

Of the Wild, Temporary

Who knows how long you've stood here, watching through tall green eyes over this jagged strip of shore? You're the silent one, without apology. Perhaps you spoke once, a long time ago, belching out smoke and impossible chunks of red rock high against the sky. Why else would the ancient ones call you Neahkahnie, the place of fire?

Now, with a road sliced into you, we assume you're thought tame. Do you feel the humans have belittled your sacredness? Do the indifferent ones, speeding by, eat away at your strength and power? Maybe it's crazy to talk at all about your knowing or feeling. (But out of curiosity, did the roar and vibration of dynamite blasting into your western flank arouse any images of past life? And are those otherwise unexplained black boulders down by the creek really a memory of your hot soul?)

From below, you seem clear and simple enough---a bulk of earth and green poised on the background of sky. We expected only a matter of time and sweat to reveal your peak and the broad view of your domain. Why would the human trail labor up your flank if not to push for that conclusion? We kept close track of the way traveled and the course yet to come, to the darkened point above, where blue was seeping all around you. We paused now and again to feel the cool breeze, to feel whether you'd speak from somewhere behind its voice.

Switchbacking through the north, winding along the west, we listened out into your forest. Then you wrapped us around to the south, where one long view opened on town and bay, the roll of hills and the white lines pushing slowly into the shore. As beautiful as it was, it wasn't enough. We couldn't be satisfied with only a hint of your perspective. Your eyes at the summit---they were the goal. We wanted to know, without doubt, why you chose this aloneness, why it seems your sensibility must clarify and quicken in solitude.

On the south face, never seeming any closer to what we believed your peak, the descent began, away into the valley. We became certain of that steady movement away, and turned, to trace upward again, following back almost to where we'd started on the circle of your flanks. You saw how the beaten path had begun to confuse us, how we checked our bearings against you. Blue left, blue right, the high point between. But we found no sign of any course leading to the blue. The search brought us only two ascents that seemed to meet in a grand view of the coast.

We began to lose faith in the human trail. (You knew it would happen. Still you were mute, even mischievous, refusing to show us to a clear summit, much less tell of past lives. Forgivable silences, if we have any claim at all to ask or be denied or speak forgiveness in the context of you. It is your territory, rule it as you see fit. Long before us. Long after us.)

For a moment, we did think you heard us pleading. We even thought we heard you speak: come up from the west, you said. If the voice was your guidance or our delusion, we still aren't sure.

The beginning of the new approach was easy, slicing through the emptiness between the clumps of swordfern, to the cold, windy ridgeline that so distinctly divides your flanks. The north view, across a deep valley of forest, came through the limbs in fragments. We stayed with the ridge, becoming more convinced of a summit just above. Carefully we chose our steps on your blue-green stones, threading ourselves around tangled bodies of the many who died to your love of winter storms.

You heard us ask passage over the muscled roots of those who still live here with you, those brave enough to challenge the winds that lash at you from every direction. You watched us climb over and crawl under those brave enough to try, and ultimately fail. We could only give a little to your slope then, dropping around a root system and shattered body that seemed impassable, slipping through the mindled limbs of young ones gathered just below your ridge. Were we truly confronting the untamed side of your character? Or had we simply stumbled into another encounter with our own weakness?

You must have seen how we were struggling for almost every step---awkward, disoriented, taking on silvered moss and the old man's beard, in our hair, on our faces, hung from our arms, as though trying to absorb us into your landscape. Yes, we did wonder if we'd come too far, come too wild and undefined. With you, it's a reasonable question, a simple logic of fear. It stopped us, Kahnie. And then---maybe it was your doing---it left us. We couldn't say why. Your stilling of the wind might have swayed us. Maybe it was our certainty that the human trail could be reclaimed, with a short drop in any of three directions. Something suggested we go on. It was almost as if you were glad for the company, some other intelligence to whom you could reveal subtle features of yourself, even if it couldn't possibly understand and empathize.

The course had become anything but apparent. Your forest

gave little clue about direction. We began to question the purpose of our pressing forward. Fighting your gravity and silence, we gave a little more to the south slope, found an elk or deer trail that parallels your ridgeline, settled into the prints of wild creatures, up a little, down a little, weaving over your ribs, erratic, trusting. Maybe we saw the way only because we wanted to believe there was one. Surely the elk and deer know your face and your soul better than any who merely visit here. When young, they were probably as curious about your upper limits as we are. What's known about you must be passed from mothers as whisperings to the young. Where to find water. Where to find food. Where, when full, to look out on distant lands.

Their paths held us close to the final knowledge. It seemed to be on that ridge, where we sensed blue as much by the smell and sound of the cold wind as by anything we saw through the limbs. And you watched us break beyond even this indistinct course, pushing through the damp life and lifelessness you allow on your flanks. Yes, by then, even knowing the need for humility, we were pushing---our passion for an answer against your passion for silence. We were aiming for the blue. If you'd deny us that, we'd ask for a wholehearted denial. And our instinct did lead us back up to that line, where you hold north and south together.

You could see then we were close. You knew we studied your profile carefully, trying to feel out the physical placement of things. A rise of stone and earth. A dip to the trunk that still toils against these winds from wherever. Down here. Up here. Our eyes settle on this hump in your spine, this mound, this one particular stone that's highest above all nearby.

Is it here, Kahnie, on this point where we feel the dropping east and west, where we know the dropping north and south? Is it here, on this green stone that may never before have felt the human weight? If we step onto that stone and call it the summit of you, Fire Mountain, will you scoff at us? Will you burst from your core with rage and ridicule? And long after you've buried us deep in the glow of your anger, will you then speak openly to other wanderers, about the day of fools who dared think they'd met your summit?

If you won't answer or show us otherwise, we can only say, by our eyes and judgement, it is here. You smile at the brashness? Forgive us our youth. Do you remember your own, when you volunteered your being to the hot belly of the earth and exploded from the ocean floor? Do you recall your words, when you told her, like the tactless child you were, of your dreams to reach not only above the wide sea but high into the clouds? That you stand here as you are, towering over this world---the simple fact betrays your own faith and your own youthful will to danger. Even if you've grown intolerant with age, that memory must linger in the soil and stones here, among the lives draped over your flanks.

If you won't speak, how are we to know? Belief is our only alternative.

Of course, we'll not say we had any secret knowledge of you. We'll admit only that your silence forced us to trust our senses, and believe we met you on the summit. Brash maybe, not disrespectful. We hope you hold many secrets close. We might think less of you if you showed all. Do you see our dilemma---wanting to know your life intimately, afraid that the final knowledge would be the end of mystery and dreams? You're wise to leave us with doubt about this particular green stone. We'll believe it's compassion, not scorn, that holds you silent.

We can easily accept that there's no grand view from here, no broad spectacle to reward the effort that led to this conclusion. The branches between us and the blue, these lives who endure, the remains of those who tried and succeeded for their times---don't you know? They mean far more to us than a brief glimpse of rugged coastline, far more than simply another angle on what we'll see again, next time the highway carries us back this way.

If this hard won place is merely a false summit, Kahnie, if confusion and compromise have misled us about destination, the struggle was more for itself than for the goal. If we've missed your peak, we've come close to you. The twigs and needles tangled in our hair, the moss hung from our clothes, the black soil drying on our fingers, the stains from wet bark rubbed against our skin---if these are marks of the unhuman, we're so many determined steps closer to your wild heart.

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