



Clouds as Tall as Mountains

Everyone comes to the mountains for a different reason. Certainly I didn't come looking for the highest peaks that never existed.

But what have I been searching for? These last years were so busy, yet now I'm not sure why I pursued a degree. That feeling of shocked dissociation kept me silent on the drive to the mountains. And even they look new and sharp, unlike what I remember. From Calgary, at night, in the depths of the university library, or when the mountains were obscured by clouds, I'd imagined the peaks that should stand there: towering crags, splintered and soaring. I thought this was normal, everyone must do it. Now I'm wondering. I seem to have forgotten the reason that made me study in the first place. When we drove through the Stoney Indian Reserve, I remembered a Navajo chant popular in the poster shops on campus:

Everything forgotten returns to the circling winds.

The only thing I know for certain is that underneath everything is rock: solid, hard stone. Oceans and cities and forests can disguise this; even in the mountains we can lose sight of it. I grew up here, I've always seen the peaks, standing on the horizon, fading to a dark blue as the sky pales, blotted by the night. But I need to remember this.

Now I'm in the Front Ranges at the eastern edge of the Canadian Rockies, standing on the hot boulders at the base of a steep crag, playing out the rope as the Lion, above, reaches for a hold with heavy chalked fingers. I call him the Lion because it reminds me of who he is. It's better than his real name. I watch him and hope I'll be able to follow. The sun is warm on my bare legs. We climb together today on our way to work tomorrow. He's got me a summer job on the Kananaskis Park trail crew.

We're above an emerald lake, ringed with a dusky pine carpet that, with the foreshortening of elevation, looks like a bed of nails some guru may lie down upon. A river issues here, filing back the limey fingers of stone. In the distance rests the flatness of the prairie, the end of the Great Plains. I can see the smudge of Calgary, the sliver of light reflecting from the tall library tower where only hours ago I slipped my final paper under a featureless door. I met the Lion on that campus, years ago. Closer spreads the town of Canmore, as if it has been washed up against the range and left to dry, like a fossilized jellyfish. The road winds into Kananaskis Park, following the path of least resistance, and where the trees have been torn up, the earth reveals the same stone as the crags.

A clank like a broken bell. The Lion grunts and I look up to see him hammer a piton into a crack and clip the rope to it through a carabiner and sling. His hips shimmy with a hula of climbing gear, sparkling in the afternoon sun.

On the drive up I'd barely managed to explain my own changing circumstance, let alone ask him about his accident last year. When we reached the base of the route and looked out over the valley, the Lion said, "These trees must be like weeds to you geologists." The Lion is always saying things like that, trying to catch my goat. He was hunched over a disembowelled pack of bright rope loops and climbing gear, chewing some food he'd found. We haven't seen much of each other the past two years while I finished my studies. His truck sits below on the side of

the road, next to a highway sign that swings in the wind like a raven croaking a warning.

Now he's above, pulling up past a shelf. His shoulders heave, and he moves with more skill than I remember. In the last two years he has climbed and improved while my hands have softened on the edges of library racks.

When he pauses I call up, "How do you feel?"

"Chicken," he says. He shakes his helmet. "No headspace."

The first climb of the season: always a blind date.

The Lion digs at a horizontal crack of loose chips. Can I trust him, or is our friendship like this limestone, hard and solid-looking but friable, having a tendency to shatter? Handholds here are notoriously portable.

The rope jigs and teases like a fishing line as he pulls out of sight. A pause, not short. Then he calls down that he's secure.

I pull the rope from my belay device and feel the butterflies inhabiting my guts. The rope rises as if charmed until it comes tight on my harness.

I step up and feel the rock. It's warm, rough, passive, and inviolable. Everything I want in a lover. I pull my fingertips down on an edge, step up on a nub, and feel my other leg swing heavy. I push up, scraping my free foot onto purchase, already forgetting my map of the holds. Getting started is the key. I tell myself not to pull too hard, to trust my feet and stand on my legs, on my skeleton, but the motion seems foreign, translated.

