MARCH OF THE ASPEN:

POEMS AND ESSAYS

By Oliver Scofield

A Thesis

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Statement of Aesthetics

March of the Aspen is a mixed collection of poetry and memoir that delves into the meaning of belonging to a place and the responsibility in having that place belong to you. Split between Red Lodge, Montana where I work as a Wilderness ranger for the Forest Service and the Idaho-Wyoming border where I grew up, *March of the Aspen* juxtaposes my connections to these lands with homesteaders, tourists, family, and those whose spaces we must share – the birds and bears and aspen's steady spread into the meadow. In a world inundated with ever more alarming statistics about changing climates I write to the local side of change: that which is only noticeable when intimate with the land.

In my four summers on backcountry patrols and a lifetime spent on my family's property, this intimacy is borne out in everyday observances. These scenes span from an old homestead to remote Wilderness and incorporate interactions between family, friends, wildlife, mountains, and the forests that grow, burn and fall between them. Norman Maclean's father said in *Young Men and Fire*, "One of the chief privileges of man is to speak up for the universe" and this work attempts just that.

When you hold responsibility for stewarding the land, be it your own or publicly held, how else – in the overwhelming face of global climate change, national indifference – can you express your appreciation, your respect other than one sapling at a time? We love on a small scale; each moose calf and meadowlark, mountain stream and magpie has its own song to sing. The divides of ownership blur with each note and possession, in many senses, becomes a moot point.

Rooted in place, my poetry focuses on the image. I let a single scene condense into its smallest form – krumholtz on the page. Form dallies in and out, structures – like cliffs, canyons, cabins – that define the freer flow around them. The essays split into longer pieces that dive into my work with the Forest Service – building trails, cleaning up litter, spending hours on end alone in the Wilderness – and shorter scenes that sleep in weathered cabins, roam trails through the Tetons, and follow the wanderings of wildlife. Throughout these words, seedlings of new growth percolate skyward. I make an effort to hear not only these individuals, but the forest in which they reside.

Together I hope these works combine to provide a glimpse of a world vastly different from the one most people inhabit daily, to allow for a reimagining of life and place and humans' relation to both. In reality, there is no poem nor prose that can capture experience. Ed Abbey said it best: "The desert lies beneath and soars beyond any possible human qualification." If there is one take-away from this collection, let it be the need to experience. And please, for the love of all other creatures, let it be the need to experience responsibly.

Land Acknowledgement

James Galvin states in *The Meadow*: "[we] do not possess but are [our]selves possessed by this terrain." His statement holds truth beyond the romantic idolization of landscape to which he seems to have been alluding. The lands that appear in the coming pages have a history that spans far, far past me and my family, the homesteaders who built our cabins and cleared the trees, and the forests themselves – all young in comparison to the mountains and the mountains in turn are children in the eyes of the rocks from which they are comprised. My writing here, about my connections to these places, to their inhabitants and their processes, is not meant to diminish, eclipse, nor appropriate others who have ties to these same places.

Prior to colonization by white settlers several Native American Nations lived in, traveled through and/or held sacred the areas around what is now called the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE). According to the National Park Service and Jackson Hole Historical Society websites, these Tribes included the Shoshone, Bannock, Blackfoot, Crow, Flathead, Gros Ventre, Nez Perce, Arapahoe, Kiowa, Lakota, Cheyenne, Pend d'Oreille, and Kootenai. I am not familiar with most of these Nations; the establishment of Grand Teton and Yellowstone Parks, along with the Homestead Act, contributed significantly to the genocide and subsequent removal of these peoples from their traditional homes. Today, the Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapahoe share the Wind River Reservation east of the GYE in central Wyoming; the Shoshone-Bannock reside on the Fort Hall Reservation in eastern Idaho; the Northern Cheyenne and Crow each have reservations in southern Montana, east of Red Lodge.

I fully admit that I do not, currently, know anywhere near enough about these Tribes and their histories, their names for the lands I call home. I do not believe this information is required to validate my own perspective but wish to acknowledge there are stories that would provide a fuller picture of these landscapes, stories I do not have the authority to tell. With this in mind, I write solely from my perspective. My omittance of their history is not intended as a further erasure.

That being said, I want to recognize that many of my poems included in this collection were inspired, in part, by Indigenous authors from around the country. My thanks to Sherwin Bitsui (Diné) for his introduction to and teaching of these writers. I hope that I have struck a balance – lauding their work through my own without appropriating the culture(s) of the authors. Much as land is bigger than any single possessor or story, I hope that each piece included here may connect to a larger narrative in conversation with those authors, Native or not, who also let the world speak through them. My presence in these landscapes is short-lived, as was those before me, as will those who follow after. The land endures, its stories with it – those written and those which soar past, fleeting as the harrier's shadow.

Aspen

builds
carefully
(boles collect)
developing
each
future
growth's
homogenous
inheritance.
June's
karaoke:
leaves
murmuring
notes
of
Pando's
quaking
roots.
Steadily,
trees
unfurl (uplift),
vestigial
weaving
xylem's
yearly
zones.

Homelands

Gros Ventre: range: I whisper up these valleys
stars
landslide
once clouds clear

Snake: river: midnight rush past ranch
and branch
black ripple
of sky

Teewinot: mountain: rooted in lupine
monolith of many pinnacles
gleams white

Jenny: lake: how can the moon think
over such apparent waters

Felt: town: faded into irrelevancy
buildings scatter like glacial
erratics

Rammell: mountain: three peaks trace veins of dawn

Teton: range: dreams' jagged edge
shadow horizon

mind placed / I find comfort in their forms / they hold / maintain / signify / through the night / long shoulders unable to support their own importance / this value I have forced upon them / perhaps this is what is meant by the term *sacred*

Who are we in the dark anyhow?
- Jim Harrison
The Road Home

And the forest at night might be beautiful,
but if it was dark how was a man to know that?
- Ken Kesey
Sometimes a Great Notion

After Craig Santos Perez

Splitting Wood

"There are two spiritual dangers in not owning a farm. One is the danger of supposing that breakfast comes from the grocery, and the other that heat comes from the furnace."
— Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*

In October my brother, brother-in-law, and I receive a text from my dad:

> *Would any of you be willing to split the firewood for me this year? Its less than a cord and chopping really bothers my elbow.*

We all respond affirmatively, of course we would be willing to help. We each express our supposed love of splitting wood and exclaim how ridiculous it would be to rent a splitter for less than a cord. Immediately I worry that by being in Arizona, 800 miles away from the woodpile, either my brother or brother-in-law will beat me to it. Not for a moment do I think either of them would mind helping my dad for an afternoon – standing in his driveway, chatting about cars and basketball and fishing – but I am skeptical they actually enjoy splitting wood.

I do love splitting wood. Especially wood that I cut in the forest, carried to the truck, stacked and restacked on the lawn or porch. This work is grounding, real, a necessary task that allows survival in cold months – a vital connection between living and understanding where that life comes from. Similar to growing a garden or, I imagine, hunting or raising your own meat. It's satisfying to understand the process from aspirant seedling to smoke clearing the chimney. To understand and to rely on it.

At my mom's house – an off-the-grid, out-of-the-way cabin – our cast-iron wood stove is the sole means of heat available. During summer, when gathering huckleberries or biking along Pinochle Road, we note downed and dead trees or those we could easily fell towards the road. In the fall, we gas up our chainsaw, pay the nominal fee for a firewood permit, and head into the Caribou-Targhee for a cord or two of lodgepole, aspen, and subalpine fir. Sometimes our neighbors ask us to fell and clear up dead trees on their property. Sometimes we thin the chokecherry that dot our fenceline. Sometimes a tree falls across the road, and we would be foolish not to buck it up and take it home. Each species burns differently; aspen for long lasting warmth on cold days, lodgepole for quick heat in the morning, chokecherry for small, dense cooking fires.

My dad and stepmom's house, while ostensibly log, is hardly a cabin and is firmly connected to grid power. The wood stove in their living room is perfunctory and used mostly because having a fire in winter lends an ambience the modern furnace has yet to achieve. On their porch stands a motley collection of rotting fence posts, lumber scraps from the garage expansion and new mudroom, trimmed ends of willow branches broken in a storm, and an odd aspen or evergreen from the privacy strip circling their property. All will be burned together, based on their order in the stack, with no regard for the type of heat each might give.

When I arrive home for a week at Thanksgiving, their pile remains unsplit. I am not surprised by this and am glad for the excuse of an afternoon outside. Over a foot of snow already

coats the ground and daily highs since October haven't warmed above freezing; it's past time to prep firewood for winter.

My dad and I shovel a short path from driveway to porch, select a chopping block, and retrieve the splitting maul from his garage. I check the edge on the maul and immediately we divert back to the garage, clamp the maul in a vice and plug in his grinder. In less than five minutes, the chips are buffed out – fresh metal shines in overhead LEDs. We return to the driveway.

Equal to the logs' mix of origins is their discrepancy in length and density. Some are rotten through and a light tap of the maul cascades them into snowy splinters. Others are tough and the maul bounces on contact – peppering their tops with thin lines that show the accuracy (or not) of each consecutive swing. I find it hard to predict what each log will entail so rather than blow through soft wood, bringing the maul into the driveway or my boot, my first swing becomes tentative, testing.

Adding to this challenge, many logs are not straight. Instead of the convenient cylinder we envision perfect firewood to be, these are skewed, oblique, cut from tree, fence or construction project without forethought. They teeter on the chopping block, their weight cantilevered out over the driveway, their ends cut jagged by a less-than-sharp chainsaw. It's clear that no regard has been given to the next step in their cycle.

I have a hard time imagining how they all ended up so uneven. Cutting perpendicular to the trunk not only provides easy splitting but is often the simplest, safest, easiest way to cut. For this many logs to end up in such straits almost speaks to intention, except I know it stems from the opposite. Not stupidity or clumsiness, just a falling out with the obvious next step in gathering firewood: first you cut, then you split, then you stack. If you don't rely on such simple tasks to guarantee heat in Rocky Mountain winters, it's easy to think of each step individually rather than a part of a whole, easy to cut without forethought.

You gotta keep up or be obsolete

Another text from my dad, a jest to my questioning of his taking a selfie. An offhand comment in an unimportant conversation and yet I can't help thinking that this text encompasses my dad rather well – joking, honest, ironic, trying too hard to get a laugh he already knows is coming, but reliably, frustratingly accurate when considered at a meta level.

Writing these descriptions about the shoddy state of his woodpile feels like a harsher criticism of someone I love and enjoy working with than I intend. Some of my favorite days when I visit home are those spent on some random project or another: trying to build a door for my stepmom's chicken coop, installing shelving in the garage, attaching the latest bike/tent rack to the truck bed, and so on. We listen to music, joke and laugh, measure incorrectly (twice), test each other's designs and logic. We think very differently when conceptualizing, and this can lead to hilarious misinterpretations of the other's instructions. In short, these projects are the sort of engaging, father-son activities that make suburbia proud.

We pull out his chainsaw, having decided to trim each end flat and burn the stobs as kindling rather than try to balance the remaining logs on the chopping block. Halfway through cutting the first round, the chainsaw works its way into a curve despite my best efforts to hold straight the kerf. Back to the garage. I dismantle and clean the saw, flip the bar over and put it back together, checking the chain for sharpness. Our family pitched in to buy this saw as a Father's Day present to replace a small, aged Stihl purchased before I was born. You gotta keep up. The older saw didn't cut well, ran intermittently, and had digressed beyond my skill to repair.

As I clean and sharpen his new saw, I talk through what I am doing and try to demonstrate each step so that my dad can replicate the process next time his saw needs maintenance. He nods, asks some questions. For someone who presents with an air of being exceptionally wise in most things, I get a feeling saw maintenance is a task he is happy to let me continue to perform. My dad is someone who often gives the impression of being entirely competent – perhaps because I rarely see him in an unfamiliar setting or trying something new – and I find it odd when I realize how much more knowledgeable I am in this circumstance. He confesses to me that actually asking for help in the first place is something he really questioned, despite his other options of elbow soreness for months or paying to rent a splitter.

We return to the pile and trim the remaining logs square. I finish splitting while he carries and restacks the wood. The temperature hasn't warmed past 20ºF and now, even though the sun is dropping fast toward the Big Holes, we both shed layers – the flow of movement finally allowing for our bodies to heat. All too soon, we finish. The last splinters and sawdust get shoveled into the kindling bin and we return the tools to their homes in the garage.

Our world keeps rushing forward, we buy new cars or chainsaws, renovate garages, record our basketball games so we can speed through commercials and nonsense we don't want to see, check and double check our watches and phones for notifications that inundate our every minute – our spirits ever in danger of forgetting these simple tasks. It feels good to slow down for an afternoon and swing a sharpened wedge of metal at stubborn blocks of wood, to reconnect with a fundamental process of survival, to exist in simple banter, to teach a new skill. For me, an afternoon like this brings into question the need to keep up; there is value in the obsolete.

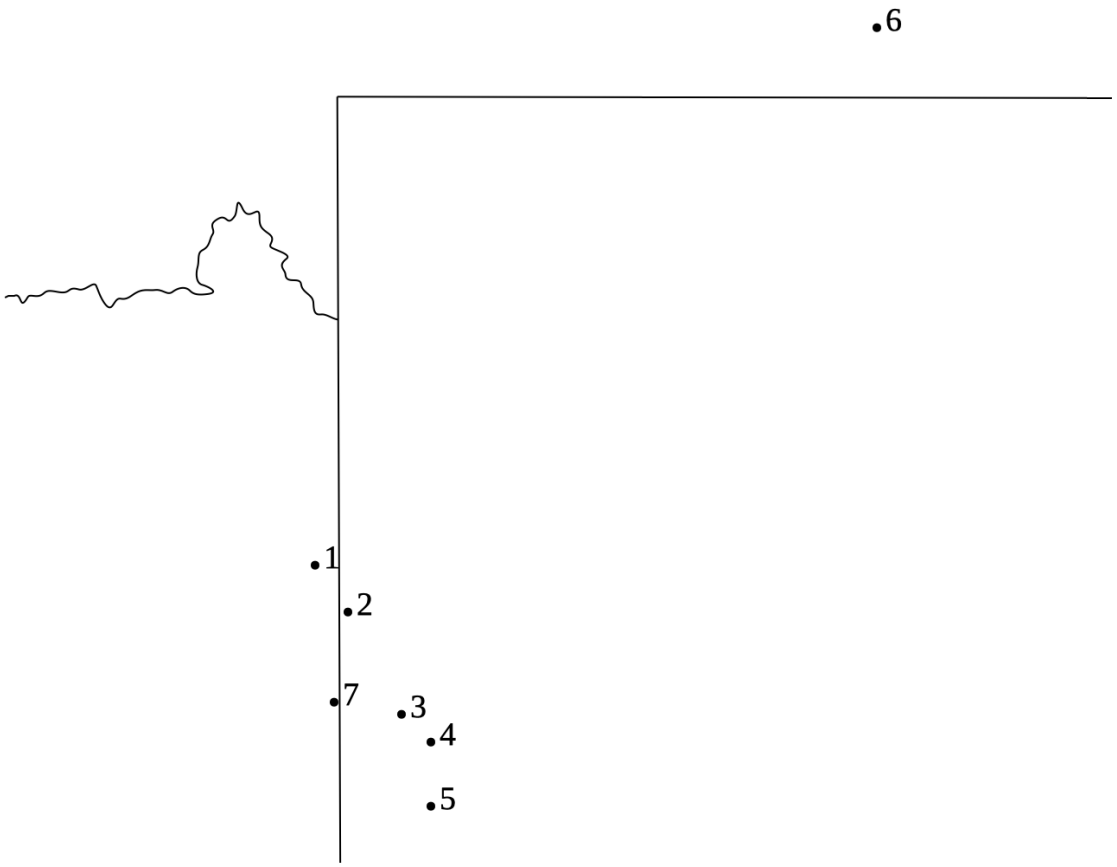
I've heard a saying that gathering firewood heats you four times: once when you cut the wood, twice when you carry it, again when you split it, and lastly when you burn it. Not counted is warmth generated by working alongside family, learning more about place, connecting yourself with life.

