

mine

one can go through life quite successfully without considering one's objective image presented to the world. A mirror would only enrage the big buck now. He would see a rival there, another male with a rack as big as his, and he would probably charge ahead and smash the mirror, thereby solving the problem.



A Cripple in the Wilderness

I used to be a naturalist, but, in all honesty, what I liked more than the names and facts and maybe even the sights of nature was the opportunity that being a naturalist gave me to walk around in the woods. For a while I worked at Mount Rainier, and, in the early summer, I liked to go to a place called Summerland, where I skied on slopes that were not too crevasse-covered or steep. Finding my way was difficult with the trail obliterated by snow, and I was vain about my willingness to go alone, though I looked like a child.

In my late teens I had spent my summers as a naturalist along the Appalachian Trail where it veers near New York City. Young people were dispatched in teams of two of the same gender to live in primitive cabins—no toilet, and our outhouse was a quarter mile away—where we ran nature programs for children from the city. We bathed in the lake and swam in the nude—now I realize that living there with no telephone or radio was probably the most dangerous immersion in nature I ever had. During those summers, female hikers were raped along the Appalachian Trail and even

killed. But I never had a hard time with anyone except a man who, as was the custom of those days, gave me a hallucinogenic drug and returned in the middle of the night to pee on my tent.

In my mind, I survived by becoming aloof: naturalist as bitch. But this is silly, to imagine I was not vulnerable. A bullet makes no distinction between bitch and sweetie-pie.

Becoming handicapped has meant becoming a little more congenial, in that my accessing wilderness now requires collaboration, as on this day when my friends and I are headed up to Mount Rainier. For Angus, this is an opportunity to put more break-in miles on the Harley-Davidson Dynaglide motorcycle that he just purchased down near Portland. I had navigated him home with my car because he wasn't yet supposed to take the bike over fifty miles per hour, nor was he supposed to drive for long at a constant speed, and this meant we had to use the back roads, where the pages of maps he had spent days printing off the computer and highlighting and annotating were useless. The hundred miles took us five hours. At one point we drove in circles, which we noticed only because we passed an old barn painted with "Dr. Wilson's Remedy for Weak Women" twice.

When Angus starts the motorcycle, it attracts the notice of Bob, the man who is painting my house. I feel guilty going off on an excursion while Bob works, which is another concession that becoming handicapped requires—I pay other people to do my work. Having always painted my own houses, this is a bitter pill. I'm not even driving the car loaded with my electric scooter; my friend Becky is.

"Nice bike," Bob says, though Angus can't hear him above the noise of his pipes.

"He just bought it!" I yell back. Angus is a chubby bald man closing in on sixty. I don't know why I feel compelled to give out information as the Harley warms. "His wife died! He has not ridden a motorcycle for thirty years!"

Many of us can be made bold by grief.

You can see what people call *The Mountain* on clear days from our town, the main roads laid out to give a dead-on view of it when you head east. Three peaks make up its crown, like a molar tooth. Now that I am crippled, rarely do I go there, even though some of the trails are paved in order to protect the alpine meadows. So theoretically I could ride up them, and this is our bittersweet mission of the day. When the snow melts, flowers bloom in such profusion that the colors make you swoon.

We missed the peak flower-blooming weeks while we arranged our trip. My psychic tendencies lean toward disappointment and lament. We have missed the flowers! Becky assures me there will still be plenty, being the kind of woman who can peer into any cup and spot the trace of moisture that still resides. We're leading Angus out of the desecrated Northwest that has been manufactured recently by countless big-box stores and cheap tract homes. You have to stay right in town, close to the water, or else go into the wilderness—because what's between them is a place of death, the towns of no town, the quickly manufactured present, which has no soul. I can't imagine our strip malls fifty years hence: they will be torn down within a decade, or else they will be dusty

and decayed, abandoned structures where squatters will set up camp. The giant supermarkets will someday house our slums.

So we leave them, good riddance, and rise into the foothills, after crossing Mashell Prairie and Ohop Valley. It has not rained all summer, and yet the valley somehow is a green dip between hills, a velvety swale without any desecration. This is where you finally catch your breath, and no one stops here. It's a hands-off place, a place where the riders in their vehicles stay put, as if they know better than to blight this ceaseless stunning bright bright green.