After unclipping the first piton, I'm looking up from under the lip of my helmet for the next moves. I reach high and wide, finding small ledges but not committing my strength and weight to them. Backing off. The rope hangs patient. My fingertips feel so soft that the abrasive smear of a hold seems too painful to carry me. Winter fingers. My tips mash into pockets and as easily they roll out, like putty as if I can't scrape the rock. My shoes slip and skid, relearning balance. Trust, I say to them. I've done this before, but it was years ago. Now I see a hold and instinctively dart to

it, then disdain it. I reach above the shelf but find nothing. Just smooth stone, washed with years of water over its sloping deck. What the Lion made easy is indecipherable. I wish I could create a hold. I feel like I'm flipping through an exam for a multiple-choice section that isn't there. My breath dusts the rock. With my wrists cocked back, my knees start to stutter.

I'm a riot of questions. *How did he lead this? How good is his anchor? Should I do a master's or get a job downtown?* I flutter over the rope, seeking any purchase. It didn't use to be like this. I don't want to fall and test the rope, not on the first hard part. I force myself to commit. Push on a toe, scrape fingernails, palm an edge. A body-memory shifts free from the mental sediment. I move up with baby steps, feeling better.

At the anchor I clip in; my hand shakes. It takes will to let go, to set my feet and lean back in my harness, staring at the thin rope that holds me there. I should have checked the harness again: the vision of the webbing blowing open in a plume of chalk is too immediate. I am aware of gravity, pulling behind me as it scrutinizes each act for negligence, for opportunity.

Pressed against the Lion, I feel the heat of his shoulder, the heavy muscle, the flex of his thigh. He shifts and hands me the gear: brass nuts on wires for slotting into cracks, metal camming devices for expanding into pockets, all attached by gated carabiners and slings of bright nylon loops. Through the smell of dust and his breath and my sweat and the spruce below, he smiles.

The extra gear weights my harness. The hammer especially seems like an unwilling slave; its iron was mined, smelted, forged, and then returned here to beat spikes into the stone fissures. The Lion plasters a creased route map against the rock. In pencil he has marked the ledges, cracks, and possible anchors. The climb goes straight up and then flares left under a bulge, forming a pinching crack. The paper flutters. I wish it had more detail, that it was a book of secrets that would take an eternity to read.

"That'll be fun," I say, looking up, trying for conviction.

I shake my head, rasp my helmet brim on the rock, and start up on my pitch. The crack is vertical, and my fingers dig because I don't believe that the friction of my feet will stick to the flat surface. I pull down on a jammed finger and feel pain. I weight it even more to move; the pain means it's too tight to slip. Two moves later I dig a chip from a hold and fling it, the flecks of mica sparkling. My knuckles are starting to bleed. The throb is reassuring. I have the negotiation underway now, we're bruising each other: neither the route nor I will leave unchanged.

I gaze down at the Lion. He looks back, unblinking. But the boulders below appear far and hard. I don't have any protection in yet. If I drop, the Lion's anchor may not hold and I could rip both of us off the cliff. It's called a factor-two fall—directly onto the anchor without anything to slow me. In my structural metals class, I once read that bridge workers were taught, if they fell, to throw their rivet hammers down, to break the water tension. But from here, nothing will break the cruelty of the earth below.

Each movement up strengthens the sense of gravity. Every time I look to place a piece of protection I drain strength from my arms, yet every move up increases my height and the exponential force of a fall. The Lion mutters. I start to panic, looking for a crack that could hold a piton or a wire-nut while my forearms burn. I snarl and try to will my hands to hold, but the numbness is creeping. The limestone is tan, not dulled grey by rainfall, so I must be right under the overhang. There's quartz laced across the rock, little nubbins my fingers are too clumsy to use. A crack constricts. Fumbling with my rack I snag a brass nut and snug it in, clipping the rope in a lurching grab. It won't break a fall: the rope movement could lift and displace it, I still have to move, but the nut fills my hold. Fear is consuming the exposure of my mind, flaring to white, curling the edges.

