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Defining Home: A Collection of Environmental Essays

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Defining Home:

A Collection of Environmental Essays

Honors Senior Thesis by Heather Bulliss

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Introduction

Nature writing is a creative genre that has been both celebrated and criticized as a part of the American literary tradition, beginning—at the latest—with the publication of *Walden*. Since that time, writers have both strove to adhere to this genre, while others, like Edward Abbey, have harshly reprimanded those who have not only referred to their writing as “nature writing” but who have insisted that such a genre can be distinguished in the first place. The purpose of this project was to explore this genre, to determine the dos and don’ts and how-tos of adhering to a genre that is not only debated, but potentially pertinent in a world that seems ever ready to forget nature as a good and necessary entity, essential to human life.

The essays herein serve as an artistic experiment of sorts. Though the essays arguably fit into confines of subgenres of nature writing, they do not adhere so strictly that they must be identified by this genre. “The Constancy of Mountains” was informed by the travel narrative, “The Curious Miniatures” inspired by the form of the natural history, and “Día de los Muertos” closely related in theme to the solitude essay, however, in many ways these essays became something entirely their own. As I wrote, I recognized repeated themes and patterns throughout the essays, discovering not only what it meant to write about nature, but what specifically what the natural world means to me as an individual. In the case of these essays, it became overwhelming obvious that I define my sense of security, my sense of belonging, to my natural surroundings. I define “home” not by an actual place on a map but by the way places make me feel, how I’m able to connect to them intimately—a connection that seems ultimately dependent upon the natural world. Of course, home also has something very much to do with the people one finds there, and each of the essays touch on this concept as well.

In regards specifically to environmental writing, these essays became a means by which I as a writer could really explore what it meant to write about nature or my environment in the direct context of my life. Simply writing about nature wasn’t enough; good writing should almost automatically include

these details of place, of timbre, of life as it naturally occurs. To be definable as environmental writing, I strove to make the environment of each piece almost an active character, central to the broad meaning of each piece as a whole. In “The Constancy,” the natural focus is the Spanish Peaks. The Peaks serve as a foil of sorts to the relationship, one strained under the stress of a first road trip, of being someplace one has never been. Similarly, the natural character of “Dia de los Muertos” is a grouping of mountains. In this essay, the mountains act more as a symbol, emphasizing the fear and desperation associated with feeling alone, with feeling like one possesses nowhere to belong.

The essay that differs the most—and potentially strays the most from “nature writing”—is “The Curious Miniatures.” The essay is very much influenced and defined by the environment in which it is defined, but, for the most part, this not a natural environment. The essay—which began as a natural history—focuses more on the role of the city and of our man-made dwellings in their splendor. The natural history aspect of the essay attempts to trace the history of the art work described therein but becomes, more than anything, a natural history of an experience and a definition of “home.”

Through the writing of these essays, I’ve recognized the significance of acknowledging the contrast between city and nature, industrial and rural, confined and free, and how these differences affect us as individuals and a society and the value of each place in our lives. Due to the restrictions of the subgenres of the essays, they collectively only slightly addresses this conflict within their content. However, even acknowledging the conflict to this extent has raised my awareness to the importance of further addressing this topic in the field of creative writing.

The Constancy of Mountains

The tent warms quickly in the rising sun.

I want to stay inside, wrapped in this light, wrapped in his arms, but my back aches from lying on unknown ground, and I need to stand. I need to move. He watches me as I roll, as I kick the sleeping bag away from my feet, rubbing his hand slowly up and down my side. His hair is more matted than it is in the mornings at home. His skin glistens in a way it never could in the artificial light and air conditioning of our bedroom. His eyes look anything but rested.

Here, in this Colorado campground, we are the farthest either of us has been from home. When we arrived in the dark last night, neither of us knew where we were. Where we really were. We could point to a map and say “there,” our finger covering half the state for good measure. We knew from the radio to avoid the west, the wildfires. But even now, we have never heard of the town called La Veta. We did not see the lake held snug within the curve of the road. We did not notice the wildflowers growing like star dust on the dry ground, peering out the dirt around us. We didn’t know we rested in the shadows of the Spanish Peaks, those twin towers of molten rock. Neither of us has ever seen a mountain and, in the dark, neither of us even noticed them.