Then we rise into the clear-cuts, a thoroughly blighted place, where the small firs grow as high as a tall man's head in stands that are unnaturally dense. The forest has been ravaged, and yet the forest is making itself again, in a mutant, hypertrophic way. Environmentalists see the ravagement and the mutation; industry people see the resilient growth, and the human life span is too short to know which view will win.

But soon we leave the clear-cuts behind, as the road zips by Alder Lake. This summer, due to the lack of rain, the lakebed is a flat expanse of mud, sliced by rivulets and divided into planes of different color, colonized by different algae. The lakebed should be littered with driftwood, giant stumps with gnarly, webby roots. But this has all been carted off. In a random act of art, someone has created a horse and a fish with the only wood that's left.

In wetter years, I used to kayak on this lake. The trip that gnaws most on my memory is one on which I took one of the summer volunteers with me. Paul had been born with cerebral

palsy; he staffed the Visitor Center desk and had a signature joke for the tourists—that he was built like a buffalo: big head and shoulders, tiny legs. He walked with forearm crutches, dragging his legs along *scruff scruff scruff*. I will tell the truth and admit I had a speck of resentment for his presence: his weakness was bound to tax the rest of us, someone had to put his shoes and socks on in the morning and take them off again at night. When a male ranger was assigned this task, I was relieved. The intimacy of holding someone's foot in my hands terrified me and made me think of the apostles and Jesus, how all that footwashing created a sexual quantum field when I read about it on Wednesday afternoons at the Catholic school.

On our trip, Paul paddled strongly and we laughed. But when we returned to the boat ramp, I could not lift him out of the kayak to stand with his crutches. So I dumped him out, and that worked well enough because he could use the water to buoy himself up, though afterward I insisted on going to the grocery store, since the lake was halfway there, and I made Paul wait in his wet clothes while I went shopping, despite his shy complaints. My impatience mortifies me when I think back, now that I'm the one who's always slow.

Sorry . . . sorry . . . this is a song the Subaru's tires sing.

As we rise to the lake, Becky tells me about the time she herself climbed Mount Rainier, when she was a student of Willi Unsoeld's at the state college in our town that was founded in the 1970s as an "alternative" institution. Unsoeld is a legend there, a philosophy professor and a mountain climber. Becky says that she climbed as one of the students

ried to Unsoeld's rope when he led a mob of them to the top in 1972. This is a poignant story because Unsoeld died a few years later while leading a student group down from the summit in a storm. One student died also, and Becky was asked by Unsoeld's widow to call the girl's mother. We speculate that she made this odd and too-intimate request to prove he was not a reckless man when it came to shepherding young people through the wilderness.

I'll say it again: many of us can be made bold by grief.

But grief can only transform the actual body so far, and our widower turns out to be trembling and pale-cheeked when we pull off just past the lake. We stop at a garden of creatures made from scrap metal, sculptures whose style resembles that of the driftwood fish and horse erected on the dry bed of the lake. Angus did not attach the windshield to his motorcycle, nor did he wear his leather jacket. When we ask why not, he gets a hangdog look.

"I wanted to look studly," he says, sucking in his belly. The thought had not occurred to me, that he'd seek romance on this trip. The day does not seem conducive to romance—the cloud ceiling high but solid.

The place called *Paradise* where the asphalt trails do their zigzagging lies at an elevation of 5,000 feet. His teeth are chattering but Angus assures us: "Don't worry, I will make it up to Paradise."

It is difficult for me to believe that almost twenty years have passed since I worked at the mountain. As soon as we go

through the entry gate, I am ransacked by my old ghosts. We're in old-growth forest now, in the deep shade where the tree trunks glow reddish, almost purple, thickly grooved in patterns according to their species. We go by the limbless snags that are the remnants of a mudflow on Kautz Creek and by the trailhead of the secret trail I remember leading to two humongous Douglas firs. When we come to Longmire, the little enclave where I once lived, I am glad the place is more developed, bustling with people and tour buses. This little bit of ruin makes the sight of it easier to bear.