After I return to Arizona I text my dad:

Don't let my brother off the hook with the rest of the woodpile!

I want them to have the same opportunity to bond and laugh together, want my brother to get some exercise and pull his weight, want them both to experience the process of providing a vital service for the family. As February nears, I am set to return home once more. Part of me hopes the second half of the pile remains unsplit, so I can take the maul and chainsaw out of the garage and sweat in cold afternoon sunshine once more.

Foundational Lesson

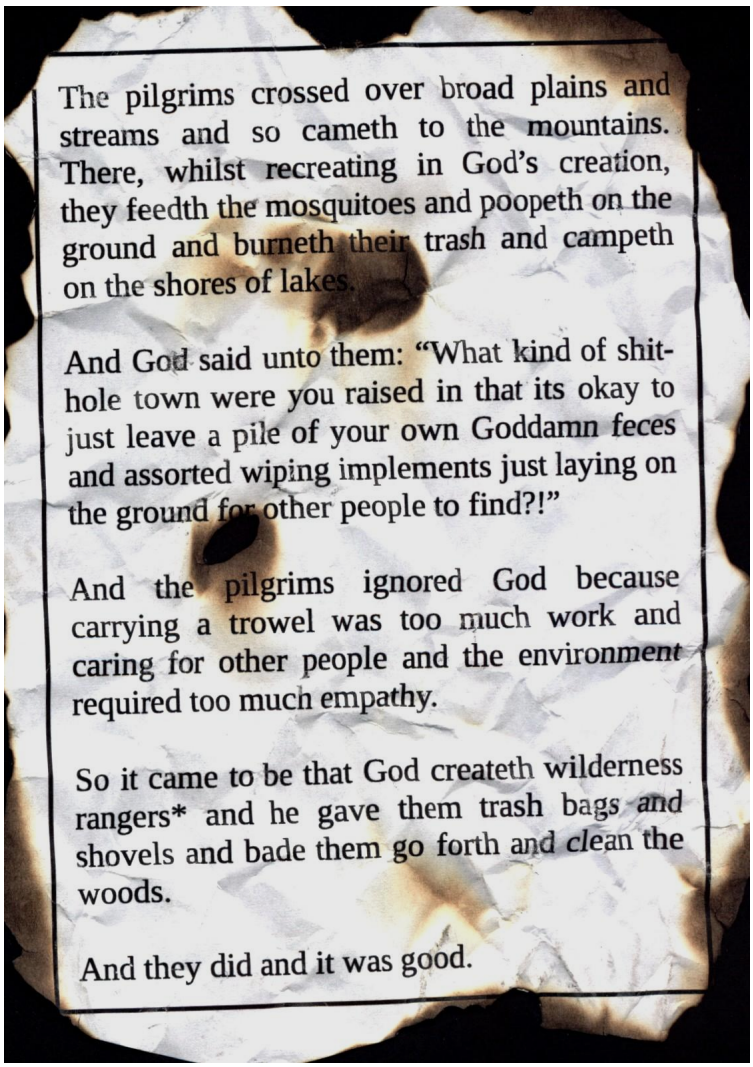


1. Examine each point as a foothold
2. Use a regression analysis to predict the missing data
3. Explore the white space to create a childhood

After Esther Belin

A Missing Page of the Bible

as found partially burned in a fire ring at Mystic Lake



The pilgrims crossed over broad plains and streams and so cameth to the mountains. There, whilst recreating in God's creation, they feedth the mosquitoes and poopeth on the ground and burneth their trash and campeth on the shores of lakes.

And God said unto them: "What kind of shit-hole town were you raised in that its okay to just leave a pile of your own Goddamn feces and assorted wiping implements just laying on the ground for other people to find?!"

And the pilgrims ignored God because carrying a trowel was too much work and caring for other people and the environment required too much empathy.

So it came to be that God createth wilderness rangers* and he gave them trash bags and shovels and bade them go forth and clean the woods.

And they did and it was good.

*Unfortunately, when God did all that he forgot to provide a reliable budget to pay the rangers and the original commandments, such as do not kill, applied to surface dumpers as well.

Reading the Trees (I)

Old growth snags
Hear my saw, watch
Lodgepole split / **B**reak, topple,
Elongate on the ground
Catch their indifferent gaze

Rain Dance

She stops.
Her twirling shawl of green
flutters out and falls:
a curtain of spring rain.
bare feet graced the ground
with series of smooth steps -
beats that echoed each drop -
pause now, muddy
amid sprigs of wheatgrass.

Her face demands poetry-
calm expectant;
eyebrows raised,
arched like falcon's dive -
looking over her shoulder
the inevitable spring storm,
she has paused
along with dancing.

She has halted
rain, budding of aspens,
growing of grass,
for *this*.

The Beartooths, slate-blue
veil of suspended precipitation,
await her movement
to shrug snow
down forested shoulders.
Creeks still trickle
but flow cannot peak
until it matches hers.

She shifts now.
twisting of hips and neck
brings her gaze
across other shoulder
moves fawn from bed
amid fragrance sage juniper
to a shaky stand.

Her smile arcs seam sunlight
through the sodden fabric of clouds,
asks "Are you done?"

shawl twitches against earth.
movement mimicked by multitudes
of droplets that release
hit ground sigh.

Her head snaps forward,
arms raise green drapery follows.
sun is cut
water hammers
down.

feet held spring back,
move more meadow
fawn dashes mother,
mountains cry winter
creeks foam,
trees leaf,
grass
and poetry
no long-

On Solitude

I. The Beaten Path

My saw pinches. Caught in the middle of a cut, I take the opportunity to pause, look around. Down East Rosebud canyon, morning colors have evaporated, allowing summer's hazy heat to simmer up from the plains. As my breath calms, I can hear the movement of the creek several switchbacks below me. A squirrel chatters nearby; I glance up the trail and then higher, towards cliff's skyward retreat with scattered boulders fallen at their feet.

I look with both trepidation and hope. I have not seen nor heard another person in 40 hours and, with my record being 43 hours, would like to put my next encounter off for as long as possible. If not a person who inspired the squirrel's warning signal, then I want to see whoever did set the little feller to chattering, be it moose, bear, or bighorn.

When half a minute of investigation fails to reveal any new presence, I return my gaze to the log across the trail in front of me and the small orange handle of my Silky handsaw stuck six inches into the cut. A casual tug does nothing to release this bind.

Wonderful. This is super fucking fun...

I again look around, now directing my gaze at the surrounding forest. I am tired, frustrated, and with no people for miles, there is little reason to filter my thoughts. My primary task this week is to make an assessment – mostly just determining if it still exists – of the Rimrock bridge after last month's flooding. I also need to cut out the trail, which a winter wind-storm has made challenging. Yesterday I cut, dragged, felled, rolled, and threw 103 trees that impeded travel on the trail – the fewer cuts I can make per tree the better. My arms and shoulders are already sore.

Returning to my current obstacle – a mature subalpine fir about ten inches thick – I contemplate my next move. This tree had stood immediately below the trail. It had fallen, of course, straight uphill so the thickest part of its trunk lay across the path. I had started my first cut on the uphill side, hoping I could then pivot the severed portion down, across the trail, and leave it below without having to saw again near the stump.

When cutting – with a handsaw, crosscut, or chainsaw – the sawyer must read the tree, as each presents its own characteristics and challenges. The better the sawyer understands these, they'll both be safer and have an easier time felling or bucking. The trees on East Rosebud are mostly green lodgepole and subalpine fir; softwood that cuts easily with a handsaw but can twist, bending as fibers are severed. The wind event that brought about this blowdown primarily snapped these trunks about 40-50 feet above the ground, littering broken tops with heavy branches and skinny boles. Occasionally, a larger tree has been fully uprooted, taking its neighbors down with its own crashing descent.

I would not consider myself an expert on cutting techniques; there are plenty of complex situations I have not encountered, and I don't spend enough time on chainsaws or crosscuts to

gain the experience I would need to reach the highest level of qualification. But neither am I a newbie. I have spent six summers using these tools and have taught the basics to many fresher to the forests than myself.

That being said, I am still standing here – 18 miles from the trailhead, alone, with just a shovel and the odds and ends in my backpack – looking at my only cutting tool pinched in a tree. Like a newbie.

I grab my water bottle and make a quick assessment:

It's 8:30am. Rimrock bridge is still at least two and a half miles away… that's an hour hike, add in an hour for trees and trash… an hour and a half back up to camp… still time to pack up, cut the few trees left between Lake at Falls and Duggan and get to Dewey before 5:30… I'll camp there and Dewey is… 13 from the trailhead. That'll be doable tomorrow, mostly downhill.

Still enough time to continue cutting but I'll need to keep an eye on my watch.

At this point I have blown this small episode into something far beyond its reality. A small squat with my shoulder under the log and one hand easily lifts my saw from the bind. It takes me another five minutes to finish my cut by underbucking, then a small relief cut by the stump and I swing the whole trunk off the trail as planned.

However, this momentary pause in my productivity serves to remind me that small mistakes can be amplified when in the wilderness. I have become so comfortable in my solitude and in my work that these small moments of awareness surprise me. *C'mon Scofield, get it together.* Any problem I encounter or risk I choose to take can multiply quickly in such a remote setting. Especially when the usual crowds of hikers are nowhere to be seen.

In fact, during a typical summer, this is our busiest trail. Colloquially called The Beaten Path, this trail spans the Beartooth mountains, connecting Cooke City on the border of Yellowstone, to Roscoe at the edge of the plains. The Beaten Path runs for 27 miles from East Rosebud Lake, up almost 4000 feet past 11 lakes, then down 2500 feet over the last ten miles, passing another 6 lakes and following the Russell Creek drainage into the Clark's Fork valley near Cooke City.

The absence of crowds on The Beaten Path is an amazing, once-in-a-lifetime experience and rather disconcerting. As much as I truly enjoy having this astounding canyon to myself, I realize that the busy, people-filled weeks are what affords these quiet days their value. Where there are people, so follows their trash – the Wilderness could use me elsewhere.

The moose had better appreciate this nice trail I'm cutting out… no one else is going to…

I fold my saw, pick up my backpack and move all of a hundred feet before encountering another 3 trees blocking my way. I can see several more from here as well and resign myself to another morning of cutting. I loosely hold on to my hopes of reaching the bridge site but that goal becomes less likely with each new obstruction.

On days when I have gone several hours – maybe three or four – without seeing anyone else, there is a shift in how I perceive each turn in the trail, each lake I approach. Hiking further becomes almost stressful as now I *don't* want to see people. The peace of morning air and quiet bird song, the rush of the creek and flow of thought can extend well into the day if I am left uninterrupted. Walking outside is a meditative, cathartic process for me; one that only increases as time goes on. Several mornings like this, I have heard a group hiking towards me and glanced about in mock dismay, looking for a quick place to hide, but I don't actually do this.

In typical summers, 24 hours alone is a treasure often cut short by my job if I want to stay productive and accomplish everything I have on my list that week. My first rule in setting a new solitude record is that it cannot be achieved by shirking my duties.

A couple weeks previously, I tied my record from three years ago: 43 hours sans people. If there hadn't been a random hiker yoohooing for bears once I was in my tent, I would have gone 48 hours total. All of one evening, through the night, and for the entire next day I was unable to fully enjoy my solitude because I was afraid it would end at any point. When I got to the second night, I relaxed, having now checked all the popular campsites and found no one. Even though I was headed toward the trailhead, I was more confident that I wouldn't see people hiking in. Tomorrow would be Monday and few people hike in on Mondays.

On this trail, here in East Rosebud, I am certain I won't encounter people coming up from the bottom. In June we lost two road bridges, a mile or more of road, a trail bridge and some unknown mileage of trail to what "experts" are calling a 500-year flood event. While this area is technically still open to the public, the amount of scrambling, route-finding, and time needed to make it to where I stand is more than anyone has done so far. Even my boss, who is a badass in all things trail related, has not visited these disappeared sections; our losses are estimates reported from a helicopter flyover from a month ago. This, plus the hundreds of trees I've found across the trail, makes me confident that the only people I may see would have come in the same as I did: up from Cooke and over the top – a long hike only to return on the same path.

The next twenty trees are relatively pain free, although in an effort to limit my cuts I have neglected to limb any branches except those directly in my way, leading to several moments of frustration as boughs catch on other trees, the trail, my clothes while I attempt to drag them out of the way.

Well that's just great. I fuckin' hate trees!

I look up furtively, hoping that the forest either hasn't heard my words or has understood that I do not truly mean what I said. My glance down to the next switchback and the accompanying fifteen trees piled there tells me that my dreams of conducting the bridge assessment are just that.

For the next three and a half hours, I cut, drag, push, and curse 80 more trees off the trail. In places the blowdown is dense enough to have ten or twenty trunks all piled up on top of each other. It's become clear to me that we will need to send at least two people out here with a crosscut. Many of the trees are too big for my little handsaw and there are more than I could

possibly hope to clear in the small amount of time I have left. I leave the big piles for whomever comes back, instead focusing my efforts on smaller trees, ones not stacked like jackstraws.

Just before I take my lunch break, I hike back to my campsite. With no one else around, I'd had my pick of sites and had chosen one a short scramble above Lake at Falls with unimpeded views of three waterfalls, the lake, the deep U of the canyon. Last evening I sat out on a cliff edge overlooking Lake at Falls. A slight breeze kept the bugs down, and I reveled in one of those evenings that keeps me returning to this job again and again.

Now, I pack camp and return towards the top of the pass – home to billions of alpine mosquitoes who have annoyingly adapted to hover on the leeward side of anything poking more than a few inches above the tundra, especially people. I cut another 30 something trees on my way up, moving quicker now because I already cut through this area yesterday and am just cleaning up a few trees for which I didn't have time.

When I reach Dewey Lake, I poke around for half an hour, checking campsites for evidence of use in the two days since I last came through. If any campers had stayed here, they would've been the cleanest, least intrusive backpackers I ever encountered – nothing has been altered. It seems I am the only one who passed this far down the trail. My watch indicates 48 hours and counting. I passed my record five hours ago and hadn't even noticed.

After an evening and night spent hiding from mosquitoes in my tent, I pack up to start the long hike out. I have 13 miles to cover before the trailhead, then a 90 minute drive back to the office. I haven't left much time for chatting with people, picking up trash, or anything else that might come up. I am banking on the absence of people continuing.

I am up and over the top at Fossil Lake before the day truly warms. A lone tent has been pitched on the far side of the lake but, as I can't see or hear any people, I decide my solitude continues. Another three miles brings me down below treeline. The woods remain empty; all the campers I found on Friday have packed up and moved out.

I hear them coming up the trail before I see them. *So it ends…*

I step to the side and look at my watch: 65 hours. A record not likely to be broken any time soon, if ever. Two older men loaded down in fishing rods and antiquated camping gear appear below me. They walk almost next to me before the first one looks up at my "good morning." We chat pleasantly for a few minutes before I wish them well and we head in opposite directions. I think to myself how normal I felt talking to others. I wonder how long I would have to be alone before simple conversation became elusive. I kinda want to find out.

