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The Sensuosity of Sadness

Maggie Hippman (*University of Utah*)

“...the earth itself lives, slowly and grandly, in the metamorphoses of geology.”

-Rebecca Solnit

Disturbance bears beauty. This is evident from my backyard in Park City, Utah, where the Wasatch Mountains drape the skyline in dramatic angles of granite and limestone. A series of geologically traumatic events in history created what is now the steady container of the Great Basin.

The hands that sculpted this bowl knew something about chaos and transformation. A protracted collision to the tune of 20 million years of geologic faulting¹ created an elongated and irregular edifice made in mineral.

This is how the bones of the earth remember its own energetic potential. And I wonder if being here, surrounded by the constant reminders of ascension, evolution and visceral trauma, causes me to seek answers in the same way the mountains seek sky—with a yearning that lives so deep in the bones it is not recognised as a choice. I wonder if our bodies sympathise with the topographies we inhabit.

The Southwestern Navajo have a belief that perfection prevents spirit from entering something. In their meticulous artwork one can find an intended “flaw” called a *spirit line*. This break in the continuity of steely perfection is a doorway for mystery to enter and vivify the object.

¹ State of Utah. “Wasatch Mountains.” *Utah History To Go* (2016). Retrieved 24 Feb 2016 from http://historytogo.utah.gov/utah_chapters/the_land/wasatchmountains.html

I like to think of fault lines as the dynamic spirit lines of the planet, pulsing against the deepest desires of the earth's energetic core. Perhaps that is where the most essential negotiations take place, below the threshold of human hearing.

When my father became sick I moved for a summer to a remote valley in Colorado, completely encircled by thirteen-thousand-foot mountain peaks.

I found thin air. I found icy, swift water and endless miles of densely rugged trails. I found the peak of a fourteen-thousand-foot mountain at the apex of a clear day. I found the entire valley spread out before me to the edges of neighboring states. I found a slackline and a boy my age. I found giant elk skulls posited with poise on large boulders, herds of roaming elk unmoving in the mists that follow a cold night in an alpine forest. I found terror and exhilaration on solo long runs in the pre-dawn hours. I think I may have found the beginning of spirituality.

The Rocky Mountains brought me to the edge of the Continental Divide—that metaphorical roof of the continent that separates drainage to the Pacific from drainage to the Atlantic and Arctic Oceans and the Gulf of Mexico. This divide is perhaps the most significant partition of hydrology for the Americas. I had passed that great fulcrum and was being recalibrated. My thoughts began moving toward a new magnetism. The gravity of my sadness began to dissolve.

Insights gathered in that first bold act of pure necessity withered when I returned to the prairies and plains of Wisconsin for three more years to finish college. Nevertheless, the understanding that different places stoke different facets of myself had been integrated into the bedrock of my psyche.

My father became sicker. Alzheimer's fractured his humanity into a primitive state. I finished school and I moved to the Sierra Nevada Wilderness for five months, living in the

heart of the backcountry with a trail crew. We maintained and restructured existing trails. We cleaved granite into sharp slices with double-jacks and momentum. Because rock steps needed to be sturdy enough to support mule trains bringing travelers and supplies in the backcountry, we used rock bars to pain-stakingly align their corners to meet in the places of greatest integrity.

The Emigrant Wilderness (which borders Yosemite National Park) is the glaciated granitic terrain I inhabited that season with thirteen other twenty-somethings who also happened to be disgruntled with the clean edges of city life.

The stunning topography that shaped our bodies against it was formed in deep history through the clever action of water. Glaciers manage to cleave enormous chunks of rock from mountains by sending tiny arms of running water into the joints and cracks of the bedrock over which it flows. When the water freezes it expands and loosens the rock like a large football player elbowing his way through a dense crowd. Once the rock is loose the glacier essentially picks it up and carries it away—a process called “glacial plucking.” Once these stray rocks are stuck to the frozen glacier they serve as a sort of large-grained sandpaper which grinds at the rock surfaces over which it moves, causing further modification of the landscape.

Half Dome in Yosemite is a dramatic example of what glaciers can do. Half of its face was cleaved off because its surface was imperfect. Its fragility was exploited through the action of water and now it is a modern day mecca for rock climbers—that strange breed of humans who will risk their lives for the purity of ascent.

Someone once told me that perfection is not lovable.

My entire experience in the Sierras was one of weak parts of my psyche being gradually loosened from what I like to think of as my *essence*—what is left when my essential character is distilled into its most efficient form.

A clean daily routine which included rising and retiring with the movement of the sun, building my body against severe terrain and sleeping soundly beneath a sky black as ink and against ground as hard as dirt, must have helped me synchronise with a larger pulse.

The purity of necessity provided buffering action—smoothing out some of my rougher edges until I fit almost perfectly inside myself.

Adapting to this way of life simply required becoming acquainted with the details. In carrying water: small, quick steps so as not to spill too much water. Watch the ground: there are endless roots, patches of mud, awkward angles and sudden holes. In chopping wood: wear gloves. Swing the ax low behind me and then around in a clean arc that culminates in a quick crush down the centre line of my body into the wood, pulled by the weight of my body dropping lower, knees bending deeply.

I suspect that it was the attention to the necessary details that helped draw me into a rhythm of slow healing. In an existence as bare-bones as the naked rock faces of the High Sierras, the crutches required in “civilisation” (caffeine, technological stimulation, a certain collective neuroticism) became unnecessary and fell away effortlessly.

