung for only one season, remain unoccupied. I'll wait to see if spring beckons new tenants. The homes, after all, are rent-free.

Leaves wet with rain
the drizzle, mist of the day… spring is only clouds away.

Yesterday, when I was feeling quite low, a black capped chickadee came by the house and stopped at our feeder. It was the first chickadee I had seen since last summer.

When I was a small child, I would spend summers at my grandparents' farm in Connecticut. My grandmother, a proud Finn, would situate me in the yard and place a spoonful of peanut butter in each of my opened palms, then tell me to stand very still. The Finns can be stoic people, and their connection to nature runs deep.

I would try with all my might to do nothing more than breathe: to keep the restless soles of my bare feet steady in that cool, summer grass. With my arms stretched out wide at my sides, my grandmother would say, "Olla hiljaa, hold steady," taking steps back and away. "They will come," she promised. Sure enough, chickadees landed on one palm and soon the other, the weightless scratch of their miniscule feet, their stubby, black beaks pecking at the mounded butter. Occasionally, one's tilted head would catch my spying eyes; and when it pecked the puff of my hand by accident, oh how I beamed!

There is a tool shed on my hillside. In permissible weather it is my writing space. Currently, it houses the chrysalides of black swallowtails. I walk in that direction.

Last summer, as is their habit, caterpillars had taken up residence in our parsley, and I would have let them be but for the two praying mantes that stalked, positioned in adjacent rose bushes, stick-still on thorny branches. I love all of God's creatures, and I know that interfering in nature's unfolding carries implications. There is the circle of life, of course. But these future swallowtails had worked so hard for so long, endlessly gorging, then maneuvering along bendy parsley arms. Our garden in summer is ripe with insects for praying mantis consumption: crickets and flies, beetles, and aphids. I made the decision, and the caterpillars were soon relocated, traveling by parsley, to an old hamster habitat placed out on my deck where they could thrive without threat.

I watched daily as summer drew to a close, as our transplanted parsley was ravaged by their boundless appetites. Then one day they stopped eating and searched among their habitat sticks for the perfect spot to rest. They spun silken threads and hung on selected twigs in

their telltale J-shapes. I waited. I had never seen the transformation of caterpillar to chrysalis, and I was an eager schoolchild with the anticipation of the event.

Days passed. Finally, one muggy afternoon, the Js wiggled. I can only liken what I saw to green sausage meat being syringed into casing. The fully hushed Js were gyrating, feverishly pushing their squishy, internal bodily contents up toward their heads. After several frenetic minutes, the pressure built to such a level that the skin at the head of each caterpillar split wide open and out poked the creature's new shape: a pale body, soft like cooked cabbage. Then just as quickly as it began, it was over. The new, supple green forms ceased all movement and prepared to camouflage. Moment by moment they dried out, until they looked like papier-mâché that perfectly matched the very bark of the stick to which they adhered. Each had become a Cerith twin, that tiny horn-shaped shell collected in children's pails along the seashore; the very shape that the chocolatiers of those seaside towns design into confections to be placed in fancy boxes and bestowed as gifts. Anchored securely to its twig, each chrysalis was once again as steadfast in its desire for immobility as I the child waiting for those little birds.

The ornamented twigs were placed in a large, empty jug as if they were long stemmed roses. The jug is on the desk of my tool shed. I have reached the shed and I open the door. The twigs are just as I left them many weeks ago: a chrysalid bouquet. I close the door and leave all to their sleep.

Yesterday my mother and I talked as she trimmed the ends of the roses my father had given her for Valentine's. I learned my great grandfather was a gardener.

Rain on my hat.
What a beautiful mess!
an exciting disaster of a hillside.

My hillside appears without visitors today, though I know that's not entirely true. There is that wet wind, and the grave robber who has left evidence of his crime. My daughter and I performed the ceremony just last week, laying to rest the beta fish she'd named Leap. We'd rescued him from a local pet store on February 29, 2020. A "quarantine pet". He thrived for two full years in a ten-gallon tank complete with a filtration system and a pirate ship in which to hide.

Beta fish are solitary creatures, hunkering in mud puddles in the wild, but Leap and I spent time together. Whenever I'd approach, he'd wiggle through the escape hatch of his pirate ship and swim right up and look at me through the glass. As he aged, one eye went cloudy, yet still we shared our daily gaze. I would open the tank's lid and hold a dried bloodworm to the water's surface with the pad of my finger. Leap would jettison up, and with his Lilliputian lips kiss a single line of fingerprint. We trusted one another.

We laid Leap to rest in a white, paper jewelry box, first wrapping his body in a cocktail napkin imprinted with a Tove Jansson Moomin design. The paper napkins were a Christmas gift from my mother. Gifts that are signifiers of our heritage, no matter how humble, are the most precious of all.

I took my spade and dug a hole in the winter-hard earth beneath a towering spruce that has the prettiest, rough bark. I placed Leap's casket in the grave. My daughter covered his casket with the crystal-like soil. We marked the spot with Leap's favorite toy, a small ceramic log that floated in his tank and in which we'd often catch him napping. Leap was buried beside his aquatic predecessor, Spot, and both beneath the watchful gaze of Saint Francis the garden statue. With arms outstretched, Saint Francis might well be waiting for chickadees too. We said a prayer.

But today the casket is dug up, pried open, the lid batted away. The Moomin napkin is intact, still rolled like a miniature rug, but Leap is gone. Whatever animal did this used skill. "Opposable thumbs?" my daughter suggests later when I tell her about the discovery. But I'm thinking fox, raccoon…squirrel? ~ the black cat that wanders into our yard every few days causing our dogs to howl from their impeccable view at the kitchen's sliding glass doors. It's okay, I think. Leap's soul has ascended, and his body sustenance for one of God's creatures. I return the casket to the earth. Bury Leap in memoriam.

All this activity, and still my giant sleeps.

There is a boulder wall along the fieldstone steps that take visitors from yard to hilltop, hilltop to yard. Stones have come loose. I note it as a project for spring.

The teak chairs upon which I sit to read are moist through and through, silvered and splintered, coated with lichen in a hue similar but, of course, not the same as the green of the lambs' ears when they were in fine shape, which they presently are not, all drooped and curled and white. The lichen has lace about its edges, a case of petite-doily-measles.

Hydrangeas with last season's dried flowerheads intact, all shades of beige, are old ladies in nightcaps dreaming of fresh blue hair done up in curlers.

The weeds are hiding – but I know they are there.

Beneath the stone steps, our snake slumbers. Beneath those same steps, burrow the chipmunks. How each, snake and prey, minds its own business all winter, I can't imagine. Yet they do. They will emerge alongside the crocus, and before the daffodils. The garter always appears when you least expect him (he's clever like that), and there will be, always are, chipmunks aplenty.

The starlings are gathering on treetops. What a glorious racket! So much organizing going on—flight patterns to determine, geometric shapes to create. They are communal masterminds garbed in a knight's metallic plumes.

The day after the last ice storm, my daughter and I watched the Japanese Maple "bleed" water. Fully encrusted in a coating of clear ice, the temperature rose just enough that one could see water moving beneath the ice, filtering its way down along the branches, creating a path, sliding in a slow and steady stream, giving the impression of veins pumping blood.

Leaves have veins. Ask any child about crayon rubbings.

So, I take in my hillside and say, here is the greatest discovery of all: nothing is asleep! It is all wide awake beneath the surface, even the chrysalides who wriggle in the most terrifyingly miraculous way when sprayed with reviving water (which is what, I have learned, one does when tending them). It is all-living, all-breathing, all-functioning in a sort of wonderous magic act, just waiting for the curtain to be drawn, and with the wave of some mighty wand, this marvelous slumbering giant will soon stand up in a blaze of color and take her bow.

In All Things

Marybeth Holleman

Say it straight.
Say how the grasses wave you along your path.
How the small nod of the field mouse sends you up.
How the nuthatch's single note, repeated, reverbs in your bones,
your veins, muscles; what
is of you and what is of all this?

Say it.
All the years of words encrypted
to what you thought would be heard—
the forest is silent. It does not mind your reticence.
It is patient beyond your wildest imagining.
But it is time, it is time, so

Say what is true: that you are not just you,
you do not exist except within all this—

The grasses tremble with dew's touch,
and the nuthatch flits among spruce boughs,
and the field mouse basks in the rising sun,
and you are them,
and they are you,
and this is it.

Drag the Wind

Erin O'Regan White

Nubbly fingers left on larch
drag across the busy wind
and I am put in mind
of an August evening when
I lay down among the dirt
and last year's surrendered
needles and looked up
through larch limbs
still green, soft, and shading.
I rolled my head your way
and said
I'd like to die here.
Then recanted
not today
but right here,
with a view to the shadows
cast by boughs and sky
that rolls over and back
as my body slackens, stiffens,
releases, and all its small stories
become orange larch needles
shaking loose, one by one
or all at once, and February
comes again to tuck me in
and the nubbly fingers left on larch
drag across the busy wind.

The Mountain Goat

Fiction

Rebecca Young

Day 1. It was still the hidden time, new moon dark, and hunger was nocturnal. The Mountain Goat was tucked into an outcropping of granite ledges well above treeline. It was still hidden time and yet there was light coming through the trees far below. It was small, a single eye, and it barely threw a beam. It worked like a foraging animal moving across brush and forest deadfall, slowly picking its way towards the mouth of the basin. The light swept across a swath of creek corridor, catching the sunshine green of the low growing willows that lined the channel's banks. She felt her belly tighten. She'd seen the hunger color in the light, and though it was not time to go down the mountain to the stream to feed on the willows, she longed for the real light of day.

It was the sunset of the season when the dark time grew longer. The aspens who all summer wore lime shades of good-to-eat green were turning to sun colors, and the little flowers, succulent and soft in her mouth, were migrating down the mountainsides and would soon, the Goat knew, disappear. Instinctively, her soft black muzzle began to chew the empty air. Then the cold and the snow would come, and she might disappear, too. She wasn't ready for winter. Her muzzle chewed the last dark out of the sky as she watched the light, now at the mouth of the basin.

It was the Woman. She was alone. She was so small down there, walking as if on the tongue of the mountains, their serrated teeth rising in a semi-circle all around her. She was long-limbed with a swishing braid running down her back. The Goat watched the braid swing back and forth, the silken tufted end looking soft and edible. Her head was down, pointing the light on the ground directly in front of her, and she rocked it rhythmically side to side as she walked. She made surprisingly little sound. The Goat had seen people many times before the scarcity of good browse had pushed her deeper into the wilderness. They left curious tastes scattered among the rocks, salt and sweet and sustaining browse.

Seeing the Woman now she felt no fear, only an inquisitive tug. She suddenly wanted salt. Her tongue tingled as her eyes tracked the figure. The Woman would have food, would leave salt along her path. But there would be time, she knew. People were slow moving. Even this one, comfortable as she was in the landscape, wouldn't be able to spring lightly up and down the near vertical mountain faces like she could. Her

purpose overcame her now, and she unfurled her tufted legs and felt her hooves catch the rock and hold. Fifty feet below, a snarled patch of alpine grass emerged from the rock. In three graceful leaps she was there, filling her belly as first light broke the world.

"Steady, steady. Slow down before you snap your ankle off," the Woman said to herself, and then she laughed. She wasn't worried she'd break her ankle, but the drama of knowing it was possible kept her focused. She was headed towards the back of the basin where the boulder field rose up to the base of a steep scree gully. She stopped, dropped her pack, and eased herself onto a boulder. She sat very still, feeling the familiar emptiness of being alone in the mountains. Here she could lay it all down, her daughter Natalie's lackluster grades, the thick stack of paperwork waiting on her desk at work, her husband Bill's absolute bat-shit idea that they should move from Colorado to Maine to live near his parents. This was her time, where all her thought and effort channeled into a single point in the sky, and there, she knew, she would renew herself. This was her ritual. The quiet hummed. Serenity bloomed inside her, the contentment of a single purpose: to climb the mountain.

The Woman went to the mountain knowing her husband didn't like it.

"It's not like a patriarchy thing," he explained. "It's just so risky. Can't you do your empowered-woman thing with other women?," he'd asked one morning as their espresso machine hissed. She'd only glowered at him as she finished tying his tie for him, a little too tight. She didn't tell him that she loved the solitude of a lone climb. She had to be alone, to heed only herself and the mountain. She knew the script, how the argument would bring them both to the edge of the unspeakable in their marriage. He would call her reckless, self-centered, and she would call him cowardly, placated by comfort and routine. He didn't do the things she did. He would never understand how in the wilderness she felt most like herself. A woman alone, in love with the mountains–this is who she was.

The Woman raised her head and looked. "Blue sky. No wind." She took a map out of a pocket in her pack and gave it a quick scan, confirming her location. Her eyes alighted on a spiral of rock flanked by cliff bands. It wasn't the tallest in this jawbone formation of mountains around the basin, but the weakness in the ridgeline created by the gully she sat under made it the most prominent. A jagged ridgeline led to a summit spire of sharp granite. She looked up the gully and the peak

beyond and took a deep breath. “Nothing rash. Be stable.” She didn’t know if she spoke to herself or to the mountain.

The Goat took her fill of moisture, cool and smelling of sweet decay, from a snowfield in a sliver of trench where water trickled down the side of the mountain. She found the source of the scent and ate the pungent soggy leaves that had been under snow all year. The sky was blue. Dry day. The afternoon rains that built and then broke over the mountains hadn’t come, and she knew the next time the clouds formed they’d bring snow instead of rain. From her position in the snowfield she could see the Woman stemming up a small chimney of rock along the ridge. She couldn’t help but watch her; the movement kept catching her eye. The Woman pulled herself up and out of the crack in a smooth motion. The Woman took two steps up onto a cascading wall of green rock pocked through with knobs and tiny incremental ledges. She reached up and took hold of a small prow of rock with both hands. It gave way.

The Woman fell backwards in wild cartwheels, and her screams ricocheted behind her. She looked like a nestling bird attempting first flight, lifting off only to bump back to earth and repeat. Some stones dislodged and followed her down the fall line, and there came two sounds. The first, the familiar clank and rumble of rock hitting rock and the second, the sound of a living tree snapping in intense wind. People must have branch-like bones.

The Woman came to rest in the scree gully below the ridge’s crest. The Goat heard the Woman’s moaning breaths, little bleats of pain, and she remembered. This was not the first time the Mountain had made a creature disappear. He had bleated, too. She had quieted his flailing front legs with a touch of her muzzle, her kid. No matter how she coaxed and head-butted him she could not rouse his hind-end. His breathing had grown louder, then quieter, and slowly she understood. She had wanted him to stop breathing then. He was lost even as he struggled, but he was so young; he did not know enough to die. Looking at the Woman she remembered. It is so good to die when you are supposed to.

I’m alive. It felt like the first thought the Woman ever had. The pain hadn’t registered yet, but her lungs felt like they’d been wrapped in rubber bands. She watched a cloud float across the horizon. She breathed. Cloud and breath. She tried to coach herself, to start assessing what happened, figure out where she was on the mountain, but she couldn’t because her mind only allowed a single thought like a heartbeat

in her ears: I'm alive. She lay there until the pain came. As it swelled over her, she opened her mouth to scream, but her throat was squeezed shut in a reactionary spasm. She couldn't find the source of the pain; it seemed to be coming from everywhere. Then she saw it and vomited little flecks of food, stomach acid, and blood. "Fuck fuck fuck," she chanted. A shard of bone end stuck out of her leg a few inches below the right knee. Her head felt full of air; she kept drifting away from herself, and looking down, she thought bones were whiter than she expected.

She eased her pack off in painful increments to retrieve her phone. Broken collar bone for sure, she thought to herself. She squinted her eyes closed, tried to calm her shallow, quick breaths, but she'd lost control of herself. Her hands shook, and she couldn't make herself look at the phone. The strength of the signal on it would determine if she lived or died. She was furious that her life would be decided by a fucking cell phone. She was the kind of person who insisted on leaving her phone off during dinner, who scolded her daughter for being constantly glued to it. "There's more to life than what you see on that damn screen," she'd told Natalie just yesterday. She laughed through her tears thinking back on her words. It was ludicrous, and she hated the phone for being right, for being so smug. "You fucking piece of shit," she said and lifted the screen.

"911—your—emerg," a monotone male voice crackled in and out of the static. She blurted her location, the name of the mountain. Said the word *help* over and over.

"I—what?" the only words she deciphered on the other end of the line.

"Ping me! Ping the phone! Send rescue! Life threatening injuries!" She begged, but the call had dropped. She smashed the CALL button again but almost immediately came the chirp indicating a dropped call. She tried again and again. Chirp chirp. She sent a text to Bill and read the phone's reply: *message cannot be sent at this time*.

"Fuck you," she said.

It was a windless day, and the sun was bright and warm for the time of year. Perfect summit weather, she thought, and for an instant she wanted the summit as she had wanted it before the fall, to have nothing but sky above her and the elation of a successful climb all around her. A single purpose settled on her like a roosting bird: to survive.

The Goat ate any green thing she could find. The bushes were turning to red stone and tasted bitter, but she ate them anyway. She wasn't ready for winter. Would the mountain sustain her another cold season? She

didn't know, but she didn't think about dying, only food. Eat the bitter leaves and survive.

"Just get it over with," the Woman told herself aloud. She'd wedged the boot on her broken leg in between two small boulders and placed her good foot up against one of those boulders to create leverage to push against. She knew she had to pull traction to get the bone back in place before she could splint the leg. If she left it as it was now, she'd most likely lose the leg. She'd avoided this as long as she could. She'd taken her vitals. She'd cleaned her many wounds with cotton gauze and smeared as much as she could with antiseptic before she ran out of supply. She'd slung her arm with the cravat to protect her broken collar bone and tucked the defective limb into her shirt. She'd taken her vitals again. She'd palpated her abdomen. It was tender in a deep place, she felt she couldn't quite get to the source of the pain. "Get on with it," she said again.

She gently pressed her good toes to the rock, like depressing the accelerator pedal of a car. Her vision blurred, and she heard high pitched screams coming down the mountainside. Her body shook as a tide of cold panic swept through her. In her head a flood of words gushed unchecked over and over until they lost all meaning, and still they rushed and swirled about her, crushing the air from her lungs: *I'm alone I'm alone I'm alone I'm alone I'm alone I'm alone.*

She came back to herself breathing in the rhythmic patterns she'd used while giving birth to Natalie. She'd insisted on a natural birth, wanting to take part in this experience of wild womanhood that appeared to be disappearing from the world. It had been a thrill, bringing forth life. It wasn't even about meeting her daughter. It would be many months after the birth before she felt any possession over the baby. She remembered feeling a vainglorious power at this thing that only she could do. She had snarled at the pain and never stopped pushing even after her voice cracked and her air ran out and then suddenly she felt the bone end slip under the surface of the skin. A strange elation swept over her, and she held her swaddled arm tenderly to her body like a newborn. Her gentleness returned and, she thought she loved all her limbs dearly, and what a pretty orange sky was before her. She ought to take a picture of it for Natalie, who loved sunsets, but her vision was fading to shades of orange, then soft white, and finally, black.

The Woman woke with a shudder as the sky drained to gray twilight, a night alone in the wilderness. She dumped her pack out next to her

and did an inventory: about half a liter in her water bladder, headlamp, phone, empty med kit, down jacket, matches and Vaseline dipped cotton balls for starting fires (no firewood, useless), compass, map, wool hat, which she put on, a bag of beef jerky, a granola bar. She didn't pack this. Bill must've slipped it in for emergency rations. Bill lived off granola bars. When she went out for dinner and drinks with clients, she could be sure that Bill and Natalie were eating granola bars at home. She considered the granola bar. She thought she'd vomit if she ate it, but then granola bars generally made her feel like vomiting even when everything was fine. When she gets out of here, she'll never allow another granola bar into her house. Bill will understand, will get a good laugh out of it, even. Or they'll get divorced, citing an irreconcilable difference over granola bars on the paperwork. Fuck granola bars, she thought. This made her feel better.

Someone will come for me, she thought. Even if her calls hadn't gone through, Bill knew where she was, and he knew what to do if she hadn't called by nightfall. She had told him where she was going, hadn't she? He would've made the call to rescue by now. They'll send a helicopter tomorrow morning at first light, she told herself. She hardened herself for a night alone in the mountains without shelter. She would survive the night—then they'd come.

Day 2. The Woman had slept barely at all through the night, but as the morning sun hit her she woke and dozed and woke again. At each waking she was defeated again. Where was the helicopter? She gazed around, but her views were blocked above and below by the black rock outcroppings she lay in. *They'll never be able to spot me here*, she thought. Maybe they'd even flown by already while she slept and she'd missed them. The gully fanned out below her, widening as it emptied into the basin below. She exhaled sharply. "Just, help me do this, okay?" she said, speaking to the scree underneath her or perhaps herself. Using her good arm and leg, she began to crawl.

When she first saw it, she thought it was a patch of summer snow. As she slid closer, she saw the bones white against the gray rocks. It was a Goat, the skeleton and hide of a small kid. The skin lay stiff across the rib cage and hips, the soft ivory fur still attached, but elsewhere the bones had been laid bare to the elements, the hide weathered away. Her hand trembled as she stroked the still-soft fur, wrapped her fingers around the slender leg bone, so like the one she had forced back down beneath the skin yesterday. His little body would disappear soon; the skin would sluff and deteriorate, and the bones would be pressed down under the winter's

snow where the shifting rocks and spring erosion would grind the bones to shard and powder. By spring there would be little left. She touched his skull, barely bigger than her hand, and let fall a moaning sob. She was scared of disappearing. “Help!” She screamed, “Anybody out there! Help! Help!” each word a long wretched claw against the mountainside until the pain overcame her panic. She vomited blood and then sat trembling in the afternoon sun. She watched the horizon, willing a helicopter to appear. When none came, she left the tiny skeleton alone again, a patch of white shrinking against an immense world.

The Goat heard the screams below her and knew where they came from. But she didn’t go there. There was a smell, familiar and horrible, near where the Woman lay on the mountain. It smelled of death, a scent she knew. It made her udders itch, and her muscles tense. She stayed high on the mountain and browsed.

A black bear ambled into the lower basin and foraged lazily near the stream under a blooded sky. He dug at the dirt, turning up roots and shaking free little berries, his immense claws strangely suited to the vegetal work. The Goat watched him without concern. Up in the rocky and narrow places he could not compete with her. His strength was terrible, but strength had little advantage on the mountains. Everything here must be careful; even the trees could not spare enough and made their villages lower down the flanks. Bear was an abundant creature, not like her. Her small frame was much more suited to perseverance; she was made to starve and survive and starve again. But she never starved all the way, and each time her instinct strengthened. Persistence kept her alive when there was no food in the depth of winter or when the streams ran dry from high summer drought. The rain would fall. There was food there under the snow.

She craved the full belly feeling of water and the clear taste in her mouth. Her impulse was to go down to the stream at the shrub line to drink deeply and to take her fill of foliage before dark. Below, the bear still shambled about the waterway lower down in the trees. She occasionally heard his brutish claws catching the rocks in the dirt. The eerie echo of claw on rock singing up the slope made her muscles bunch up nervously. She wouldn’t risk going down to drink deeply before dark and had to lick the trickle of snow runoff further up the mountain. The blood sky darkened, clotted clouds building. Soon there would be plenty to drink. She heard the bear huff once, perhaps unsettled by the first low rumble of thunder overhead. Then she could no longer see him, but she

could still smell him long into the night, his musty earthen stench coming to her on the wind, which also brought the moisture.

Day 3 Last night's snow had melted quickly under the late-year sunshine. The goat traveled down to the stream at first light, smelling only snow-chilled vegetation. She fed in the basin most of the morning, then went to the rocky base of the mountain where the Woman lay to begin the work of chewing through her pack to get at whatever food hid inside. She found the Woman alive and had shown her horns at the sight, instinctively defending herself against the life which she had not expected to find. The Woman was holding up a small, glinting thing. She pressed her finger to it again and again, all her focus strained to the task. Her skin had turned rain-cloud gray, and her breaths came in wheezes short and sharp. She whispered to herself a single word over and over until it sounded like lapping tides in the air, "please please please please please."

The Goat watched. The sky yielded nothing but vast blue emptiness. The Woman's eyes drifted, and she finally saw the Goat standing there. Her face began to twitch and wince in little spasms, and she said, "Help." The Goat looked at the Woman a moment longer. The Woman seemed to be disintegrating into the Earth. All things will become food; she needed only wait. She turned to the ridge of the gully to more stable rock and bounded up the mountain. The Goat could hear the Woman's weak voice rasp, "Come back! Please come back!" and then it was just thin, sob-like syllables getting thinner the higher up she went. She heard the words like flapping bird wings ascending into the sky.

The Woman woke choking on her tongue. It was swollen, stuck on the top of her mouth. She reached for her water bladder. She bit the hard plastic rim and got two gulps before it went dry. The stream wasn't more than a hundred feet away, she could hear it, but she couldn't crawl anymore. The blood demanded she cease. Her stomach bloomed in deep purple and black bruises; she had been bleeding all this time. She watched the sun drop behind the ridgeline, the deep blue membrane of evening slowly digesting the last light of her third day in the basin. She thought, *one more night then they'll come*.

Nights are so long. It was a habit of hers when she slept outside to pass the time in the evenings counting the stars as they appeared until she couldn't keep track anymore. Tonight, she counted to stay awake, not to fall asleep. She probably wouldn't wake up if she fell asleep, and they would come for her tomorrow, at first light.

"One…two…three…four…" she mumbled dreamily but then couldn't remember what she'd been counting. Blades of grass, maybe. She tried pinching a blade between her fingers, but she couldn't feel her fingers or hands. Dark deepened. Her hands glowed white through the murk. There's no blood in them, she thought. She wanted her gloves so she wouldn't have to look at her translucent hands anymore, but they were padding her leg splint.

Her leg, oh. She hasn't thought about her leg and now she suddenly realized why—she couldn't feel it. She tried to wiggle her toes. She couldn't tell if they moved. She turned her head to the side to get a view of her foot, waited for the dizziness to subside. The darkness was thick, but she thought she could see the outline of the toe of her boot poking out of the splint. She tried to move the boot. It didn't budge. "I'm dying in sections," she said. "My foot died before me! No fair!" she croaked and laughed in smothered, stiff grunts. "Beat me to it. Got the jump on me," she crooned to no one. She started giggling, the sound mostly contained to her throat in an instinctual effort to spare her stomach. "It's a step ahead of me," she announced to the night. She thought this was the funniest thing she'd ever said, and she was disappointed nobody else heard it.

The silence was ocean big over her head. It was a huge mass drowning everything. It was why her phone didn't work, why she couldn't hear the helicopters or the yells of the rescuers out looking for her. It's why nobody heard the greatest joke ever told and why nobody would ever hear her. The big black nothing spun, and she below it, waited. Something had to hear her. "You hear me goat?" she screamed. It felt like she'd been stabbed in the side and her stomach was being bound in thick rope. "I know you hear me!" she yelled and then saw stars she was pretty sure weren't in the sky, and she felt hot all of a sudden, even though she could see her breath in the air. "I'm dead, goat." The Woman scoffed hard, causing a ripple of pain. She tightened into a curled ball on her side and moaned. "I'm going to die," she whispered. The night ate sound and pulled her down into the warmth of the soil, and there, she was certain she could smell the brightness of evergreen that clung to her child's hair. The mountain had one more gift for her. She couldn't believe she hadn't known what her child meant to her until now.

There is a phenomenon that happens when the wilderness is very quiet, she knew, when the listener hears her own body, her breath, her heartbeat, the rustle of her clothes, and thinks it comes from another person. The listener can become convinced that they are not truly alone,

that someone must be there with them just out of sight and touch.

"Natalie," she said.

Day 4. The Mountain Goat dreamed. White land of layered mountains, rising and falling. She did not know if she climbed onto the black teeth ridgelines or collapsed into their bloodless guts, only that she could not stop moving. Only dead things are still, until the mountain digests them. The dead are moved, not moving, rollicking under the mountains forcing up the life she tastes above the ground. Her stomach has sprigs of green sapling, a gift from the summer willow, and on the tensile legs of hunger she traverses the white land glowing under garish moonlight so glaring it reflects white in her eyes of starless night. The cry of a newborn kid, and she can see the soft pink tongue extended, his muzzle seeking the teat, his virgin coat smelling of warm milk and sharp, sour plants, a scent she made. But where is he? He cries once more, but the mountains heave, the teeth gnash in great rock falls, and the cry comes from within her now. This snow is not cold. It shifts like sand underneath her hooves. Here is her milk turned to marrow, marrow to dust. The scent she made passes by her, rising, falling. Bones are so white, even after the mountain devours them.

Little Incident

Jenna Wysong Filbrun

When I thought I lost you
over the rocks on the summit, I turned my body
inside out. I wore my mind like skin
so thinking could be my largest organ.
I shrank my heart to quarter-size
and shoved it on the shelves of my ribs.
I let my lungs go,
and the wind took them away.

When seconds-hours later
I found you ok, the tectonic plates
of me crashed back together.
My mind contracted to retreat
to my skull. My heart exploded
from my ribs. My lungs heaved
their way back into my body.

Now there is a range of peaks
where a soft sea lay before.
What was at the bottom
is up in the light
in all its glory
and terror.

Skin Tracks

Edmond Stevens

"Don't wander off toward the cornices. Looks solid, I know, but they're just shelves of drifted snow and you don't want one collapsing under you."

"If you're cold leaving the car, then that's just right because you'll heat up after ten minutes of climbing."

"Never whizz in the skin track. Step off to the side if you gotta go. Other skiers are going to cuss if they have to go around your piss holes."

I am trying to familiarize my fourteen-year-old grandson with some basics for out-of-bounds skiing as I break trail through the late season gift, eight inches of freshies, climbing through the casually spaced spruce and aspens toward Wolverine Cirque. I set a modest pace to take into account a new arrival in the mountains, only a couple days aloft from his home at sea level.

"Don't slouch. Chest tall so your lungs take in full breaths."

Approaching nine-thousand-feet, I knew it would feel suffocating, even with breaks every hundred yards. What Cyan didn't yet know was that the misery would plateau, and gradually the body would realize, *Yeah, I can handle this, I'm not gonna die*.

From his first years skiing, Cyan always rejected the velvet of the groomed runs, drawn into the on-the-fly puzzle of the trees with its pillows, kickers, and whoop-de-dos. Just as he refused to accept any crumb of instruction, it was also his nature to choose his own path. Like most resort visitors, Cyan saw skiing as a gravity pursuit. A chair or gondola carried the rider to the top of the slope and Newtonian forces shaped the speed and contours of the descent back to the lift line. The idea of expending a pasta bowl of calories to achieve what a high-speed quad could gain in eight minutes might seem like madness to an X, Y, or Z Generational, accustomed to microwave ramen or the tap of the gamers' "refresh" button when the "K/D" is not going your way. What fool would work all day for two or three descents when you could pile up twenty-thousand feet of vert on your Epic or Ikon dashboard, every turn and plunge captured on a Go-Pro mini-SD card?

"Getting steeper now. Flip up your heel-riser so you're climbing with a flat foot and not stretching your calf muscles."

Actually, all this practical Beta was whisping off into the wind, or more accurately circling silently in my head, because right now my

grandson was down at his sea level home in Southern California. It was a wishful conversation, an aspiration to make a connection with the boy mostly absent since his mother, my daughter, passed away three years ago after a vengeful return of breast cancer. These days, my grandson is as hard to reach as my daughter. He never answers when I call or text. Maybe it's just the age—fourteen—when friends, video games, and super hero movies are primary. *You don't answer*, I want to tell him, *but I still hear you*.