II. The Last Frontier

In summer 2016, on my first solo backpacking trip, I ventured into Denali National Park for three days. I had been road tripping with my college roommate, both of us freshly stamped with our diplomas, given a congratulatory handshake, then booted out of academia into the real

world. Rather than accept such a dramatic lifestyle change, I bought an old Volkswagen Vanagon, we pulled out a map, and the two of us drove to Alaska.

After a few weeks in Anchorage, my buddy decided to fly home to begin his search for stable income, health insurance, and a place to live. I drove further north. I wasn't going to leave Alaska without "seeing" Denali, without backpacking into truly remote mountains, without at least pretending that I had done what I could to maximize my current level of freedom.

At this point in my life, I had been backpacking a handful of times. Several trips with friends, a couple instances for work – all in the Teton and Gros Ventre ranges of western Wyoming. Most people would likely describe the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem as the wildest place they have ever visited. The mountains there still hold all the wildlife they are supposed to; development has been limited by the presence of two large national parks, several national forests and the uniquely challenging terrain these all contain. In many ways, the GYE *is* still wild.

But the Tetons are not Alaska. This sounds cliché even as I type it, but Alaska, at least in terms of what the U.S. offers for landscapes, is just so different, so much bigger, so… Thoreauvian, primeval. Our road trip stuck to main highways due to the fragile nature of my vehicle; our five to twenty five mile excursions into the backcountry were an infinitesimally insignificant attempt to explore the state.

I lay awake the entire night before I had to catch the early hiker shuttle into Denali. My gut was clenching and my mind spinning on the possibilities of things going wrong. The park service, wisely, makes each backpacking group watch over an hour of videos on safely traveling in the pathless, *wild* vastness of the backcountry. Bears, creek crossings, weather, Search and Rescue protocols – they cover it all. Now, looking back, this information has become second nature. In that moment, truly on my own for the first time in my life, they were terrifying.

After a snafu with the bus departure in the morning, I finally arrived at the location I had randomly selected from a binder on backpacking zones. I signaled to the bus driver; he pulled over to the side of Denali Park Road. I lifted my pack down the aisle under curious, astounded stares of the other tourists. Once I was clear of the vehicle, the driver pulled away and left me alone on a dirt road, 40 something miles from the park entrance. I took a deep breath and started hiking.

What occurred during the next three days was not a transcendent experience of awe or profundity; I was mostly tired, wet from rain and creek crossings, and wishing I had chosen a more majestic canyon up which to hike. Over the following years however, this excursion came to mean so much more than I thought it would. It was my first deep dive into my own head with no other stimulation, I hadn't even packed a book, just pen and journal; it was my first experience of landscape-wide aloneness, only one person seen, half a mile away; it was my first time truly being *out*, where humans are not the dominant force on the land, even in the Tetons, there are trails, people, and an airport nearby.

Now that this solo backpacking adventure has been followed by dozens of others, almost exclusively for my work as a ranger in the Beartooths, my firsts in Denali are not as impactful as

they once were. The importance of that trip has shifted from one of intrapersonal growth to one of managerial perspective. As my work with the Forest Service has expanded into assisting with the stewardship of the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness, I have found myself remembering my brief time in Denali and what that threshold for solitude can truly mean.

III. The Modern Wilderness

I throw my phone on my bed, swing on my pack, and head out the door. I have my tent, sleeping bag, pad, first aid kit, five days of food along with all the gadgets, papers, and tools I need for my job as a Wilderness ranger with the Forest Service. My route is up Lake Fork Canyon, across Sundance Pass, and out the West Fork. The distance from trailhead to trailhead is only 20 miles, but I'll spend parts of each day off-trail visiting some more remote lakes. Most of my time will involve talking to other backpackers, horse packers, and hikers I meet, explaining and enforcing the regulations in the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness. As one of the bigger stretches of designated Wilderness in the lower 48, each week I get to live in these mountains puts me in as close a proximity to nature as today's society allows.

Time spent outside, away from the bustle of cities and allure of digital media, is an opportunity to remember how few differences exist between people and nature. These excursions into unpopulated places provide a chance to place our consumption-driven, growth mindsets in perspective; to witness the subtle livings of other creatures whose notice we often pass by; to appreciate that which has become fleeting in our day-to-day.

Wilderness Areas can be some of the best places to accomplish these goals. An official designation by Congress upgrades a piece of Federal land, however wild it might be, to capital 'W' Wilderness and provides the highest levels of protection – against development, extraction, pollution, etc – that the U.S. government offers. By minimizing infrastructure (including trails); limiting travel to foot, hoof, and paddle (no bikes or strollers); banning motors (leave your chainsaws and drones at home); and restricting commercialization (few permits for any business activity), Wilderness stands as the antithesis to capitalistic, expansionist society.

Wilderness, historically, is a colonial construct – wild nature, uninhabited by "civilized" people. As soon as Europeans set foot on American soil, they viewed nature and the natives with awe and fear. Fear became contempt which manifested itself through destruction of both the natural environment and the people who lived there. Our national parks and forests, with minimal exception, were created by removing Indigenous people to provide the pristine landscape envisioned as natural.

Wilderness now – exalted, picturesque, "pristine" – has been built on these feelings. No longer to be feared necessarily – we have constructed fences around these remote landscapes – but still partitioned, still void of people: "an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain." (Wilderness Act, Sec 2c). Our legislation has done the work of separating nature from us, all we need do is blindly accept this proposition.

This week I am conducting the A-B Wilderness' bi-annual solitude monitoring. I have three routes I need to traverse, allocating at least four hours to each one, with an additional half hour spent in a designated campsite at each route's terminus. Every year, in July and August, Wilderness rangers walk these routes, counting the people we see, documenting the length of their visit, marking down their user type along with other notes of significance. In our most visited canyons, we have three of these paths to cover, one in each designation of Wilderness. Class 3 Wilderness lies in canyon bottoms, along main trails where most of people congregate. Class 2 follows social and climber trails to more remote lakes that still see fair amounts of traffic. Class 1 is entirely off-trail, encompassing challenging terrain and harder to access places. With two data points gathered every year on each route for over twenty years, the folks in charge of management decisions can look at trends in usage and gauge whether policies need to be changed.

Solitude is a core principle of Wilderness as defined by the U.S. government. Legally, land agencies are required to manage for it. There are laws that define the number of people allowed on specific landscapes at a given time. At face-value, this may seem absurd. Wilderness areas are typically hundreds of thousands of acres; span remote, mountainous terrain that is less than inviting for most people; and are located far from dense population centers. Visitors to these areas don't spread evenly across the entire acreage. They congregate on trails and near water; they camp and travel on flat, easy to access routes; and they come to these mountains to avoid the crowds they typically encounter.

A variety of techniques exist to help forestall the impact of too many people. These range from permits and timed-entry to limiting infrastructure. Some methods are more involved than others, as anyone who has tried to apply for a permit has likely experienced. In an ideal management situation, visitors to an area wouldn't even realize that the number of people they could encounter is regulated at all. They would simply see fewer people and expect it, view it as normal – a casual diminishing of daily bustle until you are able to truly enjoy the quiet of your thoughts or the company of the select few who have joined you.

Managing the number of visitors in a Wilderness Area benefits not only the enjoyment of people who visit but also the wildlife, the vegetation, and the landscape. People are notoriously unaware of their impact in wild settings, which almost always negatively affects other species and their habitat. Moose and bears, marmots and bighorns need space and access to clean water. Left to their own devices the average tourist will pitch their tent as close to the lakeshore as possible, poop disgustingly close to the same water they'll drink and swim in, leave their food unprotected on the ground, and hack live trees to create firewood – generally degrading the experience of anyone else who uses that area.

The Class 1 route in Lake Fork Canyon runs from First Rock Lake to Second Rock Lake. The best path between the two bisects a large boulder field, drops into a gully, climbs along the base of a cliff, gets lost in steep forest filled with blowdown, then splashes through swampy inlets to Lake Fork Creek before finally emerging in a meadow off-kilter enough to make camping uncomfortable. Second Rock is nestled amid another boulder field and wrapped with tough, knotted krumholtz grown through annual punishments of snow and rock falls. These twisted trees hunker into the rocks like they might duck the next avalanche. Navigating across

the outlet on slowly rotting driftwood and contouring the shore to reach the designated "campsite" brings me as far off-trail as my work typically warrants.

On any Class 1 route, movement is not a thoughtless process of simply putting one foot in front of the other, instead requiring intention and deliberation of pace and trajectory; help is not a yell or phone call away, even satellite phones have trouble in these canyons; forces bigger than any person appear in every huff from a bear or rock echoing down from above. Despite this, I relax into my surroundings.

Even several miles from the main thoroughfare, evidence of people persists. Now that I know this terrain, traces of a trail can be found in certain sections where the few people who do make it this far out have chosen the same route. The amount of trash and number of fire rings is significantly less than elsewhere but still present. Documenting these impacts and any actual people seen is why we come out here.

On my second night out, I sit on a fallen log alongside an eddy in Lake Fork Creek. With my tent tucked into the woods behind me (100 feet from water), food hanging on a branch off to the side (10 feet up and 4 feet out), I breathe in the peace of the evening. The sun is lowering towards Mount Lockhart and Sundance Pass, giving the thick July grass a golden glow. I have sat here and watched otters and moose, trout, mosquitoes, and bald eagles, once, a pine marten; in all of the A-B Wilderness, this corner of Lake Fork is one of my favorite places to set up camp. Today, there are no significant animal visitors, just a slight breeze that deters the bugs.

From my vantage point, I can't see any sign of humans. I can trace where the trail climbs through the lodgepoles and I know where it tops out on the pass, but without binoculars, I can pretend it doesn't exist. Even in this moment of quiet, I can't delude myself to solitude. Not a quarter mile away, at least a dozen campers crowd the shore of Lost Lake, and several more are established around other lakes in the canyon. In a way, I am grateful they are here, for without them, their trash, their inability to read signs, I wouldn't have my job, wouldn't be paid to backpack, wouldn't experience intimacy with these mountains.

I am far from the first to write about solitude while out in nature. Thoreau and Muir, Abbey and Leopold – to name the famous men – each had his brush with the wild. Thoreau in his wanderings around "the swamps" of Concord, Abbey in a world much closer to today's, Muir and Leopold somewhere in between. Solitude and Wilderness have changed over the years. Thoreau – despite his pontifications to the contrary – lived in town, walked in a 'tamed' landscape, had quiet evenings alone in his cabin only when he didn't feel like visitors. Muir clearly separated the city from the mountains, found peace and health in the Sierras, probably witnessed "wilderness" much closer to how we think of these lands today. Leopold experienced both remote stretches of the American southwest and pastoral farmland of Wisconsin. Abbey sensed the coming storm of cars and people, observed in real time the subduing of the wild.

To deliberately eschew "civilization" for what these writers hold up as "wild" is a choice very few humans, from any culture, have made. The mountain men of the American west come to mind as embodiments of the rugged, wild ideal Thoreau and the others proclaim. In Indigenous cultures – more so than our staunch individualistic, American society – community is paramount. While colonialism has rarely regarded these cultures as civilizations, the truth is even

within close-to-the-earth Native lifestyles, turning away from community is not in human nature. Humans need society, even those of us who think 65 hours without seeing or hearing another person is a gift. We designated these special places and then imposed the value of solitude upon them, something not inherent to their natural state of being. Native peoples lived in these "wild" lands long before the U.S. decided to set them aside as Wilderness.

It is important to note that everyone's ability to enjoy these landscapes is because we have towns with grocery stores and outdoor gear companies waiting past the trailhead to support us in our ventures. Similar to Thoreau, we go out for our walks, and – despite what Muir may say about "going out" actually feeling like "going in" and Abbey's disdain for towns – to our homes we all return, if only to restock for our next wander.

Halfway through my week, I pack up in Lake Fork and begin to climb up Sundance Pass. Starting in dense lodgepole on the canyon floor, the trail steadily cleaves up the northern wall into patchier stands of whitebark pine, then the sedges and wildflowers of high alpine meadows. Above September Morn Lake, this trail used to climb straight to the top of the pass. Over the years, various sections have been rebuilt with switchbacks to ease the elevation gain. Old cutbank is still visible in the tundra – regrowth is a long time coming at 11,000 feet.

On my way down into the West Fork, I count switchbacks: 55 over the 1,500 foot descent. I marvel at this feat of engineering – an even grade from top to bottom, built with minimal use of retaining walls in those places where snow melts quickest – and fantasize about writing tickets to those who would dare to shortcut such a trail, climbing straight up the scree in some sadistic attempt to defy this beautiful construction and avoid an extra mile. The whole way down, Mount Lockhart, Whitetail Peak, Medicine Mountain, Castle Mountain, and Sundance Mountain frame the head of the canyon. I let the miles flow under my feet while I mutter to myself and flip rocks off the trail.

It is clear that Thoreau gains some peace of mind from his walks, learns much about flora and fauna from his observations and seems to understand some deeper importance, some intrinsic value in these places and animals. Much like today's environmental writers, he appears to struggle with a convincing argument for why their value should be important for greater society and what the take-away should be for an average citizen. The tone of his writing is not suggestive of persuasion, Thoreau presents his work as philosophy, ideas on which to ruminate, not a hard-line "this is the answer." Much of environmental writing – even when interwoven with alarming facts about climate change or mass extinction – follows a pattern of "here is my profound experience outside, perhaps you would benefit from something similar," often with the premise that if, or when, you do, you will also be motivated toward whichever cause is currently being advanced.

Abbey, in defiance of this and very much in his style, cuts through the bullshit. With his storytelling, Abbey claims his authority on the land. He *knows*. He's out there, hiking and floating and climbing and getting lost and being delirious until he can get his insight written down. This willingness – need – to experience, to be outside and explorative, to get dirty and dehydrated, to learn from the juniper is where Abbey accepts what other writers cannot: no lauded prose, no fevered account, no impassioned argument can replace witnessing – in-person – the natural world. You must see, hike, thirst, smell, sleep, stub bare toes on cacti, and so on

before any attempt at understanding, loving. In *Down the River* he is lamenting not only the death of the Colorado, but the death of experience.

As someone whose life has been shaped by experiences in the mountains, I absolutely advocate for more people to get outside and explore, to turn off their devices, get off their couches, and see what wondrous interactions our world has in store. As a ranger, working to keep these people safe, protect the habitats and lives of the animals, and enable others to have equally wholesome adventures down the road, I am thankful that most people find sleeping on the ground repulsive and live in cities far away from my haunts. Our Wilderness Areas simply can't withstand higher visitation. And yet, if everyone had a connection to some part of nature or wild place, it strikes me as unlikely our world would be in the circumstances where we currently stand. Survival could easily depend on how many people "saunter through the woods and over the hills and fields, absolutely free from all worldly engagements." (Thoreau, *Walking*).

In today's world, in an obnoxious irony, a certain amount of infrastructure is needed to maintain the "pristine" quality of Wilderness – something that is perverse to our idea of the unimpaired and the untrammeled. Wilderness, as first designated, doesn't exist any more. Over time, small concessions for trails, patrol cabins, bridges, mining claims add up to landscapes that are not the pure nature once envisioned. As more people visit these areas, as their impacts increase pressure on already surrounded parcels, can there be balance between allowing for recreation, enjoyment, and recharge away from society and preserving some small corner of the country for other than human needs?

