

## YOU ARE THE MOUNTAIN

by Kyle Boggs

What we do to the mountain, we do to ourselves, we say again through hoarse voices that shake, and are quickly carried off by that which sways the trees. This time, as sharp as pine needles, we repeat: what we do to the mountain we do to ourselves. Gazing upward toward the elegantly sloping figure of the Peaks, we turn back toward each other, pressing forehead against forehead. We close our eyes tightly, this time whispering through clenched teeth.

What we do to the mountain, we do to ourselves.

We stand like this in silence. And at first, I feel my toes going numb. The wind makes your tears cold to the touch; cupping your cheeks, I take a deep breath, opening my eyes to meet yours. I see deep inside you a reflection of myself, of the mountain, of eternity. When I look into those deep irises, I realize it is not a numbness I feel, but my body surrendering. And suddenly there is no difference between my body and the soil beneath my feet, my heart and yours. The birds, the wind, the trees, the trickle of snowmelt, and you, my love, I feel you as intimately as my own flesh. And I know you see it too. You are so beautiful. You are the mountain.

You rise from where the desert sands become rocky, from where valleys become canyons. You rise from the mesquite-covered Black Hills to the cottonwood trees tracing the gentle form of the Verde River—that river, still wild—that river, which owes you its life.

You rise from the Painted Desert, from the Hopi Mesas, where sagebrush gives way to piñon and juniper. And still you rise over the Vermillion Cliffs, where the condor sore through Marble Canyon.

Alas, you were there when the Little Colorado finally pushed through the sandstone to meet its parent at the confluence. Alas, you have known the Grand Canyon since it was a mere crack on the horizon.

You are the mountain. You rise above the Mogollon Rim as the highest point on the Colorado Plateau, where a sea of ponderosa pine embrace Douglas fur, evergreen, and groves of yellow aspen, toward your uppermost reaches, where you kiss the clouds that gently glide over your body.

You are the mountain. And you are so much more than this. It was Leopold who got it wrong in *Thinking Like a Mountain*. Not thinking, so much as remembering, means that one does not need to kill a wolf to understand the green fire. Inside those windows that shine so brightly, there is a still a green fire, a life carved from more than rock and soil. You are the wildflowers, the grasses, and the moss. You are the tassel-eared squirrel dancing among the lush green fern. You are the elk sipping melted snow, only to pause briefly before skipping off without a sound.

You are the mountain. You are the horny toad waiting for the frost, the swagger of the skunk, the prick of the porcupine, and the transformation of the butterfly. You are the rabbit looking up at the raven eyeing the snake that is waiting for the mouse. You are the soil that feeds the trees that caress the streams that form the canyons. You are the trees that sway like hair and the roots that embrace roots deep below your skin. You are the snow that collects in the pond where the salamander lives that teases the birds that live in the trees that will one day return to the soil.

Without all of these things the mountain would be dead. And you, my love, you are very much alive. You are the mountain.



Your integrity is sustained, not through myths of science, or through the myths of the Forest Service, but through an understanding that what we do to the mountain we do to ourselves, that water, blood, and soil are not so categorically different.

You are the mountain. Both physically and emotionally, you have scars. You are the reason for the city built upon your foothills, and it is you upon which the city fashions an identity, the mountain town. Yet they cut you deeper. They name your wounds: Larry's Line, Mo's Bowl, Yogi's Catwalk, the Dutchman; mortal names carved onto your immortal body. They bleed you out as surely as they bleed themselves; the green pipe, the surgically implanted artificial veins, from which they flow poison, from which they flow arrogance.

You have been led to believe, however, that you are not the mountain. They poison you with dogma as surely as they do with reclaimed wastewater. You have been, as that drunken poet said, "born into this." Born, the stone-age baby into the chaotic maelstrom of western, first world existence, born with a beating heart and a ferociously hungry imagination, born with empathy, compassion, and love.

Yet you have been led to believe that dignity is something earned, that it can be given and taken away; you have been led to believe that you do not need the trees, the rivers, the valleys, the canyons, the falling snow, the mountains.

But you do. And you have always known this.

You are the mountain, which is to say you are much more than what you have been told. You know things you don't remember learning. The collective memory of millennia is stashed away in your unconscious. Every now and then, and rather unexpectedly, the knowledge of your ancestors, of my ancestors, appears in your waking life. You are more than your job. You are more than your voting record. You are more than the films you enjoy or the music you collect. You are more than firing synapses and coursing serotonin. And you are no more your physical features than you are the muscle and the bones and the blood flowing beneath them. Every cell in your body has been completely replaced over and over again. Yet you remain inexplicably you.

It is not what we do to the mountain; after all, it is what they do to the mountain, to you, to me, to all of us that is at stake. And the only real question is: how will you respond?

Under the concrete, beneath the layers of social constructions, of cultural myths about the one right way to live, beyond a dominant culture no longer driven by well-meaning hearts like yours, there is a world you used to know, a real world that deeply misses you.

Will you hide within yourself or will you rise like the mountain you are?

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