I have to remind myself what I tell friends when they are riding out strife and distance with their own children: be constant, stay in touch, even if it's a one-way channel. Don't take it personally, though it is, in fact, very personal.

With Cyan, I fear his distance is connected to unrealized or deflected grief over the loss of his mother, too closely associating me with her. Dr. Phil psychology, I know, but maybe having to deal with his mother's death forces him to confront that great void in his life. During a trip to Sequoia National Park or a couple visits to the new home my wife and I have made in Utah, I rarely mention Anise, his mom, giving him elbow room to approach the subject on his own terms. But there's never a mention of his mother. Reverse transference, I think they call it.

Over the last decade of her life, my daughter and I had repaired our own fraught and cautious relationship, some of those tensions I owe to the quarrelsome aftermath of the divorce from her mom. That dynamic wasn't helped by my own careless serialization of live-ins and one-and-done women passing through my life. In a child's eye, that could translate into the idea that no woman was good enough and she, too, would be discarded for a brighter, shinier object.

I think of Anise's mid-20s to 30s as our "reconstruction" years. In tip-toe increments, I tried to demonstrate that my presence in her life was steady, not hit-and-miss. A breakthrough in restoring that trust came when I fronted the down payment on her first home. Over the years, she multiplied that investment into a modest cash cushion that provided financial independence, allowing her to focus on art and rise as a regular contributor to glossy art magazines. She often confided in me as her editor, which any author will identify as a special nod of trust and respect.

When touring in the backcountry, far from ski patrol and emergency call boxes, first order of business is to assess the avalanche risk. Part of the essential avi kit is a collapsible shovel, not just to rescue a buried partner,

but to dig pits to identify unstable layers in the snowpack. The current winter stacks like a horizontal spreadsheet. At ground level lie ten inches of sugary granules from the degraded snows of last October when early-birds binged on mid-winter powder a month before the resorts began spinning their lifts. Higher up, a sepia-tinted layer recalls the November/December drought when steady winds stippled the surface with dust and ash from wildfires across the Southwest. Cyan arrived for the Christmas holidays, along with a welcomed storm cycle. That week, he not only learned to bounce from edge to edge on moguls, but my wife taught him that French toast came from eggs and not a toaster.

The new year dropped like the Times Square ball, along with the third anniversary of my daughter's passing. Lingering arctic cold teased vapor from warmer layers in the snowpack that blossomed on the surface as feathery crystals. Then the robust storms of February brought red-flag avalanche hazards, as the new fluff bonded tenuously with the weak crystal structure from the January drought. March storms came in wet and heavy, finally consolidating the snowpack. But then Cyan's spring-break visit was cancelled after he spun off his e-bike, a double fracture of his lower leg ending his season.

I'd introduced my daughter to skiing when she was seven. Her first day went well, no doubt eased because I'd brought along daughters of the latest girlfriend. Watching from the deck above the beginner lift, I saw that when left alone, skiing took on the aspect of play. Later, we did trips to Mammoth and then Utah, where I'd bought into a time-share. On mild blue runs, I coached her on pressing her weight forward, keeping hands out front, rounding her turns. Like her son who would inherit those same twists of DNA, she mostly ignored my coaching and I pressed more forcefully.

"Why?" she threw down her poles.

"To get better."

"Maybe I don't want to get better. Maybe I just want to have fun."

As she grew older, the anticipation of trips or visits always churned up a measure of anxiety, as I worried that some misstep or ill-chosen word would spoil the holiday. The weekend of Anise's 22nd birthday, she'd joined me in Utah for the Thanksgiving holiday. She came off the plane wearing a cloak of gloom. I was used to that broody, anyplace-but-here slouch. This was a period when I'd begun to fear for her mental well-being and even wondered how I could sidestep into a conversation about whether she'd ever had thoughts of ending her life. However, one night

when she was staying over at my Los Angeles apartment, she'd invited friends for pizza and music videos. The tone rose to playful and spoofy as the group assumed I was asleep. Clearly, Anise was no wallflower among her friends, and I realized the gloomy moods I experienced were not about suicidal tendencies. They were about me.

That birthday weekend, she paused in the middle of Sunday breakfast. With some visible gathering of courage, her upper lip rose in a partial draw of breath. "Would it be okay," she asked, "if we passed on skiing today?" I covered any sign of disappointment. How about a movie, then?, I proposed. Maybe some shopping? Later at the airport, she reached out for a hit-and-run hug that felt, as usual, like a gesture just fulfilling an expectation. But we'd both laughed at the movie, and she was happy with the breezy floral dress and silky cardigan we'd found at Banana Republic, suitable for a mild evening of Southern California patio dining, but not much insulation for a Rocky Mountain winter.

My daughter often teased that I had an unnatural affinity to snow and cold. After all, I was born in a Northern Vermont blizzard, my father busting through drifts that blurred any distinction between road and shoulder, to reach the hospital before my mom's contractions converged into the final birth push. Few natural phenomena, in my view, surpass a duvet of plush snow smoothing over all the sharp and pitted features in the landscape. Like a fellow Vermonter, I too have often "stopp[ed] by woods on a snowy evening… to watch [those] woods fill up with snow." For most sensible folks, winter is the off-season. But in my world, summer feels like the waiting time until the snow comes again. However, my daughter, a through-and-through So Cal girl, was a child of a different season, and I wondered if she'd concluded our worlds turned on different axes.

Trooping on skis up a fifteen-degree pitch at ten-thousand feet, under a twenty-pound pack, cold enough to freeze the water in the hydration bladder, might not fit most folks' idea of "a leisure activity." But it has its calling.

I don't know why, with any absolute clarity, I embrace hard challenges. I suspect its origins are entwined with feelings of inadequacy and the need to constantly reinforce the idea that I'm good enough. There's no family history of risk-taking, other than my father's bent for driving under the influence, which was most of the time he got behind the wheel. My mother was hysterically phobic of open water, electrical storms, and fire. With little faith in fuse boxes and industry safety

standards, she unplugged lamps and appliances whenever we left home, afraid that a faulty cord or outlet would burn down the house. From my own youth, one event lingers. In first grade, classmates lined up to climb the ladder and glide down the slide, that, at the time, looked as high as a church steeple. At the top of the ladder, with a half-dozen kids stacked up behind, I froze, terrified of the plunge down the polished steel chute. The teacher on playground duty coaxed down the queue of kids. Humiliated and sobbing, I backstepped to the ground. It's not hard to make a parallel to years later when I joined the high school ski team with my best event the Nordic jump, shooting down ramps that replicated my playground slide by ten and twenty magnitudes.

Today, knowing this is my last time out on skis this season, I shuffle through eight inches of compactable snow, an easy romp, at least compared to midwinter storms that heap thigh-deep powder best managed by a relay of two or three skiers, leap-frogging in ten-minute shifts. Turning now to assess the parallel ribbons below, purling the tree line to leave the broad apron unsullied for later skiers, confirms that I am indeed alone. In this vast aloneness, the question arises that active people of a certain age cannot avoid. What is my allotment of "seasons?" Will cells and joints and stamina allow another day like this, another season to seek a summit with my grandson?

There was a time when Cyan was my regular tail gunner. Before he learned to ride a bike on his own, he'd trail behind mine, his single-wheel tag-along clamped to my seat post. Anise was supportive of our adventure outings, even skipping the usual maternal cautions. I took it as an unspoken nod to my knowledge and experience. But at a deeper level, I read it as a silent transaction between father and daughter, acknowledgment that she'd finally come to a plateau of trust with me and had set aside her once deep suspicions of my love and loyalty. "Have fun," she waved as we pulled from the curb, her only instructions: "Don't fill him up with a lot of junk and spoil his dinner."

Our adventures often took us to Stoney Point in the northeastern corner of L.A, an abrupt rock upheaval that Cyan named "The Rock Castle," a fitting impression with its natural towers, parapets, and battlements. Though not yet ready for technical rock climbing, Cyan sprightly bounded up the boulders and tumbled-rock gullies, embracing the joy of the ascent. Tethered to my harness with a length of climber's rope, he seemed unfazed by the airy ledges or exposed traverses. On one visit, exploring for bat caves or petroglyphs from the Gabrielino

Indians, Cyan took in a deep gulp of chalky dust and pollen. He coughed in spasms, violent enough to produce a string of vomit before catching his breath. I racked our gear, assuming we'd call it a day. No, he wanted to keep climbing. Admirable grit, I thought, for a four-year-old, learning early on that hardship and discomfort were sometimes part of the package to reach a challenging goal.

Stomping through a final reef of drifted snow, I reach the summit ridge, wind-buffed to a level platform for changing out to downhill mode. During the big-snow months, I'd often go out with the "dawn-patrollers," headlamps tunneling into the dark to reach the summit at sunup for untracked lines under the coral streamers of first light. Topping out, these fast-movers would execute the change-out from uphill to ski mode with the snappy precision of a military close-order drill. But mid-April brings the "bonus season," and even the hard-chargers have shifted to a lower gear. I transitioned with no particular urgency, assaying the variety of lines down the fifteen-hundred-foot slope that converged into the summer road leading back to the parking turnout. The steeper lines, with plunging rollovers, fanned out to the left. But directly below, the slope tipped at a lazier pitch, better suited to scrolling out long, scalloped turns. At this elevation, the underbelly of the jet stream often drags across the highest peaks, but today the air is untypically still, a static-free channel to the known and unknown universe.

Often, in the quiet of my nighttime walks with the dog, or pausing in the white room of lightly falling snow, I feel like Anise must surely be within earshot. Martha, her mom, tells me she often feels Anise's presence. In these quiet moments, I try to rid my mind of clutter and reach out, like in a blackout, patting for the light switch or handrail. But I cannot reach her.

As the last viable course of chemo played out, no request, no whimsy was too small. At ten o'clock, Anise might crave Lime Cucumber Gatorade, frozen fruit bars, or mizo soup. But when I returned from the market, she'd usually just say to put it in the refrigerator, never touched. Her infusion appointments gave us a chance to talk, watch movies, or quietly read on our tablets, interrupted only by a dash to the deli to get her a sandwich (roast beef on whole wheat, lettuce but no tomatoes, extra mayo).

I took notes at her oncology appointments and was present at the final consultation that needed no note-taking. "What can I expect at the end?" she asked, noticeably uninflected. "Will there be more pain?" The

specialist itemized the end-of-life decline, and Anise acknowledged each stage with a sagging dip of the head. She processed it all, without tears or dispute. I had to heel the dog chasing its tail in my chest; losing my shit right now would be a violation of her courage. I'd save it for the climb up the stairwell of the parking structure to bring down the car.

When Anise had first been diagnosed with Stage Four cancer, I'd immediately leaped over the Kübler-Ross Five Stages of Grief, bypassing "anger" and "denial" to go directly to "bargaining," trying to cut a deal for her recovery. Entering a 10K race, I'd wager that if I finished in under fifty minutes, Anise's cancer would go into remission. If I could skin up to Pioneer Peak in under an hour, the chemo would ablate the lesions on her liver. Okay, if not recovery, at least extra months on her life. If I could lead a 5.11 at the climbing gym, she'd survive to see her son graduate from Eighth Grade. But the tumors multiplied and I realized God was a tough pit boss.

During her last days, Anise asked for a change of bed linens. She pushed up from the mattress and I guided her to a side chair. With the sheets changed, I circled my arms around her torso and lifted her off the cushion, her head tipping to rest on my shoulder. We could have been slow-waltzing and I realized I'd never danced with my daughter. Not at her graduation party, not her wedding, not on some crazy impulse when the music hit the right beat. Why, since her mid-teens when it had been mutual-assured-destruction between me and her mom, had there always been some mutual fear of close intimacy? I was young for her father, and when waiters or salesgirls sometimes confused her for my date, it clearly disturbed her. Some tense undercurrent had suppressed the possibility of natural, normal affection. But I lingered on that embrace, knowing I would soon have to let her go forever.

I asked, hardly more than a whisper, "Are you afraid?" "A little," she said. I wondered if she had come to a stoic acceptance of death, or was she just trying to protect me from the pending sledge hammer of grief?

I can't say that I've ever experienced anything remotely mystical or paranormal, not that I don't welcome the possibility of other dimensions beyond what is known and recorded. For me, a doorknob has always been a doorknob, a chair a chair, a fork a fork. Solid matter is constant and not a variable, what someone once defined as "consensus reality." But for months after my daughter's death, I would text her phone while the number was still accepting messages. "Hello." "Miss you." "Love you." Only one event keeps me open to the possibility of alternate dimensions.

To celebrate Anise's thirtieth birthday, I'd been composing a poem to add to her gift. The radio was tuned to my usual alt-indie station when the news break segued into the theme from "Midnight Cowboy," a popular movie from the year she was born. Driving home just hours after Anise's birth, I'd switched on the radio and the first notes I heard were the languid rise and fall of the harmonica solo from that movie's theme. People mostly identified Harry Nillson's "Everybody's Talking" as the title track from the movie. But in thirty years, I'd never heard that theme again until that morning, composing the poem for my daughter.

Why then, that moment and that obscure instrumental? So maybe I had to revise my thinking to allow the idea that there was some connective order in the universe, a quantum link between the world we know and other dimensions.

Standing on the ridgeline, I felt like I could tap the stilled air with a tuning fork, and it would resonate at a high C. "Hello out there," I spoke in a normal voice. "It's me. I haven't given up. I love you. I miss you." But there is no response, no sign, not even a swirl of loose snow around my feet. Without the benefit of psychics and seances or Fatima-like apparitions, how would the dead communicate with us anyway? Or maybe my receptors were flawed, the way some people fail to develop the cones in their retinal wall to differentiate color.

I zipped my jacket to the chin and sealed the side vents, sports glasses swapped out for goggles. But I'd loitered too long in my changeout and meditation. A vellum of high clouds had moved in from the southeast, dropping the temperature several degrees. Spring snow is usually high in moisture content, and a modest temperature drop can turn soft, slurvy snow to ice crust in minutes. Hoping to beat the freeze, I pushed off.

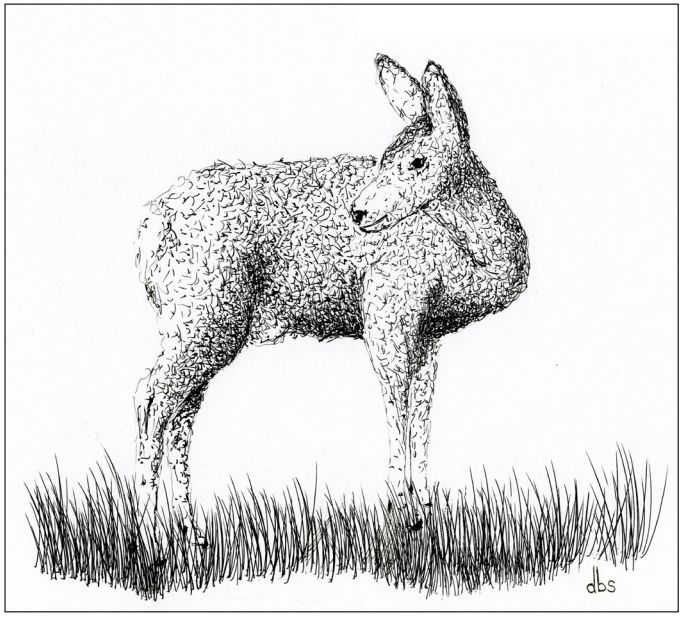
In out-of-bounds skiing, there are no warm-up laps. The first three turns are usually the most demanding, calling on strong form, throwing the upper body aggressively down the pitch. But my first turn is grabby, the skis wanting to hook on separate arcs. That thin freeze layer had set in, demanding a technique not taught in any ski school. What I'd anticipated as a flowing cavort was now something closer to ski-judo. Twice, I stopped to rest on a slope I'd skied dozens of times with the slight effort of gliding across a polished floor in wool socks.

Finally reaching the summer road, I glanced back at my ragged cursive. I could climb again, seeking out more north-facing pitches less affected by the temperature drop. But as I shuffled down the road to the

parking turnout, I hoped that overnight winds would scrub my jagged graffiti, maybe a subconscious metaphor for trying to clean the slate of a ragged personal legacy. I was glad Cyan wasn't with me this time. He'd have flailed and tumbled and never again trusted my promise of gliding through silky fluff.

Back at the car, sitting in the rear cargo hatch, I raised my boots to rest on the trays of the bike rack, already installed in anticipation of the change of seasons and equipment. I drained my water bottle and peeled back the wrapper of the toasted bagel I'd intended for my lunch break. By now, the melting snow had receded to nearly eight-thousand feet. In a month, only smudges would remain, the mountains a corral of painted ponies.

Something about the end of ski season feels like a little death, and at my place in life, the question always pesters if strength, and even life, will carry through to another season and the possibility of reaching a summit with my grandson. And on one of those summits, I hope to call to my daughter and hear her answer. If not in her voice, maybe in the deepening register of my grandson.



Over Her Shoulder

Transitus

Andrew Alexander Mobbs

Descending the mountain, life
emerges from autumnal periphery:

flash of lazuli bunting, madrone
husk curled in overcast surrender.

How quiet, this stillness breaking;
how tender, this touch of liminality.

Sunlight quilts the morning sky,
whispering new beginnings into

inception, but of course the ending
must come first. Winter's edge

will overtake us soon. In seasonal
synchrony, all the foxes, birds,

badgers fall asleep to one question:
come flood, fire, or quake,

what kind of world will greet me
when I wake?

Selling Off the Sacred Groves

Rebecca Vincent

River

At dusk the summer air hangs heavy in the old lodge by the river. We're five days into our annual trip back to Northwest Wisconsin to stay with extended family on the Brule River. The humidity envelops us like a hot cloud, transforming the lodge into a steam room adjusted to the hottest setting. Upstairs, my daughter Sära and I peek once more at the river below from the little bedroom window. Golden-red light illuminates the tips of pine trees that line the shores, while tiny flecks of orange luminescence filter through the night-green woods and water below. Soon Sära is asleep. I silently extricate myself from the sweaty tangle of our cuddling bodies and slip out of the room. I need a break from the heat and family chatter. I escape, alone and unobserved, for a night swim.

Deep blue night spreads over the lingering twilight. As the light fades, the sounds change. Little flutters and scurrying steps heighten. A small toad pads across the walkway, barely visible. When I arrive at the river bank, the water's surface reflects the sky far above the tall red and white pine trees lining the shores—a sky which still holds a glint of the day's light.

The cold of the river takes my breath away as I slide in. In the gathering darkness, my feet touch the fine sand of the river bottom. The water's surface sinks into a black mirror with silvery faint windows of dusk-light. All at once I'm in it, immersed in the cold, spring-fed waters which have flowed into Lake Superior since the last Ice Age. The river cools my baked skin as I drift. The cold of the water is silky and living. Soon night has eclipsed river and sky, and nothing is visible in the water around me. I move in water I can't see through. The current pulls me along. I float. I flow. I trust. I am reborn in this cold river again and again.

Wet and refreshed, I step from the river onto shore. The night sparkles with fireflies. Stars begin to dot the blue-black sky while a hint of the Milky Way's dusty trail emerges. In a few hours its brilliance will almost be loud, jarring—millions and billions of stars scattered like the dust of shattered crystals, like flecks of gold on ebony. Slight, intermittent sounds punctuate the nighttime silence—a flutter of wings, the tenuous movement of a branch, a rustle in the brush, the gentle murmur of water.

My enjoyment of the night is marred only by my deep-seated knowledge that my experience isn't widely shared. Most streams and waterways in the world today are simply too polluted to offer this sense of refreshment. Of course, some chemicals and toxins taint this water, as they do the water, air, and soil everywhere. But compared to most streams in the world today, this one is relatively pure. I need not rinse off after a night dip. I need not fear that hidden chemicals are leaching into me, chemicals which will eventually make me sick.

What must it be like to live in one of the many hot arid communities around the world, where the only streams to cool in consist mainly of agricultural and industrial effluent? The U.N. World Water Development Report 2023 states that a quarter of humanity lacks clean drinking water and 46% does not have basic sanitation. I can only imagine a mother's sorrow when her children want to shed the intense heat by immersing in toxin-soaked waters, her desperation after birth when she needs clean water to wash her newborn and her own sweaty, birth-torn body, and the only available water is brown and poisoned.

Sitting on the dark riverbank, water dripping from my skin onto the earth beneath me, I ponder my privilege in being able to immerse in this pristine stream. But clean water—for bathing, drinking, washing, and growing food—should be a basic human right, not a privilege for the minority.

Ravishing The Sacred Groves

Since ancient times, people have believed that particular places in nature kindle interaction with the divine. The Buddha attained enlightenment under a bodhi tree. Jesus retreated to the olive grove, Gethsemane, to commune with God and receive his messages. God spoke to Moses from a burning bush on a mountaintop, telling him how to lead his people out of bondage in Egypt to the land of milk and honey. And God issued his Ten Commandments to the people through Moses in the wilderness desert of Sinai.

Across Europe people attributed the powers of prophecy to special pools. Spirits spoke through trees, plants, rocks, and waters. At Delphi in ancient Greece, people sought the prophecies of the Oracle by her sacred spring. Animistic cultures view the land and waters as the dwelling places of the spirits and gods. They believe these spirits communicate with them through natural phenomena—wind rustling in the trees, a brook murmuring over rocks, thunder breaking a static green sky. Many of humankind's most treasured expressions have occurred in natural places.

As we raze mountain-tops for coal, mine sacred headwaters for gold and copper, and dam cherished waterfalls for energy, we destroy the temples where sacred words were uttered, where holy laws given, where oracles relayed.

Birthplace of Rivers

A mere thirteen or so miles upriver from where I sit on this riverbank, the Brule River emerges from a tangled span of wilderness, a motherlode birthplace of sources where myriad streams and wild rivers are born. It's the headwaters for numerous pristine and Wild and Scenic Rivers including the St. Croix, Namekagon, Totogatic, and Eau Claire, which flow south into the Mississippi watershed, and the Brule River, which flows north into Lake Superior. These headwaters encompass miles of wetlands, bogs, cold springs bubbling to the surface, countless tributaries, and the ancient Portage Trail which Native Peoples and voyageurs used for centuries to travel between the two watersheds. It's an enchanted realm of forgotten wilderness populated by animals and birds, where you can imagine hidden spirits peeking out from behind giant pines or inhabiting the trickling streams.

This birthplace of rivers is transected by Highway 53 and, running alongside it, the Arrowhead-Westin transmission line. Paddling the upper St. Croix River, before entering the section designated as Wild and Scenic, one must float under the giant buzzing line, immediately followed by Highway 53. Cars and semis roar above while the dark river flows silently beneath. It's very creepy slipping into that narrow, shadowed opening between river and highway to float beneath it to the other side.

Alongside the Arrowhead-Westin transmission line runs Line 61, a pipeline run by Enbridge, a Canadian multinational energy transportation company. Line 61 transports oil to the Midwest and Gulf of Mexico from the Canadian tar sands, the major fracking site sprawling over hundreds of miles of once pristine Canadian wilderness. In 2014-2015, Enbridge expanded capacity for Line 61 to allow it to carry triple the amount of crude. Enbridge has talked of creating a "twin line" to double Line 61's capacity. In 2010 a pipeline in Michigan similar to Line 61 ruptured, blackening countless birds and river animals along 25 miles of the Kalamazoo River and poisoning the water and shoreline. Only one percent of the spilled oil was recovered. It was the largest inland oil spill in U.S. history.

The sources of streams were once sacred. People cherished them, left offerings for them, kept them clean. Will Line 61 rupture and

blacken the streams that flow from these headwaters? I've canoed these rivers since I was a young child as have my mom and her siblings and my grandparents before her. Will my daughter, who has paddled these rivers since she was a toddler sitting between my knees in my kayak and who has marveled her whole life at the ducks, birds, turtles, and wildlife we witness there, be able to float these waters with her children and grandchildren? Or will the shorelines be blackened and toxified by a giant oil spill a short twenty miles upriver? Will bald eagles and herons, turtles, mayflies, and wood ducks continue to inhabit these riverbeds, or will these waters become too toxic to support life?

The evening has sunk into full black night broken through with tiny sparks of star-fire in a splash across the onyx sky. Although I'm cool, wet, and cleansed from the river, these anxieties follow me here as they follow me everywhere. Our intersectional environmental and social troubles are like a mysterious gigantic Rubik's cube so many of us strive to solve. Yet while we scamper to untangle the growing knot, icebergs melt and plunge into the sea, deserts advance, cities flood, and fires rage. A Barred Owl calls in the darkness through the towering white pines "*who cooks for you, who cooks for you?*" Bats swoop out over the river while the drone of mosquitos diverts my thoughts to my immediate setting. I swat and try to ignore their bites and buzz. Sinking back into my thoughts, I simultaneously, paradoxically savor the glory of the gift of being right here right now on this dark riverbank.

I want to fill with these river sounds, this North Woods silence, so I can take them with me. So that when I'm far from this place; when I'm locked in a grid of traffic or surrounded by leaf blowers and jack hammers; bulldozers and car alarms; all the pervasive noise of our world, I can travel in my mind's eye, in my heart-space, back to these banks, back to these flowing waters and this green land. Glimmers of these cool river waters and tangled shorelines will fortify me and at least partially inoculate me to the world's blaring insanities.

Healing the Split

Ecopsychologists assert that human illnesses result from damaged relationships with the greater whole and more-than-human worlds. The archetypal psychologist James Hillman explains that from an ecopsychological perspective, the health of the planet and the health of people are integrally intertwined; human psychological disturbances cannot be studied or healed apart from the planet.

An ecopsychologist would say that toxic tailing pools, radiation-tainted water escaping from nuclear plants, mountain tops blown up for mining, explosions at chemical factories, and all the pervasive environmental disasters to which we have become so inured, reveal as much about our psychological state of being as a species, as they do about our inability to manage these disasters on a pragmatic level. We cannot be fully healed until we realize we are inextricably intertwined with everything around us and that to tend ourselves, we must also tend the larger whole.

If we ruin and destroy every last natural place on earth; if we frack it all and extract every drop of natural gas; if we mine every last bit of gold, copper, and coal; if we suck up every last drop of oil dredged deep in the ocean floor, leaving a wake of poison and destruction behind us, then what kind of species will we have become? And what will we be left with?

As our imprint steadily spreads around the earth, the gigantic beast of industrial civilization quickens its pace to gobble up the remaining wilderness. Sometimes dark images float through my mind of a solely human-configured world--an urban-scape of glass and steel skyscrapers, televisions, machines, computers, technology, cyber-surveillance and pesticide-drenched industrial mono-crops subjugating any remaining open space. A world mined, fracked, poisoned, clearcut. An impoverished world bereft of song birds and wild creatures. A world stripped of biodiversity, a dystopian hell. This isn't the world I want. Not for me, not for my daughter or any living creature and not for the generations that will follow ours.

All life calls us to preserve what wilderness remains, not only from a practical perspective so those areas can perform their myriad roles in supporting healthy ecosystems—on which our lives depend—but also for our spiritual and psychological well-being.

I'm able to function in my modern life only through periodic time spent away from the city in wilderness. When I'm exhausted from modern life, when I'm drenched in the metal and electricity of that world and driving through a tunnel of neon-smeared flashing signs and fluorescent lights, billboards advertising endless wares and the never-ending drone of machines and human voices, I'm sustained remembering paddling on those faraway rivers of the North and hiking through other forests, mountains, and natural areas.

I see through the tunnel of time bright sunlight pouring through the shallow water of my favorite river, the upper section of the Brule—that section closest to its headwaters and Line 61. White-throated sparrows

call from the brush along shore, while glistening strands of green-gold plants float below in the coppery light: long arms of gilded-green water plants sparkling and swaying in the current. Passage after passage of winding river offers a dream-like palimpsest of constantly shifting green and amber-hued plants. I drift in my memory through a bright living kaleidoscope of golden-green forms ceaselessly reshaping and reforming themselves as they move with the current. Kaleidoscopes of color, of light, of water. I'm kept alive through river time.

May we protect these treasures, our last remaining wild areas, these sacred groves, so that future generations have a means to be healthy physically, spiritually, and psychologically. May protected natural areas remain so people can commune with life beyond the human dimension and clear their psyches and minds, and in that state of openness and clarity that comes from quiet time in nature, receive wisdom, insight, illumination, and divine messages.

Steller's Jay

The Truth Is a Nimble Little Creature

Wendy Videlock

Gratitude, too.
The only flippin' truth
is everything moves

says the moon, hovering
over our little fire
here in the heart of Chaco Canyon,
hovering over every mantra,
every sparrow,

every dollar, every
Gaza, every nation,
every little good intention.

The more difficult the world
the greater the imperative
toward the wild—
or toward blame,

toward distraction,
toward impossible heights
and humble strings

of twinkle lights.
My love, here in this sacred place
let us vow
that through the winter

we shall pause by the river
where below the frozen surface
surely tiny fish are feeding.

Let us make a practice
of coming to bear
any weather,

of gathering by the fire,
of reading to one another
as the sparrow wears

her feather, as the moon
resolves to move,
as the body knows

surrender, as the leaves

believe September,
as rhyme succumbs

to reason, as the pause
to remember
descends on every season.

Speaking in Wilderness

Joseph Bruchac

When you speak
in wilderness,
seeing not through
your self but through
the eyes of the land,
the voice you hear
is no longer yours.

You have not planned
the words you speak,
your only script
is the indrawn breath
that brings to you
the scent of pine,
brings to your throat
the first morning mist,
brings to your lungs
the cedar smoke
from the fire.

So you speak
and what you say
when it is given
voice this way

speaks with the wind
and all things that breathe,
wli dogo wongan—
all our relations.

wli dogo wongan, from the Abenaki language.

Wilderness Is Not a Luxury *Fiction*

Eric Aldrich

On the morning of my hike, I left the truck in the Sierra Ancha mountains and descended from pine forests toward desert scrub. I'd do about ten miles per day for four days—two out, two back. Because I was so stressed at my job as a conservationist, my wife Christina had suggested a backpacking trip. My therapist Ted concurred. The range was rugged and remote, a trail that stretched from Aztec Peak to the Salt Lake River, several thousand feet below, and beyond into the Superstition Mountains. A spring would provide water. No one had posted any trip logs, which meant not many people had tried this hike.

Now, hour after hour, the trail rambled over flaking mica and beetle holes. Phoenix's subdivisions and strip malls were hidden over the westward horizon, spreading out even as each year brought less rain.

Conservation is failing, the few sparse desert poppies here told me so. I am failing. Everyone who cares about wilderness awakes to failure every day. Sure, we enjoy small victories, a spring fenced off from cattle or a wildlife bridge over a freeway, but we can win a hundred court cases against a mining company while they only need to win one appeal to dig their hole.

The breeze dried my eyes as I swigged from my Nalgene. If I could have quieted my tinnitus, I would have enjoyed silence.

I felt guilty that Christine couldn't come. I'd brought so much stress into our lives since taking on this job. Every rancher threatens to develop if I don't get them the tax break as fast as possible. Always the same argument—they're sitting on untapped income they need.

Recently, Christine came with me to a leadership conference in Prescott where I'd presented to state legislators. I'd revised my PowerPoint over and over until we were late for dinner. Once we were finally served, I struggled to eat.

Christine put her fork down. She teared up a little. "It hurts to watch you. And Anna, she watches you, too. If her dad thinks the future is doomed, what does that mean for her?"

I started seeing Ted the next week. He's a nice older guy, real smart. He asked me questions about my parents and Christine, about Anna and my job. He helped me see how my internalizing society's climate failures might be hard on my wife and daughter. I did feel better from talking to him.

