Dark Night on Whitewall

By Will Kemeza

It was mid-December. I don't know whether I woke in the wind-blast which sent the hut's turbine groaning, or whether I shivered myself awake. And I don't know how long I had been sitting there with my back against the hut's western wall, snow drifting over my legs. I knew that the wind had shifted, as clouds frayed at their edges to expose sharp stars. Having coiled into a high-pressure ridge and barreling down off the Canadian Shield, the wind sounded different now. Northwest winds would roll down the long slope behind the hut, then, hitting a house-sized outcropping of schist, draw back for an unlikely moment before slamming down on the roof. From inside the building, it was like hearing a wave break underwater, or like the noise one hears pressing head to pillow on a quiet night - the pulsing timpani of blood in the ear. Even in the cold clarity of a north wind, I did not know how I had arrived at this predicament. My fingers were numb. I rolled my head to the right, and saw that someone had vomited, and then I realized that it could only have been me. I hauled myself to my feet, and opened the hut door with the heels of my clumsy, ungloved hands. I pulled off my (mercifully) untied boots, struggled out of my clothes – wet and burning against skin where my body heat had melted snow - and climbed into my sleeping bag, zipping it with my teeth.

I stayed there for the next three days. This may have been a bout with the flu, or some kind of food poisoning. Whatever the illness' cause, I retched far past emptiness, heaving up only the acid memory of food. I ran through miles of feverish dreams - slogging up fields of scree, where people who might help were always receding further

upslope, while my own legs sank into flakes of shale. To be delirious is unsettling enough, pulling as it does the ground from beneath one's feet, and (who knows?) back the veil of the heavens. But to be delirious and alone in a mountain hut is to mix a mind-rattling cocktail of isolation, confusion, and the occasional lucid insight, which sits like a small boat in the eye of a storm. I remember that, when I woke from my exhausting bouts with sleep, a man was sitting by my bed. He would remind me that I had to drink water. I'm sure that I imagined him: a fact which does not at all diminish my gratitude.

I had been eager for this winter caretaking job. Basic duties (hut upkeep and a welcome to winter travelers) aside, it meant the chance to live through the gray blaze of a White Mountain winter. I was eager to have, in the crucible of the season, something resembling a real "wilderness experience." I wanted to practice some solitude – if only in the modest dose of several days each week. I saw this job as a chance to follow in the footsteps of Thoreau, Muir, Ed Abbey and the Desert Fathers - that rugged pantheon, camped out forever beyond the edge of town. I hoped to acquire, in an easy transaction, the ecstatic (or at least contented) experience described by those bearded hermits. But their ascetic joy was elusive. To me, solitude seemed neither a gateway to clarity nor to release - the silence crowded around the hut, stifling as deep snow. I didn't know what to do with the mineral stillness of those long hours - my attention jumped like a wren from branch to branch - too cautious or too much driven by desire to perch anywhere for long. I would perk up hearing the clatter on the snow grate which announced the coming of weekend snowshoers or skiers. I greeted them like a golden retriever, and would, by Sunday afternoon, mourn their departure.

Then, there was the cold. The hut was fitted with a little black cast- iron wood stove, which crouched at the center of the room and everyone's attention. The supply of firewood was limited, however, and the stove - per policy of my employers and rigid tradition both - was to be loaded and lit once each day, and only after sundown. Even then, the indoor temperature was never to rise above 35 degrees - so that the siren song of warmth would not lure the uninitiated into dangers toothier than icy highways. I was unprepared for this kind of cold. I don't mean the acute blasts of arctic air, cutting across a ridge or the sheen of a lake - those are bracing, and numbing, but also exhilarating. Those sharp winds cause something to rise in the chest. All of us, after all, enjoy having something to lock our jaws against, and the feeling that all our banners are snapping in the breeze. It was the cold's long siege, its indefatigable circling and lurking, that caught me by surprise. Cold is an endless searcher - sliding its slow fingers around the door, under the waist of your jacket, down the back of your neck, up through the floor, down from the rafters. The cold chased me into my sleeping bag at night, and grabbed me each morning by the arm, as I reached out of the polyester cocoon to record the 7 a.m. forecast from the Mount Washington Observatory. In the cold, one lives as a defender in a citadel, forever ceding the outer battlements and earthworks (as the body cedes fingers, toes, ears, nose), always pulling inward and further inward. I worried that this endless huddling, this constant reflex to protect the core, might become a habit of mind as well as body; that, with practice, the instinct to draw in might outmuscle the instinct to reach out. Habitual concealment of vulnerability is, in more ways than one, a dangerous business.