A slow curtain of shame blunts my fear. I slam my fingers into a pocket and shimmy up by my feet. The long lip of the traverse crack is at eye level. It forms a shadow as I reach. I'm close

enough to lick it, my mouth dry and chalky as the stone. The sharp edge cuts into my palm and I want to impale it there, into my bone, to shoulder up and drop in an elbow and rest.

The Lion cries sharply, something indistinct, probably a comment about my bad form. I walk my feet up on outstretched arms. There is nowhere to stick any gear. The groove is deep and runs in gaps under the curving bulge. I start to move, quickly now, desperate. As soon as the crack narrows, enabling me to place a cam, I do, yanking hard to test it, my feet slipping.

I reach into the crack. It's cold inside, and slippery. Something in the dark backs up as my pale fingers push in. I jam my fist, daring anything within.

I should know how the gap formed, but it's like blanking on a test. Other thoughts come instead: like how the Lion's partner died last year in a crevasse.

The rope drag becomes heavy as I pull sidewise. Each step to the left means that if I slip I'll drop and swing, grating along the surface, probably pulling my protection. My legs quiver. The gap leads slowly upwards.

I scrape the rock white with a brass nut as I fumble it into a constriction. Normally, that colour would mean something, tell me the composition of the rock, but now I have no memory.

Arms numb, I move without regard. Just up, along the crack, as long as it will take me. All I can see is the next metre; maybe that's all I've ever seen. Now I want it to keep going, angling up to the vertical, continuing this essential movement where to stop is to die—and where there is no room to reflect. Just keep going. past exhaustion, past decisions.

Finally, I reach the top. I grab the slings anchored there. The Lion grunts again and I ignore him. I secure myself and prepare to belay. My forearms are dense as clubs. My mind is humming. I pull in the rope, wondering if the wind just started.

Soon the Lion appears, edging and traversing, fast and involved. He tests everything, checking slings and the effectiveness of the

placements. For a fleeting moment, his eyes are visible, deep brown like tunnels. When he pulls up beside me, it's not his physical body I sense but his intention coming close.

After I secure him, time becomes slow and expansive, so that anything is possible. We hang there with all the time in the world. His arms are lacerated. He points. My legs are the same, as though I've dragged them through barbed wire.

"Horseflies," he says, disgusted. I hadn't even noticed.

I turn to look out, across the valley. In the early summer's warmth, the snow collecting on the eastern crags bleeds black water stains like a claw has mauled their stony faces. The lake below reflects nothing in its milky haze. The sweep of the peaks is bigger than I'd imagined, so big it becomes a headache. I feel as though I've never seen any of it before.

■ After each descent I return to the maps. Not always consciously.

At the dinner table I flip through a guidebook. In my room I spread a trail topo on my bed. I'm always folding a sketched route into a plastic pouch for my pack.

In such gestures I find my bearings, ground myself. No matter how fantastic it feels to climb up a sheer wall, then drop back down, as if I've slipped its notice, the map puts my experience into perspective. It takes away my fear, my awe, my hammering heart. The maps replace those unreliable perceptions with a symbol: circled, checked off, understood.

On the first days of the job, the Lion hikes beside me and shows me the ropes. Trail crew isn't rocket science; it's more endurance than finesse, so physical that my mind can play all day while my body works. But first there's a blizzard of maps and names and references: trailheads and nicknames, road numbers and radio call signs. Mine is L69. The Lion is L71. I know from the trucker movies of my teenage years that 10-4 means "Okay." Now I learn others, like 10-20—"What's your location?"