My father died while I was living in the backcountry. My crew leader received a vague warning over the Forest Service Radio during morning circle-up. After she pulled me aside and told me that I had to hike out. I walked to the enclave where my tent had been set up for almost two weeks. It was tucked behind a granite outcropping the size of a shed, overlooking the creek we bathed in. In a daze I shoved a tattered t-shirt and dusty pants into my backpack with my sleeping bag and a journal while all my edges began to

smear. With my crew leader, I hiked out twenty kilometres to the nearest trailhead. We walked down steps and steps of bare granite; through thick pine forests with familiar smells of duff and bark; across open expanses of fire torn places with only dry stumps and numb trunks; past rivers obscured by greenery. My tears spilled everywhere onto this stunning terrain. Tragedy lay in wait at the end of this trail and I knew it.

Driving to the Forest Ranger headquarters felt like flying through space in a metal box. I hadn't moved faster than my feet could carry me in months. Technology crept into my world like an invasive species. I wanted only to return to worrying about bears and rainstorms and the temperature of the baptismal alpine lakes.

Connected to an ancient land-line in the dilapidated Forest Service office I spoke with my mother. "We will wait until you are home to have the funeral," she said with authority. I booked a red-eye back to Madison, Wisconsin.

The layover in the Las Vegas airport was nauseating. Not only was it well past my eight pm bedtime, but there were endless posters of half-naked, heavily manicured women and men with seductive expressions, and many travelers multi-tasking fast food and slot machines. I was like a newborn in the middle of a busy street—wide eyed and clean, about to be overrun by a deranged modernity. I bought a foot-long Subway sandwich and a snickers bar to eat on the plane for a late dinner.

The blanket of night offered the softness of denial. My waking dream was that this was not real. I would wake cozy in my sleeping bag to the glorious warmth of the sun creeping up behind the Sierras. Light ripped through that illusion and I found moisture hanging heavy on my skin as I stepped into the dense humidity of Wisconsin.

There was noise and television and mattresses and strange industrial smells and abstract conversations. I scanned the horizon for hope. The small windows of land not obstructed

by buildings showed no signs of trending upward. The levity I felt when my eyes met mountains was roughly two-thousand-five-hundred kilometres away.

A few days after the funeral I returned to California to finish out the trail season. I fell swiftly back into the routine and, as it turns out, into love with a fellow crew member. Of course it was not him I was in love with. It was the place. But I didn't yet know how to ascribe that deep magnetism to complex topography and the voice of a meandering river. I required a human proxy.

In anthropology there is a word to describe the strange internal space one occupies when in grief. The term *liminality* comes from the Latin word *limen* meaning "a threshold." The term *liminal* is also used in reference to what can happen in rituals, rites of passage, religious experiences, critical life-stages (such as puberty), and those individuals who exist on the fringe of society. A liminal state is characterized by ambiguity and disorientation that results from the (voluntary or involuntary) departure from familiarity. The death of a loved one creates a rupture in the smooth surface of normalcy that one must then restructure themselves around. This liminal state can apply to an entire group or culture in the face of communal devastation (such as in the case of war, natural disaster, or, say, ecological collapse).

Merriam-Webster defines *threshold* as "the point or level at which something begins or changes." I think of the mountain ranges that encircle the Great Basin (the place I now inhabit) as one continuous geologic threshold. Those who live here are walled off from the eastern states by the Wasatch Mountains, while the Sierras block wind-bearing rains coming from the Pacific. The Columbia Plateau to the north and Mojave Desert to the south complete the lip of the Basin.

Ecologically the Great Basin designates a hydrological threshold. It is the only inland drainage system in North America. Where the momentum west of the Continental Divide pushes water toward the Pacific Ocean, the momentum here is to move inward.

Another definition given by Merriam-Webster for *threshold* is “the point at which a physiological or psychological effect begins to be produced.” Like an errant drop of rain landing in the belly of the Basin I have tried to run from here. But my desires ultimately bring me back—to the site of my deepest attachments and my hardest, most repulsive grief. It is all mixed into one giant potion of loyalty.

It took more than a year in Utah for me to cross the psychological threshold from emotional numbness to the affective dimension of pain. No wonder I kept trying to run! What met me at the gate of my own escape was nothing short of an emotional monster. What ultimately kept me tethered to this Basin was the open door it offered into wild places. Its alpine forests, wide-open vistas and Redrock deserts seduced me into staying.

But it was not simply the allure of the places themselves that kept me rooted. It was the awakening of my own subjectivity inside the recognition of theirs. I began to know the different flavors of desert light and smell of salt in the air. I crawled up canyons like they were my last chance at renewal (and maybe they were). I found myself praying—on long hikes through dense sagebrush—for the ability to translate the language of the desert into my own human understanding.

Now I wonder if the personal tragedy I walked through was in some way purposeful. As if there is some gigantic expert Navajo weaver who inscribes our lives with an inherent imperfection through which our spirit learns to breathe; and through which the earth pulls us back to itself—this time more deeply.

Maggie Hippman moved to the Western United States to work as a field guide in Wilderness Therapy in Utah, and continued to explore the healing potential of immersion in nature through formal studies in the Environmental Humanities program at the University of Utah.