After Longmire, the angle of the road increases as the trees begin to shrink. We pass the trailhead to Comet Falls, which is the trail I took to my old workstation. I tell Becky about the man who tried to walk across the top of the falls in golf cleats, and about how his girlfriend ran all the way down to Longmire, out of her mind with the sight of his body dropping inside the water column. Marianne Moore wrote a famous poem about Mount Rainier, in which a mountain goat's eye is fixed on a waterfall "which never seems to fall / an endless skein swayed by the wind, / immune to the force of gravity . . ."

But of course the man was not immune.

The alpine meadow above Comet Falls is where I worked one summer, changing the signs (this is harder than it sounds, as they were planted in concrete) and repairing the trails. I tell Becky how Jim, back in the early days of our romance, came to visit me here in the rain. He'd hiked with two friends who looked hypothermic, so I made soup on my camp stove and saved the day—that's the kind of girl I

imagine I was, the spunky saver of the day. We all weave our private myths.

Becky tells me that I'm still an Amazon, but I suspect she is just trying to make me feel good, seeing as she has a habit of overestimating human nature. These days I am a Roman, right there with Ovid when he says: *Call no man happy until he is dead and buried.*

Yet the challenge remains that there is still *this day*, which has erected itself before us like one of those signs planted in concrete. And I probably will live through it, a day when my friends and I are going to travel a mountain path, and we probably will see a bird or two and a flower or two, and those things should be goddamn good enough for me to record on my list of gratitudes.

Soon the Nisqually glacier appears before us, its snout like a strip mine, a pile of dusty slag filling the wide canyon where the glacier drips to form a river that is always being born. A wide steel bridge spans this place, a bridge that looks like it was built for the sole purpose of being ridden over on a new Harley-Davidson Dynaglide. I bet Angus is terrified.

In Marianne Moore's poem, this mountain is an octopus of ice, seen at first from the two-dimensional view of the map, the mountain outlined by the twenty-eight glaciers that sprawl down its sides. She wrote the poem after coming here on one trip from New York to visit her brother who was stationed at the shipyard in Bremerton. Her approach took a primitive version of this same road, as she too headed for Paradise.

The poem renders the mountain from varying perspectives—we see the rocks close up and from afar, we see both the map and the living mass. Moore quotes from a dozen sources, from spiritual treatises to tourist brochures, and we're referred to Henry James and Greek antiquity by way of explanation. She means to make us dizzy, as the colors of the lichen-covered rocks are dizzying: "the cavalcade of calico competing / with the original American menagerie of styles." The poem emulates in form the myriad stuff it is describing.

Filmmakers came to the mountain when I worked here to shoot some footage to accompany Moore's poem for a PBS series. As the resident ranger-poet, I lobbied heartily to escort them around the park. They too were from New York, and I remember their brand-new pack boots and enormous cache of M&Ms, as if they were prepared to bivouac for days. Their gear was hardly broken in, I noted smugly, before marching them straight uphill.

They needed footage to accompany two passages in particular, and my heart went haywire when they left the locations up to me. They wanted to illustrate the penultimate stanza of the poem, where Moore describes the trees she must have seen on her hike to the ice caves that once lay under the Paradise glacier:

Is "tree" the word for these things
 "flat on the ground like vines"?
 some "bent in a half circle with branches on one side
 suggesting dust-brushes, not trees;
 some finding strength in union, forming little stunted
 grooves

their flattened mats of branches shrunk in trying to
 escape"
 from the hard mountain "planned by ice and polished by
 the wind"

"Cushion krummholz" is the official name for these trees stunted by the altitude, a term that is uncharacteristic of Moore not to have used. The natural history contained in the poem is actually a little crackpot, since Moore had also visited Banff on her trips west and conflates these two locations.

The filmmakers also wanted footage to suit the poem's close, where Moore's version of nature gets wilder and more fearsome, finally resulting in an avalanche going off "with a sound like the crack of a rifle, / in a curtain of powdered snow launched like a waterfall." So I took them to a place where we looked down on the Nisqually glacier, the same glacier whose snout we crossed on the road. (I think Moore might have climbed down to it—there is a picture of her standing on the edge of a dirty crevasse.) One of the sound technicians threw a rock while the other held up the microphone. And the result was strange karma—way across the valley, as if in response, a small avalanche tumbled down.