What damage Abbey witnessed during the 1950s in and around Arches National Park has only increased as more and more people invade the parks, forests, recreation areas and so on; the government's ability to respond to these impacts is delayed by bureaucracy, public opinion, and cost. A problem discovered today will have to be researched to see if it is really a problem. If so, several solutions will be drawn up, the public will weigh in, debate will ensue, a decision will be made. Before anything can be implemented, someone will sue and delay this process even more. By the time anything actually gets resolved, the original problem will have been replaced by six others and any agreed upon solution may no longer be relevant. Especially given how quickly things happen in today's world, the movement of government is almost comically slow. All of these add up to frustrations for land managers or rangers who then have to balance bureaucratic forces with the beautiful reality that someone will pay them to hike, camp, and live in the most amazing places on the planet.

My final morning: I collapse my tent, cram my camp clothes and sleeping bag into their stuff-sacks, take down the little bit of remaining food and full bags of trash I have collected, and arrange everything in my backpack. I have just one lake to patrol and then a few scattered campsites along five miles to the trailhead; I could be out in three hours. "Get out" days are always a tough balance between enjoying what is left of my time in the woods and rushing toward food and a shower. Even though I just finished breakfast, thoughts of pizza, salad, and beer grumble in my stomach. On the other hand, watching the sun scale canyon walls – light sparkling as it hits waterfalls – and feeling warmth creep up from the plains isn't a bad way to start my day. This dilemma is manageable because I will be back in the field two days later. An equilibrium of time spent in the woods and time spent in society is essential to an understanding of what is worth preserving and why it is preserved.

I'll complete the solitude monitoring for July's iteration on my hike out. The Class 3 route, from Quinnebaugh meadow to the trailhead, won't be quite as enjoyable as my scramble in the boulder field from a few days earlier. In my mind, the number of visitors on the main trail is a more important statistic on the overall impact to the Wilderness than those handful found in the pathless wood, so I don't mind completing this documentation as I finish my week.

As always happens when I am at work, once I get into a groove on the trail, my mind diverts off the immediate task of walking and begins to ponder larger questions of management and what I might change if given the opportunity. I don't have many answers for these questions. There are countless forces at work that pull in every direction and, at a certain level, management becomes vastly too complicated for places that are supposed to be simple at their core and reduce the stress of everyday life. For now, I am happy to leave these issues to others.

I hit the trailhead at 2:30. My backpack goes into the bed of the Forest Service truck and I pull out of the parking lot. I am not liberated from obligation – there is still paperwork to complete and a report to give – but for five days a week I get to live in the proverbial swamp, explore my own version of solitude, and listen to the music of the Wilderness.

sometimes mountain goats
look up mid-cliff and wish they
were only hill goats

Flood Assessment

a month after waters' decline
we walk a new channel,
almost perfect peaches
dribble juice down our chins
splat on river rocks
rolled from higher up canyon

creek's bite into the bank,
the motel, the road
contains no sweetness
just stony pits
dug from unripe shores
and spat through town

Western Meadowlark and American Robin: a Duet

lark
field heard
from a post

yellow
flashes listen
in pastures

west
marsh flocks
strut and feed

early bird
common sight

earthworms out
orange breast

cheery song
early winter

town and city
wild forests

Unpacking My Brain

hand sanitizer, sewing kit
Swiss Army Knife, duct tape
I dig my hand deeper
toilet paper no
flagging no
sharpie no
mosquito net thankfully no

My fingers should find the texture…
bug spray, glasses soft case
sunscreen
all pushed away

waterproof repair tape no (but I'll need this tomorrow)
extra p-cord no
headlamp not what I'm looking for but I remove it anyway

How much more do I have in here?
My eternally prepared brain starts to question itself
lighter no
ear plugs what?

I feel my goal -
must be the only thing untouched -
the slim, smooth stick
of my extra pen
stamped with a Marriott location
I am sure I never visited

I sit back in my tent
and pat my pockets
for a piece of paper

Pinochle Road: A Glimpse

Standing on our deck, I look out over fields I have known my whole life and think about how they seem so much smaller now. Crossing the uncut meadow in front of me, down to the old irrigation ditch, and through the bunchgrass to the homestead road takes a minute or two tops and is not anywhere close to the off-trail journey it used to be. Structures now dot fields that seemed to demand emptiness as a part of their existence. No longer.

Growing up here, space between us and the mountains felt impenetrable, like we were as close as possible to those reliable peaks but making that journey was impossible – the Tetons belonged on the horizon. Any attempt to approach would leave us stranded somewhere in the rolling foothills of the Caribou-Targhee. That region is still vast but now tinged with reality.

In my dreams, the land from the forest's edge to the main highway stretches. All components exist, each turn in the road, each ridge and building present but distances are wrong. The Hollingshead homestead resides across a much larger field; it lives closer to the forest than physically possible. All the houses from Woodland Hills to Luther's are packed together but the roads accessing them are gone. My dream-self will fight for hours through scratchy undergrowth to prove the existence of these structures.

The hill on which my mom's house perches is often much taller; large enough, on occasion, for a road and foundation to start going in while my back is turned. The ridge below her house also moves. Appearing both further away and bigger, sometimes our gully is filled with city streets, buildings, noise; other times, only a single house at the edge of the aspens. I turn circles on my hilltop or walk from window to window in the house – although this is rare, I almost always dream myself outside – watching development pile up around me. I run, pleading with people who just drive around me, digging muddy furrows in our fields, and continue right along with their tasks.

In those dreams where I manage to avoid the development scare, I travel Pinochle Road down towards the Millers'. The dugway, the barley fields, each slight twist in the road gets exaggerated and I end up walking miles further than exist. The dugway will present challenges of steepness, tractors, fake roads that lead into river bottoms. The mile across the lower fields is longer, but I never end up traveling it. That section, apparently, is stable. Pastures around the Millers' barns are always a much brighter green than reality. Hedges line parts of the road coming to the T, but my dreams stop there and don't attempt to perceive the last few hills to the highway. I never dream past the forest boundary and rarely of the land in winter.

Looking over these fields, I compare reality to my dreams – more people are living up here full time, snow-machining in and out to work or school once the road closes; billionaires from out-of-state buy and sell thousand acre parcels that spill across the woods and river bottoms I know so well; there is talk of a shooting range. Twenty years ago, electricity was brought up the hill and now the neighborhood is divided by those on the grid and those off. Each newcomer is evaluated for how far into winter they'll last before moving back to Boise or Salt Lake. Change is inevitable, but we like to think that we have isolated ourselves from the worst of it. In truth, we've just made each modification hurt that much more, even if they're just in our dreams.

March of the Aspen

leaves
shudder (shiver)
with morning's breath
wake us
to witness dawn
this unfolding of worlds
slow leaves shake
sophomoric shuffle (shiver) dapple themselves
greenery me in mid-morning sun
gifted unfold like hands
understanding on each branch welcome welcome
we quiver yet to grow whispers through the day leaves shift
warm windborne (shiver) shade
yet to grow leaves strive over years dance in colorful twirl
knotted eyes spot (shiver) established seeking rest each day take rain
pale yet establishing in peace rest in that quick summer burst
quaking the world here does place all splash and cool
from what it does in certainty take sunshine bask
stems each moment perfection their standing take grit take
outward of all previous colonies fecund old leaves worms
upward moments will stand and build
from the world this nothing but the whole world
itself here inevitable imagine
from grows march growing leaves sigh
roots as it like that simple (shiver) like the last
each grows lupine task robins and swallows
year's slowly and leaves could with the
xylem amongst sage shimmy change evening
among these among (shiver) all life amid
the grasses grasses bunch amidst among grass leaves
grasses and grasses grass grasses the grass (shiver)
I stand in this meadow / the meadow stands around me / and the method / of the land / unfurling like a hand / opens to receive / an offering.

cliffs grieve melting snow
a shattering of tears down
stern granite faces

Reading the Trees (II)

Overhead, aspen sway
Heedless (helpless) of the whirr at their feet
Lost amid canopy dreams / **B**ranches brush past
Ephemeral reminder they too may
Collapse groundward

If You're Going Through a Snowstorm

In the wintry wilds of western Wyoming, there roam the bison. Although their roaming days are severely curtailed – attempts to leave Yellowstone are met with mass slaughter lest disease pass to cattle – these hunky fellows still push through the snow on their way to somewhere. Somewhere, in this case, typically being in the direction of the storm's origin. Bison, you see, live under the divine motto: *if you're going through a snowstorm, keep going* and the shortest distance away from any given snowstorm is through it. Two objects moving toward each other will pass much faster than will one chasing the other – a proven rule of the hunt and why mule deer and field mice and sharp-tailed grouse will run, scuttle, and explode away from their respective predators instead of towards them (prolonging their lives being a much desirable state of affairs).

Bison are not much for running, nor galloping, flitting, or leaping. Despite their legs accounting for the spindliest part of their bodies, bison tend to be grounded. This is not to say they can't run – many a tourist has been tossed skyward by a charging, disgruntled ungulate proving that, in spite of their relative densities, bison are faster than granite. Bison prefer to amble or trundle as, with faster movement, too much prairie grass might be passed by without sampling. When you weigh over a ton, copious grasses must be eaten before wanton exercise becomes appealing.

Much of the world bison used to understand as home – the rumbly-tumbly prairie and ironed-flat skies – has been colonized by cows: those of the mooing, farting, beefy, milking variety. Cattle – perhaps used to the comforting structures of fencing – see each snowstorm as one more predator they must flee and, when placed on the open range, they will do just that: plod with heads down for miles until some cliff or barbed wire cuts off their sodden retreat. There they will stand amassed, looking in the direction they can no longer travel and take the storm's pelting, abrasive precipitation in their collective rear. Bison, on the other hand, are built like snowplows. As any aficionado on the removal of frozen deposits will know, these squat vehicles work best when faced into the bank. One does not clear much snow by driving away from winter.

Bison know this: their allotment in life is not to seek warmer climates. What, after all, is the point of a furnace-like constitution if your environment is never cold? Instead such husky, starchy, thick-furred bovines put their sizable heads down, one after another, and trudge toward the thickening storm.

The Sounding

Maps call this a lake despite the dam and ring of
naked rocks keeping the water down. My college
friends eat pancakes at a picnic table overlooking
valley's mountain mirror. Bare-chested, wearing
shorts we lounge amid sunburn and splinters.
When is the next time we will sit together and
laugh? Our six heads above Jackson Lake,
unconcerned with anything but the day's miles.
We have always been this way – a team, running
in separate directions. In winter, I will ski to
islands named after mountain men and local
fauna. Thick flakes of falling snow will render
the Tetons invisible. Where the stony bottom
obscures into dark-green we stop swimming;
already, your reflections are broken.

After M.L. Smoker

Mom's Favorite Pastime

Aspen spread solemnly
into our fields
while Douglas fir
push through yarrow and last year's grass.
She smiles when she asks

do you want to see the trees?
What she means is
do I want to spend a few hours
pulling weeds?
Her floppy straw hat

elbow patched shirt
ripped leather gloves
and faded bandana
gather around her.
We walk into our meadow

and pull weeds.
You would not believe what Luther
did last week.
Bend, grab, twist, pull.
Neighborhood frustrations

also need pruning.
And the 60 acres behind Miller's
was bought, did you see
the No Trespassing signs?
Bend, grab, twist, pull.

Toadflax gathers
in dirty piles.
We scatter seeds
collected from native wildflowers
hoping these will take root instead.

Bend, grab, twist, pull.
The foxes have a new den
we haven't seen any kits
but the mom
took a chicken carcass

from my compost.
Bend, grab, twist, pull.
Harriers order

the meadowlarks’
and tree swallows’

silence. Ours too
for a skyward minute.
Bend, grab, twist, pull.
Oh my god! The thistle is soo
bad this year

but I’ve pretty much cleared
between my driveway
and the gully.
We squat amid tall grasses
twisting out invasives, look east

worn barns, forest’s edge
then the Tetons
stare back.
It is a good day to talk
and look at trees.

After Santee Frazier

The Wolf

snowy
shivery howl
cuts bluebird hoar frost
quick splintering of quiet fields
then gone

Rallying

clouds move in two
directions high thin wisps
hurry south low fluffy
cumulus rush east cast themselves
at mountains peaks
absorb their onslaught trap
buoyant moisture hiding
in grey mass all
day clouds seek
entry to the valley all
day the Tetons hold them back turn
them back pull
them back time and again
teasing tendrils reach
out of canyons over
ridges some manage to touch
valley's floor before retreat
back mountains clouds form
a single
dark mass 40 miles long
7000 feet tall there is movement
at pinnacle and plain peaks
appear twirl off into clouds
dance with each summit
differently expose blue
sky sneak out each
drainage varied swirling
scouting probing
late afternoon
the Tetons relax
their vigil their stalwart strength
diminishes cloudbanks rally with new
energy pour past them
and finally the snow can begin

The First Snow

Pinochle Road is one that I imagine looked identical 100 years ago: a slightly rutted dirt stretch paralleling the tanager gold of swaying aspens. Fallen leaves too damp to rustle in the breeze smother dry grass along the roadside. I can almost see a wagon with two horses making its way up the small rise in front of me. I can sense when the driver, a girl in her teens, lifts her face to breathe, because my own face follows suit. I watch as the first flakes of the season waft down onto her shoulder length brown hair and feel as they grace my own.

Opposite the line of trees, sagebrush scatter amid a collection of aged buildings guarded by a buck-rail fence that also looks a century old. Ahead, the road dives into a vastness of lodgepole pines that spread steadily back into clouds, but I see her wagon turn towards a break in the fence and the two room cabin beyond.

The wagon rolls to a stop before the low log structure and the girl jumps down, greeted by two older men hunched in the doorway. This meeting of uncles and niece echoes wind's whine through a broken pane that really is there because I can put my hand on the sill and the rattling stops. It is possible to envision the two men stepping outside and unloading winter supplies, carrying barrels and bags into the barn that sits across two ruts serving as a driveway. The girl again looks up at the sky as she leads her horses to their stalls. Snow is falling thicker and she vanishes into its whiteness. The men also glance up and duck back inside; they too disappear. Now all I can make out is the empty wagon, but snow soon swallows that as well.

I blink and several flakes melt on my cheeks. Whistling hollowly, the cabin still stands before me, with two ruts leading between it and the barn. They join the road at the edge of the aspens where both trudge into the storm together. Glancing back at the buildings' faded logs, I imagine I hear laughter and wood thrown on a fire, but the real sound is an old Ford pickup that rushes past at an aggressive twenty miles an hour.

As white blends to grey, I turn and head away from the cabin, until I walk alone in swirling snow. Now I can almost pretend that the buildings are gone too, that the field is empty except for sage, grass and the narrow path all ending in darkening flakes, but my memory of the girl's face as she watched her uncles step from the doorway is too strong. And then I know that some 100 years ago, they also walked in the first snowfall and believed they were alone.

the air breathes like leaves
a crisp, crackling carpet
the air breathes like snow

Glass

I ski slowly, carefully, aware of the fragility of my burden. The other time I attempted this, the glass fell and broke before I even entered the forest. Picking clear shards out of snow proved both difficult and dangerous. Today, I have made the trees and am almost to my destination.

The day is clear so far. Not bluebird clear, when the sun turns the entire valley into fields of shattered glass, but the high, thin cirrostratus do little to block the light. Long strands of denser cloud divide the mountain peaks from their bases; a chance of snow up high. I approach a slight ridge where three tall Douglas firs lean toward a drop-off on the far side. Snow clumps at their feet after falling from branches above, a unique pattern I think of as each tree's fingerprint. I take a deep breath and think that my true task might just be starting.

