

Frontier Receding

As a child, my head was always on a swivel—both to take in the many wonders of the natural world around me, and to keep my face constantly in motion. I believed that strangers would find my face off-putting; only if I were laughing, talking, or dancing was I suitable enough to be looked at. Photographs were my evidence. *I look like **that**?* I would think as I stared, dismayed, at a picture of myself.

Fortunately, my dysphoria was a schoolyard problem, and when I returned home to my house in the suburbs at the foot of the Rocky Mountains, I forgot that I even possessed a reflection worth disapproval. With the neighborhood boys, I was a dragon, a warrior from another planet, a shape-shifting sorceress. Our bare feet pounded hard up the asphalt under the unremitting streetlights of suburbia. For all its concrete monotony and endless identical houses, this place was paradise to me and the boys. As children, we knew that each piece of furniture in the home had its own private life; each worm marooned on the sidewalk after a rainstorm was tragically sentient (so we had to rescue them all); and our suburban backyards were teeming with fairies, sprites, and other fantastical creatures. The natural world existed as much in a storm drain as in the foothills where our parents sometimes dragged us to hike.

My other anxieties were existential. In a world so improbably vast, how could one smallish, self-deprecatory girl matter? How do I stand out from the rest? I had no church to offer me time-worn answers to my age-old questions. My father was a scornful atheist or soft-spoken humanist, depending on his mood. My mother was a Catholic midwesterner who never spoke about her God and grew increasingly uneasy with her religion and its leaders. I went once to St. Joseph's with Mom to get a sense of it. I cried when everyone else—even kids younger than me—lined up single file to eat a wafer that was Christ's body, while I alone sulked in the pews. Mom tried to explain that this was

because I hadn't had a First Communion, but I was inconsolable and never returned to church again. So, raised without sermons and scriptures, I had no God.

I still craved answers to the questions that filled the interstices of my days between my schoolwork and my friendships. Owing somewhat to their mythical pull, I began to climb mountains on the cusp of teenagerhood. Mountains are geologically construed parallel to a story's arc: heart-pumping rising action, the climax of the peak's summit, the falling action of a fast descent, and the resolution back at the trailhead. The "high country", as radio hosts called it, was a new dominion of secrets that superseded the old realm in my backyard.

In my favorite high alpine basin, water cascades from a series of alpine pools into streams that coalesce at the foot of the mountains, bound for the Gulf of Mexico (though much of the flow will be siphoned away to satiate California's fruit valleys). I found true enchantment creeping through an adjacent hillside of wildflowers, dawn light pirouetting from the dew drops clinging to their stems. In a single meadow, I might spy Indian paintbrush, alpine sunflower, buttercup, columbine, baby's breath, Queen Anne's lace, and mountain bluebells as big as human thumbs.

I chose to climb remote peaks, clambering up talus fields to reach lonely summits. Here, my head relaxes on its pivot, and my quiet eyes are directed to the east, where the infrastructure of suburbia glitters trivially so far below. It is utterly silent on a windless mountaintop. Few thoughts intrude the stillness. What I do feel is a child's sense of ownership, as if the forlorn summit were my kin alone and others would be unwise to feel the same.

I grip the wind-worn granite of the summit block until the veins in my forearm inflate under my skin. I'm not afraid of falling; I'm nonplussed by a strange desire to jump. More accurately, I recognize the easy possibility of jumping, of giving total control to the mountain and gravity. Maybe

I would fly—maybe I would splatter on the rocks thousands of feet below. Instead, I scrawl my name in the summit register, below the previous entry dated nine months prior.

On these mountains, at their summits, I feel what I imagine the pious feel at mass. With nothing between me and the drowsy atmosphere, I am extant my clothing, personality, and worldly desires. I am extant all that the mountain does not reflect back to me. Whoever said that “it’s the journey, not the destination,” must not have scrambled above treeline to find themselves alone at the roof of the world, scratching the underbelly of the heavens.

When it came time for me to choose a college major, I had scant sense of purpose outside of seeking those summits, so I chose ecology. Because everyone else was doing it, I found work as a research assistant in an ecology laboratory. For four hours a day, three days a week, I hunkered in a windowless closet outfitted with a sensitive mass balance. I pried open small envelopes filled with wildflower seeds, each no larger than a grain of sand. With maddening delicacy, I counted each seed and massed them with the instrument. My data would support an overarching study of the impact of climate warming on flora. As I carefully prodded seeds into manageable groups of ten, I realized I’d never felt further from real wildflowers.

Occasionally, a seed defied the static cling that tethered it to the desktop and zoomed off the table onto the floor. I considered these escapees lost causes, unremarkable in the grand scope of the experiment. I assured myself that their absence hardly skewed the accuracy of the data. For that matter, this was just one experiment in thousands attempting to expose the repercussions of climate change in the West. *Is all of this effort worth it?* I thought as I sealed an envelope with eighty-three seeds inside. *Will anyone actually care about flower fecundity?*

With a shudder, I realized that *I* certainly didn’t care. I found it impossible to reconcile the charismatic alpine wildflowers of the Rockies with...this.