One of our first jobs is to work with a helicopter flying materials to bridge sites and flying out the full “honey barrels” from the outhouses. In a small field, the helicopter hovers above me. I can see the pilot looking down from her bubbled side window. The whole thing is a whirling dervish of energy. Not so much the chopper, but the beating blades make air and trees around us vibrate, make my muscles shake. I never imagined the sound would be so loud or the wind so forceful.

“L69. Helicopter. You got to move that ruminant, over.” The pilot’s voice comes over the radio, calm as a dinner conversation. I have no idea what she means. She repeats her request. I don’t move for fear of moving the wrong way. Finally the Lion runs over and grabs my arm. The helicopter lands right where I stood.

“Ruminant,” he explains, “means a deer. That’s you: deer in the headlights. You got to keep moving.” Within an hour the radio has spread my new nickname. That first week everyone seems to be asking with a laugh, “What’s your twenty, Rumi?”

The next day the Lion and I walk the fire road around Upper Kananaskis Lake, a rocky jumble of sharp limestone that he hates because of its monotony. He’s showing me how to kick rocks off the trail without breaking stride or bruising toes. We do this so the rocks don’t trip hikers or wear down the tread, creating grooves that pool water and start erosion. But when the trail turns into exposed bedrock, there is nothing to do but hike and reflect and listen to the radio chatter.

I met the Lion in my first year at university, in a philosophy class. Philosophy was a humanities option for me but a major for him. He got excited by the Greeks when we started climbing together, then evolved to the existentialism of Kierkegaard and Sartre. The last time I saw him he was still raving about them, his thoughts coming in short breaths of exertion. “They really got it. Nothing is but what we feel. My life is a stage. There’s no script. We have to be the writer. And the actor. The first asking, Who am I? The second interpreting the answer. I’m going to live here.

Among these peaks. Like a guru. And dream myself. The most meaningful life.”

But now he talks of Plato, the ultimate Idealist. The regression in the Lion is striking.

I like the name “the Lion.” Like mountain lion. Reading about minerals as a boy, I realized their names meant something. I remember easily how gypsum, which is mined here in the park, means “to cook” in Greek and how it’s found near hot springs, or how feldspar is German for “field” and “rock without iron.” When we played cowboys as kids, my friends and I gave one another long, descriptive animal names like we imagined the natives had. The habit remains; I name all my acquaintances by their characteristics, sometimes rock, sometimes animal.

“This road must turn you on,” the Lion says, once again baiting.

I usually get one reaction when people hear I studied geology: they look around for rocks as if they’ve just noticed them. Mostly this search leads to nothing, but sometimes, usually men, will point.

“What’s that?”

“Gravel,” I report.

“And that?”

“Sand.”

Then they look at me as if I’m an impostor. If I say it’s sili-con mixed with pyrite and quartz, they tilt their heads like dogs. Other times, they look around for a rock to present to me. The Lion spends the first days on the trails making me laugh with his impression of a geologist, frothing and gibbering, trying to gather every rock in sight, running stooped, dropping his arm-load with each new find. I’m too shy to tease back.

The Lion comes from the west coast, from the Fraser River Valley farms, a hundred kilometres from saltwater even as Greater Vancouver creeps closer like a spring tide. He says his family has been there for generations. He is broad-shouldered, lithe, enormously strong. Around his bull neck he wears the only

indication of his coastal heritage: a seashell necklace, a band of white rings, pierced and threaded.

Shells are made from calcium, an element essential for cellular life. Large deposits are found in the basins of ancient seabeds, representing eons of tiny shells drifting down on top of one another, crushing together. But what I know that most people don't is that calcium is a metal, harder than lead, yet sliceable by a knife. It's an earth metal, rarely found pure because it reacts with other minerals to form living structures. Here's another favourite habit: equating people with minerals. The Lion is calcium. With his heavy bones and vigour for work, the comparison seems obvious.

"How do people react when they discover you're a geologist?" the Lion asks as we walk down the fire road. I keep shifting my pack, getting used to the weight. The large fire axe, the pulaski, hanging between my shoulder blades, is ridiculous. And this title is new for me too; it fits awkwardly. For too long I've just been a student.

