

Looking Up

By Sandy Stott

This story arrives with the force of revelation on a windy, early-November Saturday in 2006 as I'm crossing the open, stone ridge that joins New Hampshire's Firescrew Mountain with Mount Cardigan. An early snow coats the mountains from 2000 feet up. I am alone, as I often am in the hills, and I've left myself little extra time to complete this familiar, six-mile circuit before fall's long night begins. A flurry obscures the Franconias to the north, and slats of light paint Moosilauke's broad brow bright white against the dark sky. I'm focused on my footing - a slip and fracture here would probably mean a cold night out and, if lucky, a rescue, and in my summer shorts and fleece top, I'm prepared for neither. I've found a rhythm and my boots are landing precisely; I'm reading the snow accurately - no slip-ups on hidden ice, each step a gain. I find my mind and body joining in a rhythmic dance of ascent. Like a face in a snow-cloud, my father appears.

One hundred miles to the south he is busy with his day: writing notes, making calls, working on behalf of one non-profit outfit or another. At least I assume this usual day for him. But I also bear with me knowledge that here, in his 89th year, he has any number of medical fingers pointing at him. There is a balky heart, some dicey blood chemistry and general gravity that weighs against such longevity; there are also two show-stoppers: an inoperable abdominal aneurysm, first discovered during heart surgery four years ago and since tracked to its current unsustainable size; a recently scanned tumor that has taken up residence on the business end of his pancreas. And so this visitation could be some sort of sky-sign that things are amiss to the south. But I don't harbor psychic ability or much truck with it, and so, as I ramble along I am broadly happy with this visit. My father can't climb anymore, though we are only three years removed from an epic on Mount Madison, but from the age of two on he has given me these

hills, and so it seems natural that he would appear. What strikes me though is the clarity with which I see his gift to me - it ranges from my precise footwork over slanting rock to the foundation optimism that still stokes each of his days. It is a gift given over time across the 31 years that separate his generation from mine; it is a gift received slowly. It is a gift of the uplands worth exploring.

At some young age, those of us given the hills begin climbing solo to get away; there is, at that age, much to leave behind, a whole valley full of voices and expectations, a sort of broad version of the aptly named school torment, homework, wherein everyone seems eager to teach you the laborings of life and who you will be. None of us puts homework into a climb-away backpack, however; instead, next to the jam-soaked peanut butter sandwiches and candy bars, along with the water bottle and dry t-shirt, we slip in a knife, perhaps a compass and magnifying glass, maybe binoculars too. Tying your sneakers? Optional. "See ya," we sing to anyone within earshot even as the screen door swings shut with a single slam.

About a quarter of a mile later the dirt road narrows to a few planks spanning a first stream. No cars can make this derelict crossing, and so the old road nosing into the hills grows grassy as it climbs fitfully toward the low point in the ridge where it tips toward the next town north. Whatever the destination -- the high ledges and their scrambles, the beaver pond and its fat slap of warning tails, the cave and its rumored hermit -- we feel a delicious singularity that is freedom. "Perhaps," we say, "this is who I'll be."

In this moment, I am twelve, still a newcomer to the valley and its two ridges (Skyland and Oregon) emanating like long, ropey arms from Cardigan and Firescrew's two-headed, central "massif." These arms enclose a continent in my mind. The late July day is pancake-fueled and gilded with buttery sunlight. My father is already at work along the fringes of the field below the house, slashing at the new growth that edges out annually to reclaim our few

open acres. Occasionally, I tease him about looking like Father Time as he wields the heavy-bladed brush-hook, a sort of upcountry scythe whose cumbersome swing he has yet to master. I have been given rare dispensation from my usual chore of hauling the pilgrim brush to a pile, which we will burn amid the new snowy wet of next Thanksgiving's weekend. As I step up Cream Hill's first inclines, my pack rattles the metallic samba of three empty coffee cans that are my exemption from a morning of dragging. The summer's berries are in but sparse in our fields, and already we know that a poor berry-season below sometimes means a dense, clustered one along the Oregon Ridge. "Bring back the berries," said my father, concluding the unlikely deal forged at breakfast. This is my first solo to the ridge.

I am an athletic and somewhat timid boy, and already, as the woods close around me, I feel the frisson of this "wilderness" rubbing up against the stories of adventure and wild life I've read and heard, a sort of mild electricity akin to that generated by grating one balloon against another. Snapped twigs make my hair stand up; dark coves of pine suggest portals; I weave a course along the faint line of our new trail to the ridge. Occasional pale blazes and scuffed leaves point the way, and I am good at spotting them. Fit and nervous, I am quick, breaking from the woods onto the early ledges only 30 minutes after leaving the house. These ledges, shelf for broad, shallow-rooted pitch pines and stunted oaks, also feature dense banks of blueberry bushes that colonize the fractures running through the glacier-cracked stone. A quick check beneath the small, glossy leaves reveals purple clusters of three and seven, berry numerics of a "good year." Begin picking here? Climb the remaining half-mile to the ridgeline and settle in there?