Through the mesh of our tent, we see them now, and we revel in their fortitude. In their permanence. Their rocky faces stare off into nowhere, into a place we will never find. We are but human, and in the heat, in their shadow, unable to do anything else, we make love. We move quietly over the polyester of our unfurled sleeping bags, push to the side with our toes our luggage, the portable fragments of the place we call home.

Our skin becomes something other than skin. For a moment, for a millisecond, our flesh is water, and we float within ourselves. Upon ourselves. We are not two entirely separate beings. For a moment.

The wind shifts. The walls of the tent quiver, then calm.

I imagine we are on top of those peaks, one for each of us, and we are calling across the valley, whispering across the hillsides, each begging the other to just move a little closer, to close the gap of space and time between us. We're standing on our tiptoes on the edge of cliff. A breeze, a flinching cloud, a misheard word will send us wheeling. So we keep our distance; we say nothing at all.

This is nothing like our first time, with the sand still stuck between our toes, between the crevices of our flesh. Echoes of the Michigan shore. Dream catchers hung against the white plaster walls of his bedroom. Dust falling like crow feathers, dancing with rippled trance-thoughts in fading light. His mother stirring in the living room, beneath the painted landscape, the river crashing upon the rocks beneath the trees, the blue sky shimmering in the gold frame. His sweat glowed in the burn of street lights, blue in the blink of the television screen. And he held me.

Now, we are so thirsty, so warm. Our bodies battle the worst drought this land has seen in over fifty years. We cannot imagine fifty years. Or what it means to be a mountain. Or just how far from home we really are. We separate ourselves without words. I stand, dress quickly. Silently. The zip of the tent's door shatters the illusion of morning. The sun is higher now, the ground ever turning.

As I leave, I take the camera, try to capture this place, to keep it with us always, not yet realizing what this place will come to mean.

I turn towards the tent, lift the camera, scuttle around until I've found the best view. I want to remember exactly where we slept, exactly where we rose. We are bound to this land now, it becoming somehow part of us. I cannot simply press the button. I must frame this poly-nylon-plastic dome with just enough grass, just enough of a bending tree branch that it does not look so entirely out of place. This must be perfect.

This is how I will remember this place. How I will remember this lovemaking, this heat, this tension, buzzing in the heavy air.

I walk toward the road. The dry grass cuts my ankles as I bend, aiming the lens beneath the phone wires. But the mountains, the Spanish Peaks and their magnitude, cannot be captured without them. I turn toward the lake. More mountains, the Sangre de Cristo, reflect off the water. These are not like the Spanish Peaks, two separate stocks piled upon an open field, touching, yet completely alone. No, the Sangre de Cristo are nothing like that. They rise and fall as many. They rise and fall as one. I catch the grass along the water's edge, the ripples on the surface, and the mountains, framed by trees, within a single shot.

I return to our site, our momentary dwelling. We are nomads, he and I. Searching for something we haven't yet lost. Searching for something we might never find.

Like when he proposed. I knew what was coming. The flowers his mother left on my seat in the car while we were in the theater was the biggest giveaway, but I still acted surprised when he bent to one knee beneath the tree. Our favorite tree. As he stood, I jumped into his arms. My own arms wrapped around his shoulders, my legs dangling. He twirled, holding me, and when he set me down, the ring was no longer in the box. I panicked. We flipped over hundreds of fallen leaves, one after the other, searching in the fading light. I had to find this ring. I thought he would never love me—could never love me—if I couldn't find it.

The diamonds now glint in the sun, still rising. Still burning. We have not spoken of what it is we have lost. Or what specifically it is that is missing. But its absence now hangs over us, and the neck of our marriage lies outstretched, bare to its blade. I realize the pictures aren't my attempts of preserving this moment—they are my attempts of holding onto everything that came before; the lens is my telescope, my magnifying glass. My life raft.

As I walk back, I watch him, trying to pack up the tent. He stares at each piece, slowly lifting them towards him, turning them back and forth in his hands, uncertain of where we first found each one in the dark. I set my camera down, snatch the bag from him, thinking about how even last night he was

not good for anything other than holding a flashlight. The tent is new, and it simply won't fit back into its packaging quite the way it did before. I rip out all the pieces he has collected, throw them across the ground where they gather dust. Crumpled there in the dirt, it is hard to believe that less than hour ago, this thing, this mess could stand on its own. Harder still to believe that we had lived inside it, had breathed, had loved within its walls. I growl—literally—and wonder aloud why everything has to be so difficult.