But, later that week, Ron showed me a video of a court hearing. The government had given a mining corporation the right to mine Oak Flat, an extremely holy place to Apache people. In the video, an Apache man tearfully explained a ceremony held at Oak Flat. Tribal custom forbade sharing the details of that ceremony with outsiders, but they were so desperate to save Oak Flat that they broke that taboo. In the end, their secrets meant nothing. The judge sided with the mining corporation, citing some treaty forced on the Apaches in the 1800s when our ancestors were genociding theirs.

I told Ted the whole story. I told him how people live like flocks of starlings, hoping that fate will favor us when the hawks strike. We ignore the Apache so that we can go on pretending we're not being preyed upon, too.

Ted didn't disagree.

In the evening, I secured a hammock and watched saguaros sway against the Milky Way. Crickets chirped in the creosote. Despite these distractions, I remembered unanswered emails. It didn't matter that my computer was far away. I read a sticker on my bottle as I drank, a quote from Ed Abbey, "Wilderness is Not a Luxury." It reminded me why I was there, and I did my best to forget my emails as nighthawks whipped through fluttering bats above.

I rose early the next morning, feeling alive instead of the usual exhaustion. I trekked at a decent pace all day. Yellow brittlebush should have blanketed the hillsides, but the scrub was brown. Coyotes yipped and thrashers whistled. During lunch, I watched Harris hawks coordinate an ambush from atop saguaros. The trail was rough in some places, light in others, but navigable. Just before 5:00, I made camp near a spring marked with an X on the GPS. Water filled a trough where a side canyon intersected the main channel, tall reeds flourishing off the overflow. I slung my hammock between a mesquite and a boulder, ate sardines, and lanced a blister.

The cliffsides glowed when the sun dipped below the rim. Cactus wrens flitted about the rocks. I'd forgotten to give Susan an overview of the report she was delivering for me. The clients might have questions. I closed my eyes and listened to the dusk insects. I was in the desert. I owed it to myself, and to Christine, to enjoy my surroundings.

I opened my eyes to a coyote slipping out of the grass by the spring and trotting directly at me. It showed no signs of slowing. I shouted, "Whoa!" It kept coming. I rolled out of the hammock and backed away. The coyote stopped and our eyes met, its yellow pupils unblinking.

Maybe I'm too close to its den, I hypothesized. I'll give it space, collect my stuff when it leaves, and move on. I thought I knew coyotes. They raised pups in the arroyos, howled at dusk, peered from roadsides. Maybe this one was rabid or had a brain tumor.

Gravel sucked my boots as I backed off. The coyote followed. When I reached the opposite canyon wall, I shouted, "Get outta here!" My echo sounded terrified. The coyote startled, but then circled closer. A ledge protruded above me, a deep crack running beside it. Eyeing the coyote, I scaled the crack, traversed to the ledge, and dropped into a packrat's pile of cholla pears. Barbed thorns sunk into my hand and I flailed to get them out, almost losing my balance.

The coyote watched, its bushy tail thrashing the gravel. It considered me for a moment, then slunk into the shade of a creosote bush, circled, and lay down.

Eventually my breathing slowed. My punctured palm throbbed as I situated myself on the narrow rock shelf. My back had grown weak from sitting in an office chair. It ached, but I was afraid to go down.

The temperature dropped as sunlight faded and the moon crept higher. I needed to take control of my situation, but I felt stuck. Mind over matter quelled my shivering until it didn't, and then I shook continually. Everything became blue-grey in the moonlight. Thirst arrived quickly since I had left my water with my bag. I'd kept my phone in my pocket, though. If only there was a cell tower to cover this dead zone, I thought. Any other time, I'd never call the desert a dead zone, but, on that ledge, I longed for the full-signal icon.

The canyon between my daily worries and my immediate predicament was wide, and now the view looked better from the other side. Would I be OK, I questioned? Was I OK now? Yesterday? Before that?

How would work go on without me? What would it do to my parents if I never came home? Worst of all, what would it do to Christine and Anna? Would they be better off without me, even if it was hard at first? Could Christine pay the mortgage alone? Would Anna end up suffocated by student loans?

Dying in the desert wasn't the only way I might lose Christine. How many nights had she gone to bed alone, kissing my cheek because I failed to turn my face from the computer screen?

Hours passed while I rocked back and forth, perseverating. Could I run the coyote off, live by the spring forever? I am human and that's what we do—run things off and replace them with ourselves.

But the coyote made clear that I wasn't welcome to stay in the desert and forget about meetings, mortgages, and mines. Maybe some intergenerational memory taught it to drive me off, lest I gain a foothold, multiply, and overrun the landscape. Maybe the coyotes had watched how we treated others of our own species, or maybe coyote history relies on firsthand experience.

Eventually, sunrise collected over the canyon rim, bringing warmth and focus. I squinted at the coyote's outline, tail coiled, waiting. I thought I heard it yawn.

"It's probably never fought anything with hands," I mumbled. I imagined myself tearing off one tall, velvet ear, and shuddered.

It was thirst that compelled me to go. My thighs quaked and my back knotted as I slipped down. I thought I heard the coyote panting, but it might have been my breathing. I landed on all fours in the gravel, expecting the coyote to pounce, but saw only a kangaroo rat disappearing into the grass.

I felt an overwhelming urge to reconnect with my truck. If I made it back before midnight, it would be my longest single-day hike. I sprinted to my campsite, grabbed my pack, stuffed my things inside. I took a last look at the spring, wondered how long I could survive beside the green reeds.

The return trek was knee-punishing. Every step crushed blisters. Grass seeds burrowed through my boots, turning them into iron maidens. After several hours, I slumped on a rock, drank, and tried to cram down an energy bar. I got through half before it came back up. My body ached like the flu. I kept thinking about the coyote. Maybe I should have thrown something at it, maybe it was curious, maybe it was sick. A scraping came from the chaparral behind me. I glimpsed a passing shadow. I shouldered my pack and walked on.

Morning blurred with afternoon. I conjured Anna's blue eyes, images of her bouncing through the house. Sometimes, I imagined the coyote's yellow pupils, and that motivated me too. My legs bled from scrapes and punctures. If I made it to the truck—when I made it to the truck— I could be me again. I could get signal. This would end; there would be walls between me and every coyote in Arizona.

Fear radiated like heat. Fear of the desert, fear of leaving the desert. Fear of tomorrow and next month and ten years from now when Anna would be almost grown. Fear of what her world will look like. Fear of coyotes and losing my marriage, fear of mining corporations and mountain lions and judges, fear of rattlesnakes and of failing my colleagues.

In the sunset shadows, I smashed my shin on a rock. A purple welt sprouted, but I kept hobbling. Coyote yips mixed with my jagged huffing. I couldn't feel my feet, but I was on a trail, winding upward over rocks and roots. From mesquite to oak to pine, the switchbacks rose steeply. Grass and vines overgrew the path. I don't know how I didn't get lost, but, eventually, my truck stood out against the ponderosa columns.

I leaned on the tailgate and retched, then crawled in the driver's seat, and locked the doors. Still no signal on the phone, but I was in the truck. I'd walked for nineteen hours. I almost laughed but wound up coughing. My eyes rested on Christine's hair tie in a cupholder. I smelled a pine air freshener. I'm part of the truck, I thought. I was no longer the man the coyotes saw creeping through the desert. I was a man in a truck.

My lips seeped. I removed bloody socks to find blackened toenails and eroded skin. Though swallowing sent blades down my throat, I drank a liter of water and ate some peanuts. I fell asleep around 1:30 in the morning. At 2:00, the hour I often lay awake worrying about debts and deadlines, the howling began.

In the darkness, coyotes yodeled, barked, and moaned. Sometimes they all stopped abruptly, followed by audible panting. A few breaths later, the cacophony would erupt again. It went on until sunrise. I faded in and out of sleep, startling awake when the yowls erupted.

At 7:30, I gave up on rest. I often have a meeting at that time and I wondered who was in the conference room. I imagined driving straight there, walking in with my crimson sunburn, missing toenails, lacerated shins.

I started the truck and eased it onto the road, coasted to Winkleman, a place on its way to being a ghost town. I got a motel room and called Christine.

"Done already?" She was surprised.

"Yeah, I had so much on my mind I couldn't relax," I said. I didn't mention the coyotes.

"You drove all that way…" I could picture her rubbing her forehead.

"Yeah, I know. I'm going to take a nap and I'll be home."

"OK. Drive safe."

I tossed and turned until noon, then drove back to Tucson. Christine met me at the door. She should have been at work, so I knew I'd worried her.

"Jesus, Gary!" she covered her mouth. "You're so burnt! And your legs, your feet…"

"I walked really far," I said. She stepped aside and I came in. I could smell my sweat in spite of a lavender-scented candle. Anna's iPad squawked in her room.

"What happened?" Christine took my bag and leaned it against the sofa. She examined my swollen shins, then hurried to the bathroom for peroxide and cotton balls. I almost told her about the coyotes, and I would, later, but, there in the living room, I wasn't sure what really happened.

"I wasn't prepared," I told her. "I couldn't relax, and being out there alone… I guess I…panicked."

"Oh, Gary," Christine put her cool palm on the back of my neck. She heated up a pizza while I showered. I fell asleep on the couch with a half-eaten slice on my lap.

I did relax somewhat the next morning after I responded to my emails, but it was superficial, like scratching a mosquito bite. Later, I dozed on the couch and dreamed of being on that ledge, giving a presentation. A crowd of coyotes arranged themselves below me, ears pointed upward. I was wearing a collared shirt with shorts and I was barefoot. As much as I yipped and barked, I didn't speak enough of their language. The coyotes dispersed one by one until I looked down and saw only my daughter's perplexed face staring back at me. I woke up and found that Christine and Anna had gone out. My tinnitus competed with the fridge for the loudest sound.

Ashamed by the dream, a different flock of fears settled on my heart. Fear that my mental health had collapsed, fear that wilderness would deteriorate until I could no longer return. Fear that I was wasting my life in front of screens while the saguaros crumbled and the wildflowers vanished. Fear that my anxiety would poison Christine and Anna, desiccate their hopes.

I have to go back to the Sierra Anchas before it's too late, I concluded. Before it's too late for the wilderness. Before it's too late for my marriage. Before it's too late for me. Who was I that a scavenger didn't fear me? I needed to confront the coyote, or at least my fear of it. I needed to do the trip over or lose the real wilderness in my wilderness of fears. Part of me, the part my wife loved, was still in a hammock out there by the spring.

I needed to go back, but the route disappeared from my GPS and I couldn't find the post online again. I emailed the site administrator, and he had no trace of it. So weird. I've been scouring the desert in Google Earth, zooming in and out, searching for the shine of the coyote's spring, but I haven't found it. Yet.

Icons of Aridity

Cooper Smith

The charred fingers
Of mesquites fold
Like arthritic hands
Clenched and black
Against a dull November sky,
And I hike through the moon dust,
Remnants of this season's fire.
Looming gaunt and hollow
Between shadows of life,
Grandfather saguaro stands,
Cooked, great trunk carbonized
And innumerable arms
Frozen, yellowed, and sticky
With the boiled sap of centuries.
We are backpacking through
An arriving Armageddon, of
Failing ecosystems and the
Buckling of whole biospheres
Where resiliency wanes in
The most natural of disasters.
When the standard is drought,
Even the very icons
Of the arid will not endure.
100 days over 100 degrees
Brings the saguaros
To their knees.

Trust Rising: On Walking the Plains

Penny Freedwing

Stepping out my front door, I emerge into an affluent, leafy green suburb adjacent to the wide, clear waters of Lake Michigan. It is extravagantly beautiful. Practically Edenic. Here every plant rests in a pillowy mulch bed serenaded by choruses of chubby, cherubic birds. The streets are lined with gracefully arched trees. It is fall now, and the living art of the landscape architects is on full display. Their thoughtful selection and placement of trees—in varieties and convergences never seen in nature—stitches together into a patchwork quilt of color so vibrant it scorches my eyes.

Despite the sparkling artistry of its streetscape, this quiet midwestern village has always felt to me unnatural and impenetrable. There's a spirit of disquiet baked into the landscape itself, a spirit I perceive in the sidewalks and fence lines, the alarm systems and camera-monitored doors. It's a place to observe, but not explore. I inquire silently what it wants to teach me. It whispers back—*nothing but restraint*. Though I have lived on this street for 13 years, I remain a foreigner in a foreign land. As a stranger I strive to fit in and avoid scandal. And so when I step out of my home here in this suburb, I step out onto the narrow path of permission, the well-maintained suburban sidewalk, one that promises a safe and scenic passage—if only one stays within its lines. I suppose I feel safe.

It wasn't always like this. My formative years were spent walking the barrierless ranch lands of Oklahoma. Leaving home in the morning—taking nothing with me—I would often amble out alone on a jagged line toward the Cimmaron River, a pathless route across the farms, woods, and pasturelands of our neighbors. There were, to my knowledge, no rules written or assumed about passing through. At least *I* assumed this, though I never thought to ask but rather trusted that I was welcome to go anywhere my feet and wits could take me.

I say barrierless, but there were, of course, many barriers—though most were not meant, I felt, to constrain *me*. Fences—barbed, electrified, or both—enclosed vast fields of prairie grasses. These were no great trouble to pass. I learned to listen for the rhythmic sizzling zaps of the electric lines. One hard shock will teach even the dimmest bulb to take them seriously. Through painful experiment, I mastered the tricks of electric fences: strip the bark off a green branch and ground the electric line with it. Pop over or wiggle through. Use a second branch—dry!—to

knock it back off, and you are on your merry way, no harm to self or fence. At least this worked for me. Maybe others worked out different solutions.

The more serious barriers were the ones that rose up unexpectedly. I remember one sunny day heading out, as I often did, across the Fisher Ranch. The Fishers were well-respected in town but also considered "fancy" ranchers—locally famous for hosting George H.W. Bush and company for an annual bobwhite quail hunt. Most people in that area ran ordinary Hereford or Angus herds. But the Fishers had more money and exotic tastes. They ran Texas Longhorns and handsome herds of speckled Appaloosa horses. The Appaloosas were pampered babies and stayed close to home in eight-foot tall enclosures, but the Longhorns could be anywhere on that 1,000+ acre property.

Truth is, I never gave those Longhorns a moment's thought until one day, deeply submerged in my fantastical childhood daydreams, I crested a low hill and found a small herd of them browsing just on the other side. Bad luck, it was a breeding herd. Every one of them noticed me at the exact moment I saw them. Twenty cows' heads spun toward me like compass needles finding north—each one heavily armed with its six-foot wide rack of horns. And in front of them all, the bull, all 2000 pounds of him, chuffing lustily from his wide nostrils, an incongruous tuft of grass dangling from his loose lips.

I froze and put my daydream on hold. Some animal instinct grabbed the wheel, and I turned my face to look past the bull's shoulder and avoid eye contact. I knew better than to back up or approach—either of which can be provocative. The only way out was sideways, so I began a slow shuffle, angling off and away from the herd, as though that was where I was headed all along, keeping that bull in my side-sight. It was a very long way to the closest fence line and those cows' derpy faces stayed fixed on me the whole time. Once safely across it, my pleasant daydreams came back online, and off I went again, this time walking the fence lines to stay out of the Fisher cattle's massive enclosure. Perhaps I felt a small shiver of pride to have escaped so utterly unskewered.

As a child, there simply were no established paths through those pasturelands and woods. Everywhere was permitted. Nowhere was strictly safe. Navigation was by landmark. Unlooked-for glories were as likely as terrors. Like finding ice-cold water on a blistering hot day drawn up from under the dry and cracked red earth by a neighbor's windmill. Or like the time a herd of white-tail deer, startled from their mid-day nap by my tromping through the tall prairie grass, sprang up from the

underbrush right at my feet and one by one floated over the nearby fence as though on wings, each waving the white flag of its tail in retreat. In that moment I felt that I too, solid animal that I was, might yet fly if I could but learn the trick of it.

Memories of that freedom of movement and the accompanying glories and terrors return to me now in this tidy, tied-down, and tucked-in town which I have chosen, I tell myself, for the good of my children. But what was it, exactly, that I told myself? The excellent schools, no doubt, and the verdant parks, and the spacious houses. Perhaps I also told myself that it was very safe. It never occurred to me, not once, that there was such a thing as too safe.

Oh, I can see the straight, smooth, clean logic of this straight, smooth, clean walking surface. I have witnessed the elderly with their walkers navigating down the sidewalk flummoxed at the curbs or even at small ridges raised up by wayward tree roots. The sidewalks are a necessary mercy for these and others—the nannies with their strollers, the toddlers learning to ride bikes. It would be unkind not to accommodate them.

And yet my thoughts wander often upon the open range—its vastness and staggering glories, its satisfying solutions to electrifying problems, its cold clear water offered freely on a hot day. I wonder what I have done to my children teaching them—as one must, I suppose, to be safe—the rules of suburban walking. The necessities of sidewalks. The tyranny of the straight line. I remember well each slow walk with them off to the local preschool, just two blocks from our house. We'd go hand-in-hand down the sidewalk to the school—an excellent Montessori—where they'd be encouraged to explore and learn, play nice with friends and sing songs about peace. Little did I realize that the walk itself was also a kind of lesson. I took their little hands in mine and directed them away from the street, away from the neighbors' yards, away from the perfectly climbable but forbidden sculptures and church walls, the perfectly climbable but forbidden trees. In this way I was telling them a story of a frightening and forbidding world in which the only safe thing to do is stay on the path provided. Just follow the rules and the path will take you—safely, safely, safely—everywhere you are allowed to go. And if I told them stories of my childhood on the Plains, I felt these must have been like fairy tales to them. Truly I wanted them to feel at home here, even if I could not. Or, at least, I thought that's what I wanted, for a time.

It was a time that ended very slowly, then all at once. Last spring, on a bright sunny day, I walked the long straight path down to Gillson

Beach along Lake Michigan, as I often did, to sit on a bench overlooking the lake and scribble my small poems. Arriving at my usual spot, I found that the village wisemen had erected a fence between the benches and the lake. Unlike the cattle fences of my youth, this barrier was undeniably intended for me.

As I stood in disbelief, my bile rising, I was slowly joined by a handful of fellow townspeople—exercisers, dog-walkers, view-seekers. We waterfront walkers are typically a quiet crew, but at this affront we did speak up. The summer was spent in protest of the fence—yard signs were printed and displayed, village meetings were attended, voices were raised, news reporters aired our grievances on television. I do not exaggerate when I say that I witnessed grown men and women weeping at the town meetings, begging for permission to walk and swim at their own risk.

The fence remained. Safety, we were told, was paramount. The fence would protect us from accidental drowning, preventing access to the water when the lifeguards were away. Also, preventing access to the water of people we do not wish to have in our water. Unsafe people, I guess. Now November has come, and the fence remains. I have been back, but sadly I no longer find much poetry arising from those waters.

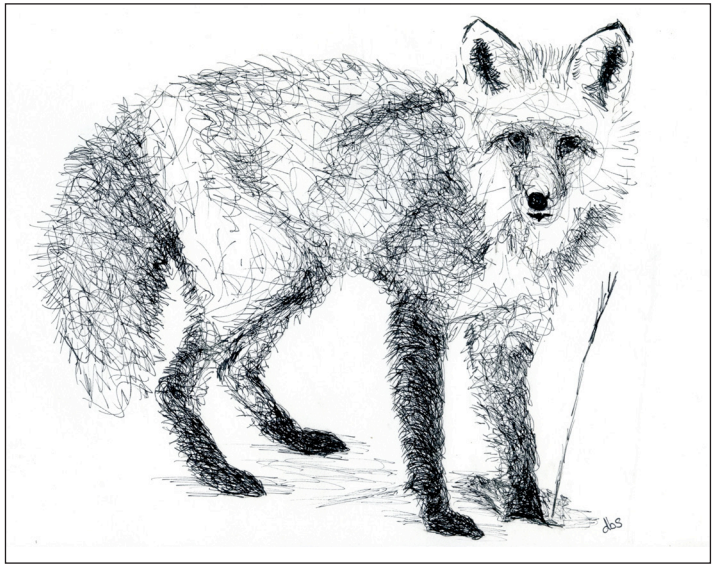
Growing up on prairielands, it was trust, not safety, that guarded my steps. Trusting to the thick leather of my boots to protect against rattlesnake venom. Trusting the green twitch to ground the wire. Trusting to wind and the deep aquifers to quench thirst. Trusting my neighbors not to loose their dogs or guns on me for crossing their property. Trusting always my own animal instincts. Trusting, also, that strange beauty will rise up from its rest and reward the bold and curious for setting out. I fear for my children not that they will be unsafe but that they will be untrusting.

As it turns out, place is not destiny, and some children learn different lessons than those their parents intended. Perhaps I should have foreseen this in my own long and winding path out of the farmlands to midwestern suburbia—a passage my own parents could neither have imagined or desired. Children, it seems, will grow up through whatever holes in the fences of their lives they find. My older daughter at fifteen has begun to navigate the environment in new ways—by parkour and skateboard. Her surgical scars bear witness to her courage. She ventures beyond the safe borders of our village to the sketchy skatepark one village over from whence she reports back strange affairs—balletic tricks and epic tumbles, tattooed and pierced fellow travelers of indeterminate

gender, a fast-talking felon with an ankle monitor. This last makes her, she admits, a little uncomfortable. I think of the bull.

And those excellent schools? My younger daughter no longer attends them. A sensitive and imaginative child, she simply could not shrink herself sufficiently to fit into their social customs and norms. Shunned by both peers and teachers, she had become almost zombie-like trudging to her *excellent* school each day. Aching at her suffering, I finally extracted her. Now I drive her each day to a distant school for gifted children where she has found her people. She fills notebook upon notebook with drawings of winged, wraith-like characters, heavily armed, with solemn faces. She is learning to walk her internal landscapes, and I can only surmise what beauty takes flight for her there.

The capacity for trust, rooted in the Great Plains, arises in me anew and settles also on my children. I trust them, as I once trusted myself, to navigate and grow, each in her own glorious way, shaped by the land, but not limited by it. This trust, a gift from my childhood wandering, is the only good firm fruit I brought out with me from the red dirt farms of Oklahoma.



Fox in February Snow

Wilderness

Nicholas Samaras

How appropriate to travel four thousand miles
to the port of Daphne, the entrance of Mount Athos,

only to run into an Elder I met in America decades ago.
We were disembarking and embarking.

In that brief exchange, I learned how to define wilderness.
Embracing the Elder, I asked him where he was going.

"Into the desert," he replied.
My look quizzical, as the Holy Mountain has no desert

but only the dense forest and mountain range.
But the Elder tapped my chest and said, "The desert in here."

When he asked me where I was going, I mentioned the monastery
and he responded, "You are going into the wilderness."

What wilderness? My monastery was an easy walk away.
But the Elder said, "The wilderness is anywhere we go

to confront ourselves." Then, everyone has a wilderness
we retreat into. Every day, we are always

disembarking or embarking. In Daphne, I looked up
and saw the dense earth and its green-black foliage

climb off into distance. Clouds descended to touch the earth.
I had come to the rough country to find

myself in the stillness of confrontation.
I left the Elder to his desert, hoisted my bag

and walked upward into the green and black hills,
the fearful, lovely wilderness.

Steppe Song

Erin Robertson

In Mongolia
you find out
the earth is much bigger
than you thought.
Space surrounds you,
swallows you up.
The blue sky
stretches out so wide,
it might just break.
The green hills roll
into foothills dotted
with yellow trees,
just like home
except without fences
roads
walls.
You ride a small horse
much, much too far.
You try not to say
tchoo
so he will not
gallop.
Hours later,
back at the ger,
your inexperienced muscles
are so sore
you must strategize
about how to
lie down.
You drink airag
and probably
offend people greatly,
but they are
too good-natured to
let you know.

You sometimes stop
at big piles of rock,
leave either a
blue prayer scarf
or an empty bottle of
Chinggis beer
(it is all the same).
And, for the first
time in your life,
you know when the
moon will rise.

The Bird Monk

Dian Parker

At the spring by the crumbling monastery, we wash for the first time in weeks. I put on my second set of clothes, only slightly cleaner than my other pants and tee shirt. I keep my head covered and wear pants out of respect for the people, but here in Sinai all we've seen so far is the monastery's old caretaker. After a lot of hand movements and broken Arabic, he shows us around Santa Katerina Monastery, built in 565 AD. Wandering through dusty hallways and past closed doors, he leads us to a long narrow room filled with stacks of towering rolled scrolls, some unfurled and cascading over the disheveled shelves. The parchments are obviously ancient and falling apart. The caretaker tells us many of the scrolls have been burned through the centuries to keep warm. "Not me," he insists, vigorously shaking his head. We wonder how many ancient scrolls are gone forever, lost in negligence and ignorance?

This was in 1986. Thirty years later, I read that scholars had finally *discovered* these texts. They were written in Christian Palestinian Aramaic, now a 'dead language.' Back then, no one thought to study, preserve, and archive these important manuscripts. My boyfriend and I had held them gingerly in our hands, centuries old, crumbling like burning newspaper.

From the monastery door, I can see the top of the 500-year-old cypress tree where supposedly Elijah heard the voice of God. I question nothing here, except myself. Traditions, myths, religion, culture—everything I've encountered so far is all mixed up inside. Traveling in this desert, I feel as forsaken as these dusty scrolls.

My boyfriend and I have been traveling in the Middle East for two years, mostly hitchhiking. Getting out of Turkey, it took us 11 hours on 5 trucks to go 125 kilometers. We're in Sinai to climb the mountains. It's a relief to be away from men. In Turkey, I was stared at like I was a foreign film and never left alone. I'd leave Eli except whenever I venture out alone, I'm surrounded by men. When I crossed the street yesterday, even before reaching the other side, three men were pressing in. When Eli and I are together, they harass us to go to their shop, çay house, or to meet the family. When we follow them, inevitably it's to listen to them gossip, get into fights, or get drunk on Raki and dance with their buddies. I'm tired deep down and hoping that this ochre, rocky desert will offer me solitude and respite from civilizations I don't understand.

After our astonishing tour of the monastery, we climb up the mountain opposite *Jebel Musa*, Mount Sinai, where Moses supposedly received the Ten Commandments. Sand-colored rock against a cobalt sky, the fat silence of the high desert, and a clear, bright cold penetrates my weariness. When Eli climbs up the wadi to scout out the next route, I watch him leave and think of going veiled to Alexandria but know my exotic romantic notions are false. After all our talk about being world citizens without a country or sex, traveling as individuals, I'm *forced* to be a woman, as much as I'd like to be invisible. No matter how much I cover myself, I'm still pursued. I'm afraid to travel alone so I travel with a man, but that doesn't diminish my frustration and anger that I have to give up my freedom for his protection. I wept for a long time this morning in my sleeping bag, frustrated by my inability to conquer my fear and set out alone. I've had to be hard and rigid, like this desert stone, and not linger anywhere. Forget being soft. Being a woman on the road in these countries sucks.

It might be hard to imagine this now in the age of cell phones, but back then traveling alone, especially in the wilderness, or in the Middle East where a woman is rarely seen alone, there was only your wits and intuition to guide you, and if need be, rescue you.

Here, now, then, the mountains are silent. And loud. I can hear silence throbbing in my brain, a continual pulse that accompanies my every uphill step. I lean back against a scarp of rock and close my eyes. Here, in the stillness, I feel like I can finally breathe.

Eli has found a narrow path and we continue our climb. The rocks are monoliths, ancient relics of the wind, carved smooth. One slab looks like a sloughing lion. At dusk, near the top of the mountain, we stumble upon a long stone wall rising upwards. At the end of the wall, surprisingly, is a turquoise door. Hanging by the wooden door is an old rusty tin can with a wooden stick next to it. Eli clangs the can with the stick. We hear a door bang shut, and wait. No one comes. We won't enter even though the door is propped open with a pole.

Backtracking along the narrow stone path, we come to what may have been a monk's hallow—large crumbling stones built into two rooms, overgrown with sage brush, roofless. It is night, colder still and windy. We huddle against one of the walls in our zipped together sleeping bags wearing every piece of clothing we carry, which isn't much. We had originally intended to travel to India from Greece where our hot weather clothes would have worked. In two years, we've only managed the Fertile Crescent, which is nothing like fertile.

I can't sleep. The Milky Way blazes overhead. Finally a full moon slips over the peak, burning loud. Now I know I'll never get to sleep in this light and the bitter cold. I wake Eli to make a cup of tea on our little Primus stove. Turns out we're out of gas *and* out of water. We've also run out of batteries for the camera so I can't even busy myself with taking moon pictures. I do jumping jacks to get warm, wearing myself out. When I finally do fall asleep, close to dawn, I dream that I'm looking down at my body mummied in the blue sleeping bag.

At first light, we climb back up to the stone wall and try banging the tin can again. To our astonishment, a tiny old man appears–an apparition. He's dressed in a long black cloak covered in red skull and crossbones, the traditional Coptic symbols. On his head sits a tall black hat with more of the red symbols. He appears gleeful to see us and ushers us through the door. Instantly, he is surrounded by dozens of crows. Fluttering, squawking, pecking at his long white hair and beard, his billowing cloak, alighting on top of his hat. The monk in black laughs at our bewildered faces and chatters away, just like the black crows. I feel exhilarated being in his presence, as if his exuberance is filling my frustration with goodness. We haven't a clue what he is saying.

With birds in tow, he shows us around. This open space without a roof appears to be a tiny monastery. While he points and exclaims, it becomes clear he lives alone, high on the mountain, and probably has for a long while. He looks as ancient as the stone, his hair sticking out in sprays from the tall hat, and a deeply lined face like a map of the old trade routes. He shows us a tiny chapel built deep into the rock. In the darkness, I can just make out the walls covered in frescos and at the back an altar carved into the rock. I can't ask him questions because my Arabic is miniscule. He is constantly shooing away the crows and laughing. This man is filled up with gladness.

Being astonished is a fact of life on this trip; whether from men's crude behavior, the foreign epic landscape, hidden ruins of early cultures left to the elements, and this solitary monk on top of a mountain in the Sinai desert.

And then this. He walks us to a tiny booth made out of wood with only room for one narrow, straight-backed chair, in front of a shelf. The shelf is below a small window covered with a tattered white cloth.

We all cram inside and with a dramatic sweep, he lifts the cloth covering the window. "*Jebel Musa*!" he cries out. There, in the distance, rises the summit of Mount Sinai; electrified and glowing in the white sun, awash in striated color, bold and proud. We see by the reverence on his

face that this view through the window is clearly the monk's deep and profound meditation of holy rapture.

But on the shelf is something even more astonishing. There lies a tall, open book of heavy papyrus. It is covered with delicate, flourishing script, inked by hand with a quill pen. Along the borders of each page are intricate designs painted in gold leaf, lapis lazuli, India ink, ochre, verdigris, carmine, silver leaf. It is the makings of an illuminated manuscript that is being created right here and right now. Awestruck, I want to bow down before him, before the sacred mountain, and before this stunning, masterful work of art.

The monk points to himself, *Belidi*. He has done this. Every word, every margin of elaborate startling radiance, every hour of every day, and most certainly for many years if not for his entire life. He smiles, every tooth nearly gone, and we say, over and over, Barie. Barie. Brilliant. Brilliant. He laughs. We laugh. He beams, lit within by his faith and solitude and kinship with the mountains and the birds. I envy his solitude, his courage, his communion with the birds. He exudes ecstasy. I want to stay here and bask in his joy and triumph.

He offers us a cup of water, nods his head, and glides silently back to his holy work station. We leave a bar of chocolate in the chapel where the crows don't seem to go, and begin our trek down. Even in the morning chill and the difficult climb on lose rock, I feel capable and strong. Renewed.

We spend the next week hiking the Sinai Mountains, including the monk's beloved Mount Sinai. On top, we spend the night and at sunrise the next morning Eli says he can see the earth turning in the rose-gold dawn. The mountains glisten majestic and wonder-filled.