Berries with a view win out, and fifteen minutes later, I'm on the knee of rock that points east where the ridge drops off to forest. Fresh bear-scat dyed a deep, iridescent purple says I'm in the right neighborhood for berries, and my own hair rises again. Stripping off my t-shirt, I turn to the work. Unlike my parents, my father especially, I am a "clean-picker," meaning I comb out the usual roughage of leaves, green berries and twigs; my cans will hold

small seas of deep blue only. At times, I single out particular berries of larger girth and special dusky color; I call them "fat-berries" and drop each singly into the can where they lodge like royals. Back humped to the sky, arms and legs moored to earth, I must look like some pale cub left to forage in this patch while his parents root about in the dark woods below. The morning sun lays a benevolent palm on my back, and the soft rattle of berries dropping into my can punctuates time, then carries it and the valley-world away.

Clipping on the plastic cover of can number three breaks the spell. I sit back in my final patch, absently eating berries, and look down on the patchwork of fields that angle along the river's course through our valley. At its end the stubby ridges pinch close admitting only the river and the thin, dusty road by its side. Somehow, I am older and different, removed from the boy who left the valley. I consider what I know of the lowland lives strung out in six houses along the mile-long dirt track: first, in a lightless grove of hemlocks hard by the river and road is the vacation shack of the "Frenchman." Jean Bois is tabbed as the valley bad-guy, chiefly for his habit of feeding booze to our single native, Carroll Akerman. When sober, Carroll, who lives with his wife Mildred (the valley's former schoolteacher) three houses and a half mile uproad, is my father's woods' tutor, wielding an axe with a precision and rhythm that sprays large chips, felling trees so truly that we have developed a simple game to test his accuracy: after selecting the tree to be felled, we place a can (in truth, often an empty beer can) on the ground some thirty or forty feet away at a point where Carroll says the tree will fall. Then we watch as the smooth, face-white wood-chips fly. When Carroll's tree crushes the can, as it often does, he wins a full one. I get the appeal of the game, of games in general; beer, however, is a mystery, as is the loud adult conversation that it greases. "J'sus Christ, Fred," Carroll will say as the two of them sit drinking companionably on the trunk of a felled tree, "ain't six people in town can swing this axe the way I can. I'll make you the seventh."

I shift in my ridge-seat, turn my gaze north. There, distinct even in the day's mild

summer haze, above the ruffled quilt of country, are the pointy Franconias. Already, I have climbed along their soaring ridge a half dozen times, but never alone. I decide that, just as I have come here alone, I will go there alone. And, though I know I will return from this first solo to my valley-self and his worries about entering 7th grade and whether or not he will make the junior high soccer team team, I know also that some sliver of me is now of these high rocks, that he won't climb down. And I know further that I will begin to return to this ledge-self, to count him into the family of me.

I am seventeen, and, despite my nature, I've grown loud. Perhaps it is part of some plan that males reach maximum lung capacity when they have little of worth to say. Whatever the truth, I am loose in the Presidentials with five friends and we are trudging and hallooing up out of Tuckerman Ravine with Washington on our minds. In particular, we envision the summer crowds borne up by both Auto Road and Cog Railway. Like many seventeen-year-olds we both believe in and scoff at the heroic. Secretly, we see ourselves so cast, but we have devised a scene that undercuts this, plays it for irony and humor on the summit. Out of sight and a few hundred yards below this crest, I slip out of harness from my packboard and unrope a bundle of flattened cardboard boxes. With a roll of tape to secure them, I reassemble these boxes and then lash them to the board, tying in the whole ensemble with a final knot. When I shoulder my packboard the empty boxes tower three feet over my head; I practice a few strides as if I were carrying another self. Now a reasonable facsimile of that White Mountain hero, the hutman, (though the only nearby hut lies on the far side of the mountain) I head for the top of New England's tallest peak.

Washington's summit is a milling crowd of tourists, many of whom are bearing cameras, mostly Brownie Instamatics, but also some good, 35-millimeter jobs. Perfect. As we enter the crowds, my friends break out in understated celebration: "Nice going," one says to me. "Whoa," says another; "you must be exhausted." "What's going on?" asks an idle tourist, who has begun

to lift his camera and find me in its viewer. "Well," says my friend, Joey, "he's just carried his body-weight up here from Pinkham. It's a rite of passage for guides-in-training." "No kidding," says the tourist, and he snaps off two photos of me as he calls his wife over. I smile and pose beneath my boxes; my friends surround me in various manic poses with flexed arms and jutting lower lips.