"It's different now," I say. "People look at me like I have some deviant sexual behaviour. Like we go to Geologists Anonymous meetings to say, 'I like rocks.' Maybe they think I stand in front of marble statues, fantasizing over the thin veins."

I remember when I did my interview with my soon-to-be trail boss, the Ant, who looked suspicious about my education.

"What about you?" I ask. "A philosophy major?"

The Lion smiles. "Philosophers don't get those looks. People are so surprised to meet a philosopher that they keep quiet, like they're wondering how unstable you are. Like we go to Philosophers Anonymous and announce, 'I am unbalanced.' Most of the time I notice people waiting for me to say something profound. Usually I make up nonsense and then look at them seriously. The best is when they nod after a moment."

The Lion kicks rocks off the back of his heel or the side of his boot, a quick snap as he passes. I've asked before why he'd

studied philosophy. It seemed somehow not solid enough for him. He told me that as a kid watching action movies he used to wonder about all the people getting killed in the background. The movie just rolled along, forgetting them. He watched the extras and wondered about what a surprise that would be; you get up one day and then—wham—dead. Didn't see it coming. He always wondered if we could ever wake up and know it was the day we would die.

That explanation reminds me of that time in university when a girlfriend of his told me that he'd seen a kid in his elementary class get hit by a car. The car sped off; the kid died at the hospital. The Lion had picked up the boy's hockey stick from the blood on the street.

I'd asked the Lion about it one night after leaving the pub, when the mood had turned fearless and people were drifting to their dorms. We stood under a streetlight in the vast, empty parking lot. He told me what happened, but it was his impression of the events that stuck: he said the schoolyard had swarmed like a field of ants when one of them gets stepped on. He looked then as though the arc-sodium lights could shine right through him.

At the end of every day that first week we reviewed the trails and techniques.

"It looks easy, but it matters," he says. "Work diligently."

That's what I like about him. That's why we're friends. He has this clear view on what's important, this determination to make his life happen without regrets, without waiting for approval. Though I suspect he has regrets. Sometimes he seems not to listen. His education is not in demand. He's out here without the pressure of choices. Unlike myself.

■ Toward the end of the first week, even though I'm dead tired, the Lion convinces me to attend an interpretative play. These interpreters come from all over Canada. They have sparse

audiences at the start of the season, so they need encouragement, the Lion claims. I ask what it's about and the Lion shrugs. The park management hires them to make the wilderness more accessible to the tourists.

We sit in the stands and watch a slender woman jangle the bells in her jester's hat and stretch her grease-painted arms.

A long time ago, before our grandfathers, before the continents were divided by the oceans, there was a kingdom over this land, spanning sea to sea. This is the Borges fable.

The Interpreter leans forward and points in a long arc over the audience's heads. The firelight illuminates her outstretched hand with bright authority. Some of the children turn to look over their small, blanket-wrapped shoulders.

The powerful king had a magic mirror that told him the future. He surrounded it with towers so he could look down on it at any time. One day, he saw his sons distressed, each holding small and mouldering maps. He foresaw the battle to divide his kingdom and ordered his cartographers to make a single map of the land.

The Interpreter's even voice and French accent make her sound royal. Early-season visitors are scattered before her on concentric benches. The stage is packed earth. Recessed lighting gives the feel of a small room, the dark night provides the walls. The visitors huddle close and hunch forward, their children clustered at their feet.

She wears a shirt with multicoloured stripes. Billowy pants exaggerate her motions. On her left a solemn man wears the robes of a scribe and on her right another has the grim face and armour of a general. The scribe holds a heavy book while the soldier leans on a spear. The firelight glints off the aluminum foil of his armour.

I sit with the Lion on the cold back benches. He has his feet up, his worn boots wrapped in duct tape. His shell necklace is