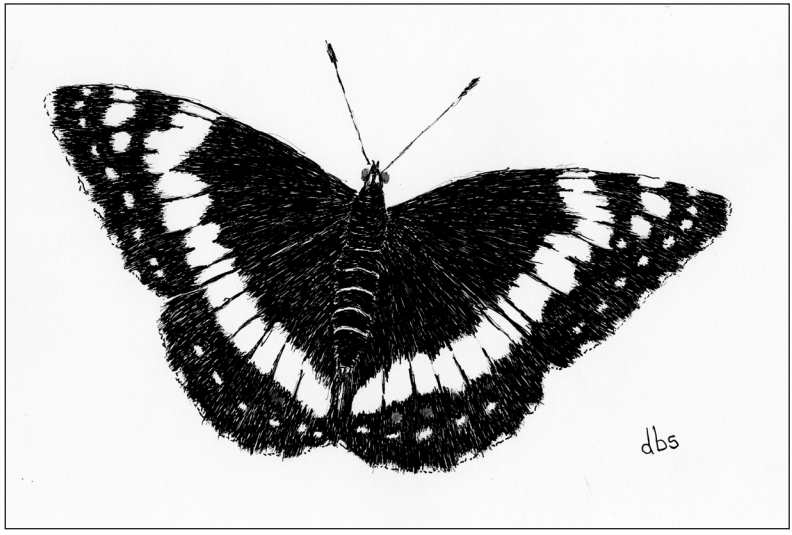
Before we leave the peninsula for Cairo, we meet a Coptic priest that speaks fairly good English. I ask him about the monk in the stone hermitage. He said it is bad. The Israelis had dynamited his spring during the 1967 Yom Kippur war, blocking the water with rocks—a spring that had flowed for thousands of years. This act has forced the monk to hike down the many kilometers to Santa Katerina monastery to fill up his two plastic jugs with water and carry them back up the mountain. And we had taken some of his precious water! The Coptic also tells us the manuscript the monk is illuminating is in ancient Sumerian. "His penance. For the last 30 years. Maybe more." I couldn't imagine what the penance was for. The monk is holy joy.

The priest laughs and proceeds to tells us that the mountain we had climbed just the day before is not Mount Sinai. "Not only you. Everyone

thinks. For centuries! There," he says, pointing to a towering mountain to the South, "that mountain is where God spoke. But no one goes there." He laughs again. "Good thing too." He said explorers, biblical scholars, and even himself believe the real Mount Sinai is *Jabal al-Lawz* in Saudi Arabia. Even the Bible states that Mount Horeb (Sinai) is in the region of Midian (present-day Saudi Arabia). We, along with everyone else, have climbed the wrong mountain.

It doesn't matter. None of this matters. Except these ancient complicated mountains. Except for the night I dreamt I'd left my body. Except for the radiant monk. I want to go back to the monk. To kiss his abiding hand that has created so much beauty for such a long time. That lives free and unencumbered by society. I want to say goodbye properly, not just with a bar of chocolate. I want to bring him two jugs of water myself, at the very least to spare him one week of that arduous trek. One week out of his glorious existence.

But my boyfriend needs the next country to conquer and I can't travel alone.



Admiral

On Not Conquering Mount Sneffels

Jacqui Somen

I'm sure the view is nice, but the wind is sharp,
the scree slippery, the faces of the conquerors fraught

with fear. I am here for the journey
eight miles of pine-lined walking: ambling time

to say thank you to the bright blue alpine lake,
to the sharp rocks at its edge, to the icy bite of its filling,

thank you to the chipmunk skittering,
to the lavender subalpine daisies shivering,

thank you to this moment, for the attention,
for not having cell connection,

thank you to the quivering yellow leaves,
the crunch of needles beneath my boots.

Thank you. *Toghoyaqh*.

Toghoyaqh, "thank you" in the Ute language,
courtesy of the Southern Ute Indian Tribe

The Blue Glacier

Daniel Hudon

There was a glacier at the top of the trail. That much I knew. The flat section had all the old growth. Then, if you had time and energy, you could hike up another eight miles to the glacier. I could take or leave the glacier. It seemed too high, too far, at the edge of my interests. I was there in Olympic National Park for the old growth, inspired by photos of giant moss-dripping trees by wildlife photographer Lucas Cometto, whose website on the Cascadia bioregion was a tantalizing invitation. After a couple of days among the monarchs of the forest, seeing the glacier would merely be an added bonus.

I planned to hike the ten miles of the flat section and see how I felt for the glacier. Another hiker half my age said the glacier was "worth it." I considered what "worth it" might mean: worth the slog with a backpack, the nerve-wracking single-log crossing over the frenetic milky-blue Hoh River, the don't-look-down 70-step descent on the rope ladder over the washed-out gulley, the 4500-foot ascent, the pick-and-choose path up the scree slope, the on-and-off drizzle, the ever-present anxiety of twisting an ankle and stranding one's self in the wilderness.

The young hiker told me he read that there had been a forest here for ten thousand years, and that fossils of mastodons were found nearby. I imagined Ice Age scenes with giant-tusked beasts roaming among snowdrifts and the monumental trees.

I set off at eight in the morning. A dozen—or a hundred—switchbacks led up the mountain away from the river. Giant Sitka spruce, red cedar and Douglas fir gave way to giant hemlock. It was one enchantment after another. At 10:30 a.m., a marker said Glacier Meadows was 2.3 miles away. I met another hiker who said it took her three hours to reach the glacier. All uphill. The glacier that was an afterthought for the trip.

An hour and a half away from the summit I caught a break in the trees and saw a tongue of ice dripping down a peak across the valley. Maybe I would get a close-up view of something like this? Maybe if I didn't get much further, this would be enough?

At 12:30, I dragged myself into a shelter at Glacier Meadows and ate a quick lunch. It was the sort of hut where the Chinese poet-hermit, Han Shan, whose name means Cold Mountain, could have stayed. *Cold Mountain*: I remembered, *there's no through trail.*

I still had another hour to the viewpoint. Up through the meadows of wildflowers. And up the scree slope, where I kept an eye out for cairns of three or four stones piled up on a boulder. I had no idea what to expect.

Two hikers came down the scree slope ahead of me. "It's not worth it!" one shouted.

I feared clouds already socked in the view. "Are you serious?" I replied.

"I'm joking," he said. "You made it."

Worth it/not worth it. It was another fifty feet up to the lip of the scree slope. Whatever lay beyond it was still hidden. Near the top of the slope, the stones turned into a dirt path and I summited the ridge.

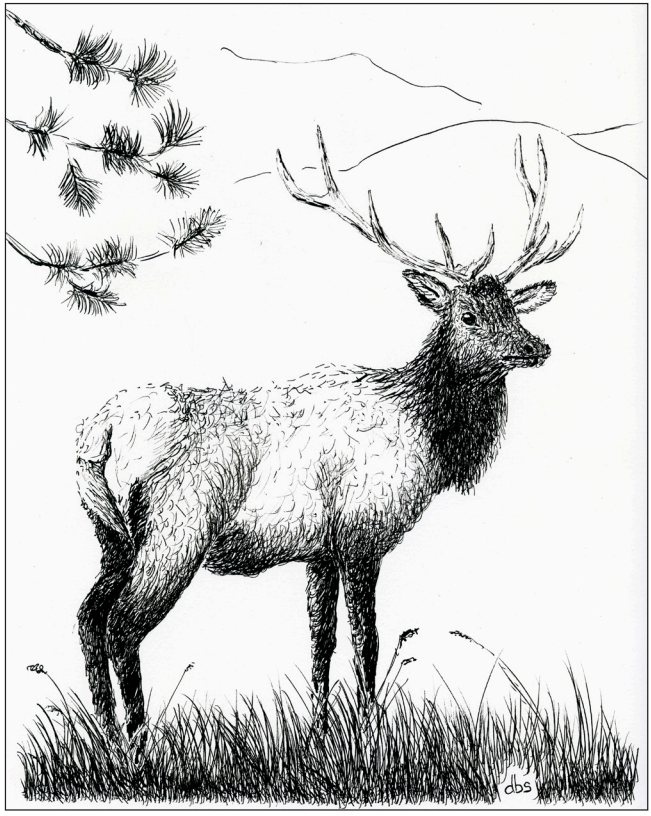
When I looked across the valley, my well—of anxiety and anticipation, of the many places for false steps, of exhaustion, of mad love for this crazy world that is changing too quickly—burbled up and overflowed. Here were half a dozen peaks hugging one another. And luxuriating among them like the Queen of Ice was the glacier. Striated and crevassed. Ribbed and ragged. Bluer than blue. No mere tongue of ice but an entire language uttering only cold words and cold phrases. She crackled. Her waterfalls roared. Her ice grunted.

It was like opening a door to a strange yet serene world. The young hiker who told me it was "worth it" was a master of understatement. It was worth a journey of a thousand days, or a trip to the ends of the Earth. I was at an end of the Earth, viewing a landscape half-hidden in the clouds, frozen and forlorn, with a terrible beauty suitable for woolly mammoths and mastodons. When was I ever this overwhelmed?

Glaciers had been in the news so much. Melting. Disappearing. Receding. They were out of reach. All so remote. What did I know of glaciers? More than thirty years ago, I had flown over a glacier in Alaska. In the Yukon, I once froze my hand in glacial runoff. On a road trip, I drove up to the Columbia Icefields, between Banff and Jasper, but couldn't get close because a boy had fallen into a crevice and visitors were asked to leave. The river I camped beside had its source here. I had been listening to the river descend from the glacier for three days already. For three days, the glacier whispered to me.

I was on an arête, a narrow ridge of rock that separated two valleys. So close to the French word, *arrêt*, for stop, as if to remind me that I was on the cusp of danger. I was fine here—as long as I made no false steps. Without its caret, the word refers to excellence or virtue, as if I have levelled up in the hike, and now, in its culmination, have achieved

something extraordinary. In front of me the Blue Glacier sprawled out in a cirque—an amphitheater it had carved out through erosion. I watched the clouds creep over the peaks. Now and then, I heard what sounded like chunks of ice falling, their echo rebounding over the cirque. Was the glacier calving? Groaning against the passage of time? Speaking its language of ice? I listened to the waterfalls. I sat on a boulder on the arête above the cirque in a kind of contemplative applause for the glacier that lingered and hadn't yet disappeared. This was a place for lingering. The hike down could wait. No other hikers arrived. The sun burned through the overcast sky and changed the lighting on the glacier. A light wind blew. I zipped up my jacket.



Bull Elk

Spark and Stone

John Ciminello

On the trail above timberline,
you untie the entangled
winds of your intentions,
and I become the pennywhistle
singing melodies
to the stars.
By the stream pouring from the glacier,
you calm the troubled currents
of your uncertainty,
and I dip my cup into
the icy waters
of the source.
At the lakeside camp under a firmament,
you remove the fear
of departure and arrival,
and I light three candles
to the shrine
of our beginning.
Through a skylight of constellations,
we watch the clockwork of the moon
and in the darkness outside the glow of our circle,
the stone waits for a spark,
an owl sails past a fir tree
and swoops toward the alpine meadow,
fog moistens the joints of the timber,
and the breath of the forest
mystifies the night.

Deep Wild Journal
2025 "Waking to the Wild" Student Contest

The editors of *Deep Wild Journal* congratulate the winners of the 2025 Deep Wild Student Contest, whose work was selected by contest judges Chelsea Catherine and John Nizalowski. The First Place and Runners Up pieces are published here, while the Honorable Mentions will be featured on our website this summer. Bios of the top three finishers can be read in the Contributors' Notes.

Our gratitude and encouragement goes out to all the student writers from throughout the United States and beyond, who sent us work. We wish we could have honored more.

First Place, $200

Colleen Alles
Spalding University in Louisville, Kentucky
for her poem "Left to Wonder"

Runners Up, $100

Michelle Chen
Stony Brook University in New York
for her essay "Journey to the Frozen North"

Wrendolyn Klotzko
State University of New York Oswego
for her poems, "A Winter Soliloquy", "The Seasons' Undersides," "The Banshee Owl"

Honorable Mentions

The following student writers, poets all, received Honorable Mentions for their work:

Shelli Rottschafer, Western Colorado University in Gunnison

Hayley Burgess, Sarah Lawrence College in New York

Marie Burdett, University of St. Thomas, Houston

Comments by Judges Chelsea Catherine and John Nizalowski

"Left to Wonder" by Colleen Alles, First Place

Colleen Alles has gifted us with a beautiful marriage of form, content, and theme in this poem. The form and line breaks are thoughtful and melodic, helping us fully hear Alles's narrative voice. The poem is well-paced with excellent sensory details and a breathtaking moment of insight at the end, helping us reflect on the interconnected nature of the world. This is a poem with a true narrative arc, and it works well on every level—much like a mother reading her child a quiet bedtime story.

"Journey to the Frozen North" by Michelle Chen, Runner-up

Michelle Chen's skillful braided essay weaves together a call for more Asian and female voices in environmental writing with an engaging narrative of an all-female expedition to Alaska's Kenai Fjords National Park and an exploration of the writings of Rachel Carson, Sandra Steingraber, Terry Tempest Williams, and Kathy Jetnil-Kijine. The result is a finely written personal essay that possesses thematic texture and depth. Chen's observation on Terry Tempest Williams' *Refuge* could be used to describe her own piece—"Throughout, it is the combination of the masculine and feminine, the lyrical and highly symbolic language juxtaposed with scientific data and journalism, that spurs further activism and understanding in readers."

"A Winter Soliloquy," "The Seasons' Undersides," and "The Banshee Owl" by Wrendolyn Klotzko, Runner-Up

Wrendolyn Klotzko's poems use form in very different ways to play with tone and intention. All three have an incredible attention to sensory detail, word choice, and thematic development. Each line must be read closely to fully soak up their meaning and enjoy their careful wordplay. Wrendolyn Klotzko forces us to slow down and be in nature, moving at its pace, to fully enjoy these pieces.

2025 "Waking to the Wild" Student Contest
First Place

Left to Wonder

Colleen Alles

From the small stream
before her, she takes
a drink. On the hill

I take one, too.
For a moment we're two females
quiet together at dawn.

It's silly, I think, to toast
a doe—to wish
my water into wine.

But it's when I start
east for the bramblewood
I realize she's got two fawns

trailing behind her, following
on wobbly legs. I let
this moment evaporate.

I'd believed today was all hers—
that the heavy work
of her own survival

was her sole concern.
I know it's the fate
of all living things

to give way to stillness
to return in the end
to the earth.

The best we can do
is keep ourselves alive
and those we call our own.

Hours later, as I ready
my two young ones for bed
I decide to believe

that she *did* see me
catching my breath
on that hill. I decide

she saw me drinking
cool water like her—
but took no hint of danger

from my body
on the horizon. That she
understood only

that, one mother to another,
I was raising
my glass to her.

2025 "Waking to the Wild" Student Contest Runner Up

Journey to the Frozen North

Michelle Chen

We were curving gently on the surface of the blue lagoon, grinning at each other, before Kim nodded and I flipped over into the ice-filled water. The cold first came as a faint pressure over my drysuit, then concentrated into my exposed face and hands as I undid my splash skirt from the kayak and floundered my way up to the surface. On the shore, the eight other high school girls expedition selected for this free expedition from across the world cheered me on. I flipped the kayak back over with Kim's help—now that I was already cold, getting back out into the air would be the hardest part. The conception of weight is inherently different in water--unlike the atmosphere, where gravity fades as you become further removed from the ground, you feel heavier while you're at the very top of the water and moving against its steadfast, downward grip. Kim pressed down on the other side of the kayak to steady it, smiling encouragingly as I tried to haul my body onto the end, which was smaller than my waist. I lost my grip and splashed down into the leaden lake, vision silvered with sunlight and droplets of meltwater, and Kim leaned her kayak further alongside mine to steady the bucking slice of plastic. Two more tries, with more facefuls of water. Three more tries, and I was sprawled on the kayak, desperately clawing myself toward the small cockpit. Clutching the swaying, impossibly buoyant body of the boat between my legs, I finally maneuvered myself using the deck's rigging into my seat. Kim handed me my glasses, and we paddled toward the shore, carving through the heavy water.

Bear Glacier, located in Kenai Fjords National Park, is a tidewater glacier located ten miles from Seward, Alaska. During Girls in Icy Fjords 2017, we camped, hiked, kayaked, and checked for wildlife such as whales, seals, puffins, least sandpipers, and bears. Our survival and observational skills helped us conduct scientific measurements. Exploring Alaska's coastal glaciers isn't easy, but there are ways of making it possible. On the first day of our expedition, we flew into Anchorage Airport and met up with the Girls in Icy Fjords team before driving to Seward and

camping in a nearby forested area. For two months, our instructors had emailed us tips to help us with our journey. As the only participant with Chinese heritage, I felt unique—special even, elevated from the masses of family and friends who had not applied to such a remote, wilderness-based survival program. However, the pride of representing Asian women as a 1.5 generation Chinese-American immigrant, who could now see for myself a future as a daring adventurer and dedicated English literature student, buoyed me through our toughest physical and mental challenges.

The Kenai Fjords' largest glacier is spectacular to behold. Throughout its lagoon in July, calved ice pieces drifted farther and farther from their origin, and we were warned not to get too close to the icebergs in case our kayaks get stuck on the ice that's hidden below the surface. To seasoned campers, the smaller pieces of ice are called glacier berries, for their tantalizing appeal as water sources. We scooped them up from the fresh water lagoon in droves and bit into them. The instant we arrived at our stop, a barren rocky shore studded with sheaths of green weed, I tried to lift a glacier berry that looked to be the size of my hand and ended up hauling a chunk the size of a baby up the slope.

Rachel Carson, Sandra Steingraber, Terry Tempest Williams, and Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner are pioneers, with the same goals as the nonprofit organization Inspiring Girls Expeditions, of introducing diverse perspectives into environmental studies. Their work transcends identitarian divides by incorporating duality and balanced perspectives, which are often lacking in environmental writings traditionally conducted by western men, and which are essential for the successful awareness and popularization of the issues at hand. These writers actively use a blend of investigative journalism and narrative nonfiction, as well as perspectives from across gender, racial, and geographic divides. As such, more holistic and accurate knowledge can be deduced about the issues of environmental justice.

Glacier Berry – During the day, it would often start raining on our backcountry excursions to gather data, and I remember gliding on the water, bags tied to the kayak, body locked in place by the sprayskirt. We only really wore the kayaking helmet during the very start and when it was raining. I even held a purple umbrella for a while and an instructor laughed at me, charmed by the prissy image of kayaking with an

umbrella on one's shoulder. With my umbrella I also carried a couple of assumptions about Alaskan life: that "America's Last Frontier" was populated mainly by armed men and wild animals. I soon learned the falseness of my view. The Inspiring Girls group first met at a cabin right after driving out from Anchorage. There were at least ten bikes hung up on the cedar wall beneath a moose antler rack, aluminum-alloy handles and vinyl seats thrusting out at us, where I'd expected rifles. Also, while I'd dreamed about seeing bears and huge mossy caribou for the months since my acceptance to the program, and the bear spray training later on would make me even more excited, we didn't encounter mammalian wildlife apart from the rare seal or mouse.

In their environmental nonfiction, Carson and Steingraber include the unsettling details of personal observations, from bodily diagnoses to sharp observations of the natural world, which become essential to their arguments as they diverge from conventional industrial, political, and medical superstructures. Steingraber contrasts the opposing emotions of comfort and connection to the land with anxiety and danger, as with "You are the food that is grown here. You are walking on familiar ground" (3), before introducing awareness of the "darker secrets" of Illinois, 87 percent of which is farmland upon which 54 million pounds of synthetic pesticides are applied every year (4-5). This constant merging of the positive and negative is an ancient authorial technique, a dichotomy between light and dark that Ancient Greeks believed and used in their literary works, as well as alluding to the Eastern philosophy's yin-yang concept. Both women oscillate between hope and despair, the "we" and the "I," in constructing their arguments and making scientific research more appealing and accessible to a wider audience. They understand that they are part of a larger conversation.

Carson first begins her naturalistic assessment of dire chemical pollution lurking beneath public awareness, using poignant remarks such as "No witchcraft, no enemy action had silenced the rebirth of new life in this stricken world. The people had done it themselves" (3). Sensitivity to health and safety, as a hallmark of feminine cultures of thinking, introduces a novel perspective against rapid technological development and deployment without fully comprehending all the consequences. Furthermore, Carson's attention to detail defies the oblivion of forgetfulness about the value of environmental life by government corporations and scientific developers. She famously evokes a town lost in silence, devoid of the sounds of nature by the white powder of pesticides through slow poison.

Steingraber references Carson's work in *Living Downstream*, and how she was the first to massively popularize scientific research against DDT, despite widespread word-of-mouth knowledge of its toxic effects. Steingraber even asks, "When someone says, 'We were not aware of the dangers of these chemicals back then,' whom do they mean by we?" (9) referencing both herself and Carson's significant usage of the word "we," a term uncommon to academic scientific writing, to highlight the importance of public knowledge and activism. The health of the female body is intrinsically linked to the health of the environment, as "chemicals linked to cancer largely derive from the same two sources as those responsible for climate change: petroleum and coal" (Steingraber xxii).

By using the funding of wealthy donors for nine girls to fly, drive, and camp with fire starters to remote locations such as Kenai Fjords National Park, our discoveries are weighed down by the responsibility of understanding the true price of our admission. The donors are betting on the small chance that our uniquely diverse backgrounds will one day manifest in ideas never previously imagined in our contributions to the world. It is a treacherous balance with no guarantee of payoff or reward, built upon these fuel-soaked sacrifices many years into the future, but "we" are women in the wilderness, inside and outside of the page, and we are here.

Tent Life – The concept of "Leave no trace" worked its way into our blood. The camp utilities were always kept far apart, in case of bears. We couldn't bring makeup, locked up the sunscreen every night because of the scent, and happily got used to going to the bathroom in the bushes. There was nothing to shower with, and I endured the acne that piled up in bright clumps over my face and the stench of ever-wet socks. Over the course of ten days we hauled bear barrels on our backs and pulled kayaks through cold rivers. Heavy rain always seemed to be on the verge of flooding our tents. Out of breath, sometimes I'd look around at the other girls and women and wonder how I had ever managed to end up here: Nine young women who were international role models, seasoned locals, and business owners, and four seasoned scientific researchers and artists. Together we had plenty of moving stories and laughter, revealed in intimate tent conversations as we huddled together in our incredibly cozy sleeping bags.

While thumbing through thrift paperbacks and inky pirated ebooks for my undergraduate English class, "Ecology and Evolution in American

Literature," I discovered another approach to urgent environmental issues that is inclusive of racial and gender diversity. Within the lyrical imagery of Terry Tempest Williams' *Refuge*, Williams' domestic life with her mother and her field experiences as naturalist-in-residence contrast with the constant and masculine-cultured governmental and political interventions encroaching on Utah's Great Salt Lake. Williams incorporates multicultural perspectives, as with "What an African woman nurtures in the soil will eventually feed her family. Likewise, what she nurtures in her relations will ultimately nurture her community. It is a matter of living the circle…In America, time is money. In Kenya, time is relationship" (137). This conflict between the masculine and feminine cultures is further espoused as a perfect metaphor for the broader landscape of environmental change versus control, as when her father has a different point of view than the women on Great Salt Lake. According to him, the governor's pumping project is seen as a way to repair the lakeshore industry's declining fortunes. Williams' and her mother's caution about forcefully changing the landscape is tied to their close relationship with the land. They see the emotional and spiritual significance of mutually beneficial and noninvasive human-nonhuman relationships as crucial to their family's long-term financial and health-based survival. Throughout, it is the combination of the masculine and feminine perspectives, using lyrical and highly symbolic language, juxtaposed with scientific data and journalism, that spurs further activism and understanding in readers.

A New Process of Observation – I ate the beach peas and red salmonberries we identified, and touched the fireweed by our tents, stunned by the violet burst of color in the bleak landscape. I relentlessly chased after the athletic girls on the water and on hikes, building up my own muscles and happiness. In the night we made sure to have our headlamps on, and when I forgot mine I stumbled through the wild brush, tripping on branches and little dips on the long walk between the bear barrels and our tents. We mapped thin waterfalls on the Pacific cliffs and made measurements of rock size and bird trails for our final presentations. Once we sat and drew the Ghost Forest, fields of lush green wildgrass behind stark white poles pinpricked by a thousand small branches etched into our notebooks. The 1964 Alaska earthquake had dropped the earth ten feet, destroying several small villages, and as saltwater flooded the forest's roots. the trees had turned pale and died, still standing.

Finally, as another young woman gazing upon endless shorelines, Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner's poetry illuminates the human impact of radioactive contamination and environmental exploitation through the lens of a Marshallese daughter. Through spoken word, she uses her platform as a performance artist to advocate for the human rights of the Marshallese Islanders, who reside in one of the locations on earth most impacted by irresponsible nuclear testing. Her poem "Monster" describes the birth defects women experienced after the United States tested sixty nuclear weapons on their islands. Throughout, the data-based evidence is compiled in turn with the women's emotions of distress in the process of childbirth, which was previously shameful and mired in silence and nightmares. By combining both the personal and political worlds, the domestic and scientific, Jetñil-Kijiner successfully brings the true impact of radiation on the marginalized to the global stage. "Anointed" movingly describes the subject of contaminated waste on Runit Island in both spoken word and atmospheric film, a form of mixed media that encompasses some of the broadest and most balanced environmental perspectives possible. Crossing oceans to collaborate with Greenland native Aka Niviâna, Jetñil-Kijiner's "Rise" is sonorous and uplifting, built upon a myth of a sister who turned to stone in the face of disaster and her younger sister who stayed unflinchingly by her side. "From one island to another / I ask for solutions. / From one island to another / I ask for your problems" (lines 57-60), the two women chant in call-and-response, as panoramic video shots switch between different islanders, swapping voices for each line. Thus they affirm the same philosophy of cross-cultural brainstorming and diversity of race and background of the Inspiring Girls Expeditions.

I, too, have crossed seas and islands, from my birthplace, humid and techno-dreamy Singapore, to foggy, water-silvered Alaska where Indigenous knowledge of seasons and salmon reigns supreme. Like the observations in my travel journal, Jetñil-Kijiner, Aka Niviâna and other women poets of color unflinchingly dictate the unspeakable details of environmental destruction without fear or shame, and with both grief and joy. Ultimately, the women of environmental justice, whose research is built upon the success and popularization of Carson, Steingraber, Tempest-Williams, and other activists' work, continue to shift perspectives on the natural world, using narrative nonfiction and journalism. We permeate beyond all odds, like frost does above a certain latitude, to crystallize our research and personal experiences into solutions, past where the land loses its footing.

Hiking in an Ocean of Green – The landscape was a process of becoming. All the ice I saw became a complete, clear lagoon, instead of a glacier constantly calving in short bursts of white thunder. It's a safety rule that you're supposed to remain half a mile away from the face of glaciers, and away from icebergs at twice the distance of their visible height or width. But over the rest of the summer, and sometimes even over the course of a single day, the looming ice chunks would melt seamlessly into the calm blue lagoon. While now we maneuvered through a river of fractals, the bright silver lumps would eventually peacefully dissolve into the water.

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2025 "Waking to the Wild" Student Contest Runner Up

A Winter Soliloquy

Wrendolyn Klotzko

How do you survive the bleak Decembers
with nothing other than a black knit cap
and cinnamon vest to melt your tremors?
Most birds turn south to slip snow's frigid grasp.
They flee while you trill in a hemlock bough
a soliloquy for nestless woodlands.
A crisp—Seet-Seet-Seet—chirping left your mouth
echoed by the lyrics' translucent strands
of frozen breath that climbs out your short beak.
The birch-snag roost sighs at your safe return,
relief you came before the Cold Moon's peak.
At the next first light, I begin to learn
to warble your—Hey-sweetie!—melody,
you bark back at me—chick-a-dee-dee-dee.

The Seasons' Undersides

Wrendolyn Klotzko

1. Vernal
I am the creek's contempt
made from swallowed mountain ice
that was jarred into snow-sealed screams,
and now, they luge melted bottles to the valley.

I am the shrieking of change across winter into spring.

2. Estival
I am the newt's yielding shield
inebriated by toxin,
a licking flame fettered below
calloused, eye-speckled orange rinds.

I am an amalgamation of the sunrise's red heat.

3. Autumnal
I am the songbirds' teeth
swallowed deep past fragile wishbones,
quartz-veined pebble-molars
plucked from riverbanks.

I am a forgotten gizzard in a feathered pocket.

4. Brumal
I am the rat king's throne
of carelessly woven tail-braids,
a fur-upholstered ottoman
never to be rested upon.

I am the devilish underside of nature's vile caste.

The Banshee Owl

Wrendolyn Klotzko

Between shadow-swallowed spaces
and splashed cones of warm light,

I saw a barn owl silently gliding above the sidewalk
as though she had become the night sky's moon.

Her pale face resembled a perfectly halved apple
with a seed sitting on either side of her beak.

She wore a long brown trench coat brushed in gray soot.
When I peered into her eyes, I wondered

if she filled them with the darkness she bought
from distant stars.

Enter the Sea Goat

Michael Engelhard

The students recline in a half-circle in camp chairs facing the scalloped bay, afraid to miss out on the scenery. By week three of this 30-day edventure, companionship, paddling skills, and new landscapes have begun to fill any void TV or video games may have caused.

Our surroundings help translate the course curriculum—politics and ecology of Alaska's Tongass National Forest—into realities that become ingrained as memories. Along the shore's scrawl, a dozen sea kayaks lie where we landed, beached like crayon-colored pilot whales. The tide carries notes of kelp, brine, mudflats, and decay—creation's inimitable perfume—while less than ten miles from us, the hemisphere's southernmost tidal glacier dips its crystal tongue into the fjord. Before we even pitch tents, we take advantage of this sunny afternoon, teaching a lesson on glacial morphology. Lulled by the warmth and my co-instructor's voice, my concentration keeps slipping. A different, animal form of attentiveness takes over as I scan the beach for bears on the prowl.

Some bright, medium-size creature *does* register in my field of vision, on an island afloat in the bay. Pacing from one end to the other, it appears to be testing the perimeter of its confinement. Could it be a wolf? I reach for my field glasses, tense enough to alert the group.

A head too small, and angular as slab marble, offsets a boulder-shaped body. Shag fluffs the creature's fore- and hindquarters into ridiculous bloomers. A mountain goat! At sea level. The incoming tide has barred its retreat, stranding it like an ice chest washed off some tour boat. At first glance it could be a billy or nanny. Both sexes sport jet-black spikes, which local Tlingit Indians carve into potlatch spoons—curved, functional, keratin art. According to our guidebooks, adult male goats are the ones most likely to go gallivanting, from alpine reaches down crenellated ridges and into the shelter of conifers, lured by any ungulate tough guy's Shangri-la: salt licks, or deep meadows to browse and populate.

The students are standing now, firn lines and medial moraines temporarily consigned to their minds' garrets. Our intern, Neil, sprints to his kayak, slides into the cockpit, and, pushing with his knuckles, seal-launches from the beach.

"What are you going to do?" someone shouts. "Drape it across your bow?"

"Don't know," he replies. "Just taking a closer look, I guess."

Why not leave it be? I wonder. *What feeds this need for proximity, this urge to interfere?*

"To cherish," the forester and ecologist Aldo Leopold mourned in *A Sand County Almanac*, "we must see and fondle, and when enough have seen and fondled, there is no wilderness left to cherish." This fondling is not just a pat on the head. We nurse oil-slicked otters and eagles back to health. We radio-collar caribou to understand their timeless but timed rounds. We keep bears in cages to edify, engage, enchant, entertain. We make room for wolves where we used to poison them and, just as absurdly, installed mountain goats in Nevada and Colorado, where trophy hunters can chase them. Others in Sweden flock to cull hundreds of lynxes. Our relationship with the wildlings has been monetized and depersonalized. In Japan, there's a bear-meat vending machine now.