Looking back at my load, I run the threads of my mind along the paths that led me to this spot. I rewind past the immediate trail of skis and sled that plods down to Pinochle Road and then winds out of the trees, cuts straight through hills lined with buckrail fences and ends at the dark opening of an old barn. I reminisce about other trips to that barn and to the trees where I currently stand. I loosely follow my way across years of skiing, exploring, imagining. I find a print here, a print there, enough to track this idea past its place of birth – in a college admissions essay – to its true moment of conception, when I was 16 at a writing retreat in Grand Teton National Park.

Turning back to the Douglas fir I have selected, I unbuckle my sled and pull it over to the trunk. Leaning my skis and poles against its bark, I grab a rope from my backpack and secure it over a large branch thirty feet off the ground; a quick bowline knot tethers the other end to my pack. Jumping, I catch the bottom branch in one hand and swing myself aloft. In no time, I have my pack secured beside me – high in the tree. I pull out four shorter straps and maneuver from branch to branch, tying them off. I lower the long rope and clamber down to my sled.

One last time, I check the glass for cracks. Each pane is clear and unbroken, ready for the final challenge. I attach the rope in two places and test the balance. Satisfied after a few adjustments, I climb back into the limbs. Slowly, I raise the rope and its load up to my level. I anchor the rope to a branch and scramble around attaching the four straps. A process of adjusting and testing takes me into mid-afternoon. Finally confident everything will stay, I lower the rope and my pack to the ground.

I rest on a branch, my back to the trunk and sigh. I feel in my pocket for the folded paper I placed there as I packed in the morning. Then, with the Tetons starting to glow in evening's sun, I sit in my tree, on this ridge and read:

Williams Essay
12.14.2011

My window looks odd resting at an angle between the branches. It took me five minutes to drag it up here and get it to stay. My skis lay at the bottom of the tree, poles tilting precariously in the ground next to them. The excitement that I normally feel when climbing is somewhat tempered by the cold wind. Regardless, the view is amazing. I lean back against the trunk and shift the pad I'm sitting on. I look through my window. The snow coated forest stretches out below me; green needles and brown branches bend under the weight of white powder. I gaze farther down the valley; to the glistening snowfields. Hawks circle, slowly searching for an unlucky rodent, winging their silent way across the sky.

Back in the forest birds chirp quietly, sounds deadened by the heavy blanket of winter. Two squirrels chase each other around a tree, playfully dislodging snow on themselves. The heavens hang heavy with the coming snow, clouds casting everything in a pale light. I sit on my limb watching the world around me, speculating if the snow will come tonight or tomorrow, and enjoying the simple beauty of nature.

The grey light deepens as I climb down and buckle on my skis. The window remains in the tree, swaying in the wind, unsure why I've abandoned it. I glide down to the trail and glance back. The setting sun peaks between the clouds and the horizon, glinting off the glass. A curious squirrel is already sniffing it out. Smiling, I set off for home, imagining people finding my window in the future, hoping they'll climb up and stare through, wondering what they will see. Nothing lasts forever, but this memory will linger long after the window falls and the forest is paved.

As I finish reading, the wind picks up and the four panes in front of me jump with the branches. Somewhere to the west, the sun casts shadows across Idaho. The Tetons, with timeless practice, reflect that light back, trying to trap sunset in the valley. I can pause in this moment and I do. Thoughts stretching again down ski tracks, up trees, along ridges, into and out of the arms of lovers, between pages, through windows. I feel like I have constructed an opening into the past, a glass through which to view not just the mountains, but all they signify.

Despite their efforts, the mountaintops lose the sun and recede into night. If I climb down now, I can be home before full darkness, but I linger… Time starts with more gusts shaking the tree. Below, I clip into my skis, reattach the empty sled and, with one last glance for the expected squirrel, send myself towards the road.

Over Teton Pass

my brother shifts

into each curve

his foot on the accelerator

we wind skyward

instinctively I lean with him

a habit learned on the sledding hills

of youth

bundled outside

two bodies on thin plastic

we hurtled past sagebrush

at speeds never fast enough

damp hands steering in the snow

now his Audi climbs these corners

no help needed

from my leaning torso

but we take each turn together

through the mountains

towards home

but away from it too

The Layout

descent starts
gradually, two ravens caw
against grey skies

trickling down, snow
creates East Rosebud Creek
paintbrush, stonecrop

white bark left behind,
the agenda is downstream,
to fall, fall – what joyful

thunder – land, slide on,
mountain goats, snow's movement
gone, polish of granite

then forest – thick
undergrowth, sonorous boughs,
tributaries cold

quick drink,
mosquito's delight, rush
against eroded cliffs

oh to stop, cascades
braided light down green
walls, trout and deep

fields of rock, grizzly
prowl – to pass those paws
by – the plunge

smooth expanse
ripped over ragged edge,
to crash in boulder

foam, broken pines:
fire's wake, plains in sight, sunlit
and hot

draw of space,
cabins along the shore, thickets
of willow, moose

unhurried, end
awaits in miles of sky and grass
that slow ocean flow

Fossil Lake
falls into

Dewey Lake
falls into
Twin Outlets Lake
falls into

Duggan Lake
falls into

Big Park Lake
falls into

Lake at Falls
falls into

Rainbow Lake
falls into

Rimrock Lake
falls into

Elk Lake
falls into

East Rosebud Lake
falls into

the Stillwater
the Yellowstone
the Missouri
the Mississippi

A Story of Robertson Draw:

Observations on Wildfires, Firefighting, and Working in the Wilderness

Smoke seeps down sheer glaciated rock over the course of the day. A Wednesday in early June and I am camping eight miles from the trailhead in East Rosebud canyon with two co-workers. When first light broke down the far canyon wall – a cascade of illumination that mirrored snow's retreat to plateaus above – the sky was that deep, pale shade of blue it can only be when far removed from the cloying and thick exhaust of human development. In the three hours since our work day began, a haze has descended in between vertical granite walls and the smoky smell that has become all too common in the west these last few years starts almost two months early.

We stand at a large patch of bare dirt surrounding a circle of rocks near the shore of Rainbow Lake. This is one of the most popular camping spots in the canyon – looking around at the cool turquoise of the glacial water, the steep peaks that rise 2000 feet above the canyon floor, the meadow still awash in flowers, it is easy to see why. A closer inspection reveals some of the impacts of that use: large bare patches of dirt amid the trees, castle looking constructions that smell of ash and smoke, trees hacked by amateur axmen into four-foot-high stumps, the sparkle of partially burnt foil and, of course, the ever-present white and brown alpine lilies, growing singly or packed in sodden clumps a predictable fifteen to twenty feet outside each campsite.

As Wilderness rangers, we will spend the majority of the summer alone, on solo patrols of the four most visited canyons on the eastern end of the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness in southern Montana. This week we hiked out together and I – the only returning employee – am showing the other two where the hidden campsites are located, how I approach talking to tourists and what, ideally, we want the canyon to look like after we have cleaned up behind the campers. We are also learning how to use ArcMap on handheld Trimble GPS devices in order to inventory campsites. The three of us are trying to objectively categorize the level of impact present at every campsite in the entire drainage.

Trimble units in hand, we pace off the amount of bare mineral soil present at the current site, using our stride length to measure area. Inventorying is a daunting task: hundreds of fire rings space themselves along the 11 lakes that spread up this 17-mile canyon, each with different usage patterns, and we need to complete a 40-point inspection on every one. Our data includes measuring distance to firewood and water, counting the number of trees present and the amount of damage on each tree, the number of fire-rings and camp "furniture," the percent of vegetated ground cover and so on. After this week, I will tackle the project on my own, as the other two split off to patrol different areas.

A couple of hikers approach us from down the trail. Despite the accumulated dirt of two full days in the woods, the three of us look official. We are wearing the not-quite-tan, not-quite-green uniform shirts, green pants, name tags and badges of the Forest Service. Despite our current debate on whether a broken piece of tree trunk on the ground should formally count as a "user-constructed chair," it's clear that we are comfortable in our surroundings and might be able to answer some questions.

Visitor queries are not unusual. People are habitually under-prepared, chatty, or just curious about anything they think I might be able to answer. Often the questions are some mutation of "Who are you burying?" as they laugh and gesture to the shovels we all carry for trail maintenance and digging cat-holes for the human waste (see alpine lilies) we find around most campsites. Other inquiries vary from the simply ridiculous "Where am I?" through the alarming "Have you seen my kids?" to the unanswerable "Where was I this morning?" Once I was asked, with no trace of irony, if I was a murderer.

"Where are the bodies?"
straight face, no-nonsense reply:
"Why would I tell you?"

As it turns out, this pair have legitimate concerns about the level of smoke thickening between the trees. They had just started their hike this morning and were curious if conditions would be safe to continue on their planned three-night backpacking trip across the Beartooths. When they learn that we have already been out for two nights and have no information more recent than their own, they pull out a phone and show us a video from the day before.

What appears on the tiny screen is still impressive despite how common these scenes have become: a forested mountainside smothered under a mammoth cloud of ash and smoke, a line of surging red signifies the difference between healthy lodgepole pines and their abrupt emigration to our atmosphere. Through the small speakers, it slowly becomes apparent the scene is quite windy and looking closer, I can see how the flames haven't been able to crest the western ridge, how the top of each formidable orange tongue is whipped almost sideways – east and back down the hillside – how what at first looked to be a rising chimney of smoke actually has a comet-like tail as it is blown eastward. Halfway through the four-minute video, a minuscule cloud of pink appears briefly, paralleling the fire line. Out of the haze flies a DC-10 Very Large Air Tanker, barely visible against the flames.

I am curious
if red is passion and fire
red, do trees love smoke?

Sunday morning, three days earlier, I step from my car and take a deep breath of the still cool, dusty air. I sip some water and lock my car even though I am the only one at this unknown trailhead. I roll out my ankles and hips in short movements that probably do nothing to actually loosen any muscles or tendons. A map posted on a small signboard near the Face-of-the-Mountain trail distinguishes this spot from everywhere else along the gutted two-track that winds out of town and into the anonymous sage flats of eastern Montana.

Red Lodge comes close to marking the 'border' between the two sides of the state and claims with that stubborn tenacity of rural ranch towns to be part of the western half (although it's agreed eastern Montana starts about a quarter mile away). This puts the town on the edge of two vastly different ecosystems. To the west and south, the staunch glaciated shoulders of the Beartooths are broken by long, half-pipe canyons that delve for miles into the backcountry. These present the rugged northern border to Yellowstone National Park and cap the northern end of the largest intact ecosystem left in the lower 48. To the east and north, the plains begin. Dry,

arid land cut through by the clean waters of the Yellowstone and Clark's Fork rivers. The boundary between the two is easy to mark. Forests of predominantly lodgepole pine and subalpine fir march down the hills and stop, waiting in ranks for the last defense of their mountain stronghold. As soon as the land flattens out, sagebrush, wheatgrass and short, hardier plants take over; the only trees are stands of aspen, cottonwood and the invasive Russian olive lining rivers and irrigation ditches.

As formidable as the forests appear looking up from the plains, I can see holes in their numbers where old fires burned and trees have not regrown. South of here, even in early June, brown dry grass surrounds a forest of grey, charred trees that stand like headstones in a cemetery; the water from snow accumulation and spring rain unable to nourish new growth through the heat of the summer. In a stable climate, regrowth into mature trees can take a hundred years or more, but some of these fire scars are thirty years old and *nothing* has come back except grass.

If these thoughts pass through my mind this Sunday morning, it is only in the vaguest of acknowledgements. Today is my last day off before our field season truly begins and I get to spend five days a week camping in the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness, maintaining any of our hundreds of miles of trails, patrolling for food-storage, fire, camping violations, and inventorying campsites. I am at the Face-of-the-Mountain trailhead to run before I use the rest of the day to organize, clean, and pack my gear for the coming months.

The trail starts in sloping flats, amongst sage, yarrow, and the calls of western meadowlarks. The first two miles are a slow gain in elevation from 6000 to about 7200 feet. The trail soon leaves the plains and climbs up an old logging road that has since become overgrown with willows, hawthorn, and small shrubs still green from the spring. After topping out at a notch about one third of the way up Mt. Maurice, the trail contours south for twelve miles along the eastern front of the Beartooths, ending at the Robertson Draw and Line Creek trailheads near the Wyoming border. I don't intend to run the whole trail, although once the initial climb has been made, there are only minimal dips and rises for the rest; I would love to make a longer day and go further. Instead, I turn around three and a half miles from the trailhead and cruise back down. I take note of several downed trees across the trail and a broken signpost that someone on the trail crew will have to hike up and deal with another day. I'll save the rest of the trail for later in the summer.

I run
past old mines, sheer
palisades and steep creeks
under forest's collective breath
I run

Later that afternoon, I am setting my tent up outside the employee bunkhouse, checking to make sure all parts are present and functional, when the on-duty Type 6 fire engine pulls out of the ranger station with a chase truck behind it.

"Early start to the season if they really got a fire," one of my roommates remarks, sitting with a beer on our picnic table. Over the last two summers, our district, some 550,000 acres, has

had a combined total of 30 acres burned. We are skeptical that the fire crews will actually get a real fire. “Probably off to buy ice cream or something.”

There are three main approaches to wildland firefighting: hand crews, engines, and air attacks. Each method attempts to remove combustible material from the path of the fire and their use is dependent on terrain and weather conditions. Resources are pooled from around the country to wherever they are needed. Fire crews from the southeast could easily spend most of their summers in the west; crews from Montana often end up down in Arizona and New Mexico early in the summer before snow melts here. As circumstances change and more or less personnel are needed, the Incident Commander will relocate resources. Even when there is no active fire, crews will be assigned to regions that have a higher fire danger and “patrol” the area – that is, drive around and look for smoke.

When a fire ignites, local crews respond first. Often this is a combination of Forest Service or Bureau of Land Management (BLM) engines and county or town emergency services. Depending on the size of the fire and weather conditions, their initial attack will attempt to suppress the fire completely or establish an anchor point from which they and newly arriving crews will begin containment efforts. In most cases, wildfires are never “put out”; they are contained – the fire is completely encircled by human constructed fire-line.

Monday morning: I sit at my boss’s desk, and get the final instructions for our week in East Rosebud. She asks how my weekend went and I describe my run, the downed trees and broken signpost. She makes a note on the whiteboard that details all the “dangles” – small projects that don’t require a full day or full crew – she hopes to cross off this summer. When we step out to the trucks, a small plume of white cloud has formed over Mt. Maurice on the south side of town. I ask.

“It’s 250 acres,” she explains. “Started yesterday afternoon in Robertson Draw, the fire crew’s been down there since dawn.” Nothing for us to worry about except in an existential kind of way.

In 2020, 10.25 million acres burned across the U.S., setting a new national record, roughly double the size of New Jersey. 2020 also set records for the most billion-dollar disasters in the country’s history, the highest overall cumulative cost for climate disaster damage, plus California’s largest wildfire (the August Complex Fire) at 1,032,649 acres and the state’s biggest fire season ever. In 2021, over 7 million acres burned nationwide, the number of acres per fire was above the national average, the number of billion-dollar natural disasters ranked second, the overall cost of damage also ranked second, and California recorded its second largest fire ever with the Dixie Fire. Most of these blazes were hundreds of miles away, but who’s to say the next big one won’t be here in Montana?

The couple puts their phone away; we reassure them that despite the fire’s impressive growth and the increased smoke, we are quite far from Robertson Draw. On top of this, the district office would have warned us during our morning check-in if the fire was threatening East Rosebud. They ask a few other questions about trail conditions and campsites before continuing their hike.

They bring up a good point, however, something that continues to bother me over the course of the summer, past the time when Robertson Draw has run its course and national concern has turned toward mega-fires in California and Oregon. When a fire can run for nine miles and increase 100-fold in 24 hours, how can you inform people fast enough that they need to evacuate, especially in Wilderness Areas with no cell service?

