

WITHOUT

Beside the trail, early summer's flowers strain to unclench leaves and petals from soil newly exposed by snowmelt. If I live to pass by them again, they may rise to my ankles, but now they are smaller than a child's hand, too small to hold in one's palm. The trail I walk is paraded by these flowers, purple and red and blue, budding against grasses of a green that reminds me of mint, and my hunger.

I have not eaten for two days. My only drinks have been from the streams that run with water so crisp I can feel its chill trickle down to my stomach. With the passage of fasting days, I discern the water's tastes more fully, tastes of snow and stones and creatures' lives.

I leave the trail behind me to avoid being found by someone wanting to discover why I am here. The only paths I come across are formed over centuries by deer and bear, coyote and wolf, and smaller creatures. The serenade of birds perched or soaring is underscored by the steady current of water working its erosive splash and rush against banks and rocks and earth.

I follow it, the water, farther up, farther in.

Night comes, and I wait out its darkness overshadowed by the forest, needles and arms of pine and the bones of aspen with their round leaves above me altogether outlined by the ordered scatter of starlight that somehow feels not distant. The sounds and silences no longer make me afraid. Neither does the cold. I am bound to these mountains. They may take me, or their residents may. Even my resignation means nothing to them.

My tears accomplish nothing against the hurt that seems to surround me now, as powerful a force as any that moved these mountains to rise over the ages.

Wind approaches, a far and invisible whisper building, billowing, and then upon the trees and me, making needles tremble and leaves clack and my skin feel its caress as a hurtful reminder before it recedes across the mountainside and the silence returns, leaving behind my emptiness.

Looking up past the canopy, I wonder at the stars glowing and twinkling in their diverse brilliance, and think of infinity's vastness and dispassion. With this vision in my eyes and this thought in my mind, I let my back press into the moss and leaves, and then my head, and at some point, I sleep.

It is insistent birdsong that wakes me. For a blessed moment I have forgotten. Then the blessing turns as memory floods me with the curse of what has happened.

They are gone.

Both of them.

They were not only my wife and daughter. They were my heart, my life, my past and present and, I thought, my future. Now my life is a greater wreck than what the patrolmen found on the asphalt.

And if it is possible to lose more than them, I have.

It has been a month. Those who love me tried to support me, uplift me, and, God forgive them, educate me. But their embraces reminded me of those I would never embrace again. Their words were flat. Their pity was another wound.

The birds do not cease their singing when the noises that flow unhindered from my soul lift up to them.

Finally I find the will to rise, and I wipe my face with my empty hands and go to the stream and drink, the water flowing into the hollow that my body has become and cooling me before what remains of my warmth overcomes it.

I continue on.

The sun strobesc through needles and leaves and limbs to blind me from the right, so my mind registers that the creek still meanders southward and I am traveling to the north. My muscles and

joints and feet loosen with movement. I hear the pepper of a woodpecker against a tree, songs from chickadees and goldfinches and vireos, and the scraw of a Clark's nutcracker. A squirrel, startled by my presence, drops its quarry and scuttles up a tree to watch me warily as if I might want its cone.

All these creatures have learned survival.

The stream continues its journey and by the time the sun is warming the top of my head, it occurs to me that I may have a destination after all. If there is no answer for this pain, there may be a place where it becomes something else. It may be at the source of this stream.

I move with more purpose. My head is light because of my fast and the altitude but my thoughts are clear, I think. I am not attached to what I am doing, and where I am going is a mystery, but if there is a destination and it is the source of this flow of water, I must find it.

I continue as daylight fades and the first stars wink above me. The gurgle and splash of the stream to my left guides me and while the darkness makes me slow to pick out my steps, as more stars emerge they are joined by a quarter moon and its reflected light falls on my feet so I can see well enough.

The nightlife of the forest reaches my ears past the sounds of water now, exciting my insistent heart. Curiosity does not draw my eyes from the dim places my feet must go but it is strange to me that I wonder whether it's bear or deer or mountain lion moving such large swaths of brush alongside me. When my companion departs at last, my heart settles and I notice an echo of something inside me that I have not felt in a month.

I consider this feeling that passed through me. Was it simply adrenaline swirling through a bloodstream depleted by the fast?

My feet ache and there are pointed pains on my heels. My knees and back resist going on. Rest is what my body wants. But this residue that swelled within me with the presence of another sentience is added to my purpose now, and what drives me will not permit a delay.

I walk in moonlight dappled by the canopy, noticing over time how it is fading as it follows to the west and gives way to the starlight. My ascent grows steeper, slowing my gait even more than it had been slowed by fatigue. Soon I find myself in a wash carved by the stream when flooded by rain, so my path is cut into a sideways angle not yet as steep as a wall. Boulders are strewn here in my way, and the detritus of the forest has tumbled here too.

My focus on my footfalls begins to fail me. Depleted strength in my ankles makes my feet clumsy. And cold is reaching deep inside me. My breath rattles in and out of my chest like shredded rags threading down and up my windpipe. My hands tremble, sensation in my fingers and toes deadening.

Finally, I stumble. My hands come up so I don't plant my face in the floor of the wash. On my hands and knees, panting, I listen. Birds do not sing. They are sleeping in the safety of the treetops, nests, hollows. Predators, if they are nearby, steal too silently for my ears and keep to shadows; they would be sniffing the air and like me, listening. A breeze ruffles the needles and leaves, and I lift my head.