The sociobiologist E.O. Wilson claimed that an attraction to other life forms got inscribed in our genes when animals shaped hominid nature on Africa's steppes; hunter-gatherers acknowledge this debt with respect. Evolutionary psychologists also warn us that we neglect or corrupt this relationship at the cost of societal dysfunction. To further complicate matters, this innate drive ("biophilia") can manifest as the opposite: a dark urge, born of greed or fear, to abuse and eradicate our brethren on Earth. Be they dachshunds or Komodo dragons, head lice or monarchs, cobras or Siamese cats, these others leave few people unmoved.

Regardless of its motivation, the reaching out of a species that exiled itself behind barriers of artifice can be a bleak and beautiful thing. I only hope nobody will suffer injury or indignity on this occasion. While Neil disembarks on the low-slung island, the goat gallops up and over a rise. Neil walks to the top, neoprene-skirted, paddle in hand, to see what we have already seen from shore: the goat churning toward an outcrop close by, muzzle pointed skyward, cutting a wake like a chunky retriever.

By the time Neil has inserted himself in the kayak again, the billy has climbed this miniature Ararat doomed to submerge. Against the sea's backdrop, the animal seems out of its element but still more of this place than we Gore-Tex-clad visitors from afar. Possessed of a mineral quality, a poise and resilience older than flesh, it stands riveted to the rock—an extension of sweeping summits, hewn from Le Conte Glacier's trunk, hefty and blunt as winter itself. Its stubborn form embodies the land's pluck and fiber. Like snowfields crisp in the distance or the void on explorers' charts, the goat not only invites speculation but even more so the projection of desires. I would trade with this bearded recluse in an

instant. I'd travel unburdened by gear. I'd grow hairy and hunchbacked and rank, sniffing out mates and competitors. I'd become agile enough to dodge grizzlies and wolves, fearless enough to bed down on vertiginous ledges, and smart enough to avoid our kind.

With a lapse into pastoral metaphor excusable in a Scotsman, wilderness sage John Muir compared this breed to others, considering them, "nature's cattle," better fed and protected from the cold. But he also acknowledged the grit in their existence. During a sledding trip above Glacier Bay, he found bones cast about in an ancient blood ritual. Presumably, wolves had caught up with a wild goat two miles from safer ground, where breakneck terrain matched with ballerina grace would have given it the advantage.

Pulling away from those sobering thoughts, I watch Neil bump the outcrop with his kayak bow. He waves a paddle blade in the animal's face. What is he doing? Trying to save the goat by making it dive? It's unlikely to drown, even if flooded out. But our intern might yet discover the flip side of hands-on approaches to learning. Clearly annoyed with being crowded, the billy indeed takes him on, defending its quickly shrinking domain. It jerks horn daggers into Neil's direction, hooking the air, unwilling to yield as much as an inch.

On shore, the students holler and cheer—for whom, I can't tell.

Eventually, the goat's aversion to humans overcomes any fear of reefs, orcas, tide rips, or the unfamiliar. With its shoulders tucked in like a boxer, it pivots and leaps high and wide, charging its twin in the burnished sea. Before long, we lose sight of it as it churns across the bay, to be culled from the gene pool or to sire a feisty clan in the high country.

Toklat River

Frank Haberle

I heard them wolves last night, you know–
You never really know if they're 'cross the valley
Or on the rocks right on top of you. Listen.
There was a strange green glow to the tent's thin skin,
Like a yellow moon was out there someplace.
A brief cameo in a swirl of cloud, but
I wasn't going out there to check. I was staying
Right there. You were snoring next to me.
This was your idea. We pushed too far.
All day before you'd been angry at me,
At the mud-soaked slopes, at the eight-foot
Walls of tangled vines. You were pissed 'bout the bears
But we hadn't seen a bear; I was yelling so loud
I'd guessed we'd never see a bear. *Come on Honey,*
You kept saying, *let's just bull our way through.*
Why you called me Honey, I asked of myself.
We wedged through a ravine, don't look down,
The font of raging green water silt below and then
We'd made the north valley, a spectral bowl,
Untouched and barely touchable. And later,
At night, me alone with the wolves, you deep asleep,
Muttered, *are you happy now? Are you happy?*

Caught *Fiction*

Talley V. Kayser

She caught the golden trout on her first cast, exactly as she wanted. She had watched the trout swim for several minutes while she readied her rod, noting the shape the fish traced as it patrolled the gin-clear water near the shoreline. She knew the trout was hungry. There had been heavy winter snow, and then spring had stayed cold; despite the intense summer sun, broad aprons of snow still draped the granite cliffs behind the lake. At this altitude, this year, every trout was hungry.

Still: she thought it all through, just like he taught her. She chose the place her fly should land and planned her backcast so the line wouldn't tangle in the craze of foxtail pines along shore. When she cast she felt the weight of the line shift smoothly and correctly, and she watched with pleasure as the line flourished and guided the fly gently to the water. The trout arrowed—no pause—its shadow like dark lightning on the lake bottom. In the beat before she set the hook, she was already smiling.

The first time she had seen this lake, her husband was walking with her. They climbed together through untrailed talus over the crest of a hard mountain pass. They stood on the cusp of descent, admiring the granite canyon with its near-vertical walls, and she, still breathing too heavily to speak, suddenly grasped his arm and pointed to distant water: a massive zaffre oval a few miles away, suspended by accident of geology on a terrace thousands of feet above the valley floor. A jagged ridgeline guarded its southern edge, and a band of conifers shielded its narrow rim, so that the lake could only be seen from above. In the gray vertical world of the canyon the lake was hugely horizontal and hugely blue. It was surprising as an alien, as an angel.

"Let's go there," she had said, her eyes fixed on the lake.

"Now? That's not on our route." He shrugged her grip away, then heaved his pack onto the ground, where it landed with a loud thud. She resisted the urge to roll her eyes at the size of the thing—it had to be well over fifty pounds—as he wiped sweat from his forehead.

"C'mon," she cajoled. "The lake is along a contour. It adds what, two miles? Maybe three? We can camp there and make that mileage up in the morning, easy. Especially since we're following trail all the way down to the canyon."

"But we're not following a trail after we cross the river and climb the other side." He rolled one shoulder, then another. "Plus, you said there's

talus on the descent from the pass afterwards. It's going to be a hard enough day as it is—my knees will be killing me."

She tried to keep her voice light. "I told you to leave that bottle of bourbon at home."

"Don't start that again." He'd squatted down by the pack and arched an eyebrow up at her. "It's not your pack. If I want to carry it, I carry it."

And hold us both back in the process, she had wanted to say. But she curbed herself immediately. It's not like he was slow, she reminded herself—he could outpace her if he wanted to, even with the extra weight. She sighed.

"Sorry. I just wish there was more room to . . . improvise. I mean, look at that!" She had turned back to the lake, feeling the pull of it. The water looked so still, so dark. "How often do you see a place that perfect? And it will be at least a year before we have another chance to walk there. And we're so close!"

She heard him wrench the bourbon from the side pocket of his pack and take a swig, then re-seal the cork with emphasis. "If you wanted more room to improvise, you should have planned an easier route. We'll be stressed enough as it is."

You mean you'll be stressed, she thought, then admonished herself again. He was right—the route was ambitious, especially since he'd never spent much time off-trail. And how many men would come all the way out here with her in the first place? She should be more grateful.

"You know, you have a point," she'd said, turning back to him and smiling. "No sense in crowding in more mileage. What matters is that we're out here. Together."

He'd nodded, and she'd kept her back to the lake while he stood and reshouldered his pack. Within ten minutes, the lake was a secret again, sheltered by conifer and granite . . . but the whole way down to the canyon floor she had kept half-turning, tracking the place above where the water hovered and waited.

Well. She was at that beautiful water now, alone. And with a trout on the line on her first cast. She brought the trout to shore at her own speed, admiring the flash and play of light as the fish struggled through the water; then she knelt at the water's edge and reached. Careful, careful. She slipped one hand under the water and grasped the trout firmly through its panic. As the trout settled and gaped, she tilted it underwater to see. Yes. Forest green parr marks, an arc of orange-red along its lateral line. Constellation of dark spots on the peduncle and caudal fin. Beautiful.

She slid a length of paracord from her pocket and threaded it through the gills, apologizing in a low voice. Once the stringer was tied and secure, she moved to extract the fly. It was a new fly, a #18 she bought for its name—"dancing caddis"—and for the cheerful chartreuse body anchoring its tufts of elk hair. It was foolish, she knew, to spend money on colors and names when her fly box bristled with sensible choices. She had stopped by the Bridgeport fly shop only to buy more tippet. But because a line of rough-jacketed men already waited at the register, she circled back to admire the neat flies in their cornered cradles, and then she thought of the snow-heavy winter, the height and northern aspect of the lake. How hungry the trout would be, after their short summer. Hungry enough to eat almost anything . . .

The man at the register had made no comment or eye contact as he counted out her selections, which she was certain matched no hatch and showed no logic. But she kept smiling all the way to her car, where she rifled through her pack for her fly box and tucked the new flies in with care. All those swirls of color and sparkle, impractical and bright. Each one her decision.

Now the dancing caddis was hooked solid through the trout's jaw. She pinched the hook firmly and tugged. It stuck. The trout spasmed and gaped. She frowned, tugging harder, but the hook didn't give. The trout thrashed again, almost slipping from her grip.

Her satisfaction collapsed. Of course. She had added the new flies immediately to her fly box. She had not de-barbed the hooks so they would come out cleanly; she had not needed to do it herself, before. Stupid, stupid. Now removing the hook would mean ripping the barb out, hard, through the tough and suffering flesh of the beautiful fish's mouth.

It shouldn't matter, she knew. She would eat this trout. She would keep the trout captive on paracord while she set up her cookstove and pan, and then she would take out the knife, the one he sharpened for her the night before she left. She would hold the trout firmly and poise the sharp blade behind the head, then bear down hard to sever the spine. She would ignore the bleeding and seizing, slip the knife out and turn the trout over. Slice with force from pectoral fin to pectoral fin, then more gently down to the caudal fin as the trout jerked and the belly skin opened. She always remembered, as she parted that cut with bloodied fingers, that the orderly organs within had never seen light.

Why worry, then, about tearing a barbed hook out? There was no clean way to do this thing. She had watched eagles haul trout from lakes many times; sometimes the eagles fed as they flew. All part of it. It

shouldn't matter. But she watched herself lower the trout back into the water. She held the trout in her hand until it could right itself. The trout tried to swim away. The stringer held it back. The trout tugged, tugged, then sank to the bottom at an odd and listless angle, the fly still firm in its mouth. Uncertain mercy. She leaned her rod against the trunk of the nearest foxtail and stood up to walk to camp.

She'd made a neat camp, sheltered from wind and high enough above the lake to avoid frost and most of the mosquitoes. There was no tent—just a ground sheet and her new sleeping bag. That was another thing she'd spent money on, though less foolishly. She had carried her old bag over a thousand miles through these mountains before she had ever met her husband; the feather down had lost so much loft over time that she'd forgotten she *could* sleep warm at altitude. Last night, though, in the fresh sleeping bag, there was no need to stuff extra layers of clothing around her feet or drape a jacket across her torso, no need to squirm and thrash toward someone else's warmth. She had zippered herself in, laid back, and relaxed in plush comfort as meteor after meteor hauled heavy raw light across the Milky Way. Sleep had eased in and had held her all night, the way it hadn't for a very long time.

She veered away from camp, toward the dead tree that marked her food cache. Wedged among her dehydrated meals and protein bars, she knew, was a scarred, tiny multitool that had served her well for years. She should have brought the multitool with her down to the lake in the first place, but she had wanted to use the knife he'd sharpened for her before she'd left. That had been a good moment—one of only a few good moments in the weeks leading up to her trek. She'd spent those weeks avoiding their tiny apartment during the day, storing up the energy necessary to move gracefully around his evening moods: long and surly silences, dramatic outbursts of frustration, and—more than once—graphic speeches about specific ways she might get injured or killed while in the mountains without him. Two nights before her departure, as she was sorting through her resupply packages in the dim light of the living room, he'd launched into the hazards of river crossings and she had run out of grace.

"I am going to remind you," she'd hissed, striding over a package of quinoa to stand face-to-face with him, "that I guided professionally for over a decade. That I know this specific terrain inside and out—that I've set records in this mountain range. That I have made every adjustment to my plan that you have asked for." She'd begun ticking them off on

her fingers, one by one: the shortened trip length, the alternate route with emergency exit points, the three-times-per-day check-ins via her GPS device, the fixed blade she would carry prominently on her hip . . . "for Chrissakes, Daniel, we met while I was solo in the mountains! And I haven't gotten a trip like this in, what, four years? You know I'm more than capable . . ."

By that point, he was ducking his head to hide tears, his broad shoulders heaving. She'd lost steam, sighed, and reached out to hold him. They'd moved to the bed, and she'd continued to stroke his hair while he sobbed and clutched her shirt, muttering phrases into her chest. "I just don't want to lose . . . I don't know what I would be without . . . if you get hurt . . . " She'd stared into the middle distance, quietly reminding him of all the reasons he should believe that she'd be fine, wincing with guilt every time her thoughts circled back to the half-packed box that really, *really* needed to be mailed the next morning. She should be more present for him. He so clearly loved her. She should be more grateful.

Eventually, he had quieted. When he disentangled himself and sat up, rubbing his face, he'd noticed the fixed blade sitting on her bedside table, ready to be packed. Wordlessly, he'd walked to the closet, retrieved his sharpener, and begun honing the knife. She watched the rhythm for a while, watched how his breathing eased. She relaxed, registering the action as acceptance: she was going. Everything felt settled, then.

But that knife was a fixed blade; it did not have the pliers she needed now. She strode to the base of the tree, found her cache, wrenched open the bear-proof canister lid, took out a clear plastic bag, and removed the multitool from her repair kit. Then she resealed the bag and canister and walked swiftly back down to the lake.

That's how she was. Sometimes swift and sometimes slow. The pass climb, for example, on her hike in yesterday. It had been a hard climb, still long and steep, but the freedom to move as her body wanted made it feel almost easy. She had trotted up the first several miles of open, low desert, successfully reaching shade before the first wallop of heat hit. Her momentum had continued up and up as the terrain changed from scrub to aspen to conifer, then to the high places where trees grew sparse; she had slowed only at and after a raging, steep water crossing that demanded care. She'd smiled through the crossing, feeling how the water's wild power honed her focus, loving the wildflowers that flourished in its spray on the bank. She had lingered over lunch, letting her shoes dry out; at another stop, she had pulled out her binoculars and watched the zip and hover of a Calliope hummingbird for a long time,

smiling. She had climbed slowly through bands of talus that required all four limbs, traversed across sun-drenched snow. Near the top of the pass, she felt the elation of open space and sped, keeping her eyes up, singing under her breath. Her decisions. Years had passed since she had been out alone—too many years. But she was alive and strong, and the mountains were filled with dry wild light, and she imagined they still welcomed her.

When she had reached the top of the pass and seen the lake hovering impossibly in the distance, she felt like she might grow wings. She would reach the lake a day ahead of schedule. There would be time to stay awhile, before moving on. And on, and on, for twelve days. She grinned at the nervousness that ruffled through her joy. Rugged land, full of challenge and promises. The map promised a high valley she had never visited; the still-rushing snowmelt promised to test her at every crossing; the trailless terrain promised time alone.

Then her grin had faded a bit as she remembered. She had made promises, before she left. For everyone's good. *There is no reason to resent this*, she had told herself firmly, as she settled in the sunny lee of a boulder and pulled out the small GPS unit. *You promised to check in here. The least you can do is let him know you're safe.*

Now she arrived back at the lake and knelt among the cones and needles at its edge, reaching for the stringer. She pulled it toward her, then winced as the trout tugged and thrashed in response, its panic humming up the line. Her voice was low and quiet as she drew the trout toward the surface, then lifted its sleek body from the water.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. If I could do this without hurting you, I would." She reached; the trout flailed, slipping easily out of her hands. She tried again, finally finding a good grip on the trout as it gasped and tired. "There you go. Shh, shh"—as if she could soothe a creature she was also strangling. She gritted her teeth and tightened her grip. Backed the hook out, pressed the barb down, eased the fly free. She lowered the trout into the water again. The trout shook its head a couple of times, briefly seeming strong. Then it settled again at that odd, wrong angle.

All wrong. She felt her face heat. What did it matter? She folded the pliers into the multitool and shoved it into her pocket. She stood, paced, a few paces to the bag that held her kitchen kit, and began assembling the stove, breathing through the tension in her shoulders. She had tried to learn from him—she really had. She tried to be careful, tried to be prepared. Tried, also, to be kind. But she always missed something. She was always too fast and then too slow. There was no elegance to her, to

her fishing. Just earnest effort jarred again and again by mistake. Harm after harm.

She returned to the fish and knelt on the shore. She took out the knife he had sharpened for her.

What had she expected at the top of that pass, when she turned on her GPS unit?

Not the suddenness of the message that rang the small box loudly and insistently, and not the flood of messages that followed, coming so fast that she could not even read one before another interrupted.

Good luck today! I love you
I already miss you
Hope you're having fun
I hope you're okay

The box had shrieked and shrieked. It shrank the open ridgeline to a tight point of sound, so that the box was all she could see or hear and her joy leached away entirely. There must be some kind of emergency. She'd been hiking, what, five or six hours? She could get out fast, though—it was all downhill—if she needed to . . .

It took a long time for the box to stop ringing, for the pass to fall into a scared and sudden quiet. She began reading, the small box shaking with her hand.

It's hard to be without you
I couldn't sleep last night. I didn't at all. I wonder if I will while you're gone
Where are you now? Are you okay?
I haven't been able to eat. I tried but I threw it back up
I love you so much
What am I supposed to do if you get hurt?
I can't stop wondering if you are safe
I don't know if I can eat while you're gone
I'm sorry. I know you don't want this
I just love you so much

On, and on, and . . . no. Nothing else was wrong. Only this. Nothing else was wrong, but she couldn't breathe. She couldn't breathe!

She had squeezed her eyes closed and focused on her exhales, trying to make them longer. Then she had remembered coaching him through his last panic attack, and her eyes had snapped open. *Name four things you can see that are blue.*

She only needed one. She fixed her eyes on the lake in the distance and breathed. Breathed again. Gradually, she became more aware of

other details: the wind swirling around her legs, the sun's heat on her shoulders, the sharp dark shape of her shadow. Her heart rate settled. Her hands stopped shaking, enough for her to type one reassuring message into the GPS unit.

But only one. She felt an ugly smile twist the corner of her mouth, as she realized none of the messages asked her to come back. He knew better than to ask her to come back.

She did not need to eat this fish. Her bear canister held enough food to last eleven more days—a heavy weight she had been proud to carry with such aplomb. But the stove was set up, the pan was oiled. Everything was ready.

She knelt again on shore and lifted the stringer from the water. She saw the trout's whole body gleam golden and perfect in the sun.

It was good, what he had taught her. The cast, the cut, the watchful eye toward water. But it would never replace the long walks, the way her best steps took her away from trails and over ridge after ridge until she looked back and realized her body could cover ground that should be impossible. Realized how far she could go, one step at a time, alone. How could she stay with love that measured itself in fear, with a love that had no skill in letting go?

When the golden trout slipped from the stringer, it moved like a muscled strand of silk, easing into the water with only the barest lilt of sound.

She stayed kneeling and silent, the length of paracord dangling unknotted in her hand, and watched the fish's colors cant to one side. It began to sink.

Then the trout righted itself and turned. Its ribbon of muscle moved, deliberate. Once. Twice. The trout swam away from shore, dragging a slow strong shadow over the rocks, moving toward the high cliffs and their snow.

What It Takes

Sarah Platenius

Up Lemmen's Inlet for a swim,
boat tethered to rock,
patches of wheat-like grass at hightide,
sea asparagus immersed.

I look at you beside me on the little island
in the last corner of afternoon sun.

We've been here before,
not knowing what to do,
still caught, pushing outward
to plan, worry, organize, fix, shuttle, feed.

I've undressed, my clothes in a little heap.

The inlet flows into Duffin Passage,
then Templar, which empties into the Pacific,
the best way I know to tap into infinity
with you by my side.

No wonder they call this god's pocket,
not that I need a god
to remind me of what's godly,
or what it takes
to jump in.

Wild Women Don't Get the Blues

Fiction

Susan Marsh

Heat had already begun to build by the time I reached the trailhead at nine o'clock. I parked across the road from the only other vehicle in sight, a battered blue pickup truck bearing local plates and bristling with roof racks for boats, bikes, and skis. A faded message adorned its rear bumper: *Wild women don't get the blues*.

I laughed, but with a pang of envy, wishing I were a carefree adventurer fit for such a bumper sticker. I imagined the owner of that truck plying the clear, cold water of Granite Creek in a kayak so short and sharp it hardly counted as a boat. Or maybe she was climbing one of the peaks surrounding this trailhead like points on a crown. The woman I conjured was young and slender and smoothly muscled under a deep tan, her skin darker than her sun-streaked braid. Whatever she was up to, she was doing it alone.

While part of me yearned to join her—or perhaps more accurately, to be her, I had work to do. I picked up my tools—a Pulaski and a crosscut saw—and hit the trail.

The first water bar was filled with silt. Tiny sparks of mica gleamed as if a pulverized mirror had been stirred into it. I raised the multi-purpose Pulaski—one side of its head formed into a limbing ax, the other a hoe-like adze—and began to scrape. Cleared of silt, the water bar would deflect rain from the next thunderstorm rather than allowing it to carve an ankle-spraining gully down the middle of the trail.

But on that late summer day, the earth was dry and the scraping not so easy. Embedded cobbles resisted my blows before reluctantly rattling free. I scratched and dug at the hardpan until a beveled, wide dip crossed the trail.

I moved to the next water bar, and the next, slowly working my way up a sloping wildflower park until I could no longer hear the distant prattle of the creek below. The pickup truck at the trailhead receded into a metallic speck, a flake of bluish mica.

After an hour my shirt hung limp with sweat. What am I doing here, I asked myself, with strands of gray hair hanging in my face, two painfully creaking knees, and an ankle that suddenly popped out of joint earlier in the summer and left me limping ever since? Women of my mother's generation came to mind, the housewives who were neighbors when I was a child in the 1950s. They might have strolled along a beach or lakeshore, stopping to examine a bit of shell or stone, before turning

back to conversation and martinis. By the time they reached their forties, their lives were mostly sedentary.

The image they left with me, of how a proper middle-aged woman should behave, could still blossom into my thoughts like a thunderhead, interrupting the pleasure of being strenuously outdoors. I celebrated my fortieth birthday on a backcountry ski tour with my husband and our Labrador, who bounded straight down through the deep powder, scribing a dotted line through our S-turns. As if to stick a pin into the bubble of joy I felt that day, I flashed on the idea that this was an odd thing for someone my age to be doing. Looking back, I roll my eyes. C'mon, girl—you were only forty.

The impressions in the dust looked like the wild woman was wearing running shoes. She would be miles ahead by now, and it was time to forget about her. Besides, the trail had entered a patch of forest where a fallen tree would keep me occupied.

It was a fresh subalpine fir, with blistered bark running with pitch. I slipped the saw from its fire hose scabbard to reveal a wide steel grin with a four-foot row of daggers. Picket teeth alternated with flaring rakers, the cutting points designed to scribe parallel grooves while the rakers moved between them to plane away julienne strips of wood. I had heard frequent complaints from trail crews and outfitters about why you had to use hand tools, not chainsaws, in designated wilderness. *I can cut a tree out in minutes with a Stihl, and it takes a half-hour with one of those misery whips*. Yes, the chain saw is faster. But it can bind up and run out of fuel, and if you're miles into the backcountry you're left to walk out with a useless (and heavy) saw, leaving logs across the trail. I liked the quiet of the hand saw, and the meditative time it offered while I worked.

The teeth skipped along the bark initially, then found purchase. Once the cut was started, with each stroke the saw sank deeper and I sank into the rhythm of its movement. I rocked from one leg to the other, pulling the saw along as if it were my dancing partner, and cut the tree with relative efficiency and grace. I laid the scabbard over the row of shark's teeth, tied it snug, and strapped it back onto my day pack. I hadn't given a thought to anything other than cutting out that log, and leaving behind wild women and '50s housewives left my mind refreshed.

All morning I repeated the simple labors of clearing trail, practicing a basic level of watchfulness—a heightened state of paying attention that comes with focused physical work. Foremost I attended to the details immediate to the task—the balance and swing of the Pulaski, the sharpness of the saw's teeth, the placement of my hand or foot or pants leg in relation to each. Pacing myself to prevent fatigue, I listened to and

felt each log as I cut it, for most of them were under tension and might spring free with unpredictable force.

In this state of watchfulness I brought certain skills to bear. I needed to know how the water bar was supposed to function and where to place a new one; how to approach a fallen log across the trail and where to make the first cut. A physical knowledge lay beneath this awareness. My shoulders remembered how to adjust for the weight of a Pulaski carried in one hand. My hands and feet worked comfortably in the familiar stiffness of heavy boots, the damp heat of leather gloves. I recognized the sharp tang of granite meeting metal and the sweet scent of freshly sawn pine. I knew the song of the crosscut saw, a bell-like overtone to the rhythmic rasp of its working teeth. A rising tone confirmed that I was nearly through the log; a dampened squeal warned of imminent binding.

As the trail approached timberline my pace increased. The logs were smaller and fewer and the trail leveled out so water bars were no longer necessary. For lunch I picked a rocky knob with a stunning view of peaks cut by the creek's canyon, all wild and uninhabited—except for the blue truck girl.

My work stretched into brief deployments of the saw between periods of hiking, and I entered a second state of watchfulness. A horsefly droned in the shadows and I kept an eye on where it might land. Cumulus rose on the horizon and I gauged the hours before a thunderstorm developed. My attention, while still focused on my purpose, now included the wider world, a world of wild beauty that was the underlying reason I chose to work in the woods. A yellow swallowtail dipped over a field of blooming fireweed. A Steller's jay dropped a feather the color of midnight at my feet.

Like the butterfly on a wildflower, my thoughts lit on other days, other summers, cycles enclosing cycles year after year, always changing yet comfortingly familiar. The cycles drew me, small person at a small task, into their timeless realm. I had cleared this trail before and expected to do it again. Each time, I walked with gratitude among the fragrant firs, trees that grew and fell and rotted while the forest itself endured through seasons and centuries. Each step I took on a favorite trail etched deeper into my heart a love for the mountains.

My love of mountains, I have come to understand, has helped me to regard the people in my civilized life more tenderly. They only want to get through their workday with their sanity intact so they can escape and enjoy a few feral moments of their own—even if only to feel the breeze on their faces as they drive home with a window down. I imagine them shouldering along the sidewalk on another hurried workday while I am

up in the mountains being paid to clear a trail. I want to turn their faces up and away from the pavement, to the emerald mountainsides and a billow of white cumulus above. I want them to hike the trail I cleared, to inhale the scent of a newly cut log, to catch up with that girl whose bumper sticker has remained lodged somewhere in my mind.

Clearing trail closes the gap between what is and what is hoped for, an embodiment of closing the imaginary gap between the earthly and the spiritual. Spiritual: a peculiar word to use in a story about trail work. What's spiritual about sawing trees and kicking rocks?

I was raised to believe that God sat encamped in a lofty beyond, ready to pounce on my transgressions and wag his finger at me. The church tended to disdain the "material, earthly world," the world that I called beautiful. The hymns and litanies called this earth a basket of trials, a vale of tears, a cradle of temptation. I was taught to pray for deliverance.

The trail work I performed felt like humble service of the Christian washing-of-feet variety, an act of benefaction for the place where other feet would tread. More practical than foot-bathing or lighting a votive candle, it was nonetheless a ritual, not a chore. It helped me reach the highest level of watchfulness, when my labor opened a door to contemplative calm and my mind began to stratify, like grades of fine oil. I could flip rocks with my foot while walking and bend to toss a branch off the trail without breaking stride. Meanwhile, my mind scaled the highest mountains and basked on lichen-crusted rocks. The wildest, deepest part of me knew she was home.

Yet, as I bent to pick up another fallen branch in the trail, that bumper sticker kept interrupting me: I was a wild woman too, wasn't I? But I often got the blues. The buff babe of my imagination jogged along, far ahead of me on the trail. She lived inside me as well, encouraging me to accept my own small competencies.

She helped me to forgive the feral child inside who was good at bursting through doors at the most inappropriate moments. She knew why my white blouses were never clean when I was a child; I got them dirty climbing trees, running up leaf-shadowed paths, and filling plastic pails with blackberries. It wasn't my fault that my parents insisted on dressing me in 1950's girlchild garb when I had other plans for the day.

From the high point where I put the saw in its scabbard for the last time, I watched the cumulus scuttle off to the east, leaving the sky clear and deep. No thunderstorm today. Horizons vibrated with ranges and ridges, receding panes of blue. With my eyes and lungs and tired limbs, I said a tiny prayer of thanks and started back down the trail.

When I reached the first water bars I'd cleared hours before, they looked as if they'd been that way forever; no hiker would notice that I'd spent the morning on them. I was about to congratulate myself for a job well done when I glimpsed a figure striding from the trees across the road toward the blue truck. She had not been ahead of me after all.

I hurried to reach her before she slipped away.

Her shirttail hung over her jeans and a broad straw hat shaded her face. When she dug in her pocket for keys I could see a tanned and slender forearm, just as I had pictured it. Then she pulled off the hat and tousled her short silver hair.

With my eyes riveted on her, I stumbled over tiny pebbles in the trail and fought the urge to yell for her to wait, but already the truck began to move. Once on the roadway it paused and though I couldn't see her behind the tinted glass I could tell she was watching me. The passenger window went down and she leaned across the seat.

No buff and braided girl, she could have been a grandmother. Her arm was not only slender but bony and wrinkled, her hand oversized with swollen knuckles. I pulled myself up and walked to the driver's side of the truck, where she propped her elbow in the sun.

"What a day," she said with a smile.

"Where'd you go?"

She flipped her hand upcanyon, behind her. "Granite Creek—easy going compared to where you were. But I'll tell you what, that creek's still up and the ford was damned cold."

The only ford I knew about was six miles from the trailhead. Most people stopped there unless they were heading to the alpine tarn at the head of the drainage. Had she walked all the way to the divide? Something about her told me that she certainly could have.

"Nice to see some trail work getting done," she said, nodding at my Pulaski. "Maybe I'll go that way next time."

I nodded my thanks and she started down the tree-lined road, waggling her hand out the open window. I was still waving back as the dust behind her truck settled to the ground.

Bison

Margaret Pettis

A poem stepped through the pines,
tapers lit by lightning, not a lord:
his great mane and broad wet back,
his pointed horns and small dark eyes,
draped with a cape of hailstones,
a mantle unmelted, unmoving.
I caught his eye from my
distant crossing on the trail
his kin had cut through the brush,
stirring dust into mud
clinging to fetlocks
and swinging black beards.
His jaws ground cud
he'd carried from the meadow.
Not turning his head, he stood
in the woods. Night bedded down.
Pelted with stones of ice
and needles, red and dry
hangers-on knocked loose
from the high, prickly canopy
whiskering his snowy robe,
his eye held mine,
white ice on black lashes–
two beasts in the forest,
alone.

