

Wilderness House Literary Review 20/1

Jordan Thibault
strangers

Her weathered face was as rugged and windswept as the craig she stood upon, and in the leathered wrinkles an accounting of the universe and all its constituents could be made. The hair on her head was white as down and as light, drifting upon currents of air like cottonwood, and in the elongated light of dusk wavered like a luminescent halo.

She ranged upon the summit brow of Mount Mansfield from dawn to dusk. She spoke little unless spoken to and often stood like some silent apparition, hands clasped behind her back, gazing down from that tundra height to the green valleys below.

Of the hikers that toured these heights or passed through on their Long Trail travels, only I knew who she was, and although she often stood as still and stolid as a pillar or ancient milestone marking the way, she would not approve of the analogy.

After our first meeting I began hiking to the summit to join her solitary observations. Rarely did we speak, at first, but when we did, I felt I was being admitted glimpses into a recondite perception of reality, the taste of which incensed my desire for knowledge, both about everything everywhere and her all at once. Eventually I told her so.

But she simply shook her head sagely and her eyes smiled, crinkling her face like autumn leaves, and spoke of the consignment and allotment of land.

What do you mean? I asked naively.

In response she spoke of her childhood which was spent in a mill town in Rhode Island which had grown and prospered from the stunted bodies of children and the violent harness placed upon the Blackstone River, although it was not clear to me whether she recalled this abuse from personal experience or tacit knowledge. She continued her declamation describing the homes built upon false foundations torn from the flesh of the earth and buckled tarmac roads that struggled to maintain safe passage through the winter months.

Even then, she was—same as everyone—conscripted into a longstanding conflict with the natural laws ordained by transmutation and transformation without her consent.

Years later, she lived in New Orleans and within that sprawl scribbled by slavery, violence, and treaties of deportation began formulating her radical ideology concerning the nature of absolute and relative locations and her formal rejection of cardinal directions.

The surveillance of land and the development of infrastructure are equally detrimental to our species' biological proclivity to migratory patterns she explained. The graphic delineation of the earth's geography and the prerequisite naming of its features only demonstrates mankind's nescience.

The rapacity to coordinate our position within arbitrary monikers is

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proof of our own estrangement and our movement through the world is simply a false pretense of our own devising.

Her ruminations and explications drew me invariably into her silent contemplations, and as time, which is hardly more than a precondition for experience, passed behind us, I conceived the world as an amalgamation of all its tributaries without the need to dip into her well but as a fellow caretaker of deep, dark water.

Then she was gone. I never saw her again. But her provisional presence upon the mount had altered the very essence of its topography and alpine mosses and low-lying berry bushes in the moment it existed and its following absence which was proof of her words as I could no longer view the apex as the same location that had existed before, and indeed the place I had been had moved far, far away.