After having been in that sleeping bag for three gut-struck, delirious days, my fever broke. I could eat again, if warily. I was weak and tired. But I was desperate to get out of that sweat-soaked bag, and out of the hut's ashen shadows. So, after waking up fever-free, and lolling around inside for a morning and into the afternoon, I pulled on my plastic boots, and walked out the door. I descended quickly from the porch, sliding over the hard-packed snow and through the biting air. After the quick drop, I made my way down the side of a nearby notch along a wide, flat, wind-swept trail: a scar in the mountainside and monument to the old days of industrial logging. The sun was already trailing south and west behind a wall of mountains - darkness was not far off. I needed, and quickly, something which could give some kind of comfort, and some assurance. I wanted to feel less alone in the world, and to have the world confirm that, in the grand scheme of things, all would be well. I wanted to feel exactly the way I had so often on top of a mountain.

What is it that draws so many of us to mountain peaks? There is, no doubt, something about the physical exertion of a climb which releases a cascade of endorphins, sparks dormant synapses, and scrambles the workaday neural pathways. But there is more to it than that. The stacked, totem-pole ecosystems of the northeastern mountains make of our climbs a particular sensory experience. The ascension from hardwood to spruce/fir forest to krumholz to alpine zone, all over a rock-bound, root-snarled treadway, is its own kind of walking meditation. Hiking the trails of these glacier-scoured uplands, we pay attention to each footfall, as we must, but it is a loose attention. As when we recite a mantra, cast a fly, or finger clarinet keys, the intricacy of our physical task occupies the guard-dog of the conscious mind. Other thoughts are free to come and go through the

mind's backcountry like flocks of crossbills through the firs. A rhythm emerges, following the percussion of lung, heart, and boot sole. The scope of our conscious attention constricts, as the high vault of maple, ash and birch tightens, becoming the wet, dark tunnel of squat spruce and fir. Then, suddenly, we break through. Encountering treeline, the doors of perception are kicked open. Having grown accustomed to a visual world of several square feet, we are suddenly citizens of hundreds of square miles - striding across forests, ridgelines, and valley towns, and face to face with the fluid undulations of the sky. There is, in the hike of a northeastern alpine peak, performative re- birth: a movement from dark enclosure toward a chilly, breezy rapture - and the embrasure of a wider, chancier world.

But it is not only that the views are long. They are also largely forested, and the landscape seems (deceptively) only lightly influenced by human commerce. These views are colored by the possibility of (and our hope for) for teeming extra-human life. In all those miles of forest, though they are seldom seen, we know that neotropical songbirds brood like embers in the dark canopies, fishers wind their way down tree trunks, moose loll in the swamps, ravens bank along updrafts, and lynx, wolf, and catamounts make their shadowy sallies from shrouded redoubts. Knowledge of these animals' presence evokes something gene-deep: a sense of wholeness, affirmation that we are in the presence of a functioning nutrient cycle - a miracle of self-organization and long-standing co-evolution. This, an intact natural system, feels like home (even if it feels like the way-back yard). And these animals, our extended family. An overwhelming sense of kinship is the catalyst of mountaintop joy; solitude is only useful as it leads hitherto. These long views also include the spreading blast zones of development, and the smear of airborne

pollutants, revealing how much might be lost, and how quickly. Now, there is forest with flora and fauna intact. Someday soon, in the words of a local poet, it might be otherwise.

Then, there is the sky. The poet Gary Snyder writes about the high mountains of his native Pacific Northwest: *"West Coast snowpeaks are too much! They are too far above the surrounding lands. There is a break between. They are in a different world. If you want to get a view of the world you live in, climb a little rocky mountain with a neat small peak. But the big snowpeaks pierce the realm of clouds and cranes, rest in the zone of five-colored banners and writhing crackling dragons in veils of ragged mist and frost-crystals, into a pure transparency of blue."* Those of us who love the northeastern mountains must - finally and after much argument about base-to-summit measurements - recognize that ours are the stubborn stumps of a once towering range, on the tired edge of a continent seeking rest in a widening sea. And yet these peaks jut far enough skyward that a climber walks above treeline on a winter day with frost feathers underfoot, and helmed by the blueblack of deep space. Hikers in all seasons are likely to find themselves above a valley-annihilating undercast, or to be keel-hauled by galleons of towering cumulus at full sail. We feel ourselves, on a Presidential ridge, to be strolling the banks of the roiling tropopause. This may not be true forever, as we roll the bones of the biosphere with our carbon spew; for now, though, these northeastern mountains call down the jet stream like a cold god on the wing. We have access here to that realm described by Snyder, a lively *otherworld* seemingly unmuddied by human affairs.