Not willing to admit, of course, that I am the one making it so. Not willing to meet his eyes, to see his slightly opened mouth, the pained scrunch of his brow.

I abandon my attempts to stuff the tent in its bag, of pinching and pulling the zipper shut and then open again. I try to close the trunk. The six gallon tank of water sloshes under the added weight of sleeping bags and sweat-stained pillows. The door won't close. I take things out, put them back in the exact same way. The door won't close. He moves near me.

He touches my arm, and I pull away.

He offers help. I shrug, saying nothing.

He begins to move things around, to take things out and put them back in different place. I know there's sense in this. But I swear he's putting them back in all the *wrong* different places. The plastic container filled with our separate shampoos and conditioners, our toothbrushes, and various flavors of toothpaste cracks in its new location. The suitcase of books, the one I insisted on bringing though I will not finish a single one of its many volumes, does not seem quite as protected pressed against the metal arm of the trunk door.

I push him away. The sun, now high in this Colorado sky, pulls at the skin on my back. The mountains offer no shelter from its gaze, and I can feel my back and shoulders tighten as they burn. I grab the sleeping bags and throw them into the trees. I toss our pillows, the ones I've been trying so

hard to keep out of the dirt, onto the ground. I wheeze as I begin just shoving everything every which way. I don't look at him as I do so.

If we were home, it would be the dishes he hasn't cleaned, though most of them are mine.

If we were home, it would be the piles of paper on his desk, though most of it is unopened mail with my name on it. There, too, he simply stays quiet. Watching me. His mouth hanging just slightly open, his eyes pulled just slightly shut—preparing for tears, should this be the time I finally leave him for no reason at all. There, too, he simply waits for the storm's passing, washing the dishes by hand when there are none left clean in our cupboards. Going through the envelopes, piece by piece, tossing out those that are not needing, reminding me to open those that are.

Here, he finishes packing. Without ever looking directly at me, he fits the tent back into its bag. He arranges and rearranges the contents of our too full car—the towels we left out to dry, the fire tools we couldn't use, the baskets of food, the laptop and notebooks and sharpened pencils—finding a place for all of it.

We get in, the coolers pressing into the backs of our seats, pillows and blankets piled high in the back window. And he drives. I direct him from my atlas; he wants to listen to his gps. We turn around once, twice. We return the way we've come only to turn back again. Once, twice, he pulls over. Looks at me and—not quite yelling—asks, “What do you want me to do?” I stare down at my feet, at my hands that are not holding his.

“Whatever you want.” And he pulls back onto the road, glancing back and forth from his e-directions to the map now limp in my lap. This is the first time we have ever been lost together. The first time we've ever been this far from home. The first time we have ever felt so far apart.

We are hungry. I start to pull out cold-cuts and crackers from the back seat. Neither of us wants cold-cuts. Neither of us desires crackers in this heat, the air already so try in our tightened throats.

We need gas. There is small town in the shadow of the Spanish Peaks. We don't not know its name, who dwells within its houses, what we will find when we stop there. But we do stop, tired of turning in circles, tired of each other's tired eyes. There is a diner across the street from the gas station. A small eatery with a sign that boasts of gourmet sandwiches and soups. We don't want cold-cuts; we don't want crackers.

He pays for the gas, feeds the car from the old-fashioned pump. I used to stand outside with him, when we needed gas. In the winter, I would press my face into his chest, watch our breath rise and fall together, the car supporting both our weight as he leaned against it.

He hangs the nozzle on the hook, thanks the mechanic who runs the little station, before getting back into the car. "The soup?" he asks. "Maybe they'll have broccoli cheddar or tomato. You could get grilled cheese with it." Though I did not even consider standing with him for the gas today, I long more than anything to bury my face against his skin, to listen to his heartbeat, to feel his arms around me.

"Ok." And we pull slow across the road, park in front of the door, walk tentatively, moving close to one another as we walk, but we don't touch. The sleeves of our shirts might brush together, but with our hearts still raw, my anger—that unexplained, uncontrolled beast in my chest—still simmering, we keep just enough distance between us that neither of us is sure what the other is thinking. Neither of us knows if it's ok for our skin to collate, to join across this space between us.

I'm afraid to the make the first move. Afraid that this time, so far from home, I have gone too far. That if I reach out, wrap my fingers around his, he might pull away. That the damage—*because* we're lost, *because* we're so far from home—is irreparable. And I've lost him.