Into the Guts of the Earth, or, The Day I Fell Out of the Boat

Heidi Obermeyer

In 2003, my premier summertime destination was Crystal Rapids Water Park in Loveland, Colorado. It was just far enough away from home that it felt like a special trip, and it had everything my childhood heart could desire: slides that shot you out like a cannon at the bottom, a concession stand with decadent ice cream and french fries, and most impressively, a gigantic wave pool. Every twenty minutes or so a warning sound would emanate from the long, low building at the deep end of the pool, and somewhere within it machinery would start to hum, and slowly, but then very suddenly, enormous waves would emerge from the back end of the pool and gain in size and velocity until the entire pool was a churning, frothing ocean on the plains.

I remember venturing out farther and farther as I got older, first in inner tubes and then as a swimmer, diving under the big waves where my feet couldn't touch the bottom, and letting the water suck me in and then push me out. It felt like cheating death to feel the power of that roiling, wild water, even within the confines of lifeguards and stop buttons. It felt magnificent and dangerous.

This sense memory is the first that occurs to me in the seconds after I am lifted up and out of a paddle raft by a wall of water on the Colorado River, about 90 miles downstream from where our trip down the Grand Canyon had put in a week earlier at Lee's Ferry. Our group—twenty-four guests and seven guides—has been traveling self-sufficiently with all of the food and personal effects for the thirty-one people in our party safely locked, loaded, and waterproofed spread amongst four oar boats, one supply boat, one wooden dory, and one paddle boat. Rafting trips are an absolutely miraculous display of human organizational ingenuity.

The day of the swim is our busiest, rowdiest day of the trip so far. A big white-water day, with rapids large enough that the guides stop to scout a few before we go through, climbing to a higher vantage point to assess the hazards ahead. They hadn't done that for anything we'd gone through so far, and the tension in the air is thicker than usual. First we run Hance and it's huge, a delight and a battle. Our guide Cricket walked us through the game plan for the paddle boat that morning, drawing the rapid and outlining its hazards in the sandy beach at camp. We all peel

off our paddle jackets shortly after Hance, suddenly hot from movement and the arrival of the sun on the river.

Our journey through the granite gorge continues, a crescendo in the deepest part of the canyon. The walls are black schist cut with lines of pink granite—harsh, foreboding, and velvety, glistening in the midday sun as the occasional desert plant ekes out a living on an impossible cliff face. Carving through water in the paddle boat feels incredible, and the next rapid, Sockdolager—named for a one-two boxing combination—is an absolute blast. We pass under the two pedestrian bridges near Phantom Ranch and spy a mule train on its way down with a resupply, our first unwelcome sight of civilization in over a week.

Here's the thing about rafting the Grand Canyon: you run the rapids. You ask how long someone's been runnin'—never running—Grand Canyon. And you pick lines down these rapids, moving from left to right or right to left around and between hazards unseen on the surface. It's a fine art, and when a boatman runs a rapid right, it feels like there wasn't much to worry about under there after all.

When we arrive above Horn Creek, the guides pull off to scout. The oracle rock—a boulder just above the rapid that usually gives some clues about how the river's running—issued unclear directions today, and there is some debate about which line to take: riding the main current between two massive boulders that form the rapid's namesake "horns" or making a dynamic cut from right to left, entering the rapid just under the rightmost horn. Cricket is decidedly against the first option, "splitting the horns," at this low water level, and is quiet and focused as she explains our line. We're to cut in from the right, avoiding a hole where she flipped a dory earlier in the year.

Before we run rapids, we get well tucked into the paddle boat. For me, front left, I shove one foot into a cup mounted to the floor and the other under the inflated support behind me. I am wedged in so well my toes hurt from doing it for the last few days. We ratchet down our life jackets so that they are like corsets—not going anywhere. When we crest the beginning of the rapid, time stops. The water is enormous.

We enter and the roar is deafening, Cricket's shouted paddle commands faint against the noise of the water. Our little boat slips in like a dwarf among giants, completely insignificant. We crash through one wave that nearly unseats me, the first time on the trip that I actually feel like I might leave the boat. Then we slide down the other side at a slightly wrong angle, and, irresistibly, with no other choice, we go crashing directly into another enormous wave, one that lifts my entire body up and

out of the boat like it's no trouble at all. I am disappeared from my seat and thrust into the water, and suddenly I understand how power works.

It was extraordinary how similar the sensations were to the wave pool—the propulsion of the water, the full force of it lifting and pushing my body, and the gentleness with which its momentum set me down where it had decided I was going to go. The warm water, tepid from record low reserves back at Lake Powell, dampened the shock of being thrown into the river. I surface facing upstream and feel no panic, just the surreal realization that we have not run the rapid correctly. I can hear Cricket yelling at the paddle boat, turning them back to me, and once I rotate to face downstream I focus on breathing between waves. It takes me a few seconds to get used to the life jacket holding me up, and once I do, I begin to awkwardly swim for the raft, a cork in the Colorado.

A crashing wave thwarts my first attempt to grab Cricket's outstretched paddle. As I reach out for a second attempt, I suddenly see my yellow hat in the water. Not thinking, I grab it and then grab Cricket's paddle handle. Plucking me from the water has been Cricket's only focus, and for every second she has spent reaching for me, another second has passed with the boat un-captained and at the mercy of the rushing current. As Cricket pulls me towards the boat I see that we are in line for a direct hit with the hard, black schist of the canyon wall, and I make a split-second decision to let go of the boat so I won't get sandwiched between it and the wall. I suddenly feel strong hydraulics from the eddy to my left, and work hard to grab a rock before I am pushed even farther towards the side walls of the canyon. Fortunately, the water slows a bit along this edge of the eddy, and the wall is covered in fluting that makes for good handholds, so I manage to grab on and finally come to a stop.

It's strange how the noise of the rapid remains constant throughout the swim. I see that I've managed to cling to a generous-sized ledge, and so, paddle in hand, I scramble up onto the rock, soaking wet but out of the river. Other guides pass by in oar boats: Garrison sees me and motions "Ok?" as he goes by, and then Austin follows shortly after, motioning "Ok?" and yelling "We'll come get you!" over the din of the whitewater. I believe this with my whole being. Somehow I am not worried that these strangers I have spent a mere eight days with will, in fact, find a possible way to me in this impossible canyon.

I realize at this point that I am completely obscured from view of the group, hidden behind the curve that forms my eddy, but I am relieved Garrison and Austin saw that I am safely perched on a rock. I test out the edges, dip a toe in the water trying to decide if I might be able to climb around the corner and get a view downstream. My ledge turns to

slippery, polished granite just beyond where I am standing. I think of the couple in Death Valley who ran out of water, left their car, and died lost in the desert as the Park Service easily located their vehicle. I remember this, and I commit to the key to an easy rescue—don't fucking move.

Just a few minutes pass, and suddenly I see the tip of one of our giant, clumsy oar boats roll into view, Garrison rowing upstream like mad on the opposite shore against the tail of the rapid. A few guests hop out to tie his boat up, we motion OK again, and as we are gesturing back and forth Cricket and the paddle boat roar into view, the five remaining passengers all paddling furiously. She is laser-focused on coming to get me, and they maneuver across the rapid and into my eddy at a surprising speed. I miss my chance to jump into the rear of the boat on their first pass, but make a flying leap on the second, paddle in hand, and hit the bottom of the raft with an inelegant thud. I've never been in Cricket's pocket of the boat before, and I try to start paddling, but it's awkward from the back of the raft. I get up and scoot back into the group in center left, and we make our way downstream, all relieved and then quickly gleeful that I am safe.

Our party stops for lunch at the next available beach, the warm sand beneath us a soothing respite, and I am told to get water and electrolytes to help clear the adrenaline. Miraculously, I managed to hang on to my hat for the rest of the swim and tucked it securely into my life jacket as I stood awaiting rescue, so I set it out to dry in the sun, a newly minted good luck charm. The incident is the most exciting part of the trip so far, and I am touched by how many of our group are so genuinely relieved that I'm ok. The guides are a little incredulous that I stayed so calm, and I even score a coveted invite into their raft circle for a beer and retelling of the tale when we get to camp. There is an excited undercurrent running through camp all evening, resulting in some excellent zingers and jokes. I shall henceforth be known for my new leadership position—Captain of the Grand Canyon swim team.

dusk, the granaries

Donna Mendelson

We're small numbers
4 days out 53 river miles from put-in
9 miles 2 rapids 5 long riffles today

The river the canyon the time
people have lived in this place
are big numbers

The river has cut for 6 million years
into sea-bottom-laid limestone sandstone
siltstone conglomerate gypsum chert

We climb cliff's shadows to a ledge
of sediments elements fragments
shell fossil stone at rest 300 million years

We arrive
a thousand harvests late
to meet a woman climbing

to save behind stacked stone walls
squash seeds corn
to plant for her next year's meals

Above the river on this ledge of time
we listen stones and deer hooves
clatter down on their way to rest

at this ancient place where people long have walked
rim to river's roar curl tumble
at the creek's outwash

here where everything rolls rests
climbs clatters echoes washes
holds on goes on

The Theology of Sand

Don Lago

To sand, are sandstone cliffs a resurrection into grandeur and immortality? To sandstone cliffs, is sand a release from imperfect, ever-eroding bodies into nirvana?

I was confused about sand at this moment.

I was supposed to be inspired by the sandstone spires above me. Nature poets, and even atheists, often liken the cliffs to cathedrals. Some sections of these cliffs were named for the loftiest figures in the Bible. The entire canyon was named for a place of sacred sanctuary: Zion. Zion's mother river seemed to have been named for the mother of salvation: the Virgin. Especially at sunsets, but even in the middle of the day, people call its luminous colors surrealistic or unearthly, though this earth is far more real than most.

Yet I was a bit annoyed at sand. I was climbing a steep slope of deep sand, climbing 500 feet, and with every footstep upward I was sliding back down, maybe a quarter of a footstep. This poor traction meant that mind and muscles had to work harder to constantly rebalance body. This balancing system had evolved many eons and species ago and was fairly automatic, but it was still tiresome—the lizards around me held the same balancing device but weren't foolish enough to slog up loose sand when they could find solid ground nearby, under the bushes. Sand was filling my shoes and made my feet slippery inside my usually smug shoe world, and it was even infiltrating my heavy hiking socks. I had to stop and sit down and take off my shoes and socks and drain the sand, and I did not see this sand as geology or poetic symbolism but only as pollution. So quickly, mammalian hygiene and comfort fixations reduce Mother Earth into mere dirt.

Given these mixed messages, perhaps it's not so confusing why I was confused about the theology of sand. With all its religious names, wasn't Zion Canyon supposed to offer some sort of theology?

With its indifference to solid forms like myself, with its rejection of holding on, the sand behaved as if formlessness was the ultimate form of sand, the alpha and omega, and sandstone was merely an interruption.

This sand was once part of one of the greatest deserts in Earth's history, a desert a thousand miles wide, with sand 2,500 feet deep here at Zion. On today's Earth, only the Sahara Desert aspires to be as great. Two hundred million years ago, rivers poured sand into a vast inland basin here and the rivers dried up and the sand remained, piling ever deeper,

for millions of years. Hot winds blew all the moisture out of the sand, blew the sand across the ground for a dozen miles, fifty miles, a hundred miles, shaping it into dunes small and large and larger, dunes melting downward and inching upward and cresting and spilling downward again, dunes rolling across the desert like ocean waves. The direction and strength of those winds and the shapes of those dunes are preserved in today's cliffs, in their sloping and crisscrossing lines. The sand still remembers its identity and freedom as sand, its cavorting with the wind, its dune artistry, its embodying time as a visible and relentless force. The sand had no desire to stop, to build cliffs. The cliffs are a prison from which the sand continues doing its best to escape, to rejoin the true ways of sand.

The sand had been imprisoned many times, trapped in the wrong places, evil wizards turning it into stone for millions of years, but the sand has always proven stronger than stone and broken free and returned to sand, and it always would. The rains and the floods and the wind and the sun and the wedging ice and the earthquakes recognized that sand did not belong in stone and joined together to set it free, and they always would. Sand was primordial; it came before sandstone and endured after sandstone and everything else.

Though this sand had been a Jurassic desert, it holds few dinosaur footprints, or any footprints, for this sand was not here to serve life; it was here simply to be itself and to live its own life. The sand was telling me the same thing it had said to wayward dinosaurs: this is my realm, not made for your passage, your hunger, your human hiker pride.

But perhaps the sand was quicksanding my perspective. It was forcing me to look downward, at mere footnotes, when the whole point of coming to Zion Canyon was to look upward, at the grand story.

I looked upward. The cliffs were looking down on the sand. To sandstone cliffs, sand is the tragic bleeding of cliffs, sand is weather tortured, sand is involuntary exile from the long fellowship it had embraced in cliffs. As cliffs, the sand had held firm and stood tall and proud. The sand had painted millions of sunrises and sunsets glorious colors. The sand was a master sculptor of sinuous shapes. The sand gave nests to hawks and stairways to desert bighorn sheep. The sand inspired humans to feel closer to divinity. Why would sand want to leave all this for anonymity and rootlessness and unemployment?

The sand on which I was trudging was especially tragic, for 8,000 years ago the cliffs had broken off, losing their cliff identity, broken into a massive landslide that dammed the Virgin River and perverted the river's

identity into a long, deep lake, and the river had to work long and hard to break the dam and remove it and become a river again, but the dead cliffs remained a steep jumble of boulders and sand that occasionally slide into the river and dam it again.

The cliffs look down on the sand as mere raw material for constructing future cliffs. The sand won't remain sand any longer than necessary. By river and wind it goes searching for the doorway back into sandstone. This sand has been sandstone over and over, sometimes sandstone cliffs, a million years here, a hundred million years there. Sandstone is the goal, sandstone is home, sandstone is beauty, while sand is only decay and exile and wasteland.

Yet "wasteland" didn't seem to be the judgment of the grasses and wildflowers and shrubs and trees growing abundantly out of the sand. The junipers were hundreds of years old. When this cliff collapsed into a landslide, it wasn't long before seeds began floating down and green began creeping up from below. Even sandstone held enough nutrients to let life take hold. Some of this sand was specks of shells from ancient seas. Its iron and other minerals held talents still untapped. Plants had funneled the sand into themselves, transmuted it into DNA and cells and stems, turned sunset cliffs into leaves absorbing the sun with greater genius, not melting sunset right back into the night but turning it into flowers that pass the sunlight into bees and honey. This sand had supported plants before, in cycles of swamps and seashores and even deep deserts, and now it had returned to sunlight and life again.

How does life fit into the theology of sand? Are plants the dead sand, long mummified and entombed, resurrected into glory with colored haloes? Through life the formless sand rises into form, the inept sand acquires many talents, the blind sand gazes through bee and lizard eyes, the oblivious sand beholds itself and sunset glows.

But the sand never desired any of this, and does not comprehend it. It was easier to remain sand. It was hard work to rise into plants and maintain them against summer heat and winter cold and eroding ground and hungry mice. What was the point of all this trouble? Sand was immortal but plants survived for only a speck of time. If plants always quickly melt back into sand, why not just remain sand? Plants were just as oblivious as sand. It was even more trouble when sand became bees and lizards and mice, infected with unrelenting hunger that forces them into unrelenting effort, through summer heat and winter cold, forcing them to compete for food and territories and dominance and mating, forcing life to fight and kill and eat other life, and even the survivors were

soon rewarded with nothing but death. It was entirely illogical. It was Hell.

When life became human it became even more illogical. Humans began projecting their confusions onto sand and sandstone. In mere cliffs humans imagined prophets and saviors and angels and gods. Not far from here, Navajo medicine men use colored sands to create elaborate pictures of gods and cosmic harmonies, into which the evil spirits infecting people drain, infecting the sand with evil, requiring the medicine men to discard it with careful ritual. On the other side of Earth, in the Himalayas, Buddhist monks arrange colored sands into mandalas that embody gods and focus meditation but that also have to be ritually destroyed. Would sand destroy its own beauty so fast? Humans never asked sand if it wanted to be burdened with the powers of divinity and evil, with the duty of making humans healthy and happy and immortal. The sand of sand paintings and mandalas was just as oblivious as ever.

Amid the sandstone cliffs was a long thin line, not red but grey, not as smooth as the sandstone but more corrugated. This was a lens of limestone, the remnant of a modest lake that had arisen in the middle of this desert and then disappeared. The landscape had offered a basin into which streams flowed, perhaps during a wetter climate fluctuation. Algae thrived in this lake and supported a larger organic world, including trees, which left fossil imprints. This oasis in the middle of a vast desert attracted every animal that could find it, insects and birds and reptiles, maybe including dinosaurs. Birds may have accidentally brought in the eggs of mollusks or amphibians or fish. Over generations and centuries, matts of carbon and calcium piled up, heading for limestone, if well-mixed with the sand and mud flowing into the lake. To the animals living here, the oasis was nurturing and good, and the surrounding desert was hostile and evil. Never before had this desert faced such a strict judgment. How did being viewed as Hell fit into the theology of sand? All we know for sure is that the desert set out to obliterate the oasis, drying up its sustaining streams and its shores, blowing sand into it, answering its hostile life with equal hostility, entirely burying the lake under sand, deeper and deeper. Yet the desert was unable to remove the limestone scar that would mar its sandstone beauty.

As the canyon eroded, so did the limestone seam, dropping specks and pebbles and rocks into the canyon, into the river, which pressed its power and liquid sandpaper onto the limestone, trying to dissolve it and remove it for good. The limestone flowed down the Virgin River and into the Colorado River and towards the sea. From the river and the sea, the

limestone was siphoned into roots and mouths and welcomed back into the forms and powers of life, nearly forgotten after 200 million years. Life was the same; life had changed enormously. The former desert oasis limestone, the exiled Zion Canyon limestone, passed from life to life, species to species, ability to ability, wing to fin to foot, habitat to habitat, then returned to the land and the rivers and the sea, returned to new desert oases, and joined the descendants of the trees and reptiles and birds it once had been.

Specks of that limestone flowed into humans and returned to Zion Canyon, but they did not recognize their old oasis or their canyon home; they were suffering from memory loss.

I reached the top of the landslide and stepped to the edge and looked down, the slope so steep I could not see it, not unless I crept right to an edge quite steep and sandy, and perhaps it was the ancient oasis in me, remembering its obliteration by sand, that warned me not to trust this sand; this sand was a slippery arrogant betrayer that did not appreciate life. I stayed away from the edge. I could see the river far below, telling the boulders to get out of its way, white with frustration. From the cliff's viewpoint I looked up the canyon at the massive sculpted cliffs, sunset-brilliant all day long, the stone fingerprint of sand's endless journey from place to place and shape to shape.

Perhaps it was the ancient sand in me, the sand that did not recognize why life went to all the trouble of maintaining a fragile form for one grain of time, that was noticing, as I slogged up 500 feet of sand, that this was a lot of trouble. As the sand slid beneath my footsteps it was saying: *We don't support all your trouble. Just feel in this hourglass your life draining away. You cannot change the destinies of sand or yourself by kicking us around. Why are you bothering with this climb? Gravity always prevails, even over sand, and we don't even try to fight it. Humans are so illogical and needy, hallucinating prophets and saviors and angels and gods onto oblivious atheist sandstone cliffs. Only fools would try to figure out the theology of sand.*

The ancient sand in me gazed over the sinuous brilliant cliffs; the oblivious sand had eyes through which to see, feelings for amplifying shapes and colors, a mind for minding the mindless sand. The sand thought: these mind things are kind of amazing. The sand finally saw the journey it had been making for eons and thought: who would have thought?

Bisti Badlands

Lauren Camp

At the trigger point of autumn, we staggered
into pre-history: tectonic process, friction
and distortion, the emptiness of heat and pressure.

Everything here oared by dinosaurs, wind-stretch
and water. Full daylight, no darkness.

As we walked, glint became sun flare.
Ancient trails took us twice as far as the next cave.
What had been submerged now narrowed to stumps

and slump, bald and riddled. Everything touched
came loose: the arches, ridges and fissures.
Every fine pebble or petrified height of the earth.

Isolated in equal parts territory and bewilderment,
we plunged between towers of silt and shale
in our sneakers and daypacks

to see what carbon remained, what undersea welts,
to see cypress hardened to stone.

After that I dreamt only white and coal
between the call of coyote or raven. I dreamt red-
weathered earth above sand hole. Stream and layer,

frost and thaw, dry light and acid. I dreamt basin
and badland, spires scattered on gullies
of incised sand. Even upon it,

on the timescale of ocean and geology,
wearing human on my face, my face hot on my body,
I noticed a hum in the earth

and great thickness of color as particles of desert
cracked and dissolved, the land bare of river or breath.

Coyote Music

Dan MacIsaac

From staccato yips
to ululating yowls,

the old rogue shifts.
Addled noise of

the trickster echoes
across a broken range

from parched arroyo
to thistled slope,

bitter ridge
to brined valley.

Throat music,
unmuzzled, storms

across an oiled tongue,
gales through slick teeth,

the howl over and over
breaks the pulse, and plunges

to rise through sharp
scales of time.

Sacrificial

Fiction

Perrin F. Keene

Beneath the gloves and scarves and coats and blankets, the men shook with a frozen feeling, the Slim One particularly vocal about his discomfort. “This ain’t right,” he said, gripping his horse’s reins. “Us dying o’ cold out here. I don’t know why they can’t make ‘em graze somewhere further south.”

The Bearded One shrugged his broad shoulders, his hat pulled low as if he were trying to nap as his steed marched onward. “You just skinny is all. ‘Need some meat on ya,’ my ma would say, hah.” He sniffed, his nose running despite his forged nonchalance towards the weather. He wiped it away with a thick glove, then flexed his stiff fingers, knuckles cracking as if the ice coating them was breaking.

The Slim One was unconvinced, huffing and mumbling and shouting to his partner that they oughta stop early to make a fire so they don’t freeze to death.

They didn’t make camp until sunset, stopping the herd in their heavy-hoofed tracks. The cattle, a large bustling group of reddish brown and white fur wrapped over fat and muscle, with short sharpened horns, settled in for the early evening. They sighed thick clouds of misty white air from their pinkish noses. The mountains framing them were tall, distant mounds of snow-painted rocks, and as the night grew darker you could still see the snow illuminated silver by the moon.

A fire burned softly between the cowboys, their boots aimed towards the flames, daring the leather to catch ablaze. The crispness of the air was overtaken by a warm smoky smell. They drank water from tin canisters that made each sip taste like metal, sparking another string of complaints from the Slim One, and ate their own cans of beans they’d warmed at the fireside.

The Bearded One decided to complain about those before the Slim One had the chance. “Taste like rubber at this point,” he mumbled.

“Hm mm,” the Slim One nodded in vigorous agreement. “Like fucking nothing.”

In a moment of steady silence, metal forks tapping against cans, there was a groan. They looked up across at each other, eyes met briefly and darting away as they listened to the quiet. Somewhere within the herd there was another moan of pain.

The Slim One stood up first, marching into the thick of cows and bulls, weaving through their large sleeping figures scattered across the ground.

The Bearded One followed after taking a final bite of his beans, setting the can down into the exposed dirt by the fire. Deep into the sleeping cattle was a small opening, a single cow laid out in the center. The others around her had their heads lifted, watching her with their large expressionless eyes in the darkness.

Behind her was a calf. Wet with blood and afterbirth, it breathed heavily in the cold, shivering and mewling. Any white in its fur was stained red with bloody streaks. "Get a blanket," The Slim One said. He hit the Bearded One on the shoulder with the back of his hand. "Go on, it'll freeze to death like that."

They wrapped up the newborn, drying it off best they could with a rough woven blanket they'd bitterly miss using during their long walks, the thick threads soaking up the scarlet from the animal's hide.

The Slim One placed her head in his lap, rubbing his hands over the blanket quickly and everywhere he could reach, knuckles frozen over and painted red. The little thing smelled like how iron tastes.

The Bearded One mostly watched, keeping an eye on the mother as she lifted her head and shook, ears flipping about, breath labored. "That thing needs to stand up, soon," he said, pointing to the calf.

The Slim One nodded. They both worked to help her raise up. Her newborn knees left her legs wobbling like a broken table. The Slim One chuckled a bit, seeing the calf standing with the blanket cloaked over her like that. "Goofy little thing with them legs, ha…" He knelt down and lifted her furry chin, smiling as she mooed in a high-pitched version of the others' throaty groans.

"Thing's gon' die before we get where we're going," the Bearded One decided.

"Maybe not." The Slim One kept up some hope, cupping the calf's head with both hands. Her fur was remarkably soft, unmarred by the outside world yet. Her eyes were large, deep black circles, like twin polished stones, eyelashes long and curling. "Cute thing…"

The next day wasn't much warmer than the last. The sun did very little to provide any heat, much less light, what with the heavy gray clouds hanging over them, a cruel blanket, threatening to snow at any moment. The Slim One would remark on this fact every couple miles, looking up as if it would start the moment he opened his mouth. "Bet we'll have to stop and set up early, sleep through a blizzard 'er some shit."

The Bearded One stopped quelling his concerns after the third or fourth time it was mentioned.

When it did start to snow, the Slim One spooked the nearest few cows with his exclamation. “Shit! Shit, shit, I knew it! I didn’t like the look o’ them clouds, whadda I say?”

“We can keep it up till it starts sticking,” the Bearded One said flippantly, then buried his head into his rocking shoulders, bracing for the cold that would follow the fluffy white flakes.

They kept the herd moving for a while before they were trudging through layers of snow instead of rock-freckled dirt. And even after that, despite his partner’s very vocal concerns, the Bearded One didn’t stop until the day crept to a close. They set up camp in record time, a fire burning just outside two small tents, the scent of charring wood soaking into their clothes and blankets. The Slim One kept his gloved hands close to the fire, flames nearly big enough to lick at his fingertips. Every few moments a log would crack, sparks dancing into the air.

They ate their beans in the triangular entrances of their tents, taking in what heat they could from the flickering hearth amidst the gray and white world that enveloped them. As night came, the Slim One stood, a blanket still wrapped around his slender shoulders as he looked through the herd, returning to the camp site with the calf in tow, holding her by the scruff of her neck as she weakly stumbled after him.

“What’re you doing with that thing?” the Bearded One asked, his teeth starting to chatter.

“She’s gon’ freeze out here. Imma keep her in my tent. The ma can sleep outside here,” he nodded to the heifer following him.

“That’s the dumbest shit I ever heard,” the Bearded One said through a laugh.

“I don’ care.” The Slim One sat down in the tent, pulling the calf inside with him, hugging her stout neck as he steered her. The mother cow mooed. She stuck her head in the entrance as well.

“You look like an idiot,” the Bearded One chuckled. “You Mother Nature, now? That it?”

“Shut up.” The Slim One’s voice was muffled behind the thick canvas.

This pattern kept up every night it snowed. The Bearded One would laugh and joke that the Slim One was treating the calf better than a person. “Next thing you know I’ll catch you feeding that thing with a spoon.” All ridicule was dismissed, the Slim One sleeping rather soundly with a warm fluffy creature at his side. He even started referring to her as “Dolly.”

"Oh, what, you gon' and named her now?"

"She looks like a lil doll."

"She looks like a calf, dumbass. You gon' and got yourself attached now. What's gonna happen when you part with her?"

"I ain't a child."

"Coulda fooled me."

The Bearded One woke up the Slim One and the calf rather abruptly with a shout one morning. The sun was just beginning to turn the world into a cold blue, the black remains of night still leaving as his voice broke. "Coyotes! Fucking coyotes, I know it!"

Outside their tents the satchel that held their food had been torn open, the cans and packages of jerky that were still in the vicinity crushed, ripped and spilled out onto the snow, the beans mostly licked up by coyote tongues, any cheese or bread scavenged. The Bearded One kicked at the snow, a shower of white dust flying into the air, his face tightened into an expression of such anger that the Slim One took a step back, almost knocking Dolly over as she stood behind him, trembling in the cold. "I'd hung it up! I'd hung it up, how the shit did they get it down?"

The Slim One nearly answered but decided against it, realizing just in time that the question was very rhetorical. The tips of his fingers tapped against his palm rhythmically. He suddenly got the sense he would miss the taste of those rubbery flavorless beans in a few hours.

After a long silence involving the Bearded One sitting with his head resting in his hands and the Slim One running his fingers through his hair, walking in circles around the scene of the crime, the Bearded One stood with an air of determination. He pulled his rifle from his horse's saddle, checked if it was loaded, sniffing and wiping snot from his facial hair as a bird started singing a jagged tune somewhere.

"Where you going?" the Slim One asked.

"Hunting. We need food, hm?" The Bearded One said quickly, frantically, tone tight with a fear he couldn't express quite right. "And since you're the bitch o' this relationship I figure I'm the best one to actually kill something."

The Slim One didn't say anything as the Bearded One marched into the woods. He just stared, watching his partner's boots leave dirt-coated imprints in the pristine white snow, like ugly scars.

Amongst the trees the Bearded One felt the quiet of the world in his bones. It settled into him as he knelt down, rifle raised over a fallen log,

aimed into an open field where the remains of a few deer tracks could be spotted from a distance. He breathed in the fresh freezing forest air that didn't include cattle manure for the first time in weeks. He waited for a long while. The tree branches shook with a sharp winter breeze, silvery flakes raining down and sprinkling white flakes across his clothes. After what felt like hours upon hours, he saw movement.

Two does stepped out onto the white scene, coats thick for the season, big dark eyes open wide as they watched for threats, unaware of the one just up in the woods. He looked down the black metal scope, breath short, hands trembling lightly with that icy feeling he'd nearly gotten used to. He aimed at the taller one's neck, just below its jaw.

When he pulled the trigger, they both darted away unscathed.

In the camp they sat in a snowy silence once again. The Bearded One kept glancing at the calf, looking between her and the Slim One.

The Slim One was looking into the fire, mouth closed tight, his knee bouncing nervously.

"Hey," the Bearded One kicked his boot lightly.

The Slim One looked up with a fragile shade behind his eyes. "I got an idea."

"What?" the Slim One asked curtly.

"You ain't gon' like it."

"Tell me the goddamn plan."

The Bearded One looked over at the calf again. "She ain't in the count. The count o' the cattle, I mean. She ain't even meant to be here at all."

The Slim One didn't say anything. He knew what the suggestion was—he knew very well—but he didn't want to say anything yet. He couldn't quite look his partner in the eye.

"She's just a little thing anyway. But she'd keep us fed till we get where we're going. We ain't gon' make it without something to eat, now you know that. The count won't change, we won't get any docked pay, and we'd probably be saving her a death in the cold. She's a sickly thing, no matter you letting her sleep in your tent er not."

"I ain't eating Dolly."

"She ain't a goddamn person!" The Bearded One shouted loud enough for the cows to stir.

The silence came back for a while. They set up for the night within that silence, the Slim One particularly rough with his belongings. He let Dolly sleep in his tent again, stroking her soft face and watching as she breathed in a steady rhythm, pink nose wet and smooth. He felt the top

of her head, finding two small bumps where her horns should one day grow, and he looked at her cloven hooves, dark and sharp and very much not human. Morning light broke the night's hold and she didn't look any more human than she did in the dark.

The Bearded One woke to find the Slim One standing outside, staring into the dead embers of the evening fire, hands buried into his pockets. The silence persisted. They didn't speak, but there was an understanding. The Bearded One unsheathed the hunting knife from his pants side, gripping it tight with his frozen hands. "She won't suffer, none. I promise."

They ate in silence. The Slim One hardly touched his meal, picking at the little rib with a fork half-heartedly despite the hunger pangs in his gut. The Bearded One was more eager, savoring each bite of meat and just barely containing his remarks of how good it tasted. Reminded him of his wife's cooking, he would have liked to say. He figured that the Slim One wouldn't appreciate the comments, though. He wiped his mouth with a handkerchief, his black curly haired jaw wet with reddish pink juices. To a certain extent he was grateful to those coyotes; he hadn't eaten this well in months. The Slim One hadn't either, but something about the meat didn't sit well on his tongue or in his gullet. It tasted sour. When it started to snow that evening, the Bearded One wrapped up the rest of the meat tight with twine and tarp, laying it within his own tent to keep out of reach of any canine scavengers.

