

Mountains of Love

Essay by T. A. “Tom” Barron

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Striding along this alpine ridge, I leap across the flowing rivulet that bubbles down from higher snows. Then, hearing the water strumming and gurgling, I bend down, drop my pack and splash my sunburned face. The snow-cold liquid shocks my skin, chills my teeth.

I pause, watching the water cascade over the toe of my old boot. Slowly I grow aware of the water's many voices. High-pitched splattering joins with low-down drumming. Somewhere, echoing among the rocks, a soprano chants a rolling hymn, while a basso profundo belts out the accompaniment.

At times largo, at times presto, the watery music pours on, splishing and burbling without every pausing for breath. Singing of all the places this water has been, all the places it will go. Cloud, snow field, rivulet, stream, puddle, pool, river, ocean, and one day back to cloud.

As I gaze up at the snowy slope, glowing peach in the late afternoon light, that familiar urge takes hold. I scamper up a rocky ledge to a good jumping off place. Time for a little downhill. No skis and poles required, other than the ones God gave me.

With a loud whoop that startles a marmot off its perch, I throw myself onto the snow. Sledding down on my backside, powder spraying in my eyes, I careen down the slope. Banking to the left, I barely miss a boulder. As the glissade picks up speed, I lose track of where I am and spring to my feet just as the snow turns to jagged scree.

Standing alone on the ridge, I brush the snow off my shorts and drink a double lungful of crisp, light air. Then I laugh out loud.

I feel as alive as could be. Right here, right now. This place, this minute. I am whole. And free. And alive!

I remember the first time my father took me up a ridge like this. He ended up carrying me most of the way on his shoulders, shoulders that seemed to me then as sturdy as the granite cliffs surrounding us. In addition to his 6-year-old son, he carried a beat-up map, two wool hats, three or four bandages, a metal canteen of water, and, as his only concession to luxury, a king size packet of Beech Nut chewing gum totaling no less than 240 pieces.

Come to think of it, he almost never chewed any of that gum. Only once did he break open the packet and hand out a few sticks to celebrate an exceptionally fine sunset. “Have one,” he said with a smile.

But never again. The rest of this vast supply remained untouched, though he lugged it all the way to the top of more mountains than I can remember. Perhaps he considered the gum to be our survival kit in case of an emergency. So we could keep ourselves chewing long after food and water ran out. Or stick together branches and leaves for a shelter from storms. Or make a rope for rappelling down a treacherous slope. Only Dad knew the truth.

And, I realize with a cringe, it's too late to ask him now. Dad passed away more than a year ago.

Those shoulders seemed so small and frail in his final months. Yet his eyes, hazel with a trace of brown, still seemed younger than his years. Full of mirth, and the quiet satisfaction of a man who had worked tirelessly to get seven kids started in life. Who had tried to treat people honestly and generously at every turn. And who had been married for 55 years to the same woman, whom he loved even more in their autumn than in their spring. (My mother used to say, usually after one of their little scraps, that they had long ago learned “to see right through each other and still enjoy the view.”)

Dad’s only serious character flaw was his stubborn pride. He gave up hiking his favorite trails long before he had to, just because he did not want anyone to see him stumble on a mere root or rock. And he certainly did not want to lean on anyone else’s arm. His arm was made for others to lean on, not the other way around.

In an effort to help unobtrusively, I made him a walking stick—a simple oaken staff with his initials carved on the handle. Whenever I asked him how he liked it, he would grin and tell me that I could have a brilliant future as a wood carver. In other words, he hadn’t touched it.

What is it worth to have had a father I loved and respected so much? Enough that the joy and gratitude I feel at having known this man is even more than the grief I feel at having lost him. But not a lot.

A sudden whoosh of air rockets just over my head, making me duck for cover. A falling rock? A meteorite? No...a hawk.

Talons buried deep into the hide of a pika, the red-tailed hawk goes about its business. The business of surviving. It pays no more attention to me now than it did a few seconds ago when it almost gave me a crew cut. I am merely part of the landscape, like the bristlecone pine and the pinnacle of stone.

Life goes on.

What kind of life is it, I wonder, for that hawk? What stories could it tell about leaving the nest and learning to fly, about the chase and the kill, about reading the wind and riding the zephyr.

I reach out and touch a lichen-covered boulder standing twice my own height. Think of the stories it could tell! Stories of stardust and lava and the birth of a planet. Stories of gargantuan blue glaciers grinding over the land, then vanishing completely in just a few thousand years—no more than a blink of the farseeing eye of geologic time. And, perhaps, stories of two-legged creatures with painfully short memories and little time to learn the language of boulders, creatures capable of both great wisdom and great folly.

The hawk lifts off. Stepping closer, I can see that not much is left of the unfortunate pika. What was, only moments ago a lively little beast with piercing whistle and bouncing tail, is now nothing more than a tangle of bones and shredded fur.

No more will it scamper lightly from rock to rock. No more will it whistle like a miniature locomotive when anyone dares to enter its territory. No more will it breathe the air scented with the subtle fragrance of elephant head flowers, the same air I breathe even now.

Its body has gone to the soil. In another spring the elephant heads may bloom here anew, filling the air with their fragrance. If the pika’s life was brief, it was nonetheless a gift. Now the gift has been returned. The thread pulls. The wheel turns.

My gaze lifts from the knot of bloody bones to the circle of summits above me. Sunset has begun, casting its luminous veil over the ridge. Golden hues sparkle on the snow and dance on the rivulet.

With time, the colors deepen. The cloud-streaked sky turns orange, then scarlet, then crimson. Shafts of purple pierce the flowing collage, illuminating the lands below. The entire world is aflame.

If only Dad could see this, I think wistfully. Then, on an impulse, I pull a stick of chewing gum from deep in my pocket.

“Have one,” I say with a smile.