There are two people on staff, so few that the landscaper, having sought solace from the day in the lobby's shade, seats us before returning to the heat. Sitting at the wooden table, he watches me. I still don't dare to look fully into his eyes, afraid of what I might find there. They are wide, searching. He follows my gaze outside the window. A man stands in his garage, tinkering with his daughter's bike as

she bounces a ball against the pavement. Quietly, cautiously, we talk about how we might want to live beside a mountain, how we might like to live in a small town. I wish to myself that I could be a mountain. Not just standing on its peak, but actually made of stone. Solid. Unchanging.

Unwavering in my love.

We are the only people in the large room, and I pay attention to it now. The art on the walls is strange. Boasting of teal and magenta that reminds me of the nineties and makes my head spin. But I don't mind these colors here, hanging on these walls. There is something of the west in them. But something eastern, too. Not completely native, but not completely haughty, either. There is a comfort in this, in the collision of opposites. As if this place was made for the sole purpose of reassuring guests, "It's alright. It doesn't matter. You're here now; we don't mind where you've been." Here, in this middle place, within these walls and their colors, we are just us. We are safe from the sun. We are safe from the dust. The mountains do not taunt us with their consistency.

He reaches his hand across the table. His thumb strokes the tops of my fingers. I do not want to leave this moment. I do not want to leave this wooden table and this wall art. The solace, the comfort of this place. The acceptance of this unchanging town. I look into his eyes. My lips stay pressed tight, but one side lifts up, just slightly. A half smile. And he looks back. He sees me; he knows. We are far away from home. The farthest we have ever been.

The Curious Miniatures of Mrs. James Ward Thorne

The boys, of course, love the Arms and Armor room—the sunray patterns of colored metal fashioned into a shield, the funny half armor of a Pikeman that poofs out like a dress, the fully suited knight greeting guests on horseback. In this room, these boys dream themselves real-life comic book heroes, swinging imagined Thor-ian hammers in the shadows of 400-year-old artifacts of war. When their parents lead their sisters away from the room by hand, the youngest boys insist on galloping ahead, their imaginary swords recharged in the wake of old power.

The older boys linger, bask in the shadows, suddenly struck with a profound awareness that they are not knights, not really. They age in an instant, wonder if—though not knights—they could be strong enough, brave enough, true. These boys—the pensive, wondering boys—stuffs their hands into their pockets, and when they walk, they cross their legs slowly, one in front of the other as if on tightrope, swaying in the wind.

The girls are enamored with the Art Institute’s room of little rooms. The exhibit is arranged as a hallway wrapped around an island of walls. The space is flanked on either side with gold-gilded frames, very much like an ordinary art gallery. But the glass in this room does not guard mere two-dimensional paintings or prints. The frames do not simply rest against a solid wall with nothing behind them but dust and drywall. No, the content of these frames extend beyond the frames, reaching into the very walls themselves. These are the Miniature Rooms of Mrs. James Ward Thorne.

The girls skirt around and around the gallery, their tiny shoes thumping against the step that lines the bottom of the walls, present for the sole purpose of giving the little ones a boost. Even with the step, in their eagerness, they ask their mothers and fathers to take turns lifting them to see these little rooms. They don’t want to miss anything. Their tiny noses touch the glass, their pink-painted fingernails digging deep into the frames.

I join the skittish girls, their tired parents, their warrior brothers, and those older boys still lost in self-wonderment—keeping always two or three frames between them and their families, leaving more room for their aging thoughts—and I know nothing of Mrs. Thorne. I have been here before, and though I have found the rooms amusing, I have never labored over them, never gotten close enough to see the fog of my breath on the glass. There is no particular reason for my previous disinterest or my sudden need to look deep into every frame, as if I am searching for something. But this is what I do, now: search.

I take turns with my companion, pointing out our favorite details to one another. The hands of the clock in the French Provincial Bedroom, the harp strings in the French Anteroom, the stained-glass windows of the English Roman Catholic Church, Gothic style. She swoons over the birdcage, complete with tiny birds, in the Virginia Drawing Room; I cannot look long enough at each candle fitted to the chandelier in the South Carolina Ballroom. The girls, who have spent so much time dragging their mothers and fathers to each of the picture-perfect princess rooms, running impatiently around me if I lingered too long in front a frame, have tired and left long before I am half satisfied.