If I had ever felt the need for the ascension of spirit associated with a summit, it was that December afternoon. Knowing that it would take too long to trudge through drifted snow to a peak-bound trail, I decided to bushwhack. I turned to my left, to face the

east wall of the notch. This was a small and trail-less mountain, with a steep western face creased by shallow gullies. The summit was invisible from the trail, tucked behind the lip of the wall, overhung in several places by rock which had been undercut during the latest glacial retreat. Deep snow pooled near base of the wall, but its angle dictated that there would be only a thin crust covering rock and ice higher up. With the weak sun falling west, shadows pooled in the gullies across the snow, marking possible lines of ascent. Facing the wall, I wished I'd brought crampons and ice tools. I had not. But I could see that, despite the wall's slope, spruce and fir hung on singly or in small bunches from the trail to the lip where the wall met the whitening sky. I started up, kicking shallow steps along the edge of a deep gully where I could find some purchase, grab trees, and keep away from the hard tongues of blue ice. I climbed steadily and gracelessly, keeping my belly close to the sloping ground and clawing for every foot. Past the mid-point of the climb, the trees became sparse, the snow crust thinner over the ice, and the stakes, were I to slip, noticeably higher. I threw myself sideways over patches of ice, only catching a trunk or a fistful of branches as I started to slide toward the glacial debris scattered several hundred feet below. Despite shaky legs, slow arms and an echoing hunger, the immediacy of the climb left little room for ruminations on cold, the loneliness of sickness, or the sense of grave finality which swoops in with a boreal December.

Mountains constitute an irruption in the landscape. They stick out, and they seem to have discreet points of origin and cessation. A mountain is a story with a clear narrative arc - unlike the undifferentiated sweep of steppe, forest, or open water. We are drawn in by the particularity of a mountain - its *thusness* - its seeming singularity. And, as a species of storytellers, faced with something enormous and ineffable - the

mysterium fascinans et tremendum - we have at it. The stories we tell are varied; we remember hikes for particular adventures, encounters with animals and weather, and partners present, or absent. But we who return to these peaks become familiar with the rough outline of the scientific narrative, as well. We learn that these peaks began their rise 450 million years ago. That they were present as the first animal life began to leave the salty womb of the oceans, spurred by competition for space along the crowded coastline of the earth's single continent. That they contain chunks of what is now Scotland and North Africa, so they have watched the continents drift apart. That they walked tall in their young adulthood, ranging above a blurred procession of changing ecosystems and long and short-lived species. That they weathered the tidal flux of glaciers, one having occurred, geologically speaking, just this afternoon. We know that the familiar, fragile alpine flora colonized pockets of valley soil where these recent glaciers had scraped bedrock all but clean. That the ancestors of these plants bore the weight of mastodon, caribou, giant elk, and the attendant feet of hunters, with clawed or moccassined feet. We know that these plants retreated upslope in a subtly (until now) warming climate, as the conifers nipped at their heels, and retreated further as the mast-bearing trees (oaks, chestnuts, beeches) hiked up their skirts to cross the range from the west, casting broadhand their nuts which would become currency for a new forest economy. These alpine plants have retreated until they stand, now, with their backs to the precipice of the sky, riding out their fate with undiminished exuberance, to which anyone who has crossed these peaks in June can attest.

Getting to know a mountain throws the story of our own species, and the story of our individual lives, into sharp relief. The human event suddenly loses its place at the

center of the Grand Narrative - we have come, we will alter the ecological order (like an asteroid or an ice age), and we will likely go, leaving a few fading clues for whatever trained eye might follow. Ours may be an era which scarcely registers on a geologic time scale. Our own lives, of course, flare like fireflies and are gone - back into the mix of matter/energy which thrusts up continents, sings as a thrush, and blooms each June as a mat of alpine azalea. What a relief, needed desperately by all of us once in a while: the apprehension that the story is not all about us, that the world is more than what we make of it, and that we are part of something much larger than ourselves .