Later that day, I am looking down the north side of Mt. Clay; my friend Ray waits a half-mile below me with my packboard and its re-stowed boxes. I study the glacier-split rocks, the whole jumbled slope, and then set off in a quick-stepping, high-kneed gait, dancing down the rocks, my feet landing faster than thought. My eyes are focused a few yards ahead; I don't look at my feet. Once, then again, when I sense there's a missing step, no steady landing, I leap high in the air, buying a few seconds to figure out what's next, and then I land on some edge, dance on over the gray stones, my boots knocking out their hurried cadence, the rocks sounding a hollow croak when my feet tip them together. In a few minutes I am down, chuffing air, my mind and legs alight with the fire of this solitary rock-dancing.

By my twenty-second year, I have burned through my first two cars, and now I approach the hills by hitching, selecting my trails via the lottery of drivers' destinations. One time, when a car deposits me at the foot of the Sawyer River Road, it's Carrigain; a few days later I emerge near Lincoln, where I stick out my thumb again and ride south. Experience sorts my rides into three categories: the best (and smallest slice of the percentage pie) are the truckers and "regular" guys on their ways to work; the other two types divide nearly equally into those who want to lecture me (let's turn this hirsute vagabond around) about getting haircut and job and those who simply want me -- I learn a polite non-listening and a direct "no"; I cultivate a faint menace as back-up.

The truck drops me at Appalachia's parking lot; in two minutes I've stepped through the slot between trees, crossed the old railroad bed and shifted uphill, away. Though I am solo as

usual, I am aiming for the northern flank of the Presidentials, my father's old rambling grounds. Famously, in family, and faintly still in these hills, he was hutmaster, leader of the "croo" at the Mad House, Madison Hut, in '39, and semi-adopted "son" of northcountry legend, Joe Dodge. Among Dodge's tribe of "Macs," -- Red Mac, Green Mac, Sorry Mac -- my father was simply "Mac," making him, perhaps, an ur-Mac. Anonymously, these 31 years later I am here as part of an ongoing attempt on the peak of self, laying down a tracery of prints in the mud from last night's rainfall, climbing, I hope, into an understanding of who I will be. I am fit and fast on the trails, hero of my own running narrative.

I've left behind the construction work from which I'm combing enough money to get by, and I've turned away from law school applications that I filed for form's sake, just so I seemed to be applying to some future. All that lies to the south as I look up at the heaped, ice-split rock I've sought. The stones say little; I say little to those I pass. But here, on day three, is a moment: I'm dropping down into King Ravine to look for summer ice, and from some distance I can hear that I'm gaining on a gabble of voices. Usually, this is enough to turn me around or nudge me from the trail -- often, when I hear people nearing, I step a few yards off the trail and wait until they pass; few see me, even if I'm in the open. Perhaps it's the days alone, perhaps it's the high register of girls' voices, perhaps I'm simply lazy, but, as the voices grow louder, I stay on track to catch them.

The camp group, perhaps a dozen girls and two counselors, has halted for a water break; they're clustered on the narrow, steep trail. The canter of my boots alerts them to me some twenty yards above; I turn my feet loose. Usually, in the frozen posing of late adolescence (the state seems eternal) I would blow by them, but, as I drop down opposite the group, one says simply, "How do you do that?" I stop; "Do what?" I say. "Run down so easily," she answers. "We're killing ourselves to get down one step at a time; you're running." I look up. She's twelve or thirteen; her gaze is direct, curious; she stands forward a step from her peers, who giggle, which unsettles me. I sort through possible answers like playing cards -- discard

Paul Newman; ditto John Wayne, who can't walk; how would Redford answer? "I'll show you," I say, surprising myself, and then I search for the counselors and ask if that's okay.

For the next five minutes I conduct a small clinic in rock-dancing, which depends upon maintaining a boot rhythm of quick, short steps, even if you have to dance in place before picking out your next landing spot. No big steps or leaps, no heavy landings; it's all light and fast. I dance down ten easy yards, emphasizing the diminutive in my steps; I set up a faint soundtrack of short out-breathes. The girl launches, takes one too-large step and then finds the little-step rhythm; she arrives with a wide smile. "Wow," she says, "that's fun." And inside me an alignment slips into place; of course I don't know it then, but I've had an encounter with my life's work: teaching. Later that day, as I'm checking my map, deciding where to go next, I realize that I've been teaching this first lesson on the Chemin des Dames.

Climbing Home

I'm not clear what awakens me, but the scene I see first is a slightly concave immensity of pale blue that bends beyond peripheral vision. A fine silk of cirrus could be the wisps of my dream's final image except that it stays steady, modifying the sky as I come free of sleep's long tunnel. I raise my head; far to the east Washington winks white above all its sibling ridges. I could be there, I figure, in two days; or I could settle back onto my stone pillow beneath this canopy of blue.