Though I revel in noting the details, at the time, I do not know how meticulously Mrs. Thorne labored to bring each of her rooms into being. “Purely a labor of love,” she wrote of her process. I do not know that before any room was given walls, rugs, or frame that Mrs. Thorne first traveled the world, studied books and paintings, carefully drew—or had drawn for her—retrospective blueprints of historical homes.

I do, however, marvel at how, when I lean far enough left or far enough right while keeping my face close to the glass, I can see rooms *within* the rooms. Doorways and hallways open not to blank, white space, but to more three dimensional places hidden beyond the frame’s edge. Behind windows—which I can see through—yards possess shrubbery, and though the horizon is flat, painted behind the

landscape, I imagine that if a draft were to come through the room, I might actually see leaves fall from the fitted branches.

I do not know that Mrs. Thorne took it upon herself to learn wood carving, taking pride in fashioning the thinnest table legs. I do not consider that she personally completed much of the petit point in the making of the cushions, couches, and chairs. I do imagine her peering into each glass case, quizzically questioning whether or not the grandfather clock should be moved .04 inches to the right and if this chair should have three legs on the rug or two. I envision her holding a thick magnifying glass, but I do not know she was also holding a pair of tweezers, upholstering, painting, wallpapering, pinching, picking, perfecting, twelve hours days in her home studio.

Though I am in awe, I grow quiet. I become contemplative like the older boys, now long gone. I am whisked away, in part, by the magical realism of the rooms like the girls, like the younger boys among the swords; but I recognize that there is a falsity in these rooms, that they are reconstructions only. That knighthood and chivalry and princess-dom are reconstructions, romanticized memories of the past. They are far too small here for anyone to ever really walk through.

Though, here I am, lost in Mrs. Thorne's rooms. Even if false, there is also a truth in these rooms. I realize, after sometime, I'm not simply looking into little worlds as something separate from myself, but I believe myself, to some extent, to be entering these worlds. Walking through the glass. The effect begins as little more than a feeling, nothing more than me imagining my pointer and middle fingers walking together across marbled and hardwood floor like little legs. But as I linger, as I am mentally shrunk to scale and being wandering through the walls, I'm not just in a room in a wall in Chicago.

I am sent back in time; I walk into a room in a 400-year-old cathedral, and when I exit stage left down an endless hall, I find myself in the Salon of Louis XV, leather books lining the shelves from ceiling to floor. Or in the contemporary Majorcan Kitchen. Reformulated from a photo in a book, this kitchen's tiny pieces of service-ware range in origin—Spain, Mexico, Nicaragua—gathered and shipped from the

ends of the world. I am traversing both time and space at the hands of this woman, a single room consisting of places separated by the expanse of oceans and mountains, the time leaping from my present to hers, to that which she has framed before me.

I do not know that for what she could not master, what she could not find in markets and souks and what she could not build herself, she hired artisans, specialists. The tiny pieces of furniture, the little tapestries and rugs, the original paintings—created with real paint, tiny brushes, patient hands—that she could not make in the space of her studio, she commissioned. She studied the window scenes of local department stores, prepared at any moment to march into their work rooms, demand to know who had been responsible for the display, and hire them immediately for five cents more.

Her favorite of these stores was Marshall Fields, that staple of the streets of her Chicago, only a quarter mile from where I stand now.

Never showing her work until into she was fifty—her rooms honored in her first major showing as part of the *Century of Progress* Chicago World Fair—Mrs. Thorne had mastered the secret of retaining youth: never ceasing pursuit of one’s childhood pleasures. She loved dollhouses as a child, but this love was not just that gender-enforcing, just-like-every-little-girl-since-the-beginning-of-time love. When she opened her galas, it was not for her gain, but for the gain of the viewer, the experience she could provide. Any profits she might’ve made, she passed on to others: to underpaid artisans, widowed women, the patients of a children’s hospital. This love was her obsession, that something-every-artist-must-have adoration, and her art—her passion—was consumed with sharing the life of miniatures with the world.

I have known this kind of love. My mother, the painter—my companion, a poet—have known this kind of love. We have been consumed.

And though Chicago was her home, the source of her patrons and her artisans, her passion began with a visit to Europe. Mrs. Thorne, having stumbled upon tiny chandeliers in a French flee

market, set out to collect other tokens, other period-themed memorabilia and returned home with a trunk of treasure. Miniature armoires, globes in their stands, bed posts, vases of flowers, wall clocks, framed and hand-painted masterpieces, sets of dishes, little rugs.