Mountains are irruptions in the landscape, but it is also clear - with a little imagination - that they are events: waves which rise and fall on a stony sea. As ocean waves express the fluid energy of wind and water, mountains implicate everything around them. Theologian Michael Himes says that the purpose of a sacrament is to "make what is always and everywhere present visible in a particular time and place". This is what mountains do for us. They make immediately tangible to us forces which are with us always: the grunt and grind of tectonic shift, the broad branching and re-branching of life, the transformative flow of the water cycle. We are, in fact, as much an embodiment of these forces as the mountains. As Gary Snyder points out: "they are what we are, we are what they are." The truth is that we no more shoulder the sky while crossing a mountain ridge than we do while stuck in traffic, but we need these wild ridges to remember that this is so: that we are always participating in the economy of the wild world, for better and for worse. This understanding has clear ethical implications; wilderness ethics don't end at the trailhead. We who want alpine plants, the spiraling song of a Bicknell's Thrush and the incensed air of balsam fir in our lives and our children's

should indeed avoid stomping on fragile plants, making excessive noise, and soiling streams while traveling in the backcountry. This is basic etiquette - a practice which can change our habits of thought and action. But we should also pay attention to our gas mileage, the efficiency of our light bulbs, and where the morning cereal comes from. Mountains seem to exist in another world, but they do not. They are our world, concentrated. The reality of interconnection among divergent ecosystems (and all beings) is a lesson we will learn from incalculable loss, or - quickly - by the kind of attention which is inexorably joined to affection. We can learn this lesson by getting to know the mountains we love.

In the lengthening afternoon of that December day, as I hauled myself over the lip of the mountain's headwall, I was lightheaded with hunger and chilled by sweat. I looked east, the direction in which I'd been moving, up at familiar mountains: ice-glazed trees white against a flint-gray sky. Then I turned around, to look down the long valley. There, already obscuring the peaks at the southern end of the notch, was a towering wall of the darkest cloud I'd ever seen. The cloudbank was moving north and east, toward me. It moved slowly but with unflinching purpose, like a slow flood or a black glacier on the march. It enveloped everything - the sky's fading light, the peaks and the valley's trough. It was like seeing a negation, like watching the advance of absence. I had climbed that mountain with the last of my strength, looking for the solace of the peaks. Instead, in the cold dark, I felt the full iron weight of winter. Winter, which is the world being what it will be. Not what we ask of it, or what we would have it be. This time, there was no solace. Wildness has a way of attacking our ideas about wildness - about its healing powers, about its place as a locus of easily accessible meaning. And this may be the final,

and the great gift, of mountain peaks. They are an ever-open portal to Mystery - to the creative process which grounds and surrounds everything, and which we cannot comprehend because, as Wendell Berry writes, it comprehends us. In this experience is the preservation of the world: the realization that we are a small part of something which we will neither finally understand nor master and on which we are entirely dependent. We place demands on nature with the righteous rage of Job, insisting that our industry be rewarded and our desires - for things or for particular experiences - be fulfilled. We insist (as I did in climbing that mountain) that the wild world conform to our self-absorbed constructions of reality. And, sometimes, like Yahweh from the whirlwind, the wild world offers a rejoinder:

"Brace yourself like a fighter;/ I am going to ask the questions, and you are to inform me!/ Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations/...Have you ever in your life given orders to the morning/ or sent the dawn to its post...Can you fasten the harness of the Pleiades,/ or untie Orion's bands? Who makes provision for the raven/ when his little ones cry out/ craning their necks in search of food?... Does the eagle soar at your command/ to make her eyerie in the heights?"

In wild places, when we are cracked open by beauty or by exhaustion, we can come face to face with the world as it is, even if we see dimly and only for a moment. This can be desolate, but there can be a shiver of joy when the constructed reality we mistake for Reality writ large splinters like a scaffold of toothpicks in a tornado. And there is an imperative here, as well: let the wild world be what it is – live with it, love it, be attentive to it, and do not waste time struggling against its cycles (whether this struggle takes the shape of an economy defying the natural systems that support it, or the

familiar quest to avoid the dark door of death). I had been trying to force the wild world to be what it was not; I wanted only flaring sunsets and major chords – not impersonal cold, or the subterranean forces of decay. On top of that mountain, I was forced into a submission which was also an acknowledgement; the world must be taken as it is – darkness, death, loneliness and all. My Irish grandmother used to repeat the refrain, "Ain't it awful?" And she was right – often, it is. But to come face to face with awful cold and the awful realization of personal limitations on the summit of a mountain is to pass through the awful facts; it's still beautiful, and still a world well worth belonging to (and fighting for). Despite its mystery – *because* of its mystery.

Later that winter, a fellow caretaker taught me the constellations of the winter sky. I would shuffle in circles around the ice of an alpine lake, leaning into the wind, face skyward, tracing the lines of old myths. But I was conscious, as never before, that all of these myths were set against (and indeed spun from) the dark fields of lidless space. These stories were made to shine a light in the darkness of human experience – and they do. But we are lucky to have access to places like the Whites, where the darkness still burns down through the light of human artifice, and the light cannot overcome it.