Only now do I see pale patches nestled in the earth nearby ornamenting the darkness where warmth hasn't yet made the snow melt. The question of how high I've climbed moves through my mind and is gone without an answer.

Against the palm of my right hand in the wash, I feel a vein of wood the thickness of my wrist. Pushing against it, I learn that it is not a root but a fallen branch. I lift it and draw back to sit on my feet, every stitch of flesh in my legs stretching and resisting. The branch is straight, as

long as I am tall, and sturdy, and on the end where it had been attached to a tree it has snapped off at a sharp point. I hold it up to the starlight and see the twigs poking out on either side and I nearly ask for its forgiveness before I use my numb fingers to begin snapping off the twigs, stripping the resistant ones, and then the branch is usable.

With its help, I stand, and step uphill once, and again, alongside the stream, leaning on the pole and using it to leverage me up and on, watching carefully where I place each foot.

My knees join my hands in quaking with the cold. I know what this means but will find warmth nowhere but in movement. So I press on.

In hours, I have an absurd sense that I am enlarging. It is the trees; they are becoming smaller. I am approaching the elevation of the treeline now, too high for the aspens, and even the pines here struggle for four or five feet of growth, their trunks twisted as if wringing from themselves every particle of energy to strive higher. Emerging out of the forest makes the starlight's illumination more profound around me, and I can easily see where to step.

Dawn begins as a blush of rose to my right and when the sun crests it seems to summon a breeze. I resist the sense of caress the breeze gives me, instead choosing to focus all my energies on my footfalls. My pole supports me when I stumble now and I'm thankful that I have it. I hear fewer birds up here, and see fewer still.

For the first time, I step in snow. It crunches under my feet, my weight sinking my heels into it. I plant the pole on my downhill side, thinking that a fall and slide would keep me from the source of the stream that to my left has cut a break in the snowfield, and I realize that I have truly made the source my goal. Whether it will be a place for me to join my wife and daughter, or not, I do not know. All I know is that in this fast and through this climb I must arrive at that place

where the stream disappears into the rocks and draws from secret melt in deeper places, or from whatever source feeds it.

Emerging from the patch of snow, my feet come onto rock and I stop. The sun stands in the sky at my shoulder, warming me. The trembling in my hands and knees has stopped, and sensation is returning to my fingers and toes.

I turn and bend down, leaning on the pole, and take a handful of snow from the edge of the patch. I put it into my mouth. It tries to freeze my tongue and palate but fails, melting.

As I follow the stream, it becomes a wide, shallow course over rock, and up ahead, it appears that my path will come to an end where the water of the stream glints in sunlight over a dip in the rock. Far beyond, a granite hillside is taller to the west and east than to the north. I move in that direction and in thirty steps the rock levels beneath me to reveal a great bowl of gray granite adorned with fields of snow clinging to the slopes, and at the base, the flat expanse of a lake of variegated blues. As I stare, its surface ripples with the hand of a breeze passing over it, a shallow wave of wind on water glistening. And then the breeze is gone and the surface is placid, mirroring every intricacy of the stony and snow-patched walls surrounding it.

I step toward the lake. The water is so clear that I can see through it how the rock slopes down into it and thirty feet out vanishes into depth.

Using my pole for support, I gingerly lower my body to sit and then place the pole at my side, the sharp end pointing north. I do not drink yet of anything but the sight. Acknowledgement that there may be another lake farther up, I choose to ignore. I know that this is the place.

The stone beneath me is smooth, warmed by the sun. It draws me away from what is before me, and down, until my back is warmed too, and the backs of my legs, and the back of my head.

I am unaware of sleeping until a sound comes to me: gentle clicks on the stone counterpoint, rhythmic, intentional. Before I open my eyes, I know what they are. I resist, knowing that pain surrounds me, and fear comes now that what I will find when I open my eyes will deepen my sorrow. I fear this because in my loss, I have lost my trust. I have lost my faith. Hearing that sound, I allow my fears to come. I allow my tears to come. I allow myself to recognize what has led me here and to determine that if this is the culmination of it all, the only thing I have left is the choice to accept it or not.

So I open my eyes. When I turn my head toward the sound, my tears are drawn down the side of my face.

With blurred vision, I see a doe twenty feet from me bending her head to the water to drink.

Next to her is a fawn, its fur dappled with white, at peace next to its mother, also dipping its head to drink from the source of the stream.

The fawn too is female.

My sob startles them. The doe's head jolts so she can see me. The fawn brings her head up too, drips of water streaming from its chin onto the stone.

They stand at the edge of the lake. I lie on the warm stone. We stare at one another. Then the doe blinks, shifts its hooves, seems to content itself, and bends to the lake again. The fawn takes her lead. I watch them, the way the sunlight plays on the fur on their muscled necks and thin legs. And within me again stirs what I felt last night when something moved at my side in the darkness.

They drink their fill and stroll some distance from the water and stop. The doe surveys the lake and the far recesses of granite, but I have a sense that she does not allow herself to forget my presence.

At last, they step away from me with that counterpointed click against the stone. The doe's white tail twitches, and they are gone.

The sun has dried the tears on my face.

I sit up and look after them, but I am alone.

The air tastes sweet. In the stillness, I can hear the buzz of an insect hovering over the surface of the lake.

My stomach rumbles.

At my feet, I glimpse movement. I am surprised to see in the crystal water, swimming casually over the stone floor of the shallow, a trout the length of my forearm, rainbow colors varying in its skin.

As I sneak my hand to the pole and angle its sharp tip at the water, I whisper a prayer.