I collect my treasure as moments. Pressing my face to the glass of the world, my love, my obsessions are my moments that move slower than most. Those times in which I am lost, far from home, far from a zone of comfort. Walking the streets of Chicago alone, dressing up for the opera, sitting on the floor of a college party with my laptop while I write. I do not mind the estrangement that comes in these moments, the solitude or the extreme inclusion, the recognition of myself as an oddity or as one simply refusing to mold to the world in which I find myself. I never search for a map, try to return, until my cases are filled with lost-ness.

I imagine Mrs. Thorne peeing out at me now, living within these frames. Watching my every move. She is ghost in these rooms, ever present. Not existent as an ectoplasmatic form of a lingering spirit but in the presence of her fingerprints, invisible to the eye, left in hundreds throughout these walls. I wish to touch where she has touched, to trace a path with my fingertips the places she has stepped within these frames. She is reaching her hand through the glass, grabbing hold of my hand, beckoning me to stay within these frames.

Her artisans still loiter here, too, a hundred finger prints of a hundred men overlapping, above, beneath, those of Mrs. Thorne—her art a collection of intimacy.

It is to her landscapes I flee. Though she loves this city—though I love this city—it does not feel like home now, to either of us. Her studio table has since revealed this: her love of little trees, kept in endless supply. Still holding her hand, absconding reality with a reckless abandon, I run my hand along the wisping brushstrokes of a painted blue sky. After Edwardian England, after Modern Carolina, Kentucky, and Japan, we run through these landscapes, these open places beyond the edge of the frames. We climb through the windows—Mrs. Thorne and I—to run through sunflower fields of

Provincial France. When we can run no longer, we fall asleep in hills of heather and dream of the Land of Oz.

Outside this museum, it is raining. Outside this museum, time races onward. The taxis continue to honk their horns, the clouds blacken and roll, towers Mrs. Thorne never saw bludgeon the sky, the people pause only to catch their breath.

But here, still inside the warmth of the rooms, time is slower than normal, one minute per second. One inch per foot. The light in the little staircase falls and shifts in different shadows with each hour. My heart changes with each beat, with each new room I walk through.

When I finally leave Mrs. Thorne's collection and step back out into the Chicago rain, I don't know that this city was her home. I don't know that these streets—though they have surely changed—were her streets. That this skyline—though likely so much taller than what she would have seen—was her sky. I do know that this place is not my own, that while I cut across streets in front of taxis, curl up against the warm bodies of friends sleeping on hotel floors, that while I chase ghosts in the stairwells of the Congress and get drunk at clubs I need passwords to enter, this city is not my own.

But it is part of me. Mrs. Thorne is now part of me. The Michigan shore is close, its waves beating indifferently to a beat entirely different from the rush of streets. These are waves Mrs. Thorne would have heard, would have seen. The water itself is the same water that would have sustained her, the very water that has sustained me my entire life. Across the lake, across its winter waves, I do have a home, I do have a place.

If the rooms are small, the city is colossal. It is moving, breathing, alive. But there is more life, I think, in the little rooms—in the hundreds of years they monument, the hundreds of hands that helped shaped them, the hundreds of guests who, just as I have, have found a solace in their fragile walls. I belong here, too, in the collision of present and past. In this fusion of interior and exterior. Of here. Of now. Listening to the heartbeat of Mrs. James Ward Thorne.

Día de los Muertos

The car creaks beneath us. Moans and growls and gutters beneath us. The passing signs tell us to turn off the air conditioning for the next seven miles. And we obey without hesitation, wipe the soon-to-be dripping sweat from our brows. The trucks drive slow around the curves of the mountain side, stretching the seven miles to what seems like ten, twenty, one hundred, the distance between cars withering. Bumpers nearly touching. The sun is high. We feel the heat like dust in our throats, though the windows are closed and the air is clear.

The barrels along the side of the highway shout silent warnings: RADIATOR FLUID, DO NOT STOP, DO NOT DRINK, and—we imagine—IF YOU BREAK DOWN, YOU ARE ALONE. But the cars along this stretch of highway are close. They move together like a single serpent, twisting and turning upon the tar, along the edge of these mountains, beside these looming piles of stone. Should falling rock crash and break against the pavement, there is no question that someone would be hit, that those of us remaining would think to ourselves, “How terrible. How terrible,” and “Thank goodness it wasn’t us, it wasn’t me.”