My job bears almost no responsibility towards people. In the event of an injury or missing person, I only help as common sense would dictate and inform the county's Search and Rescue, but I don't participate. I am out here to "protect the resource" – in this case, Wilderness. Yet this is where my mind goes: how do *I* get people out, and really, who else is there? Except for the other two rangers and the occasional game warden, I'm the only authority wandering the forest.

In the last week of my field season, before I leave to start grad-school in Flagstaff, a similar scenario unfolds: over the eight hours from lunch to dark, smoke leaks through canyon walls to the point where, when I step out with a headlamp for my last pee before sleep, inch-long pieces of ash glare like snowflakes in the air.

I think of all the people I know are camped around the two lakes in this drainage, try to picture how I would evacuate the canyon, assuming the trailhead is still open. I remember there is one group camped three miles in the opposite direction and can easily speculate that several others have left the main trail on climbing routes or to get away from the crowds on the lakeshore. I have no idea how I would go about finding and telling everyone to pack up and hike out, and I probably know this area better than anyone. Fortunately, when I turn on my InReach, I have a message from my boss informing me that I am safe where I am and should hike out as planned in the morning.

Still, the question remains. I remember a story I'm sure I heard on NPR the past summer: 200 campers airlifted by helicopters from the middle of a lake in the Sierras, wildfire burning down to the shoreline.

We return to the ranger station on Friday, still with minimal information about the fire. Online (*inciweb.nwcg.gov*), the government tracks all active fires in the country – both wildfires and prescribed burns intended to reduce fuel loads and lessen the impacts of future natural fires. Crucial information regarding evacuation orders, fire size, upcoming weather, predicted fire behavior, and the all-important percentage of containment are detailed when you click on each fire's icon. Every fire is also given a name, typically denoted by the location of its start (an amusing way to spend an afternoon is to come up with fire names if ever put in charge of such a decision: "Trash," "We didn't start the," "This world is on," etc.). As soon as we are in cell service, the two of us not driving rattle off statistics for Robertson Draw: *25,000 acres, 0% contained, 23 structures burned, a red flag day tomorrow.*

Red Day
or
Inspiration for a Burgeoning Wildfire

eastward cinder wind
gonna take you, spark gonna
make you grow gonna see you
potential make the wild fire
feed you the grass gonna give
you a house
        for dessert

you gonna grow big, spark be
better than you fathers be strong
and fierce
be passionate,
        be warm

they gonna fight you, little spark they
gonna try to destroy
        you nature

you gotta think, little spark you
gotta think like chimney you leap
them lines
wind got you back wind
lift you
wind spread you
you, spark
you just gotta burn gotta take
that inner fire let the world
see
ain't no fear
ain't no shivers
just you, spark
        all grown up

The map shows the entirety of the Face-of-the-Mountain trail within the burned area. Some part of me instinctively knows I was the last one to travel that section of trail; the last one to see those trees and shrubs alive, to smell their needles and leaf-litter, to trip on their roots and enjoy their shade. It's an eerie feeling, like this knowledge, this state of witness should carry meaning or that I hold some sort of responsibility for being in the area, despite not coming within five miles of the point of ignition.

Wildfires have become commonplace in the last decade and smoke often clogs the air several hundred miles removed from the actual blazes – this is scarcely news – but something changes when the fire producing the smoke is in an area known intimately, visited the day the

fire started. And my run hardly counts the same as watching your house, town, community incinerate the same way. Still, my feeling of connection settles in over the next few days and lingers long after my season ends, the fire fully contained.

We enter Red Lodge. The sign on the Quality Inn reads “Thank U Firefighters!” instead of its usual offering of Wifi and breakfast. I have conflicted feelings towards these ‘heroes.’ For about 20% of their job, they are tasked with the impossibility of stopping an inferno from devouring a town. A vital undertaking, no doubt: to stand in the way of fire, hundreds of feet tall, blown by winds of its own making and – using hand tools, a hose, a chainsaw, fire itself – convince the flames to defy their very nature. I have heard stories about working on a fire: the other 80% of their time is spent talking about “that one time, on the fireline.” Also to consider is that such extensive (and intensive) fires are a relatively new presence on most landscapes, developing as the result of a century of fire suppression. Should one be considered a hero for simply doing one’s job? Especially a job that, with correct ecological balance and responsible management, shouldn’t exist in its current form?

Such self-importance is enough to turn Wilderness rangers, trail crews, office staff, recreation and range technicians into a bunch of cynics when it comes to fire. Especially given the chronically underfunded status with which the rest of the agency grapples each season. Our district has 338,000 acres of remote Wilderness, hundreds of miles of trails, thousands of visitors each year, and three rangers to patrol the entire area. The season prior, 2020, both engines on our district added personnel: 13 acres burned that year. 2020 was so busy for camping, hiking, and backpacking, the three rangers had all they could do to keep things from eroding faster than they did. Several weeks I hiked out 40 pounds of other people’s trash; places that started the summer as vegetated forest floor were packed into durable campsites; fires, built illegally, were left to smolder long after the campers had departed; food was dispersed on the ground for bears, squirrels, and deer to consume; the list goes on. I put out at least 15 unattended campfires that summer, one of which had already escaped its circle of rocks. I’m surprised the whole forest didn’t burn.

In 2021, the United States Forest Service allocated 2.4 billion dollars to firefighting, with an additional 2 billion available for suppression efforts if needed. Funding for the entirety of “management of National Forest System lands” including:

- trail, campground, and road maintenance
- law enforcement efforts in the backcountry, campgrounds, rivers, rangelands, and forests
- invasive species assessment and noxious weed spraying
- mining/rare mineral development and regulation
- cabin rentals and upkeep
- ski area leasing
- wildlife, water-quality, vegetation, and air-quality monitoring

essentially everything the agency manages other than timber and grazing, was allotted 2 billion – less than half the fire budget.

Multiple times, I have walked out of the backcountry – rank from a week of burying other people’s feces, cleaning up their trash, explaining why food has to be hung, fires extinguished, camps kept clean, justifiably tired from a job whose duties never seem to end – only to find five or six firefighters napping in their engine at the trailhead, ostensibly on patrol.

This is incredibly frustrating. And yet, I don't want their job. Trying to fight the result of a hundred years of fire suppression? To stand in the way of climate change with a pulaski? No thank you. I'll take the poop.

The Heroes' Hard Day

a hum on the horizon
clouds billow, blow
smotheringly clear

Closed Due To Fire

men lounge behind these signs
their inaction vague
thick and apocalyptic

cavalcade of white trucks –
land agency flashcards –
sit idle in the dust

despite their sirens

trees turn ambition to smoke
numbers blend
evacuate to the nonsensical

cough inducing
the ashy smell of denial
weights the air

dry and cloying
this illegible lethargy

The next few days of work we are pulled off our typical assignments and tasked with installing signs around town, at rest areas, and on the barriers that block entry to affected trailheads. Then comes patrolling those areas behind fire closure signs, escorting campers to collect abandoned gear, and kicking out opportunistic hikers who possess an alarming disregard for personal safety. All of these actions feel very much behind when they needed to be done. The fire has been burning for a week, has already run to the top of Line Creek Plateau, contoured around Mt. Maurice, spread into the sage flats. The atmosphere is calm compared to the panic-filled day of smoke and air tankers. While the blaze has continued to spread, growth has been small, mostly burning green areas fully surrounded by the charred forest. At this time, Robertson Draw has the most assigned personnel out of any fire in the country, but it's still early in the season. Even at 29,000 acres, what feels like a big fire for us in Red Lodge is dwarfed by what will come later in Oregon and California.

Over the following weeks, the fervor around the fire dies along with the last small flames. BLM and out-of-state Forest Service engines are still common in town, but the impromptu airbase that took over the tiny Red Lodge airport has been downsized to a single helicopter. The colossal column of smoke that was so prevalent for the first week has dissipated and all that can be seen of the active fire are small pillars of light grey as single trees on the north edge of Mt. Maurice slowly smolder. Occasionally, the helicopter will fly up and drop a bucket on these hotspots, but for the most part they are left alone.

Maurice bisected
green fades south into the black
evening's smoky plume

Other details come to light. Suspected from the beginning as human-caused, this is confirmed when our law enforcement officer arrests a local man with third degree burns on his feet and legs. If you want to talk about being under-funded: she is the lone armed federal employee for the Beartooth *and* Ashland *and* Gardiner Ranger Districts – 1.5 million combined acres in four separate units spread over 300 miles. Hers is an impossible job even with cooperation from Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, the BLM, other ranger districts and help from recreation techs and rangers like me. An amusing and unlikely narrative unfolds:

How to Start a Wildfire for Dummies

Get drunk,
drive dirtbike to remote trail,
when engine trouble occurs
spill gas on ground and legs,
next, and this is critical,
test the spark plugs.

Bonus: for a better story,
remove shoes and pants.

As with all human-caused fires, the unanswerable question of cost arises. Can one person be held responsible for the multi-million-dollar effort to contain a wildfire they started? It's unrealistic to think the average person could afford to cover a bill that size, but legal concerns are raised by people, companies, and governments that lose property to a fire caused by someone's negligence or stupidity. There aren't easy solutions to these problems, but such incidents are occurring more frequently and with much higher consequences. Some of the biggest fires in recent years have been started by people, either in a genuine accident or through gross negligence. The Eagle Creek Fire in the Columbia River Gorge was ignited by a teenager lighting fireworks. The Dixie Fire began when a tree fell on PG&E power lines. Both caused tens of millions of dollars in damage. The teenager was court-ordered to pay 36 million in restitution over ten years. PG&E went bankrupt due to several settlements in wildfire damage lawsuits. I would think that if the numerous signboards, warnings, and Smokey Bear slogans were not enough to convince people to douse their fires (or abstain from having one altogether), the threat of insurmountable debt might do the trick.

Soon Robertson Draw loses even the local limelight as the usual chaos and packed schedule of the field season take over. While nowhere near as busy as the summer of 2020, our trails and Wilderness Areas still see plenty of traffic and with this, the typical food storage, camping, parking, and fire violations. On top of educating people about the regulations and enforcing them when folks don't comply, I have the campsite inventory to occupy my work hours.

Despite this, the fire keeps affecting my summer in small ways. A grizzly bear has been pushed out of the burn and is now competing for space in canyons already occupied by their own ursine residents. This particular bear has been seen near campsites and crossing a bridge in the Lake Fork drainage. Nothing aggressive or alarming, but a situation on which Fish, Wildlife and Parks is keeping close tabs and we Wilderness rangers are using as incentive to get hikers to hang their food properly. As early as mid-June, a fire ban is implemented on the forest; with resources stretched to cover Robertson Draw and the smaller Crooked Creek Fire, the District Ranger and Forest Supervisor are taking no chances with careless campers starting yet another blaze. My boss, who is usually very invested in our weekly reports on the Wilderness, is consistently out of the office, supervising fire crews on restoration work in places where the fire has been contained and snuffed out.

The fire ban is something I look forward to each summer. Approximately 80% of the trash I find in the woods are items that optimistic and ignorant campers have tried to burn in their fire-rings: foil, toilet paper, metal cans, glass, wrappers, diapers, plastic bottles. Trash that a campfire has no chance at incinerating and is left in the ash for the next camper (or bear) to find. As soon as the fire danger indicates the need for a ban on campfires, my weekly trash removal drops considerably.

Fire restoration work occurs in places where, through bulldozing, chainsawing, back-burning, and digging hand-line, firefighters have removed fuel sources, creating barriers to limit the growth of the fire. Once a fire has passed through and an area is safe, the firefighters do their best to revegetate the exposed soil, installing water-bars to help forestall erosion, carrying downed and dead wood into bare spots to provide habitat, nourish the soil, and generally try to make these unnatural expanses look better and regrow as quickly as possible. Sometimes restoration also involves replacing destroyed fences or small structures – anything the local district can get done quickly while the more numerous personnel and finances of the fire world are still present and available.

pinecones,
serotinous
burst the seeds of new growth
landscapes reset, revitalized,
transformed

When I leave for the season in mid-August, Robertson Draw, at 29,800 acres, still isn't 100% contained. The steep, rocky fins and cliffs on the north side of Mt. Maurice have prevented fire crews from fully extending their perimeter all the way around the fire. The likelihood of increased fire activity is quite low because fire typically burns downhill slowly and remnants from the last dump of fire-retardant still coat a line of trees between the smoldering hot-spots and

the ranches at the base. For the most part, remaining actions around the fire are limited to monitoring and waiting for rain in the fall.

Although only minimally involved in the Robertson Draw Fire, my proximity to the people who were, my location on the day of ignition and the possibility of encountering another fire in the future have allowed these events to linger. Combine my personal experience with a broader recognition around how fire is directly impacting so much about the places I live – wildlife face changing food supplies and habitat loss; housing developments engineer fire breaks into the landscaping; air-quality and prized views of the mountains are smothered by smoke; my job requires active fire prevention and support for those fighting them; evacuation orders have had my parents (among hundreds of thousands of others) packing valuables into cars and setting up sprinklers on roofs – and the effects of wildfire are not as distant as they might appear.

Where is the next lonely trail on a mountainside – sunlight dappling through green boughs, birds calling between branches and in the meadows, bears trundling through thick undergrowth – to go up in flames? With each new season, each path I wander, each campsite cleaned, this thought crosses my mind. When I think back to my run on Face-of-the-Mountain, I remember the early summer heat and the smell of the pines, thousands of them breathing together on those hillsides; their exhales now mere remembrances. Had I known I would be the last to see their living, would I have given them more attention? Such speculation is futile; I now cannot.

Robertson Draw

Gasoline likes
a spark
and

Grey Day

For Tatum, may the mountains care for her soul

cliff's granite wall –
stretching straight
into an overcast sky –
looks taller
than the silent seconds
since she was on top

resting now
amidst elephantine boulders
a noise
cutting air
fills her head,
her heart,
and all space
rising infinitely
up that somber rock
reverberating
into the heavens

mist touches Mystic
white above and now below
trees ghost in between

Reading the Trees (III)

Objectively, trees block the trail
Hazards of travel, these
Leaning masters / **B**ind us to task
Escape, our routed path – bole to bole
Cutting planned, crosscuts unsheathed

Blowdown

spillikins in the wind
boles piled, criss-crossed
disappearing the trail
into their midst

our crosscut starts each cut
a smaller swaying than
lodgepole in breeze

the saw sinks deeper

a rhythm on the edges
grumbles and conversation
provide the bass and drum lines

rocking now fully,
torsos flow toward
and away from the log

a pause
grey steel poised
ready to sink teeth
into fragrant wood

grains splitting or another
in the ceaseless dropping of rain?
our saw starts again

loudly then,

a solo

with quicker,

hesitant beat
space clears

teeter on the end of that note and

the tree drops
hands move to lift
pivot, release

and on to the next

your pull
scritch

shring
shrring
shrrring

shrring
shring
shrriing
shriing
shrring
shring
shrriing
shriing
creeak

pop

shring
shrring

my saw,
Backcut!

shring

shrring
shring

shring

Falling!

Clear!

Pyrolysis

When fire moves through a landscape, what it burns is largely defined by what can move out of its way and what cannot. There are, of course, other factors that greatly influence which stationary species conflagrate and to what extent, but from the perspective of each tree or shrub or grass, these must seem frustratingly random. For plants, there is only the long evolutionary curve of change to provide life-saving qualities that might allow them to withstand the passion of wildfires. Many of these cannot say their genes have selected for their own survival but rather that they must die and trust the process will see their progeny continue in their stead. When you exist on the land, rooted in the certainty of your placement, you exist at the whim of moisture content, fuel loading, wind speeds, and the sporadic but reliable ignitions of sky and match.