Moore spent the night at the Paradise Inn, which is where we go to take the chill from Angus's bones when we finally arrive at the top of the road. Built in 1917 in typical Park Service style, out of the kind of logs that epitomize Park Service structures, logs that look as if they would make a good throne for an ogre, the inn is a place where I rarely set foot back when I was a ranger, meeting its comforts with my disdain, intended as they were for tourists, a word I always ut-

tered—like the other rangers—with derision. Becky and Angus buy chili at the snack bar, but I stick to the cheese I've brought and a mealy apple from my own tree. I can at least be a climber in this regard—eating bad, cold food.

From here, Moore hiked with her brother to the mountain's famous ice caves under the Paradise glacier, formed by the river that runs underneath. I do not know if Moore toured the caves as I did, entering the darkness with my headlamp where the river flows beneath the glacier, following the river until it exits at the wide mouth of the cave. Her poem is full of colors that seem accurate enough: emerald and turquoise and manganese-blue. They would have been lit by daylight through the dense quartz layer of the ice, which gives the colors a muted neon glow.

But the Paradise glacier is just about gone now, its lower reaches reverted to *firn*, the intermediate state between ice and snow. It is sad to fathom how the fundamental thing—a glacier—on which Moore built her poem could have disappeared, for the poem is nothing if not a statement about the endurance of the unfathomable complexities of nature in the face of the human desire to get them figured out. The fact that the glacier has melted away delivers a blow to the gut of the poem. It may have been complex, but it did not endure.

A few relatively flat meadows exist in Paradise—hence its popularity with nineteenth-century campers. From here a series of hillocks stair-step up—to a large snowfield that ends in Camp Muir, at 10,000 feet, where a climber has to rope up to begin glacier travel. On this day I can't see the mountain's

top, and the high clouds shrink the distances. The Tatoosh Range is visible to the south—black crags down which I glissaded every summer, an unmarked route that dropped back to Longmire.

Today we set off to wherever the dinky concrete trail leads. You can tell that the ground is not used to being exposed, as it is on this dry year with scant snow cover—the soil is brown and dusty between the various clumps of alpine leafage. Angus keeps forgetting that it's against the rules to wander off the trail—whenever we see a flower his impulse is to march straight for it. I would prefer that no one talk, a remnant from those days when I traveled alone, but how do you say to your friends, *Please do not speak?* It is rarely possible nowadays for me to replicate the experience of traveling alone. Sometimes Jim and I can manage it, but I am tired of requiring a husband.

People coming down the trail nod to encourage me a little more enthusiastically than seems natural, but I will not let this piss me off today. The ones who keep to themselves are those who have come down from the mountain's upper reaches. When I worked here I climbed to the top each year, just to prove that I could, and so I know them not just by their plastic climbing boots but also from their leathered skin that tells me they have spent time above the clouds. You climb at night, when there is less danger that ice will melt and crevasses pop open, and you try to time it so that you get to the summit not long after the break of day. That first light is an oozy purple with the clouds below, when you gradually step out of their last stratum. That light is what people

climb for, I think. Everything else is dark or heat or cold or exhaustion, but the early light is heaven.

Now there is one young woman walking down alone with ski poles in her hands to break the impact on her knees. Her hair has been pinned up carelessly, and her gaiters and clothes are ragged. I want to stop her and suck her blood: *I was you, make me you again.* I should know better—if she really is me, then she would probably resent the intrusion on her privacy.

Since I can't march, my plan is to be content with identifying the plants, even though it seems unnatural to wrench knowledge from the field guides without balancing that knowledge with some gained by experience. So I tell myself: *Okay, have an experience.* Two ravens swing on branches overhead along with the other birds made bold by years of snack food. This is my experience: to hear the ravens croak. To hear the slow, sporadic way they say the word *grok*. (This, the book says, is how you tell them from crows.)

It turns out that we are indeed late for the peak blooming weeks, which come right after snowmelt. And it is my habit to sulk when I feel that my perfect experience has been foiled by my disease—if I were healthy, I would have come here alone and sooner. But Becky points out that there are still plenty of ragged stragglers, like the blue cascade asters everywhere. And purple gentian, the last bloomers, just coming up, their flowerheads like little boxing gloves punching upward from the ground.