The Slim One washed the plates and utensils harshly, scrubbing them with a rag in the nearest stream, just down through the trees and over exposed boulders topped with snow. The sound of rough cloth against tin was a scratchy, irritating noise that he tried to block out with thoughts of his bed, his sheets, his pillows at home. He very much missed home. Wind leapt through the needled branches above. The low muted moos of the herd sounded melancholic. On his way back he saw indents in the snow other than his own boot-prints. Light was dim as the evening set in, but he could still see the outline of hoof-prints walking away from the camp. He followed them back to the fire pit, but they'd faded away some paces before he reached the warm glow. He didn't mention anything to the Bearded One. Could you imagine if he had? "What, you seeing shit now? Fuck off, you're a paranoid jackass is what you are" is what he would've heard.

Morning crawled in, savoring the dark snowy hillside's quiet. There was a steady fog of cattle breath in the air. The Slim One woke with a jolt,

heart pounding in his ribcage. He didn't bother to wait for the Bearded One to wake up, barging into his tent and gripping his shoulders tight. He shook him awake. "Come on, get up, now," he whispered harshly.

It took a moment, but the Bearded One murmured into consciousness, eyes half-shut as he asked what the problem was.

"I seen the calf—Dolly—I'd seen her in my dream." He didn't care much about ridicule then.

"You gon' batshit, now."

"She was looking at me from the trees, eyes all big and watery; she was crying."

"Did you really need to wake me and tell me this?" his partner demanded.

The Slim One left the tent without saying anything else. He looked to the trees, a blank space where he imagined a little white and red calf to be. He could still see the dark wet streaks running down her soft round cheeks, like cuts bleeding out.

The Bearded One wouldn't say anything until later that day, simply in passing, but he might've had a similar dream.

"You seen it too?" The Slim One set down his plate, happy to do so.

"I don' know what I'd seen." He took another bite, chewing thoroughly. "You can have dreams about damn near anything, I don' see why you're making such a deal of this one."

"We had the same damn dream is why."

"Don't mean shit. We were both thinking 'bout the calf—makes sense."

The Slim One wanted to press on, but he decided against it, finishing his food with even more reluctance than the night before. Within the herd he could hear a singular low moan. It sounded heartbroken. He tried not to think about it as he fell asleep that evening, but he woke in the night to that moan again. He leaned out the entrance, squinting through the snow-coated darkness. In the distance again he saw Dolly. She stood still, thin gangly legs holding her thin body up with more ease than they ever did in life. Wet streaks still ran down her face, dripping onto the icy ground from her furry chin. Her big black eyes stared at him as if waiting for some kind of explanation.

"Dolly…" he said. His voice broke. His heart stayed close to the ground as he stood, taking a slow step forward. "I'm sorry, honey. I didn't want to, you gotta know that…"

She opened her pink mouth, a breath of cloudy air escaping alongside the cry of a child. A very human child. The Slim One flinched back, hands trembling near his face as she screamed for her mother.

The Bearded One woke up with a racing heart that morning. He pressed a large hand to his chest, letting his pulse steady before rubbing his face with meaty knuckles, mind playing over the dream again and again. He stared at the dirt under his short fingernails. He thought for a moment it looked maroon. He came out into the day to find the Slim One packing his saddle for their daily travels, tears of his own running down his narrow face.

"What're you doing?"

The Slim One didn't answer. He sniffed and wiped his nose with the back of his sleeve.

"Hm? What's the matter, huh?" The Bearded One marched up to him, hitting him upside the head with the back of his hand. "You crying? You really that much of a pussy, huh?" He asked each question genuinely, words rushed and angry.

The Slim One didn't speak because he knew it would come out shaking.

"You just trying to prove me right is what I'm seeing. I was already thinking you some sorry excuse for a man, you know that? No need to prove it to me." He hit him again. The Slim One's shoulders were hunched in defense.

They mounted their horses, the Slim One's eyes still hot as he stirred the cattle. Beams of dim sunlight managed to peek through the overcast gray. The herd was slow to move, and as they started their trek the cowboys noticed one had stayed behind.

"What's the matter with her?" the Bearded One asked, stopping his horse.

They stood still for a moment, watching as the cow laid out alone, head slightly lifted as she was otherwise motionless. They brought their horses closer, the Bearded One stepping down to get a better look. She didn't react outside of the lone flick of her right ear.

The Slim One noticed red ribbons in the whites of her eyes and a wetness at the corners. She'd been crying. He sniffed, the cold starting to seep in as he tried to look away.

"What's her problem?" The Bearded One stood with his hands on his hips.

"Probably missing her calf." the Slim One said through a tight chin.

The Bearded One looked back at him with a firm expression. He turned back to the heifer, marching closer through the muddied snow. "Get on, now," he said, and gripped one of her horns, pulling her upwards. "Come on," he groaned as she stubbornly kept herself down. He wrapped his arms around her neck, yanking her forward as best he could.

The Slim One glanced at the herd, which had slowed to a lazy pace on this hazy morning. He looked back just in time to see the cow impale the Bearded One with her horn.

A pale spike stuck up through the fleshy underside of his jaw, up through into the roof of his mouth. He went limp, the cow pulling away and standing as quickly as she could, as if she'd shocked herself.

The Slim One let out a shout as he watched the Bearded One fall into the swathes of dirt-coated snow, a white dust icing his clothes. He leapt down from his horse. The animal neighed in a panic. He rushed to his partner, lifting his heavy head with both hands into his lap. Blood gurgled from his mouth in thick waves of crimson as his heart beat. Bubbling pools of it spilled down his hairy chin, staining his shirt scarlet. The Slim One's gloves were quickly wet with the stuff, and his eyes stung as the shock settled. The Bearded One's teeth reminded the Slim One of pomegranate seeds. His wide eyes found the Slim One's, his lashes damp and his focus fading rapidly. Pretty soon his partner's tears would be the only warmth left on him.

Black Vulture

This Morning

Wally Swist

"Just as it is" –Sono Mama

The aromatic sweetness
of the thicket wild with
fleabane and milkweed

opening into fragrance,
where two deer
must have strode

through those tall stems,
knocking some down,
creating new paths

from which
the redolence emanates
even in the slightest wind,

is nearly overwhelming;
the call of a cranky catbird
wrenches its sound

all the way down
beyond the slope of the knoll,
where the grove of trees

stops before the sky and all
the passing clouds that are
held in the pond's mirror.

As Water Travels

Peter Anderson

eastbound storm clouds,
only the crow heads west
across the valley.

drifting veils of rain,
distant lightning, an old fencepost
and a meadowlark's song.

make yourself at home,
said the mountain, so the clouds
lay down for the night.

The Road to Chachapoyas

Mike Hull

En las montañas no estas solo. Dios es tu compañero. "In the mountains you are not alone. God is your companion." A young Quechua woman tending a small shop on the side of the road that climbs over the western sierra of the Andes and leads to Cajamarca offered me this assurance. Gratefully received. When you become engaged with the land and spend all your energy getting to know it, and it provides you with experiences of beauty and understanding and growth, then that becomes a relationship that permits, even begs you to ask, "What next, *compañero*?" I have spent enough time cycling through the Andes solo to realize that each trip is a spiritual journey, and lest I forget, the Quechua remind me.

A couple of days later I paused on the ridge above the gorge that the *Rîo Marañon* tumbles through, and where the town of Balsas has established a farming community and a secluded tourist refuge in a fertile oasis. From my vantage point seven thousand feet above the river, I could study the dirt road that would lift me nine thousand feet in long sweeps across the steep mountains that were facing me. I noticed that the vegetation turned from an arid grey to tropical green at about five thousand feet. And the mist, *la neblina*, rested at about nine thousand feet. This would contain the cloud forest.

In Balsas a family invited me to join them for dinner and offered a storage room for me to spend the night. I was on the road early in the morning and traveled comfortably on the long, shallow switchbacks. By noon I was midway and stopped at a small pueblo for lunch. The dry warmth of the café and the aroma of fresh empanadas offered a pleasant break, and the woman who served me sat down at the table and we enjoyed an unhurried conversation. I doubt that she sees many customers. I had not encountered any other travelers on the road that morning.

Pushing on up the road, I was soon swallowed by the fog. The visibility was less than a hundred feet. I was dressed in black and my tires made no sound on the damp road. As I approached another small village I could hear children, and I called out a greeting to let them know I was a human and not some spirit drifting through the mist.

When I entered the cloud forest with its dramatically unique flora, I got off my bike and walked a short way to view the plants on the downward slope. Then I stood still to watch and listen. There was no wind, and just an occasional bird song interrupting the silence. The only

movement was the barely perceptible motion of la neblina rising up the mountain and gently caressing all that is green and growing. Flowers the size of my hand opened themselves, their fragile petals reaching into the air to be suckled by the mist in a dance so soft and sensuous it seemed erotic. Should I be watching such an intimate moment in the relationship between the mist and the mountain? I did watch. And I wondered, is our human kind capable of so caring a caress? I realized this is why the mountain brought me here: to learn that actions we think are only human are really a part of all living things. We have words to help us to understand and explain and share them, words like *caress* and *caring*, *intimate*, *sensual*, *erotic*. But those experiences have been shared by all life forms on this planet since the first green plants emerged out of the soil hundreds of millions of years ago and reached into the sky. And that union has endured and is celebrated by all of life, including us, the comelately child.

The clouds had retreated just enough for me to see a few tall trees at a distant point probably a little more than an hour away. A good place to spend the night, I thought. I set out slowly, reluctant to leave this place. And quickly the fog became so thick and the slope of the mountain above and below so steep that I could hardly see anything beyond the road.

After a good while I came to a place on the ridgeline that permitted me to look down on both sides of the mountain. There were a couple of old adobe houses nearby, and at first I thought they were abandoned, but then I noticed smoke coming out of one of them. I left my bike and walked to the edge of the drop on the opposite side of the road. Still no wind, no sound, but there was a subtle undulation of the mist as it curled over the ridge, seemingly under its own power. I was mesmerized as I stood there watching the mist gracefully, willfully, dance its way over the ridge and down the steep slope.

And then there was singing. A beautiful wordless song that floated upon the subtle waves of the wispy fingers of the cloud . . . or was it the song that called the mist up the mountain and glided it over the ridge to nurse those who waited? I wanted to stay long within this moment. I turned cautiously and saw the clear silhouette of a mountain girl backlit by the ambient light of the cloud that encompassed her. She was floating above the adobes. And I was not surprised that an angel had descended to sing to her mountains. This is, after all, the Andes. She did not have words, just tones. She gave voice to the motions of the mist, and la *neblina* danced to the rhythm of her song.

The light shifted and revealed that she was standing on a small hill just behind her house. She saw me and stopped singing. I walked

to my bike, nodded my thanks for this moment, and slipped back into *la neblina*. And there I whispered to the mountain, "*Muchas gracias, Amiga*." My guide and my mentor. I think I now understand better that some experiences can be expressed with words like mine, others are only captured in music like that of a mountain girl, and still others must be danced as *la neblina* does.

I can't say how long it took me to get to the trees where I planned to camp. I realized I had entered a world where my sense of time and space had no relevance. No point of reference. But it seemed as though evening was approaching.

As soon as I got off my bike a man called to me from up on the mountain. A tall, elderly gentleman was making his way down a mountain path, speaking the whole time, cautioning me about camping here. Too dangerous. And he went on explaining that people must show each other respect. I must spend the night at his house. All this was stated rapidly in a mix of Spanish and, I think, Chachapoyan. There were many words I simply did not recognize.

We hid my bike and then climbed into the clouds and soon arrived at his house, an ancient adobe built by his father. Farm tools from that earlier era hung on the walls of a shed that extended out from the adobe. We sat down on a bench that was sheltered by the roof and had a long conversation, mostly one-sided. He had stories to tell, and I was sure many of his words were not Spanish. He told me that he had lived in this area all of his life. He and his wife have children, but they are all grown and live far away in a city. When Luis lived in Chachapoyas, he taught catechism to the young children. He reached for a book in a cabinet nearby and showed me his Bible. He wanted to share some scriptures with me, but he could no longer read. He reached for a box on another shelf and inside were his glasses. They looked like old aviator goggles with thick lenses fixed in a leather strap. He said these didn't work anymore.

I travel with an extra pair of reading glasses. I grabbed these from my bag and offered them to him. When he put them on he looked out over his garden and declared, "*Claro*." Then he opened his Bible and began to read.

I explained, "These are for you to keep. I have another pair for myself." He offered his thanks, and was lost for a while just turning pages in his Bible.

*Consuelo, his wife, appeared on the path. Rising through the mist wearing her many-layered skirts and wrapped in her manta, she was the image of a diminutive PachaMama with a sweet and ancient face. The

three of us talked for a little while and Luis suggested we get ready for bed. The light was fading. He opened the door to the cabin and told me to wait while he and Consuelo cleared the *cuy* (guinea pigs) out of the bedroom. When this was done, I entered a large room with two full-size beds against opposite walls and a clear, open space between them. Luis had lighted a lantern, and in the dim light I could not make out what the clutter in the corners and along the base of the walls was made up of. They showed me my bed and I removed my shoes and climbed in. Then they stacked four heavy wool blankets on top of me.

Luis extinguished the lantern and I heard the two of them get into bed. They talked awhile and Consuelo frequently had to repeat what she said. Then they recited their prayers together, spoke briefly again, and fell asleep.

In the morning I woke up as Luis opened the door and light flooded into the cabin. Consuelo cooked breakfast over an open fire in an outside kitchen attached to one end of the cabin. She smiled and handed me a cup of coffee, which I carried with me to join Luis who was sitting on the bench writing a letter, which he asked me to take to his sister in Chachapoyas. Consuelo soon arrived with a breakfast of three boiled potatoes, and while we ate, Luis gave me instructions on how to find his sister.

Farewells are not easy. I cannot claim to adequately express gratitude in any language for such cherished moments.

I walked down the mountain path, retrieved my bike, and peddled into a wall of dense fog. It was only an hour to the summit, and just before I reached it a sign on the side of the road announced, *Zona De Neblina*. Recalling my previous experiences within la neblina, I think that whenever I encounter that sign in the future I will approach with high expectations, humility, and some humor. At the beginning of every trip in the Andes I have asked them to "build me a body to match your mountains," and they do. This time they also offered growth of a different type. A clearer understanding of Nature—if you will, of *PachaMama* and my place, the place of human beings, in this great process of creation in which we have all been invited to participate.

As I crossed the summit and began my descent, I slipped out of *la neblina* and into the sunlight. There were a few small houses by a stream, and in the early morning the families were already doing their laundry and had covered several bushes and a few boulders with a collage of brightly colored clothes—a visual feast after so much time in the clouds. And what came to mind was the Spanish phrase for giving birth, *dar a la luz*. The Andes now "gave me to the light."

Green Cosmos

Julia Travers

During the day,
the glancing blue veil
that arcs above us
hides most of our celestial neighbors.

But as bright beams pierce
this thick canopy,
points of sun
constellate in the spaces between branches.
Looking up, I shift just slightly
to the left, to the right,
and moments of light
set in verdant fir crowns
pulse, flit, and sparkle.

Like one who wonders at the
gemmed night,
stirred and stilled,
I marvel at these daytime stars
shaped by the hands of trees.
I am held within
this small green cosmos.

Spirits of Kalalau

Kathryn Wilder

–for David S. Boynton (August 30, 1945—February 10, 2007)
and Rebecca A. Lancaster (August 29, 1956—December 16, 2008)

Kōkeʻe, Kauaʻi

Weather rules. In Hawaiʻi, weather moves like the sea, undulating, with a trough and crest and surge as with any wave. Rain today does not mean rain tomorrow, or even tonight. Some weeks it might rain for days in a row, if that's your luck—many a tourist has complained when their few days on an island turn drippy; they forget that rain keeps the islands green.

In winter you can count on cold weather upcountry, where frost covers the dawn in delicate lace and fires draw people close in the evenings. Up at Kōkeʻe, 4,000 feet above the blue Pacific and 1,200 feet below the summit of Waiʻaleʻale, we fetch fuel for the woodburning stove, our breath visible. Back inside, I snuggle deeply into layers of blankets and Hawaiian quilts and listen like a sleepy child to the talking of men. ʻAwa, the traditional Hawaiian drink made from the root of the ʻawa plant, is offered and shared, and in its warm, bitter bite and the soft firelight, I find Piʻilani.

Piʻilani, wife of Kaluaikoʻolau (Koʻolau) and mother of Kaleimanu. A hundred-plus years ago, somewhere near to here on this same mountain, Piʻilani may have stopped on her final sojourn into Kalalau Valley, accepting the warmth of fire, hot tea, food, and the company of women before re-entering rainy darkness. This one last time she would descend the ancient and treacherous trail down razorback ridges to the cliffs and caves below to check the grave of her husband. This last time, she went alone. "Climbing in the dark she felt the small stones turn / along the spine of the path whose color kept rising in her mind . . . the way was in her feet again. . . ." (from W.S. Merwin's *The Folding Cliffs*).

Princeville

Before I knew of Piʻilani, I decided to go into Kalalau for research purposes. Having worked as a river and wilderness guide, I imagined leading a small group of women into the remote valley for a backcountry writing workshop and needed first to experience Kauaʻi's rugged northwest coast within Nā Pali Coast State Wilderness Park, to hike the Kalalau Trail, and explore Kalalau Valley, accessible only by foot,

boat, and helicopter. I hadn't moved back to Hawai'i yet, and from the continent I gathered information, maps, permits, and backpacking gear, then collected Rebecca from California. Rebecca, my best friend since fifth grade. We'd had many adventures together, but this would be a first.

My mother and her husband Ed met us at the airport, housing us in a Princeville condominium as we packed and repacked our backpacks. They gave us a ride to the trailhead. That was the easy part of the experiment. The harder part: At forty-five, Rebecca and I were undeniably middle-aged. Rebecca had not backpacked before, didn't hike much, and wasn't used to off-grid living.

I figured if I could get her in and out safely, I could lead others in.

Kalalau, Hanakoa
Six miles in today, with overloaded bodies and packs and not enough stamina. Sore-backed and sore-footed, hot, and in the early stages of dehydration despite stopping at each water source to pump, filter, iron-tab, and drink the water, we finally made it to the jungled valley and rushing stream of Hanakoa. A shelter over a table provides a dry place for our tiny aluminum stove, on which Rebecca heats water for Ramen. I devour a Lemonzest Luna Bar before setting up the tent and rolling out our thin sleeping pads and fleece bags.

Early signs of dehydration? Emotions rising to the surface, which I noted as we rounded the end of a huge horseshoe bend only to find another bend awaiting, the trail on the far wall barely visible in the distance. Rebecca stopped, her body shaking. "Are you crying?" I asked. At this, she sank slowly into a heap at the side of the trail, choking on laughter. I knew better than to sit down with my pack on—I might not be able to get back up—and leaned against a rock, tears splashing as I gasped for air.

The Earthwalk Press map, which I had to have but failed to read carefully before departure, says in red print, "Get an early start to avoid hiking in the hottest part of the day." It warns of dehydration, heat exhaustion, sunstroke. Like the novices we were, we packed too much stuff and left too late in the morning.

Kōke'e
In 1892, Pi'ilani escorted her husband and son, victims of Hansen's disease, into the depths of Kalalau Valley. Months later, persecution by haole, or foreign, law forced Ko'olau to act in self-defense. After Ko'olau shot the sheriff, police and soldiers pursued him, burning the homes and

belongings of innocent Kalalau residents along the way. Two soldiers, sent up into the cliffs to retrieve Koʻolau dead or alive, also fell victims to his excellent marksmanship.

The army retreated to a safer place, from which they seared cliff walls with rifle fire for four days as Koʻolau, Piʻilani, and their son drank dew from leaves and ate nothing. Cannon fire followed, but Koʻolau snuck his small family deeper into hidden depths. Criminals in their own land for wanting to stay together, Piʻilani nursed her husband and son through the pain and horror of leprosy while they lived in hiding for nearly four years.

Kalalau, 8 Mile
I'm sitting at the edge of a green knoll, the grass on the emergency helicopter landing pad as short as resort lawn. Pack shorn, I lean against a boulder set back from the ledge, my feet hanging over. The cliff rounds out like a woman's belly in early pregnancy, then undercuts to the sea. Huge shadows of rock, easily seen through the teal water, lie scattered across the ocean floor. Erosion eats away at this oldest of the eight main Hawaiian Islands, stone by plunging stone. Feral goats expedite the process. On the steep hillside behind me, in the exposed iron-red soil, other large basalt chunks await the fall. May their timing not be now.

Small, tomato-like plants grow on a vine on this cliff face. They smell and taste like tomatoes, but as soon as I eat one my throat feels funny and my imagination swells. Surely if poison tomatoes grew here there would be warnings! I look at my trusty map. In red: "Do not eat wild or once-cultivated plants. . . . They may be poisonous or you may be allergic to them. Help is far away if you have a severe reaction. . . ."

A swarm of dark, noisy birds swoops suddenly up over the cliff and directly at us. Their large wings fan me with air as the birds head for Rebecca, who screams and ducks. I double into giggles as Rebecca hides her head and hugs the earth. The geese settle a few feet away. "Nēnē," I say. "A native goose." Rebecca glares at me, at them.

In the days of Piʻilani and Koʻolau, many families lived in the valley. An 1893 report shows twenty-eight "lepers" living among 120 Kalalau residents. Terraces where Hawaiians farmed kalo still exist beneath the overgrowth. Banana, sweet potato, and ʻulu were farmed or grew wild, with guava, lilikoʻi, and tomatoes later introduced. Wild pigs fed on fallen fruit, and fed the people. Today's feral goats feast on an abundant selection of delicacies.

Kōkeʻe

This morning I wanted to look into Kalalau from the top, hoping to see the distant ridge upon which Piʻilani carefully stepped with her husband, son, mother, and niece on their first descent. Mist hung thickly in the valley and swirled up over the ridges, hiding the view and coating me with moisture. A thick quilt of green with bright appliquéd blossoms draped over each ridge. The sense of steepness and depth dominated the beauty. Between each pair of cliffs, swirling fog. A misstep could have sent me sliding into a final forever.

Other "lepers" also risked the ancient ridge trail into Kalalau as they fled laws and a government not their own. The rules of leprosy had changed—the foreign government prescribed segregation and isolation as treatment for the then-incurable disease, and no longer allowed family members to accompany victims to the "leper colony" on a remote Molokaʻi peninsula. Some victims chose not to go to "the grave where one is buried alive" and disappeared instead into the vapors of places like Kalalau.

Kalalau, Red Hill

On this last hill above the valley, we watch small bands of the Clan of the Shirtless march by—two or three at a time, or six, if you do the math. One of them wears nothing but her backpack and boots. These young women, often accompanied by dreadlocked men, look about twenty years old—they have no lines, wrinkles, or stretch marks, none of the physical signs that mark the wisdom Rebecca and I think we have earned. We demonstrate this wisdom by resting before descending to the beach.

Helicopters full of tourists circle above the valley every few minutes. Those noisy moments erase the sense of wilderness that a twenty-two-mile, multi-day backpacking trek can bring, when you alone are responsible for yourself and your safety. The map warns that an evacuation from this valley could take up to five hours, but these metallic birds whap-whap-whapping above make "civilization" feel far too close.

During an interlude I hear the waves below, the voices of birds and women in the trees, and the wind that lifts up over these cliffs. The long, deep Kalalau beach stretches across a pocket in the cliffs, and the valley runs up to the high mountains behind us, to Kōkeʻe.

In "Koolau the Leper," Jack London writes, "In fine weather a boat could land on the rocky beach that marked the entrance of Kalalau

Valley, but the weather must be very fine." Today the ocean has calmed, whereas yesterday it thrashed against the cliffs eight hundred perilous feet below us, further eroding an island over six million years old. We watch two men pull their kayaks up onto the sand. Their journey from Hanalei probably took them four hours; ours has taken two days.

Did Jack London see and feel this red soil, those steepled cliffs, or did he write Koʻolau's tale only from what he'd been told? He does not mention Piʻilani in his account of her husband.

The next steel bird flies in, eroding the moment.

Princeville

The Rebecca experiment failed. At her insistence we left a day early—she refused to camp another night and I dared not let her hike out alone. She said that she would not return to Kalalau unless someone carried her in, and then back out, and she would never eat another Luna Bar. When we got to the trailhead and parking area, I couldn't reach my mother on the payphone, so we hitchhiked. A dread-headed young man invited us into his vintage van. We shoved our packs into the thick, smoky interior and sat on the floor. From where he dropped us off, we hiked another mile across blacktop and green lawns to my mother and Ed's.

Although surprised to see us a day early, I think my mother understood—she'd known Rebecca as long as I had. Rebecca had camped with us lots during our teen years, but she had not followed me in seeking wildness beyond pavement. The valley and trail were beautiful, Rebecca admitted, but she preferred the Princeville condo, hot water, flush toilets.

I will admit to the pleasure of a hot shower, but a familiar longing haunted me. I feel this when I leave the river: craving those days of moving with sun and water like tides and the moon; people working together to take care of the elemental; rowing or walking most important after water, food, and shade. Where bodies become equally beautiful and the details of a place glow like sunset all day and night long.

In 1906, a man named John Sheldon purportedly wrote down Piʻilani's version of her story. In Frances N. Frazier's English translation of the Hawaiian account, *The True Story of Kaluaikoolau*, Piʻilani laments as she exits the valley, "And O, the succoring, hospitable valley of Kalalau! . . . I am going on a road that leaves you behind, leaving in the intense fragrance of your wildness the bones of our beloved ones. . . You will be hidden from my sight, but always in my heart I will gaze in remembrance."

Kalalau

Despite my failure with Rebecca, a couple of years later I planned to lead a group of high school seniors into the valley. Wet weather stopped us—the trail too slippery, streams impassable—so I led a group in the next year. Actually, I followed. I had asked my friend Andrea to help. Brazilian, competitive swimmer and outrigger canoe paddler, twenty-three years old and five-and-a-half months pregnant, her bare brown belly protruding between shorts and sports bra, she had the gumption and fortitude necessary to guide teenagers. At first, the strapping young students from a Maui private school pressed her; eventually, few could keep up. I didn't even try. At the back of the pack I paused often to look at cultural sites and the scenery, the different plants, for native birds. And to breathe.

We each carried an equal distribution of food and supplies but the students complained about their heavy packs. When we reached Kalalau, they argued when I insisted they pitch their tents somewhere other than on the nicely manicured helicopter landing pad, staring open-mouthed an hour later as a helicopter descended loudly onto the pad, uprooting a tent staked nearby and sending it flying down the beach.

Of the fourteen participants, two of the young men helped without being asked. The others stood around while Andrea and I cooked. They washed dishes reluctantly. Each evening, dishes washed, food put away, cooking fire extinguished, teenagers off to their own tents, the night waves muted our voices as Andrea and I debriefed quickly before sleep overcame. We would return, we vowed—just us, light packs, no pressure. That was our hope for the next season, but weather makes its own plans.

Kōkeʻe

The men talk further into the night, stoking the fires in the stove and their hearts. I imagine the men in Kalalau at the end of the 1800s discussing similar issues of land ownership and the fading rights of Hawaiians. In 1893 American businessmen, backed by the American military, dethroned Queen Liliʻuokalani. Hawaiians had already lost hundreds of thousands of people and hundreds of thousands of acres, and now they'd lost their queen. This wrong has not been righted.

It was after the overthrow of the monarchy that the Provisional Government came into Kalalau to get Koʻolau and remove all the "lepers." Piʻilani had committed to her husband and son to stay with them through their illnesses, and Koʻolau told the sheriff that if his wife could not go to Molokaʻi with her family, he would not go. Piʻilani's commitment ran so deep that she agreed that Koʻolau should kill the three of them rather

than risk capture, a plan that would mean watching her own son die at the hand of her husband.

Instead, Koʻolau shot the sheriff.

Other Hansen's disease victims turned themselves in. The Provisional Government emptied the valley of all its long-time Hawaiian residents, diseased or not. Koʻolau and Piʻilani carried their son higher into the folds of Kalalau. After the soldier deaths, only twice did Piʻilani and Koʻolau speak to anyone other than each other and Kaleimanu.

Kalalau hid and fed them but could not cure them. Kaleimanu died first. When Koʻolau passed, Piʻilani stayed hidden for another month before climbing the rigorous footpath along cliffs and rims to the place that is now Kōkeʻe State Park, where I snuggle by the fire. From Kōkeʻe, Piʻilani descended the mountain to the ocean town of Kekaha and her family, nearly four years of story wrapped in her tattered clothing and heart. She did not disclose the location of Koʻolau's body. Despite efforts of lawmen to find him, he remains protected by silence. As does Piʻilani—only her family knows the place of her burial. Who else needs to?

Home

I am much older than forty-five now. I did not lead that imagined group of women writers into Kalalau. My interests shifted, moved inward, and no longer did I wish to risk taking others into storied and sacred places—a risk that lies not in the physical challenges but in people misunderstanding the land.

While at their whim the Clan of the Shirtless and the Dread Heads traveled that dusty or muddy trail along Nā Pali and occupied Kalalau for weeks at a time illegally, Hawaiians still cannot legally inhabit the valley. But they know the stories—Piʻilani, Koʻolau, and Kaleimanu only three individuals among generations of Hawaiians who lived in Kalalau.

One of the men warmed by fire and ʻawa up at Kōkeʻe that night still lives on his home island, where uncountable generations of his ʻohana have lived. He still draws young Hawaiians to the fire, ʻawa, the stories. Another of the men tripped or slipped on a treacherous trail he knew well and fell from a three-hundred-foot cliff. The year after David Boynton fell to his death, Rebecca overdosed, ending our forty-three-year best-friendship.

Merwin writes, "Mr Fornander said / that the story is all that we have when things are over / the story begins as an echo of what went before / but then it is only the story we are listening to." If ever I do hike back into Kalalau, when weather allows, I will carry Rebecca in. And leave the story there.

At Magdalena Bay

Cedar Koons

A windless morning and glassy bay,
dawn colors cloaking moonset,
your exhalation and vapor mist,
a V from double blowholes, wets my face.
You emerge, roll and lift a fin
toward my outstretched hands.
The profile of your spine mimics
the dry mountains behind you,
mottled skin with white
cloud patches, black shadows,
grey background with yellow patterns
of sunburst barnacles.

Your skin is smooth, firm
and cool to my touch. I pat your head,
touch the rim of your baleen lips and
encounter your eye, large and soft like a horse's,
gazing at me as if understanding
the unfathomable: that we cannot
comprehend our attraction, nor
recognize the danger of its lure.
Your whiskers tickle my hand as
you glide away from my boat and propel
yourself ecstatically into my element,
an instant before plunging deep into yours.
Like a shiny valentine, your black tail
waves to acknowledge our kinship
and the mystery of our affection.

On Knowing The Wild

Steve Gardiner

The northeast side of Sylvan Peak features a massive cirque, a bowl scooped out by one of the glaciers that carved the Beartooth Mountains of Montana. The sides of that cirque are steep. In fact, on the topographical map of the region, the contour lines are so close they form a solid bar. The map shows the remains of a glacier resting in the bottom of the cirque.

I could tell by looking at the map that I needed to see that cirque, felt drawn to look deep into its core. I drove up the West Fork Road to the Senia Creek Trailhead. The trail has no mercy. It is steep and rocky. My thighs burned, and I was sweating when I reached the Red Lodge Creek Plateau, but I was excited to finally be walking there. I was interested in the looping hike and couldn't wait to see the rugged cirque.