By degrees, the forest of my childhood became intelligible to me in the Latin names of the trees, the location of the floodplains, and the nitrogen cycling of the entire ecosystem. I no longer built stick houses for fairies but examined leaves for signs of very real infestations. I counted and assessed cottonwoods, *Populus angustifolia*, for one project and measured soil pH for another. I memorized the skull morphology of every mammal in Colorado. Most notably, I was made aware of the startling potential of biotechnology to save species from extinction and “rewild” entire ecosystems.

My peers stumbled upon topics in ecology that suited them; they used their newfound interests like springboards to a deep sense of purpose. When I thought of *my* future in ecology, I was overcome by the same feeling I had at the mountain’s summit, knowing I could jump but always willing myself away.

Once an insatiable hiker, I could no longer move through the mountains at a clip slower than a run. On my mountain bike, I could go even faster. At such speeds, individual ponderosa pines became impersonable, mere scenery. No insects could alight on my shoulders. The pain of the climb became the objective, not the life lining the trail. The mountains still whispered secrets, but I spent less time engaged in their minutia. Summits that once excited me were too easy. I craved steeper rock, sketchier scrambles, and longer days in the high country. The frontier was plumbed raw. I had to go bigger, more technical, and more remote to feel relevant in the mountains.

On a spring morning in Idaho’s Sawtooth range, I set out to ski a formidable mountain couloir. I’d only just met my partners, Carter and Jeff, but our shared ambition burned to ski this steep line. We set off in the nearly balmy air of early spring, making good time to the mouth of the chute. Fixing crampons to our boots, we began to march up the couloir, entering its maw as the pitch grew steeper. We moved up the snow-choked chute like parasites crawling along the white flank of some giant beast.

At the very top, the slope angle pushed fifty degrees; in a standing position, the tip of my nose brushed the snow in front of my face.

Carter offered to be the first to descend. Backgrounded by the bulging spires of the range's high summits, he edged into the couloir, sliding horizontally towards a choke in the passage. Downhill of this constriction, the couloir doglegged to the right, hiding the majority of the line.

"I'm gonna do a jump turn!" Carter shouted up to us.

As his skis left the ground, his hips pivoted, but not quickly enough. With a yelp of realization, Carter tumbled over his left ski and began to roll tomahawk-style down the chute, disappearing past the choke. We noted with astonishment his downward progress via a series of screams, groans, and grunts that echoed up the couloir.

Then there was silence.

"Carter!" I screamed, my voice cracking. Silence.

"Carter!" Jeff repeated. Silence.

A creeping trill of horror lurched through my chest and settled in my stomach. I did what I always do in times of utmost human fallibility: I prayed to a God I don't believe in. *God, please let him be okay. Oh my god, holy shit! Good god, please let him be alright.*

From a thousand feet below, a weak voice drifted skyward, amplified by the granite walls: "I'm okay, guys. I'm alive."

Aside from a broken thumb and a mild concussion, Carter survived his thousand-foot tumble unscathed. His ski helmet had a ding in it the size of a golf ball. He spent the rest of the trip in a hammock, face dark and eyes full of demons.

I was also unsettled. In spite of our meticulous trip planning—checking avalanche forecasts, assessing the aspect, considering the snowpack, and readying gear—we were unable to overcome the human factor, a variable that is almost reliably the bad egg of a well-laid mission. In our tabulation of the mountain and lust for the summit, we hadn't stopped to consider whether our objective was suitable for the skill and experience of the group. In Idaho, I began to understand for the first time the true indifference of mountains to tragedy.

In my own hammock, I slowly scanned the aspens and lodgepole pine around the clearing. For once, I did not want to survey, numerify, and trivialize the trees. They were the same as when I was younger, reaching towards me, mysterious and maybe sentient.

I am the apotheosis of the Western developmental program. Raised to excel in tests of physical rigor and mental stamina, I am rarely satisfied. I desire innovation and steady progress, at the cost of simplicity and gratitude for the ordinary. I am disturbed by mediocrity.

We witness the city encroach the foothills and accept it as so. We permit the logging of forests and draining of watersheds in the name of cheap soda and two-ply toilet paper. I take more than the summit's glory from the mountain—I rely on its bounty in every aspect of my livelihood.

Here then, is our fraught, sticky relationship with what we call the natural world: we seek to reduce it to data for its own protection; we gain a vaunted summit and grumble when the masses too want a chance at the mountaintop; we have been told that the far crevices of the world have been mapped, but still, we can find microcosms in a small pond, on a single leaf, or in a suburban backyard.

I rolled reluctantly from my perch in the hammock to stroll towards a nearby copse of Douglas fir. In winter, it's easy to mistake the forest as bereft of life. Streams are frozen, birdsong absent, and the silencing blanket of snow wraps the world in cool detachment. But the prints of animals in the

snow remind us otherwise. A deer crossed this way recently, and rabbit tracks that intersect the deer's disappear under a pile of deadfall. Even the pawprints of mice, barely more than whispers in the surface hoar, are evidence of survival. As I pad by a creek just beginning to thaw, I notice green stalks protruding from beneath the snow. I bend down to hold in my hand the still-attached seedpod of a shoot of grass and hear the stream gurgling below a layer of ice. I crave deeply to know these things.

I realize that I never had any claim to the private kinship of a summit, only my own experience atop it. Under each rock of the summit slab, forests of lichens grow undiscovered, pika munch their larder of dried plants, and innumerable insects flit around the puddles in crevices. The closing of the frontier was a fabrication, but then, so was the frontier itself.