Dirty white mops, which are the seed heads of spent anemone flowers, stake the hillside. And the tall dry stalks of

hellebore, a plant distinguished by its pleated leaf. Becky and I stop often to consult the field guides and play our knowledge game. Angus is fidgety and wanders ahead until he realizes he's lost his \$500 Harley-Davidson sunglasses and heads back down in a tizzy to see if he's left them on the bike. We wait for him at a dip with a trickle of snowmelt where neon-pink monkeyflowers still bloom.

Even before he returns over the rise, we can hear him coming back up: now he's wearing the sunglasses and talking on his cell phone. When he gets off the line, I grouch at him for trammeling on my nature experience with his technology and loud blabbering.

"But I wanted to call my brother George! I wanted to tell him about all this!" His excitement shows in his voice's high pitch, as if we have taken him to the moon. He tried to come here once with his wife, he says, but heights scared her and they turned back.

And now my friends force me to turn back because the asphalt is getting rugged and ripped. I have no choice but to let them have their way since they are the ones who've been pushing me free when my wheels spin, though not to end somewhere spectacular seems anticlimactic, and I feel my expectations plummeting again, which forces me to find an Indian paintbrush flower still in bloom so I can write this down in my book of gratitudes.

The scooter skids down the pavement—the paths have been steeper than I realized. Angus and Becky walk in front of me and promise they're willing to throw themselves in my path if I lose control. I've given up on having a meditative ex-

perience, though there are not many people out on this gray day. Still, when we come to a marmot near the trailside, I tell my friends to shut up for a while.

The marmot makes a show of chewing its dry weeds, its silver fur rippling on its perch on a rock. Long ago, I chose this species for my totem animal: for its sweet whistle but mostly for its sluggishness and love of sleep. It does not keep score of its accomplishments. And it doesn't need to keep a book of gratitudes because it's grateful for every leaf it bumbles on.

We stand frozen, and the marmot doesn't flinch, not even when a family comes noisily trooping down the trail.

"Hey!" they yell to us, and still the marmot doesn't spook. "He was in that same spot hours ago when we passed him going up."

Marianne Moore also includes the marmot in her poem, supposedly as a surrogate for her brother, after learning that her first choice, the badger (from *Wind in the Willows*) was not found on this mountain. The marmot's whistle she describes as "the best wild music of the forest," the marmot itself the victim of "a struggle between curiosity and caution."

But our real marmot does not seem to be struggling with caution, and the only way we'd arouse its curiosity is if we held out a potato chip, which is against the rules. Moore quotes with condescension from the park rules of her day: "that one must do as one is told" and conform with the man-made regulations if one is planning to conquer the

wilderness, the place where you'd think you'd be most free. Nowadays the most pointed example I can think of is that once you step onto the glacier to begin your travel there, you must carry down any waste you generate in a blue plastic bag. There are two methods, I was told: you either use the bag like a mitten or squat over it, making a direct deposit.

Two-thirds of the way through Moore's poem about Mount Rainier, she suddenly brings up the ancient Greeks and their fondness for smooth and polished surfaces, their shunning of the disorder that more truly characterizes nature. Happiness is attained by willpower, she says, with Greek civilization

ascribing what we clumsily call happiness
to "an accident or a quality
a spiritual substance or the soul itself,
an act, a disposition, or a habit
or a habit infused, to which the soul has been persuaded,
or something distinct from a habit, a power"

Happiness comes through persuasion and practice, according to Moore: it's an unnatural state of being that we can learn. As far as my own happiness goes, the first thing I have to learn in order to attain it is how not to envy healthy, hearty people like Marianne Moore—who poses in old photos with her gaiters and alpenstock.

The trip home was uneventful. Angus must have been even colder going down. At one point, as we drove the mountain road, the summit of Mount Rainier appeared

through a hole in the clouds, a sight we had not seen all day. But when we pulled over, Angus signaled wearily for us to drive on. And a few days after our trip, he told me that as he shined the bike's pipes and tightened its bolts, he realized he'd become indifferent to it. The motorcycle was just a surrogate, he realized, when what he really wanted was a woman.

(Sure enough, by the time I edit this, the woman is found and the bike is sold.)

As for Marianne Moore, I was surprised to read that on her second trip west she didn't even go to Mount Rainier. The mountain wasn't what she wanted, though I don't understand it—how a healthy woman could *not* want the mountain. But she was content to study it from a rented cabin sixty miles away as she devoted herself to the geography she was most passionate about, which was the landscape of her poem.