Red Lodge Creek Plateau gave me a chance to catch my breath and recover from the steep climb. I saw the top of Sylvan Peak, tempting me to keep walking north. The sky was clear, and by the time I was in position to look into the bowl, the sun was high in the sky.

Since I first saw that canyon on the map, I had a picture in mind, but I wasn't prepared for what I saw . Most glaciers in the Beartooth Mountains are fairly flat, but the glacier in the canyon where Timberline Creek runs was a scene of broken ice tumbling down the valley, tilted at every angle.

Rising from the frozen chaos, the nearly vertical granite walls hovered two hundred, three hundred feet above. The sheer sides of the canyon came together in the far back, forming a semi-circular rim. Scattered stones hung precariously to the upper edges and on ledges in the middle. They provided proof of the harsh weather, the freezing and thawing that happened over the centuries this cirque has remained hidden in quiet splendor.

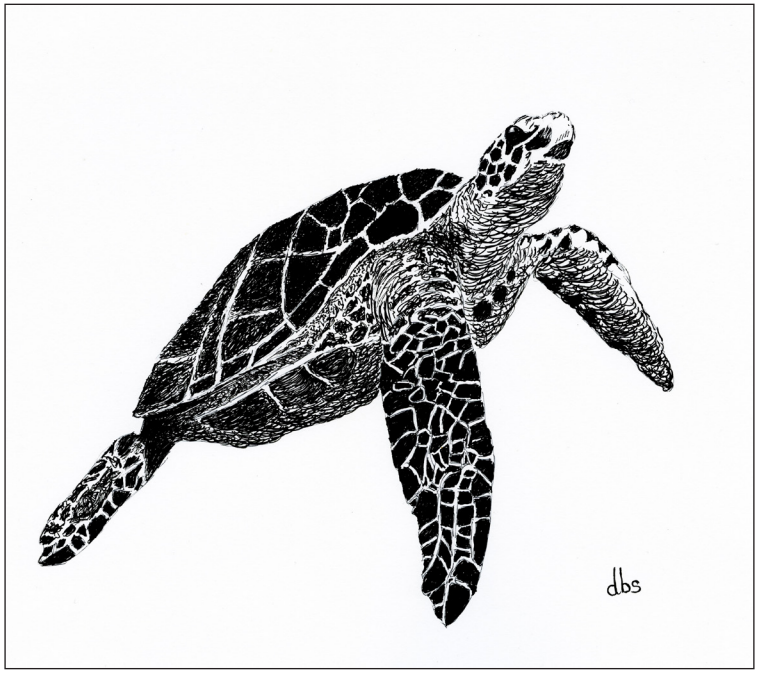
Sitting on a rock, I looked from one side to the other, from the foot of the glacier to the back where it met with the granite wall. The sun highlighted the icy blocks, emphasizing the angles. The wild landscape showcased the forces needed to create that cirque. I sat entranced for many minutes, then walked the trail toward Lake Mary, where I stopped for lunch. From there, I hiked the trail down to the level of the West Fork of Rock Creek and walked into Quinnebaugh Meadows.

The contrast couldn't have been greater. The cirque on Sylvan Peak was portrayed in black and white. Quinnebaugh Meadows was lush and

green. Trees, bushes, and alpine grasses filled the creek bottom. The fresh air smelled of growing plants. The creek bubbled over mossy rocks.

Walking back to my car, I remembered a bumper sticker I had seen one time on a pickup in Wyoming. It said, "Wilderness: Land of No Use." I thought about the wild scene, the granite and glacier in the cirque on Sylvan Peak. I looked again at the pastoral beauty of Quinnebaugh Meadows, and I felt sorry for the owner of that truck. I wonder if he had spent the day with me, would he scrape that sticker off? Would he change his mind?

For me, I've been to Sylvan Peak. I've walked through Quinnebaugh Meadows. I've seen the wild and I hold those images in my mind and heart. It's been two decades since I hiked the loop on Red Lodge Creek Plateau. I may never hike there again, but the memories will be with me for the rest of my life. I love knowing that a place that wild exists.



Tortuga

After Now

David Albano

–in the Adirondack High Peaks

After climbing
the Great Range traverse,
I want to stand
in the cold parking lot
sipping a beer
from out of my trunk
and shivering through sweat
in the oncoming dusk.
My crampons will be dropped
on the floor of the backseat;
my backpack will lean against a dirty fender,
and I will ignore the throb of my thighs
telling me to drink water before the cramps set in,
and smile with those who shared
the climb, or the beer, or the parking lot.
Below the Great Range,
we can still feel Haystack in our feet
and Gothics on our shoulders.
The sun will have just gone out,
and we'll stitch a story of the climb—
the stumbled, kicked steps on the Devil's Halfmile,
the worry about falling ice,
the trust in our hands
on the backside of Saddleback,
and upon reaching a peak,
the greeting of the storm at face height.
And in the parking lot, we will mend cord-stretched nerves
with reverent laughter
because death, even as you read this, is close.

That Is Enough For Me

Sam Ruhmkorff

I thought we'd sing. Thrum the air with the folds in our throats. Breathe the cold, tuneless wind and make it a human thing. Make it sound like John Denver.

Hand on the small of your back, pulse quickened, my ears kept vigil for your rasping. I never dreamt we'd be here.

You are made to track the antelope, wander the barren downs, find treasure underneath weathered stones and logs. Search with clawed fingers and amber eyes. Your heart beats like the moon. Your strides are waves, tides, seasons. Plum juice and blood smear your lips.

The rocks have been shaped by epochs of ice and bitter wind. Your stealthy foot finds a crack, expands it an atom's width. Your hands scrape off flecks of granite, leave motes of skin in return. We climb, singing the words of a man who is no longer alive.

There is no point to going higher. No point to braving whatever the weather is doing on the other side of the ridge. No point, except that you want to, and I want to, and if we do—if we get away with this—we'll have a story to tell.

Some future day, you remember this mountain, and me. The membrane between us is always open. Your hand is raw and cold in mine. The wind bites. Hail stings our cheeks. We're scared, but our song isn't.

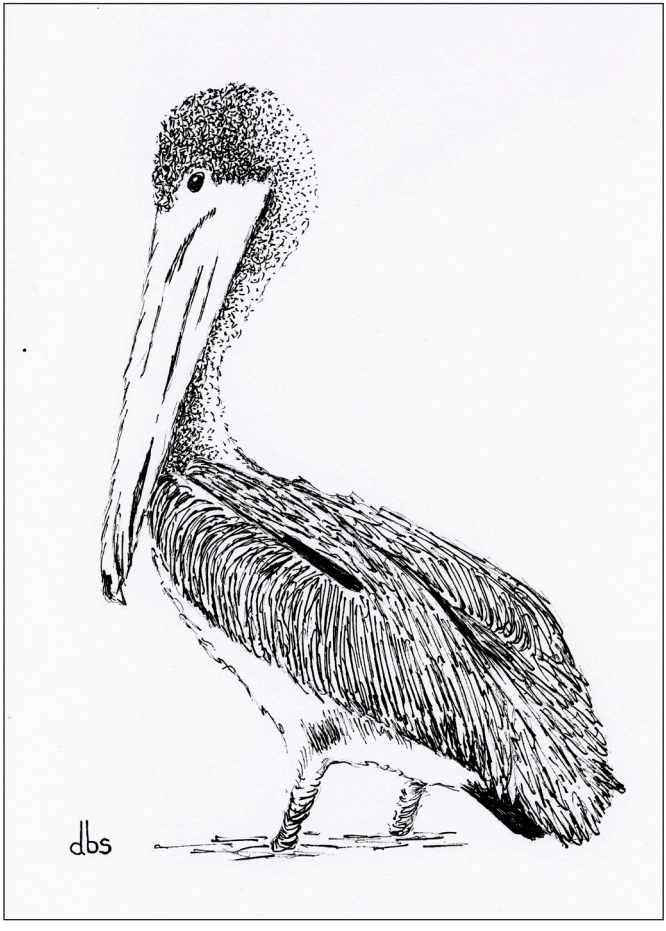
Some future day, you climb through the canopy, a cliff swallow who fledged too soon fluttering in your gnarled palm. Your feet carry the dirt of a thousand mountains. Deer graze on rich grasses in your wake. You make camp for a week, waiting to cross a river swollen with snowmelt. Hook your arm around the smooth roots of a fir willing to lift you up the slope. Plunge your hand in deep mud, take the pulse of the earth.

We let our song slide away. Tap the summit stone. The wind snaps the hoods of our jackets, throws rain sideways in our faces. Descending the far ridge, your footsteps crater the rock. A dozen yards in a single step. Clouds curl round your ears. Your lungs push the wind back down the mountainside. I follow. I will walk with you as far as I can.

As a baby, you slept with your cheek on the ledge of my shoulder. When I fed you, your lips pursed, a violet about to bloom.

If I die in the mountains, know I will always be there. The scent of earth and pine pulled along by your passing. A pebble hidden in

the crannies of your pack. Take me places I didn't get to see. My last thoughts: rivulets running through spongy moss. A stand of yellowed larches. The elegy of a white-throated sparrow. You.



Pelican

Before We Go

Deborah H. Doolittle

I'd like to hike the mountains, one set
of footprints stepping in the other,
stand at the trunks of ponderosas
looking up, spine straight as any pine,
rooted in a sense of vertigo
we call wonder.

Before we go, I'd
like to climb above the treeline, stand
above the clouds, and looking down, see
an ocean of eiderdown, the tufts
of treetops and mountain peaks floating
like wrack, a hint of what's to come.

We'll stand, hip to hip,
hand in hand, at the apex of our
trip, the climax of our story, while
we're still together, contemplating
the sublime and the profound before
we take that denouement to the ground.

Camping

Emily Benson

It was always a respite, despite the inevitable rain. We'd pack up the nylon tent and the green canoe and the big Coleman cooler and go to the woods, the mountains, the ponds and little lakes still enough to paddle safely with a couple of grade-schoolers. One of them liked the outdoors very much, nearly feral, painting herself with streaks of shale and buttercups; the other ambivalent, deep in his inner life, immersed in music we couldn't hear or understand. The rest of us inhaled birdsong, the sigh of the insect-green tent against the breeze, and the snap of dry twigs catching in the fire pit, spitting up orange sparks before the dark curtains of forest rich with the scent of spruce and hemlock and ferns. Sunset and gathering stars rippled on the gleaming, bramble-bordered water that lapped the campsite as the day, our busy little lives, the hard hold on performing our roles were released. We were each of us our own selves– alone in the quiet woodland night, together.

Contributors' Notes

David Albano is a joyful dad; his children love poetry and pizza as much as he.. He has taught in places from Malawi to the Navajo Nation. His favorite place to teach is under a tarp in a thunderstorm on a canoe trip. Poems published in *Blueline*, *Earth First!*, and *Italian-Americana*.

You can find **Eric Aldrich**'s writing in *DIAGRAM*, *Deep Wild*, *Terrain.org*, *BorderLore*, *Maudlin House*, and *HAD*. You can find Eric Aldrich exploring tunnels, wandering the desert, or lurking around freight trains in Tucson, Arizona.

Colleen Alles lives in West Michigan with her family. The author of three novels and two poetry collections, Colleen is an MFA candidate at Spalding University and a fiction editor for *Barren* magazine. When she isn't writing, Colleen loves distance running and wandering the neighborhood with her well-loved beagle, Charlie.

Peter Anderson's books include *Riding the Wheel*, a lyrical almanac from the edge of the San Luis Valley; *Reading Colorado: A Literary Road Guide*; and *Heading Home*, flash prose and prose poems exploring rural life and the modern-day eccentricities of the American West. He is a long-term topophiliac. *petehowardanderson.com*.

Emily Benson lives by the shore of Lake Ontario in Western New York. Her love of the outdoors started with childhood camping and canoeing trips. These days Ms. Benson can often be found hiking in her favorite parks with her two sons. Find her published poems at *www.emilybensonpoet.com*.

Joseph Bruchac lives in a cabin in the Adirondack foothills with his wife, Nicola. They do their best to care for the land and the beings who share it with us. Much of what he writes is informed by the Indigenous understanding that we're part of—not apart from—nature.

Lauren Camp serves as New Mexico Poet Laureate. She is the author of eight poetry collections, most recently *In Old Sky* (Grand Canyon Conservancy, 2024), which grew out of her experience as Astronomer-in-Residence at *Grand Canyon National Park*. *www.laurencamp.com*.

Michelle Chen lived in Singapore and China before immigrating to New York City at the age of four, where her passion for far-flown landscapes combines fictional biography with poetic postcolonial displacement nourished through glacial fjords, cherry blossoms sprawling across the Northeast, abbey ruins in endless meadows, and midsummer tornado warnings.

Each morning, **John Ciminello** does a walkabout to taste the sweet moist air of beginnings. His poetry is an expansion of what he sees and feels in the outside world, before going inward. John's poems are a blend of musings, missions, medicine, and mischief.

Michelle DiSarno is a teacher, photographer, and poet from New Jersey. She is often navigating life's deepest tensions: delight, longing; grief, grace; sorrow, joy. She seeks the wild with thirst for its transcendent beauty, where tension gives way to worship. She shares on Instagram and BlueSky, *@inperfectwander*. She'd love to connect!

Deborah H. Doolittle's publications include *FLORIBUNDA* and *BOGBOUND*, with some of her recent work appearing in *Ibbetson Street*, *Iconoclast*, *Rattle*, *Slant*, and *The Stand*. An avid bird-watcher, she shares a home with her husband, six housecats, and a backyard full of birds.

Trained as a cultural anthropologist, **Michael Engelhard** worked twenty-five years as a wilderness guide and outdoor educator in the canyon country and arctic Alaska. His latest books include the memoir *Arctic Traverse* and the collection of canyon essays *No Walk in the Park*. He currently lives in Moab again.

Jenna Wysong Filbrun is the author of the poetry collection *Awa*y (Finishing Line Press, 2023). She practices poetry to deepen her awareness of connection and loves to spend time at home and in the wild with her husband, Mike, and their dogs, Oliver and Lewis. Find her on Instagram *@jwfilbrun*.

Penny Freedwing writes: "From Acadia to Tahoe, from Puget Sound to the Smokies, from Sedona to the Upper Peninsula, from the Great Plains to the Lake Michigan shore, my heart has awakened to such strange beauty. This home of ours remains wide and wild and welcoming. Let us go further in."

Steve Gardiner has hiked and climbed on five continents and lives in Minnesota, but finds that the Beartooth Mountains of Montana feel most like home. He has published nine books about outdoor adventures and education. Read more at *https://www.quietwaterpublishing.com*

Frank Haberle is the author of *Downlanders* (Flexible Press, 2023), a novel following five misfits into a fictional wilderness. His story "Zone 28" appeared in *Deep Wild* in 2023. A longtime Brooklyner, Frank daydreams continuously of his backpacking youth on the Appalachian Trail and in Alaska, Europe and the Rockies.

Marybeth Holleman's books include *tender gravity, The Heart of the Sound*, *Among Wolves* (co-author), and *Crosscurrents North* (co-editor). Raised in the southern Appalachians, she transplanted to Alaska's Chugach Mountains after falling for Prince William Sound just two years before the oil spill. She's happiest in places where humans are outnumbered.

Sophie Hoss loves the ocean and firmly believes that rain is the best kind of weather. She is in bed by 9 p.m. every night, and she has a small dog named Elmo who likes to wear little sweaters. You can read more of her work at *sophiehosswriting.com*.

Daniel Hudon, originally from Canada, is grateful to old trees for luring him deeper into the backcountry. He is the author of *Brief Eulogies for Lost Animals: An Extinction Reader* and has recent essays in *The Smart Set*, *The Revelator*, *Hidden Compass* and *Appalachia Journal*. *danielhudon.com*

Mike Hull spent two years as a monk, two and a half years as a hermit—most of that time on Alaska's tundra, twenty seven years teaching in remote hunter-gatherer villages, and twelve years bicycling solo among the developing world's indigenous peoples, experiencing other perceptions of reality.

Talley V. Kayser teaches, writes, and walks at the western edge of the Great Basin; her poetry and prose has appeared in *Rattle, Alpinist*, *The Gettysburg Review*, and elsewhere. Talley enjoys solo travel through the Sierra Nevada, where she is mesmerized each time she catches a golden trout.

Perrin F. Keene is a writer from Greenville, South Carolina. He writes short stories, novels, and essays typically relating to nature, Westerns, and ancient myths. He can usually be found outside, hiking or writing about something he saw on his hike.

Wrendolyn Klotzko is a poet studying Education, English, and Creative Writing at SUNY Oswego. She is from the Adirondack Mountains, where she fell in love with nature and poetry. Wrendolyn is currently the head poetry editor of the *Great Lake Review*. She aspires to teach poetry at the collegiate level.

Cedar Koons is the author of *Bourbon and Branch Water*, poems (Kelsay Books, 2023), *The Mindfulness Solution for Intense Emotions* (New Harbinger Publications, 2016) and, as C.R. Koons, three mystery novels set in Taos (Camel Press). Cedar loves to explore the wild in a kayak. She lives in Dixon, New Mexico.

Don Lago's *Canyon and Cosmos: Searching for Human Identity in the Grand Canyon* (University of Nevada Press, 2025) uses the Grand Canyon as a Walden Pond for exploring the place of humans in the grand scheme of things.

Zishuo Li is a student living in China. His poetry is deeply inspired by his childhood life in a rural village and this intersection between wilderness and human culture. Now, formulating poetic phrases, Zishuo tries to capture a little aspect of the wild values to share with everyone.

Dan MacIsaac spent six seasons prospecting in Canada's north. For ten years, he served as a director on the Environmental Law Centre board at the University of Victoria. Brick Books published his poetry collection, *Cries from the Ark*.

Susan Marsh lives in Jackson, Wyoming, where she loves rambling with her dog Maya in her favorite mountain haunts. Since retiring from the U.S. Forest Service, she continues to advocate for our precious public land through her writing and various volunteer projects.

Donna Mendelson studied ecocriticism and nineteenth-century literature at Binghamton University and taught there and at the University of Montana. Her poetry has appeared in journals and magazines including *Camas*, *Cirque*, and *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*. She still carries her 1976 backpack and rides her 1981 bike.

Andrew Alexander Mobbs is the author of the poetry collection, *In These Glorious Pastures* (Kelsay Books, 2025). A native Arkansan, he has relished walking the lonesome paths and hiking in wild places, including the deserts of Arizona, the Mongolian steppe, the jungles of Thailand, and the rainforests of Western Oregon.

Lisa Napolitan is a New Jersey-based writer, artist, teacher and student continually fascinated, energized, and humbled by nature. Her happy place is her garden or any natural space where birdsong is found. Her forthcoming dissertation combines her love of children's picture books with her passion for conservation. *lisanapolitan.com*

Heidi Obermeyer is a writer and artist based in Washington State. Her work focuses on wild places and human experiences in the natural environment, particularly the American West. Originally from Colorado, she is most at home in the Rockies or on the Colorado Plateau. See her work on Instagram, *@ madebyhio*, or *heidiobermeyer.com*

Outspoken in his commitment to the natural world and a passionate advocate of poetry for social consciousness, **Harry Owen** is author of ten collections. He holds a PhD from the University of Pretoria, and lives amongst wine and mountains near Stellenbosch, South Africa.

Dian Parker writes: "The natural world is my inspiration, my life blood. Whether hitchhiking through the Middle East, living on islands, hiking through the forests of Vermont and kayaking its many ponds and lakes, the earth is my home. This is my fourth story *Deep Wild* has published. I am deeply honored. *www.dianparker.com*"

Margaret Pettis left California to wrangle horses for the U.S. Forest Service in Idaho's Sawtooth Wilderness and stayed to wrangle Utah students through freshman English. She wrote *Back Roads of Utah*, *In the Temple of the Stars*, and a five-novel mystery series. *MargaretPettis.com*.

Sarah Platenius is a visual artist and writer. Her essay "Reassembly" was a semi-finalist in 2024 for the Terry Tempest Williams contest sponsored by *North American Review*. Her poetry and essays have appeared in *North American Review*, *Orion*, *Terrain*, and elsewhere.

Erin Robertson leads nature writing classes in Boulder County, Colorado (*@ bocowildwriters*) and serves as Writer-in-Residence for Friends of Coal Creek. She traveled to Mongolia with her husband on their honeymoon in 2000. Along with their two sons, parakeet, and pup, he teaches her about wonder every day.

Sam Ruhmkorff is a recovering philosopher (having taught for twenty years at Bard College at Simon's Rock and Smith College) and a burgeoning fiction writer who discovered backpacking during a certain global pandemic. He tries to spend as much time in the wilderness as possible with his loved ones.

Nicholas Samaras is the author of *Hands of the Saddlemaker* (Yale UP) and *American Psalm, World Psalm* (Ashland PP). He is currently completing a manuscript of poetry on Eco-poetics and a memoir on his years lived underground.

Eric Paul Shaffer writes wildly after looking closely and hard at the actual world. Like John Muir, Eric can spend all day crawling around on a few square yards of the planet. Love for the natural world appears in all his books: *Green Leaves*, *Even Further West*, and *Free Speech*.

Cooper Smith is a writer based in Flagstaff, Arizona. Cooper writes extensively about the vast and varied landscapes of Arizona and the Colorado Plateau. His writing explores the intersection of place, time, and self with our experience of the natural world.

Jacqui Somen is a freelance writer who resides and recreates on unceded Ute, Cheyenne, and Arapaho land. She is happiest when surrounded by tansy asters. Her poetry has appeared in *Humana Obscura*, *Molecul*e: *a tiny lit mag*, and *BlazeVOX*.

Edmond Stevens is pleased to return to the pages of *Deep Wild*. Recent work has appeared in *Five South*, *Muleskinner Journal*, *Waxing & Waning*, *Sport Literate*, and *Whitefish Review*. He pursues little-traveled peaks which, for him, replicate the writing process, finding by trial and error the path to the summit.

Wally Swist's books include *Aperture* (Kelsay Books), poems regarding caregiving his wife through Alzheimer's, and *If You're the Dreamer, I'm the Dream: Selected Translations from Rilke's Book of Hours* (Finishing Line). *Huang Po and the Dimensions of Love* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2012) was co-winner for the 2011 Crab Orchard Open Poetry Competition.

Ahrend Torrey is the author of *This Moment* (Pinyon Publishing, 2024). His work has appeared in *Denver Quarterly*; *Panorama: The Journal of Travel, Place, and Nature*; and *The Greensboro Review*. He lives in Chicago with his husband, Jonathan; their two rat terriers, Dichter and Dova; and Purl, their cat.

Julia Travers is an artist and writer with *Fish Publishing*, *American Public Media*, *Rough Cut Press*, *Ecological Citizen*, *The Poetry Society of Virginia* and others. She grew up on the Chesapeake Bay and lives in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. They love Shenandoah National Park. See: *linktr.ee/JuliaTravers*.

Wendy Videlock lives at the base of Thunder Mountain in Western Colorado. She is a child of the desert, having been raised in the Sonoran Desert outside Tucson. She is the award-winning author of five books of poetry, a children's book and a collection of essays on landscape, language, and the imagination.

Rebecca Vincent is a writer and environmental educator with a Ph.D. in Mythological Studies. Her writing explores water, nature, myth, and the intersection between myth and the environment, and has appeared in various anthologies and literary publications.

Marcia Wakeland stepped off the plane in Alaska fifty years ago and knew she'd found home. She has scavenged for adequate words to describe the experience of this particular wild place, yet she is content, instead to be awed.

Erin O'Regan White is a writer and printmaker from Missoula, Montana. She creates broadsides on a 1935 Hacker Test Press with her comrades at Bear Scratch Press and has secret hiding places in forests all over Western Montana. Pygmy owls and Cooper's hawks co-hold the title for her favorite bird.

Kathryn Wilder has sought the wild side since her early teens. In Hawai'i that meant Nā Pali Coast, Kaho'olawe, the sea that is the road between islands. Today Wilder writes and cowboys in southwestern Colorado; *The Last Cows: On Ranching, Wonder, and a Woman's Heart* will be out this fall.

Rebecca Young is a writer, educator, and adventurer living in Leadville, Colorado. Her work seeks to disrupt the patriarchal and anthropocentric mythos of Western wilderness and outdoor adventure. When not working on ambulances or in classrooms, she is most likely to be frolicking over mountains on ski or foot.

Acknowledgments

The work listed below has been previously published in the following books and periodicals, and is reprinted by permission of the authors:

- "After Now" by David Albano, in slightly different form in *Blueline* 2024, Potsdam College of the State University of New York.
- "As Water Travels" by Peter Anderson, in *Riding the Wheel*, Kelsay Books, 2024.
- "Bisti Badlands" by Lauren Camp, in *Crab Orchard Review*, 2013.
- "Why I Go To The Woods" by Michelle DiSarno, in *Humana Obscura* #10, Fall 2024.
- "Enter the Sea Goat" by Michael Engelhard, in *Alaska* magazine, June 2020, as "Lessons from a Sea Goat."
- "In All Things" by Marybeth Holleman, in slightly different form in *Waccamaw Journal*, No. 28.
- "The Blue Glacier" by Daniel Hudon, in a slightly modified version in his monthly newsletter, *DH News: The Dauntless Holiday*.
- "Wild Women Don't Get the Blues" by Susan Marsh, revised from a piece in *Talking River Review*, Summer 2001.
- "Sacrificial" by Perrin F. Keene, in *Miscellany*, January 2024, College of Charleston.
- "What It Takes" by Sarah Platenius, in *The Sound Range Hearing Pilot Project*, 2019.
- "Eight Points at the Navajo Bunkhouse" by Eric Paul Shaffer, in *Fishtrap Anthology*, 2006.
- "Skin Tracks" by Edmond Stevens, in *Waxing & Waning*, #12.
- "The Truth is a Nimble Little Creature" by Wendy Videlock, in *Rattle*, December 2023.
- "Spirits of Kalalau" by Kathryn Wilder, in an earlier version in Aloha Airlines' magazine, *Spirit of Aloha, 2007.*

About the Contest Judges

Chelsea Catherine began writing poetry at eight years old and eventually expanded into fiction and nonfiction. Their piece, "Quiet with the Hurt," won the Mary C. Mohr award for nonfiction through the Southern Indiana Review and their second book, *Summer of the Cicadas*, won the Quill Prose Award from Red Hen Press. They live in the high desert of Colorado where they like bird watching, photography, and reading books about the art of living. Find them at *chelseacatherinewriter.com*.

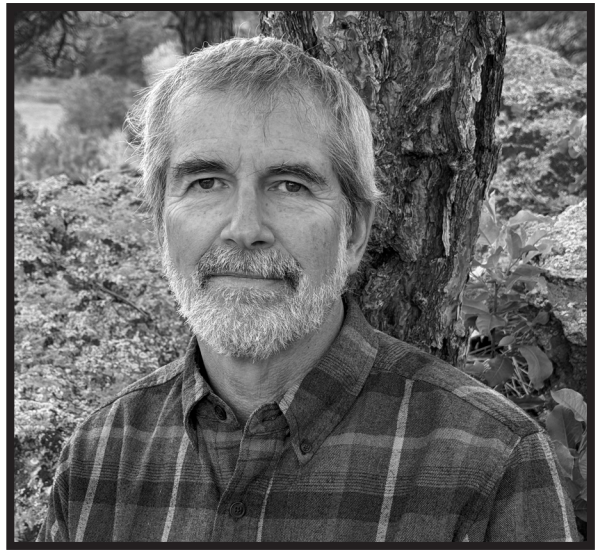
Born and raised in upstate New York, essayist and poet **John Nizalowski** moved to Santa Fe in the mid-1980's and has ever after lived west of the 100th meridian. He has published six books, most recently *Chronicles of the Forbidden*, which was a finalist for the 2020 Colorado Book Award in Creative Non-Fiction, and *The Emergence of Frank Waters: A Critical Reader*, a volume of scholarly essays he co-edited with Alexander Blackburn. In addition, his work has appeared in a wide range of literary and journalistic venues, including *Deep Wild*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Under the Sun*, and *Blue Mesa Review*. His writings have also been anthologized in *Reading Under the Sign of Nature*, *Rekindling the Inner Light*, and *Going Down Grand: Poems from the Canyon*. Before retiring in 2022, he taught mythology, creative writing, composition, and cultural studies at Colorado Mesa University in Grand Junction.

Artists' Statements

Deep Wild 2025 Cover Artist Julia Buckwalter

Julia Buckwalter's large, vibrant paintings in oil display her passion for the desert, years of emotion and memory becoming "windows" of time. Her paintings reference photographs she's taken while out hiking or trail running, and while in the studio she draws from those desert experiences to step into the painting's energy. She paints mostly in sessions between six to eight hours, sometimes finishing a scene in one go, with access to inspirational music and coffee a necessity. Her keenest inspiration has always come from the work of Maynard Dixon and Georgia O'Keeffe, fellow cloud lovers and desert dwellers.

Buckwalter has lived in Moab for over a decade. She spent her childhood in Utah, traveling often throughout the Southwest to our parks and monuments and places like O'Keeffe's Ghost Ranch in New Mexico. Every desert's sweeping landscapes and majestic skies have made her feel at home. She's lived on both coasts and acquired a degree in the Visual Arts for Painting at Pennsylvania State University. Buckwalter was awarded the distinction of 2021 Artist in the Parks by the Canyonlands Natural History Association. Contact the artist at *julia.buckwalter@gmail.com* or on Instagram *@reddirtpainter*.



David B. Such, Deep Wild 2025 Portfolio Artist

David B. Such offers these comments about his work: "I am an engineer, not a trained artist, but I have enjoyed drawing for most of my life. I love plunging a dip pen into a black inkwell and skittering (or sometimes swiping) ink across the page, and I am not afraid to use some thoughtful scribbling. The visceral feeling of drawing with ink on paper surpasses anything digital. Also, I appreciate the metaphor of drawing with indelible ink. Mistakes cannot be erased but must be blended into the drawing in order to create something unplanned, yet hopefully beautiful. The same is true about redeeming mistakes in real life. Basically, I am a lot more interested in overall form, how the weight feels balanced on the paper, beauty from a distance, texture and line quality rather than precise details, realism, or color."

David is a left-handed mechanical engineer with over four decades of experience working with large turbines and other machinery. When off the job, he retreats to his home in the foothills of Colorado where he appreciates close connections with natural surroundings and enjoys reading, writing, drawing, gardening, and hiking. His essays, poetry, and drawings have appeared in *Weber—The Contemporary West*, *The T.J. Eckleburg Review*, *Penumbra: Literary and Art Journal*, *The Flagler Review*, and a number of other publications. See *dbsuch.wordpress.com*.

Photo by Rick Kempa

With gratitude...

for all who have been a member of the *Deep Wild* community since 2019: the hundreds of writers and artists who sent us their work for consideration each year; the 300+ whose creations we have been able to provide a home for; the many members of the *Deep Wild* team, all of whom donated their precious time and energy: first and foremost, Poetry Editor Heidi Blankenship and Graphic Designer Dave Gutierrez, who have been on board since the inception, and Janet Goldberg, Fiction Editor since 2022; gratitude also for Andrea Bishop at All-American Printing in Petaluma, Technical Consultant Bradley McGinty, Advertising Specialist Aaron Denham, Distribution Manager Fern Stringham, our first Fiction Editor John Yohe, Editorial Assistants Shelby Newsom, Corinne Brumby, and Ian Ramsey; the judges of our annual Student Writing Contest...and for our many readers and subscribers, past and present, whose love of wild places and good words has given meaning to our endeavors.

Rick Kempa