I can't recall exactly when I began my habit of taking naps during days in the mountains, but they are a very different kind of sleep from the usual shelter- or tent-centered slumber of an overnight. Whereas any sort of camping transforms place and time into a little settlement whose utensils and niceties have been lugged there in a backpack, mountain napping is the sleep of merger, it is the sleep from which you rise, in Henry Thoreau's phrasing, "everywhere at home." This tilt of feeling and practice takes place in my mid-twenties; by my

mid-thirties it is established. Now, I find that I climb not to get away, but to go home -- region of best self, land-self, self-not-singular, upland-me, kin of rock, water seep, pine.

Often, I wake from a hill-nap as this self. Today, the tough, iced hide of March snow still covers the sun slope below the Oregon Ridge. I've made a chair of my old gut-strung snowshoes, and, while my dog Wally snuffles and noses around the bases of beech trees, I lean back, close my eyes and feel the sun take my face and then my mind. Adrift in the play of warm air laced with fingers of cool I half-dream, my breathing slows. Finally my mind quiets; images and thoughts slide beneath the surface.

When I open my eyes, I'm looking up into the branches of hillside beeches. A cerulean sky fills the spaces between dark gray limbs. The sun has edged west to my right cheek. No wind stirs. Wally lies curled in a ball of sleep. My fingers play idly with his copper fur; he wakes, stretches. A squirrel emerges from a tree's trunk and climbs ten feet to a branch where it sits, tail curved. Wally watches too. The squirrel runs out along the branch and jumps into open air. I blink, straighten up. The tiny body hangs against the blue background, then begins to fall. A squirrel with a death wish? But the squirrel spreads its legs, and folds of skin unseen before form air-catching arcs; it soars downhill. Fifty yards on, heading for a smash-up with a trunk, bare feet away, it pulls its head up, neck bent nearly to its back, and stalls in mid-air, then settles onto sharp claws that clutch the tree.

In the afternoon sun a whole troupe of squirrels emerges from beech homes and laces the trees together with the grammar of flight. Wally runs the ground from tree to tree, but they never fall.

Other times it is some form of slow walking that brings me to him.

Yes, it was a good night. Snow fell throughout, a windless February snow, a full foot from a sky that broke into slats of early sun and now this near, blue canvas. Ten degrees only, but the labor of stamping upward on snowshoes and the late winter sun compensate. And I

have reached midslope on the first wooded rise above Cream Hill, bound for the Oregon Ridge crest, rising slowly across an unmarred sheet of white. Each step is an act. I am in no hurry.

I lift my right shoe vertically from its print, shift weight to my left pole and lean forward to begin my next step. As I do so, I probe upslope with my right pole. I repeat, repeat again. The snow three feet to my right explodes. A whirl of dark wings brushes by my right ear. Again a foot away. And again.

No time has passed and it's over. I lean over my poles and stare at the three holes in the snow - three grouse lay there asleep in sunlit snow caves, three fierce hearts beating slow dreams. I watch the wing-burst snow where they were.

Here

Not long ago, on a work-blurred day at the high school where I teach, I was talking with one of my students. It was a rare day of strong winter sun, and under its close sky we were looking ahead to summer, mulling over its possible trails. Escape is an enduring fantasy of schoolteachers and students alike; in winter, we are all in some way ungraduated, yearning for commencement. But my student and I were also looking back to the past fall when we'd shared a classroom with fourteen others and read a gathering of writers selected for their loose kinship across time with Henry Thoreau. In that boxy room, we'd nosed through "Walking," Henry's forceful reminder that no day should be passed entirely indoors, that walking out into the world (his recipe calls for four foot-borne hours per day) is living and the surest connection to life's spirit.

Often enough, I hoped, my students and I had left indoor's florescence in favor of the clear and clarifying sky. With us we had taken our hazed and work-addled consciousnesses, which I also hoped would not blind us to that sky. Outside, we had sought and awaited the moment where the squirrel runs its branches and leaps, mimics the best sentence structure and

narrative surprise; the moment when sleeping thoughts burst fully feathered from the even snow of the given day. And in our meandering ways, we had searched for the land of the best self, the place where each of us could determine who she is or who he is. Those seemed good reasons for stepping outside where, even along the floodplain of the Sudbury River, it's possible to turn uphill. Some days, my student and I agreed, as we had climbed Henry's runged words and sorted our thoughts and tasks, we had awakened toward those best selves.

Each morning I emerge from my riverside house and look up; above me the same sky stretches its light north over the Oregon Ridge, above round-headed Moosilauke; I believe that the Franconias tickle its belly; I believe that Washington and the other pere-peaks survey their valleys from this same sky. All the years of looking up and climbing home have brought me here: to a place where each day I teach from the father-given hills, from their trails and viewpoints, where each day I am a guide. And on good days, perhaps I serve even as a sort of *pater* to exploration and thought that would locate good footing along the ridgy regions of the self.