YOU ARE ALONE. But we are not alone, we assure ourselves.

But we are strangers to this land. We have only seen mountains once before, and they looked nothing like these. These mountains, these piles of boulders lining California’s eastern stretch of I-8, look nothing like the smoothed and pointed peaks of Colorado’s *Sangre de Cristo*. They look nothing like the Imperial Dunes, those sugar-like heaps of sand we passed what must have been just minutes ago. These mountains are peculiar, like something I would expect in images from a Mars rover. Foreign. Lifeless. Nothing I ever imagined existed here.

Green-gray brush glues the stacked stones together, the peaks looking ready to tumble with a single roll of thunder or thick slap of fog—thought I assume, there is rarely thunder here; I can’t imagine

there is ever fog. And the heat, the heat is unbearable. The car continues its creaking, the temperature gage twisting closer and closer to red. The engine shutters. Our brows shine. The signs still warn DO NOT STOP.

Three months from now, we'll attend Halloween parties. We'll find ourselves surrounded by people we do not know or have met only in passing. I will paint my face for *Día de los Muertos*, I will think to myself, in the confines of a stranger's walls, "I am completely alone." The other women, they will skip around in see-through tutus and pointe shoes. They will dance in skin-tight shorts and Wonder Woman headbands. I will sit in the corner, sipping a mixed drink of whiskey or rum, stroke the head of a cat that does not belong to me.

DO NOT STOP.

In these mountains, in these hot-glued piles of pebbles, we can't stop. We won't stop, even if we need to. The car lurches and shakes every time the transmission shifts gears. But the exits off this highway are few, and when we peer down the twisting slopes of those we pass, we see nothing. We see emptiness. We see roads that crumble into desert, stretching far—much farther than we dare to stray from this path we've planned, this path we've followed. The route to safety, should we seek it, is that very that promises to lead us astray. To leave us alone. I am driving. I am hot. I am a rose in a whiskey glass. I cannot stop.

The strangeness of these mountains is what will make them unforgettable in a week. A year. A lifetime from now. They will provide a new landscape for my dreams when my dreams turn to nightmares. I will not lie: there is a fear here. There is the idea that danger is always imminent. That at any point, around any corner, Death will be waiting. BEWARE OF FALLING ROCKS, the signs warn. DEVIL'S VALLEY, they inform.

I wonder how many have tried to pass through here on foot, imagine people trying to climb these hills. Human beings from the south, searching for a better life, a place they can belong. I have read

of them in *The Devil's Highway*, read Urrea's account of the twenty six who tried to walk across the desert. Who followed a boy with red hair, a boy called *Jesus*. A boy who abandoned them.

These rocks would provide good cover, I muse. The boulders appear almost intentionally placed, a million little footholds, perfect for climbing. But the air, the sun, I think, would prove even more dangerous than the Desert. Urrea writes of the desert and the path that cuts through it. The path the twenty six thought they were on. *Camino del Diablo*. He calls the Sonoran Desert *Soledad*. Solitude. He describes the walkers' journey, across the border, across the sand. Across Desolation.

Walkers rarely make it through.

But these mountains, these monsters, they are haunting. I would never wish to scale their sides, their poised peaks of doom. I want to take pictures, so I don't forget—so I remember the way my throat is closing at the sight of them, the way my knuckles whiten around the steering wheel, the way a part of me assumes there will be no end to them, or at least not one I will see—but forgetting is impossible. I wonder to myself if these hills are not part of some greater conspiracy. If they, and *Soledad*, do not exist for the sole purpose of keeping people out. Keeping people away. Alone.

Even the All-American Canal—that irrigation system of the south, that man-made river, rushing along the country's edge—is a part of the ploy, I think. A trick to persuade people back towards its bank when this land—the desert, the mountains—proves too trying. Their lips cracked, skin blackened, throats dry, the canal offers a promise of life, perhaps. But over five hundred have drowned in its currents in the last fifteen years, no signs warning DEADLIEST WATER IN U.S. and YOU DO NOT BELONG.