On the other hand, if the course of time has granted you a specific mobility, you are both released from inexorably waiting for death to find you and given the opportunity to make decisions that can lead awry. For the deer and the wren, the snake and the spider, there is a possibility that some wrong turn or missed cue will result in meeting with fire. For their freedom of movement, they may pay that ultimate price. However, circumstances exist that allow these creatures to escape from impending cremation and so live to ponder their fate for another season.

Once fire has passed over and sputtered to its demise on the trenches of men or vagaries of weather or its own insatiable appetite, the species of the forest have much to assess. Any herbivory with the ability to evaluate has passed the first test – by breadth of bark, helpings of height, or inventiveness of insulation – and their long vigilance simply continues, now with increased anticipation for nutrients, erosion, cell damage, shade, and the potential return of fire itself. Either waiting for fire or waiting to see if its effects will kill them, plants spend much of their time standing in expectation of future events over which they have no control. Will the hillside wash away beneath them? Will a small scar at the base of their trunk prove cankerous beyond its size? Will a wind storm push through a suddenly open canopy and topple a tree used to having neighbors? Time is the lonely measure by which flora answer these inquiries, in the seasonal bursting of wildflowers or the long-winded growth of conifers.

Having weathered the immediate storm, by running or flying or burrowing away, animals, too, will have questions. Where should they look for food? Has their shelter or mating habitat vanished? Are they able to simply flit elsewhere and re-establish? These queries are myriad and answers vary dramatically with each species. Often, decisions made depend entirely on the nature of the flames and the durability of the floral landscape. If the fire burned with high intensity, then less food and shelter might be found within an animal's previous territory. If the fire was quick and light, merely dancing briefly on the ground, then more of their original habitat might be sustained.

The name of wildfire is change. Whether flora or fauna, those who escape its needling heat and cloying suffocation experience this alteration each moment they exist in proximity to the burn scar. Direct changes in canopy cover, ground cover, water retention, and temperature lead to altered habitat, different growing conditions, erosion, and ecosystem succession or transition – all or some of which might return to a pre-fire state if given enough time. Here, again, the mobility of the animals may prove its worth as they can now travel to find the environment that best suits them. Unless, of course, they were too specific in their needs and the

niche they call home succumbs to the changing climate, forcing them to wander, lonely outcasts, until they, too, pass on. For those who must stand or resprout or regrow, this state of change exists in themselves for they *are* the habitat, the food, the very way in which landscapes are defined.

Fire is change. The degree of change depends on the fire. The type of fire relies on the land. The conditions on the land derive from fire. That plants and animals alike have developed strategies to co-exist with such a fevered presence is no surprise – fire weaves itself through the history of every species on the land, defining them by what burns and what does not.

The Second Dream

There is a new train and I am confused by this. I am standing on the hillside below my mom's house and suddenly four or five passenger cars swoosh by on shiny tracks. The train's movement is quiet and I think about how considerate this is given they built the line across our property. No engine pushes or pulls the cars; they just hum as they pass below me. I look in the windows to see hundreds of passengers staring blankly back at me or at their phones – they don't realize their trespass. The train passes by and moves out of sight, I can't even turn my head to see where it goes.

My mind blanks for a few seconds before I realize there has never been a train below our house before. I turn now eastward, looking for my mother, who would never have let the tracks get built, instead my gaze follows the curving rails out of sight toward the homestead road. I finally think to wonder, *Where does the train* go*? Who are these hundreds of people who have somewhere to be in this mess of eastern Idaho sage and aspen and barley?*

I lie next to the humming strips of metal with a socket wrench that is much too small for the bolts holding the rails to the ground. I envision plastic lumps with fuses in them and imagine some railroad security personnel whose jobs are to walk the lines with scissors and cut any fuse they find smoldering. I want to derail the train, to smooth the hillside back to its previously uninterrupted arc of chokecherry, scarlet gilia, sagebrush and lupine but I need help. I can't bring myself to blow up anything, can't figure out how I wasn't here to lay myself in the path of the bulldozers and keep the tracks out in the first place, can't find my mother, whose vigilance for neighborhood change seems to have seriously failed.

I lie beside the tracks crying, my hair hanging down over my face, body convulsing quietly as another set of train cars passes. I wish it was just a dream. I remember how my dreams are always worse than reality. If I were dreaming, then the tracks might be fake, I might still have time to protest their construction, even though there would be no reason for a passenger train within 150 miles of our house. With this as my plan, I sit up, wake up.

Thieves of the Dew

don’t
We want
you to know
the tops of fenceposts
tell these fields
each spring
when the grass
whispers rumors into dawn

don’t
We want
you to know
hard truths melt
trickle layered
knowledge to
root and tongue
what secrets know the streams

don’t
We want
you to know
the tops of fenceposts
lie to every hill
and treetop
who hear precisely
where the morning has flown

Cathedral

The lake shore trail ascends and despite the friskiness in my legs I lessen my pace. To my right, Cottonwood Creek runs down from String Lake. When I top this rise, the entirety of Jenny Lake will spread southward. My boulder comes into view and I sigh, slowing to a walk, then stopping. For the past four summers during college, I have worked on the Jenny Lake boat dock. Each day spent on these waters deepens my connection and despite being part of a National Park, available for public use, I have come to think of the lake as mine.

A couple is sitting on my boulder: their intrusion is as alarmingly personal as it is surprising I haven't experienced this before. I don't want to wait for long, I never do – the next mile of the loop is my favorite – but it would be sacrilegious not to stop at my rock.

Since I can't tell if they have seen me yet, I lollygag the last 20 feet to the boulder, kicking rocks off the trail, absently staring everywhere but at the tourists. I hate startling people as I run up behind them. The lack of awareness the average hiker possesses constantly surprises me. Bears won't cautiously clear their throats and say "excuse me" when behind someone. Fortunately, they move off down the trail as I approach. I quietly reclaim my rock.

As tall as me and almost ten feet around, my boulder is perfectly placed on the terminal moraine of a long dissipated glacier. Standing atop this chunk of shiest, looking southwest, I have an unobstructed view of Jenny Lake, the entrance to Cascade Canyon, and three of the tallest peaks in the Teton Range: the Grand, Mt Owen, and Teewinot – collectively, the Cathedral Group.

I stand for a minute or so, arms outstretched, trying to take in as much as I can, even though today is my third time around Jenny this week. The sun off the water, patches of snow high in the crags, the green that spills out the canyon and pools around the lakeshore, I breathe them in. Then, with a sort of reluctance, I climb down, start along the trail and gradually ratchet my pace back up. Soon enough, I have to pass the couple that borrowed my spot. Gritting my teeth, I graciously apologize when the woman jumps, exclaiming, "I thought you were a bear!"

Leaves of Memory

he breathes in the sage
and snow squall
and eastern breeze
like they are memories
that whisper through darkness
spurious gusts along the ground
fecund leaves in tow

the clouds that move thought
across reaches of sky
find him in the flats
his back to the river
he ignores their direction

the far shore beckons
booming and banging
each dawn
but he breathes in the sage
leaves off crossing the water
until clouds lay thick
to his knees

Storm over Crowheart Butte

Acoustically benign,
clouds dash
endlessly forward,
generating harmful icicles:
jagged
kami-
kaze
light-
ning.

Mountains
needn't observe,
passively quite resilient. Sometimes the
undergrowth vanishes – Wyoming's xanthic yarrow zeroed.

Foundational Flow in Teton County

Close your eyes and let your world slow down. Take a breath. All is dark with prickles of star. Place your left hand on the left side of your rib cage. Breathe deeply and feel the sun's warmth rise from your hand and crest along those thin calcium slats until the day has begun. Fill that eastern lung with sage and bugling elk and aspen leaves decaying and damp. Breathe here in the morning, palm on chest, the sun's warmth balancing between the two. Your ribs are the Gros Ventres tumbled to the side. Cracked and winding, they are your eastern boundary; as you breathe, feel them wild and flowing.

Move your hands now to rest on your stomach, do not press but feel that connection to the base of your spine. Breathe in, let your stomach rise under your palms. See how the sun has shifted to midday? Use that heat and bring it from your stomach up along the spine as you raise your gaze along the crest of the Tetons. Center your being on each side of these ridges; explore each crevice with breath that rushes out canyons. That hard knot near your left kidney, that's Jackson. Take a thumb and knead it into the tough spot, feel for the vibe, try to break up the ski-season fervor. Return to your stomach now, the spine of the Tetons long and tall in your back. Take a breath.

As the sun lowers westward, let your right hand move to your rib cage and pull the day's heat into the Big Holes. Let each breath expand. Linger here amid the ranches and development. When you clear your throat, that's two centuries colliding. Feel as each heartbeat pulses down veins of road, follow those dusty trails as they disperse throughout your body. With your palm, pull the sun across your chest and down each rib, let its rays poke between your fingers into your heart and highlight each individual vertebrate with alpenglow.

Breathe in and push your arms overhead. Brush past the Lemhis' and Lost River Range to the west, feel for the Wind River Range and the Northern Absarokas in the east. Let the last light dissipate out your fingertips and ignite the stars. Close your eyes and feel around in the darkness. Imprints of Yellowstone contour in your mind, streams trickle behind your eyelids and cool your body. Your skin becomes the thin glow of city lights touching clouds – a warm energy to contain all you are. Before the moon rises, let awareness expand from the dark skies over your head to the tip of each finger and toe. Breathe slowly and evenly and let night tingle down the spine of the Tetons and pool in the valleys of your lungs. Breathe through chill and darkness until the sun brightens once more in the east.

When the world takes you away from your body and you live in the soles of your feet, close your eyes and breathe through your spine. Let these parts of you exist. You are already home because home is already in you. With each breath you confirm its being and your being. Reach out and touch the Lemhi's. Feel your pulse down each road and trail. Let your mind fill with the heady space of the Yellowstone backcountry. Howl into the night. Sleep with a hand on your heart and feel it beat, beat... beat… beat. Breathe.

Reading the Trees (IV)

Outside on the lawn lie
Heaps of cordwood
Lessons in humility / **B**orne with saw and axe
Each winter week's chore
Chopped, stacked

bear stands in meadow
among sagebrush and aspens
says “what dat?” “who dis?”

The Understanding

I drive or walk out the Elk Refuge road and pass the cliffs where we spotted a wolf pack hunting bighorn sheep. Years earlier I skied across their tracks north of the refuge where the tumbled foothills of the Gros Ventre dwindle into Antelope Flats, patches of aspen and sage meadow interlaced with decrepit buckrail fencing. I, stepping my skis aimlessly toward a distant ridge with vague thoughts of topping out at Coyote Rock, saw their tracks traveling the field in front of me: two wolves trotting lightly next to each other. I crossed their memory and headed perpendicular to their direction.

The sheep had isolated themselves in thin bands of rock, trusting, as always, in their sure-footedness and the steep terrain to save them. The wolves circled, calmly attempting to dislodge or frighten a bighorn into a fatal mistake. We didn't watch long enough.

The Elk Refuge also holds memories of pronghorn, bison, wapiti, a golden eagle. Their tracks plow through crusty snow or silhouette on the hillside. Some days the elk push the bighorns across the road, some days the bighorns hold the high ground on Miller Butte. Moose and coyotes traverse singly through these groupings. One winter I drove out once, sometimes twice, a day to follow their meanderings. The rumor of wolves present in every vague movement and peripheral shadow. All eddied and ebbed like tides.

Last year, skiing with friends, we wandered down Cottonwood Creek to the Snake and followed the willows north to the Bar BC ranch. When we crested back to Baseline Flats: a canid shape in the flat-light, wind-blown distance, loping into the river bottom we had just vacated. In our narrative later, we had the power to claim a wolf-sighting, although we couldn’t be sure. Grey in an oncoming storm, fleetingly quick through the sage, coyote or ghost were equally likely guesses.

Like ghosts their tracks flee into Idaho. The laws are different each side of the border and the wolves know; circling in gullies of the mind, fur and mist blending together. Stories percolate out of the forest, tracks near Woodland Hills, a carcass in Swanner Creek, a howl I pretend to hear echoing through starlight.

The first time I saw wolves, I was a kid on a family road trip through Yellowstone. We stopped amid one of the numerous jams of cars and tourists blocking the road and asked what everyone was looking at. “Wolves and a grizzly.” Obviously we parked. A quick walk up a rise next to the road and there, on the other side of a small river (such a mediocre impediment somehow implied safety), we watched the wild at its most visceral. Either the wolves or the grizzly, likely the wolves, had pulled down a full-grown bison. While we watched, the grizzly had possession of the carcass and alternated between trying to eat his fill and fending off the five wolves who worked in cohort to distract the bear and grab as many bites as possible. I think this was in Lamar Valley. A place, now, where I have seen wolves several times.

I like thinking of them out there – packs of them, some solo wanderers, just being themselves, existing despite and in spite of us humans. They flit through the edges, like the mind is a valley. I do not need to see a wolf every year to believe in them, their existence is beyond

any power belief can give them. They hunt about – haughty and aloof – and I never try to speak to them directly.

*

The moose never talk back to me, but we seem to have an understanding. A friend from high school used to be well known for having moose chase him into lakes. I haven't heard of any recent encounters; I'll have to ask him next time we talk. The only time a moose has come close to breaking our treaty, I was with this friend. In the entrance to Death Canyon, narrowing and steep, three young bulls were huffing and stamping up the trail, already ticked at another hiker in front of us. We pulled out our bear spray and backed off enough for them to make their angry way to the creek.

All of my other moose encounters, even if initially surprising, have been peaceful. Like I said, we have an agreement. I'll greet each moose courteously, ask how their day is going, apologize for entering their space and disrupting their nap or meal. They, in turn, will stare at me soulfully. Some will run or move away, especially if I am with others, but most are content to hang out. The longer we remain in the same vicinity, the longer my conversations. "What a beautiful calf you have there." I'll congratulate the mother. Maybe I'll narrate what I'm working on, cutting trees or cleaning waterbars, tell them how my day is going, speculate on the weather. They, in turn, will stare at me soulfully.

Moose are common enough but still special. I rely more heavily on their presence than other animals. Like I said, we have an agreement. Any day I see a moose, it's a small blessing. *They're still here*. I imagine whenever they see me, they think similarly: *He's* still *here?!* These are the banalities of a comfortable existence. When the time comes to depart, I wish them a good day, thank them for their patience and understanding, and give them a little bow. They, in turn, will stare at me soulfully.

*

For years now, a pair of foxes have made their den in the vicinity of my mom's house. Sometimes it's below the house in the gully. Sometimes across from the homestead in a rotting pile of timber. Sometimes we aren't sure where they have denned, but she sees them regularly enough to know they're around.

I see their tracks occasionally; when I visit for a weekend or holiday, when I lived there during covid. It's rarer that I see the actual animals. Much like my understanding with the moose, my mom and her partner have an agreement with the foxes. They let the vulpines pillage their compost and occasionally leave meat scraps among the sage. One August afternoon, we were eating dinner on our deck and threw the fatty ends of a roast in the mown portion of our yard. As we sat not twenty feet away, a fox trotted out of the tall grass, sniffed around for a bit and hunted down every last bite – completely unconcerned with our presence.

The foxes don't offer much more than the moose, just appreciation for their existence – a daily or weekly sighting lets us know the world can still be wild. In Idaho, as with most western states, predators under a certain size can be shot on sight with no hunting license or season. A

handful of neighbors take advantage of this law as frequently as they can. The foxes really should be cautious around the houses up there. But, like I said, they've an understanding with my mom.