At the Halloween party, three months from now, the other women will compliment my *Dia de los Muertos* makeup. They will say, "So beautiful," and swoon over the roses I have pinned in my hair. I will hesitate. I will stay in my corner, stroking the cats, thinking I am the definition of solitude. But these women, they will have too much to drink, and I will leave my corner to bring them water. They will fall into each other's laps, and I will pour their drinks down the drain. "Thank you. Thank you," the hostess

will say before following a man she does not love to his car, pleading with him, for what—Another cigarette? A joint she claims to no longer want, would never use? A kiss goodbye, though her fiancé, passed out, is sleeping upstairs?—I will not know. Wonder Woman will cry—a love of five years only three weeks abandoned—and yell into a phone for hours before finally whimpering, “I hate her,” hanging up on a friend whose name she will no longer know.

Before any of this, when I first walk through door, I will think, “I do not belong.” I will see a table set up for beer-pong, hear music I would never want to dance to, be jealous of the love these women seem to share. I will think these women are my mountains, my nightmare. Their shared friendship is my desert; their beauty my *Soledad*.

But when they see my makeup, when they say, “Beautiful,” they will mean it. When I think they are drinking to lose themselves, I will realize they are already lost. They have already driven through this hell that we drive through now. They have read the signs. They have broken down. They are alone, tagged as immigrants within their own lives. And I cannot leave them abandoned. I can’t let them think that this fate, this scorching of their soles, is all that is left of them. I must find them, if I can.

I can’t find Devil’s Valley on a map. Nor in any website describing Southern Cali’s steep terrain. Each search engine asks, “Did you mean: Death Valley? Devil’s Basin? Devil’s Highway?” Devil’s Valley, I learn, is the title of a work of fiction, but I find nothing linking it to I-8. The signs have lied to us:

DO NOT STOP. We must stop always.

DO NOT DRINK. We will drink with caution. We will quench our thirst, to keep us from drowning.

YOU ARE ALONE. The signs do not say this, not really. But the mountains do. *Soledad* does. Even the “All-American” suggests that togetherness—unity between the “us” and “them”—does not exist. That death, desolation, is the only thing we—they—truly belong to.

I can’t let this be true.

The *Sangre de Cristo*, I remind myself, are nothing like these mountains. Their solid sides do not threaten to crumble in a single gust of wind. Though the valley is hot, the Spanish Peaks provide shade to the town of La Veta, and in La Veta, no one is alone. No one is forgotten.

Just outside the town's limits rests a roadside memorial. The land along the side of the country freeway rises up toward a soft peak of smooth rock—orange, maybe sandstone—the rock itself hollowed out by weather and rain in a series of shallow caves. Within each crevice, memories are laid bare like treasure. Statuettes of Mary and the Saints. A pair of shoes. Scatterings of faux flowers. Rosary beads. Rocks covered with names.

When we stopped to read them, these names, these love letters, a barbed-wire fence separated us from the caves. An apparent warning to all intruders to stay away. But the wires themselves weren't just wires anymore. They were transformed, covered with bandanas and handkerchiefs, wallet chains, handwritten notes in plastic bags, little crosses made of sticks. The people who had been here did not care what the fence seemed to say. They had found a way around it. Under it. Through it. They had found a way to belong.

In his recounting of the twenty six, in his warning sign, his reconstruction of solitude, Urrea recounts a conversation between border patrol and lost, sun-leathered men:

"They're dying."

"Who's dying?"

"Men. Back there. *Amigos*."

This is not just story Urrea has told. It is not just a political agenda, a reprimand of the border and its many horrors. It is not just an account of Desolation, an outcry of rage to the land to the land. A plea for the future. It is also a prayer for the past—a monument, a memorial. For *amigos*. It is Urrea reaching out to these men—men he did not know before their journey, before their loss, before their

hell—and climbing under the wire. Leaving letters and tokens, remembering the names of those who were lost and those still living, still trying to make peace with themselves.

His epigraph reads, “For the dead, and for those who rescue the living.”

He has listed the things that they carried.

He has noted the exact places they were found.

Like a cross beside a mountain road. A homage to the dead that says, “We remember.” A reminder to the living, “You are not alone.” Should this mountain I am tumble, I will stop. I must stop.

I will stop three months from now three to gather their bodies. *Mis amigos*. Collect the pieces of their broken hearts. Though we have only just met, I will hold them. I will long to carry them over the wire, to lift them slowly, gently, away from its barbs. When they are crying, I will want to stroke their hair, pull them close, and whisper:

“You are welcomed here. You are safe here.”

You belong.

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