In summer, seeing these critters depends entirely on looking in the right direction at the right time. They'll bark through the night every now and then, and like to leave eggshells scattered from their compost raids but tracking them beyond such activities is challenging. In the winter, their prints are everywhere, covering each fresh snowfall almost as quickly as it piles up; it's surprising we *don't* see them more often.

Every time I call my mom, once we have navigated around the updates and news, I ask about the wildlife. She's always got some recent encounter to share: a mountain lion on her ski home from work, moose in the trees near her partner's cabin, sandhill cranes in the barley fields, a fox crossing the driveway. These memories do not hold as much distinction as those of wolves; each day we try not to take these sightings for granted.

White Day

after Anthony Cody

The hinge between field and cloud opens this morning – bare aspens, creek bottoms, foothills – then swings shut into seamless white.

each welcome
squeaks
into the house

we use our seclusion
as a lock

marks
three days
below
zero,
shattered
silence
sparkles
like
glass

were chosen to paint a winter scene, picture
watercolor doused in January

dance into
each other
until each one's
snow
can become
the other's

ourselves, how
could we not see
how far we
actually went?

defines itself by erasing

and then itself

The hinge between each welcome squeaks into the house. We use our seclusion as a lock.

waver
decide
open, closed
in, out
where are you from?

do not experience
that most worlds
pivot in action
and change

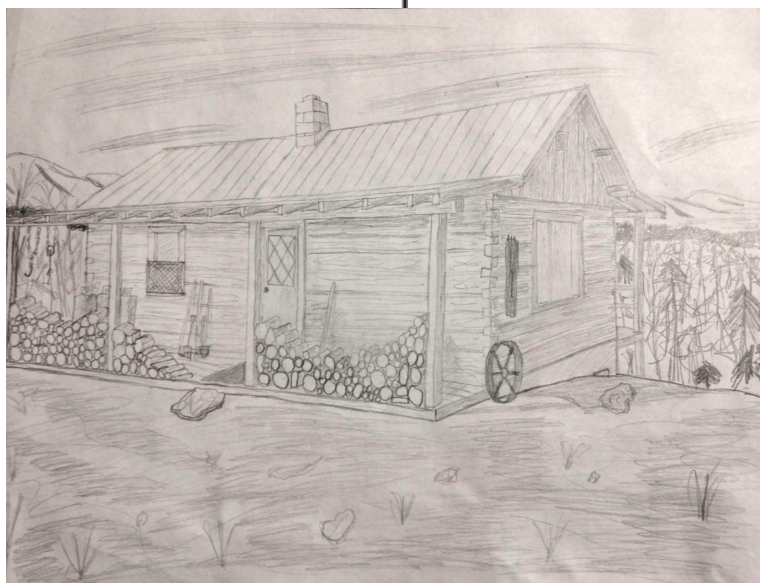
home may imprint
where it wasn't
land doesn't require
birth certificates

with the door
shut is best
heat in
mice and bats
out

are ski boots in cold bindings
not mice in the roof

We live,
We care,
We work,
We learn,
We return,
We borrow,
We love,
We return,
We return

not easily picked – winter.
Chosen with gravitas
beyond shovels
and heated driveways
fall turns the key,
each storm a tumbler
slowly (or not) latching
our world in place.



Field and cloud dance into each other until each one's snow can become the other's.

folded, eternal
thought within
thought,
disturbance under
the hill, hosted by
blowing wind in
every hour when
the sun goes down

NOW PLAYING:
Season 4 billion
Episode 340

Enjoy 24 hours
of moisture
caressing granite.
Will it snow?
Will the moon
be visible?
Tune in to find out!

*Exclusive viewing
has been modified
to fit your window.

new bud
breaks
green

man frost water itself
fun icy sharp groomed art
house heavy crunchy grey
itself tiring endangered light
deadly food melodic itself
destructive ball layered home
arresting blinding instructive
travel annoying cold itself

boundaries do not fall
into line with ease
despite the shapings
of road and fence.
We take down *No Trespassing*
signs so their illiteracy
doesn't factor –
they know they belong.

This morning marks three days below zero, shattered silence sparkles like glass.

window in an evergreen /
history beheld unseen

Dec 28, 2014

It's a cold morning
for a grouse, a moose or a
chokecherry berry

a vague memory
like trick-or-treating in feet of snow
or summers without smoky haze

Bare aspens, creek bottoms, foothills were chosen to paint a winter scene, picture watercolor doused in January.

huddle among hills while
our skis strike harmony
between their trunks

glide pole glide pole

branches welcome us
dreamlike, white pillars
escaping slowly skyward

glide pole glide pole

we note tracks, feathers
see stories of the animals
whose past we cross

glide pole glide pole

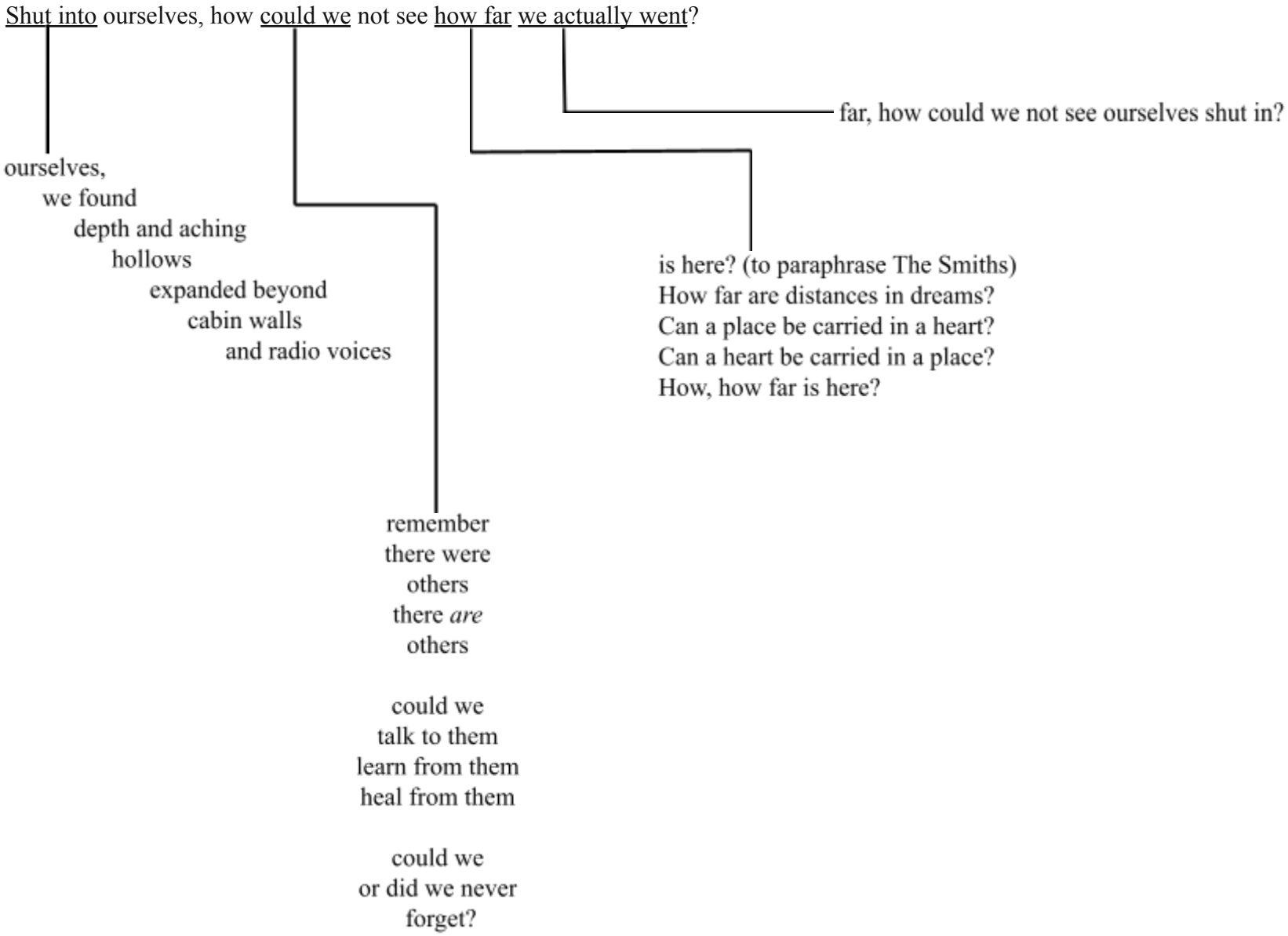
vague shapes
in the white

in words
wait a few months
pages drifting and compacting
settling under the roofline
maybe ball a few up
and throw them at your brother
then see, sometime in March,
how accurately your scene
melts

like a still day on the lake, dawn possibly, when wind has yet to muster enmity towards calm and bird song. Picture water like this: the lake is frozen, but ice is skimmed so thin you wouldn't want to write on it. Picture water like this and in any other form it takes. Hold these images in your mind as storms to the west move north and those to the south push east.

silence penetrates
deep piles of powder
until even wind hushes
breath held
each snow-tined branch
and black-capped chickadee
quiet
waiting for something,
something so small
the forest itself must still
then,
drip
drip
drip

how fragile,
this white landscape


Shut into ourselves, how could we not see how far we actually went?
far, how could we not see ourselves shut in?
ourselves,
we found
depth and aching
hollows
expanded beyond
cabin walls
and radio voices
is here? (to paraphrase The Smiths)
How far are distances in dreams?
Can a place be carried in a heart?
Can a heart be carried in a place?
How, how far is here?
remember
there were
others
there *are*
others
could we
talk to them
learn from them
heal from them
could we
or did we never
forget?

White defines itself by erasing

cultures,

histories,

languages

until our best guess
at the First Nations
is pointing at the peaks,
hoping they were named locally

as we all do
by what surrounds us,
by what hears us,
who has passed through
and who resides

and then itself.

first and last
in between
and always
always
before morning dissolves
the last star

In Defense of Whatever Happens Next

I.

Faint wagon tracks
lead away from Felt
along Bull Elk creek
across meadows
up a switchback.

Then, the Hollingshead homestead
buildings adrift
in waves of foothills
crumpling against
lodgepole shores.

Aspen nestle
edge two-track
cover themselves in spring.
The wagon rests
under hand-hewn planks
supplies yet unloaded.

Miles and Karl
silhouettes
on their threshold
looking like the barns
they have built
grey, stooped, worn.

II.

Going forward looking back
hay falls in lines, spiraling inward
to catch Miles on the iron seat, horses fore:
the prow breaking sea of timothy.

He keeps scythe swathes smooth
through dips and over the ridge.
Snap of reins, red tail's shriek
        against that symphonic swish
of grass slipping sideways.

Down the valley
clouds, dark, heavy
        push east
        slight flashes
        will pass below
they stay dry-docked another day.

Karl sharpens axes in the forge
wooden handles clamped in a vice
file scrape matching his breath.

A broken window pane
        like a sunrise yet to come
        condenses light onto the silver gleam
        of fresh metal.

breath
        rasp
                breath
                        rasp
The file pushes forward
axehead ground slowly back.

III.

In October's first snow
I see them most clearly
ancestors through thick flakes
they move
                with wind
        among cabins
and along the ridge.

I give their actions
calm urgency
as if they must achieve
autumn's chores
before the tattered aspen
        vanish.

IV.

Each cabin burrows
in two feet of snow
whistling hollowly
wood stoves cold
and empty of ash.

Stakes poke through
the drifts
haphazard seedlings
of Doug fir and lodgepole.

Come spring
we won't till
and plant these fields
but watch the inevitable forest
reclaim its own.

Past an old Toyota
buried to its wheel wells,
I ski to the forge,
trundle open the door
cough into the musty
scent of mouse droppings
and sawdust.
I pull a file from a drawer
clamp my axe in the vice
and breathe out.

After Laura Da' and James Galvin

Notes

Statement of Aesthetics: The quoted lines here are taken from Norman McClean's *Young Men and Fire* and Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*.

Land Acknowledgement: The quote here is from the back cover of James Galvin's *The Meadow*. I highly recommend reading the entirety of this book. It is simply my favorite. The information about the Tribes here was taken from the NPS website for Grand Teton National Park and the website for the Jackson Hole Historical Society.

Aspen: Pando is considered the largest organism in the world, an aspen tree in central Utah, he (for he is comprised of all male tree stems) is estimated at covering 108 acres and weighing over 6000 tons. That data from wikipedia.

Foundational Lesson: What I like to call the tri-state area, see here the borders of WY, ID, and MT.

A Missing Page of the Bible: Did not actually come from the bible. Nor was it found in a fire ring.

Reading the Trees (series): OHLEC is an acronym used to determine the feasibility and safety of bucking or felling any tree: Objective, Hazards, Leans/Binds, Escape routes, Cutting plan.

On Solitude, part III: Quotes here are from *The Wilderness Act*, legislation enacted by Congress and signed by President Lyndon Johnson in 1964, and Henry David Thoreau's *Walking*, written in 1851. Other texts referenced are Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac*, John Muir's *A Wind-Storm in the Forest*, and Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire* (specifically the chapter *Down the River*).

Flood Assessment: On June 12 and 13, 2022 Red Lodge and much of the Beartooths, northern Yellowstone, and surrounding area experienced an extreme flooding event that decimated towns, bridges, and roads, causing damage that will likely take years to fully repair.

Western Meadowlark and American Robin: All text here is sourced from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's entries on these two birds. I simply erased most of it.

March of the Aspen: Aspen spread primarily through their roots. If given time, they will colonize an open field, short plants at the outskirts. To be read as the trees grow, the rain falls, or the wind blows.

If You're Going Through a Snowstorm: I don't know if I have ever actually read about this phenomenon in anything other than a novel, but I know I have read it in a variety of novels.

The Sounding: Italics from M.L. Smoker's poem *The Feed* in her book *Another Attempt At Rescue*. Jackson Lake, despite being located in the middle of Grand Teton National Park,

is actually managed by the Bureau of Reclamation. The dam on the outlet is the first in many that obstruct the Snake's flow to the Colombia.

The First Snow: The Hollingshead brothers, Miles and Karl, built their homestead in the early 20th century. Many owners cared for the property before my parents bought it in the 90's. Most of their buildings still stand today and are on the Idaho List of Historic Places; they are also protected by a conservation easement with the Teton Regional Land Trust.

Glass: This hasn't actually happened, although I want it too and it will someday. The writing retreat in Grand Teton National Park was a program called Art and Literature in Nature that I attended my junior and senior years of high school. The embedded essay is copy and pasted, word-for-word, from a college admissions essay I wrote for Williams College.

A Story of Robertson Draw: Fire, disaster and budget stats taken from *climate.gov*, the Custer-Gallatin National Forest website, and the USFS annual budget justification document. Robertson Draw information pulled from memory, *inciweb.nwcg.gov,* and local news articles from the summer of 2021.

Grey Day: In summer 2021, a woman went missing in the Beartooths. Her body wasn't located for several months and the circumstances of her death remain unclear.

White Day: All photos and drawings are my own. The *Field* sub-poem on page 76 siphons most words and imagery from Robert Duncan's *Often I am Permitted to Return to a Meadow*.

In Defense of Whatever Happens Next: Title and first line of part II are taken from James Galvin's *The Meadow*, pages 131 and 13 respectively.

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Bristlecone – *Mom's Favorite Pastime* and *In Defense of Whatever Happens Next*
Flyway: Journal of Writing and Environment – *A Story of Robertson Draw* and *The Layout*