

Every Mountain is Cold Mountain

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*“What we do to the wildness outside
us, we do to the wildness within. . . .”*

I.

It is a clear day on the Dingle Peninsula—or nearly so. Beyond the Smerwick Harbor, a series of peaks called the Three Sisters sit like a wall on the horizon before opening onto the Atlantic. Behind me is Mount Brandon, the second highest peak in Ireland. It is not seven shades of green in the fields between the mountain and the sea, but filled with yellows, browns, greens, the dark lines of stone walls, and shadows on the hills cast by clouds. Like most places, it is more varied and diverse than the tourist brochures mention.

I have come here to study Irish culture with a few other students from Sacred Heart University, Connecticut. They are Catholic girls here for boys and parties. I am some sort of pagan-Buddhist hybrid here for mountains and megaliths. Within days of arriving, we are guided up Mount Brandon. It is appropriate to begin my studies out on the land, where culture emerges like mountain streams from the rocks around us. Mount Brandon is a common destination among pilgrims, sacred to Saint Brendan and the source of visions that led him on a voyage across the sea. Before that, I am told by a local poet, the mountain was called Sliabh Dagda, named after the Irish god.

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In some sense, one could say that the mountain is the local manifestation of the god himself. When we think of gods we imagine radiant human beings—better to think of salmon, mountains, rivers, and trees. God or Dagda is just a word that points like a metaphor toward the identity of the mountain.

We pass a small stream, one of many that run down the western slope of the mountain and flow eventually into the Feohanagh River and then out to sea. Wooden crosses stuck into small mounds of stones mark the way up the mountain. There are no paths up here but this trail of crosses—on clear days the mountain’s peak shows the way.

The clouds have been darkening above us as we climb, and it is raining by the time we reach the first ridge. Looking toward the harbor, the sky is still crisp and blue to the west. Mount Brandon, though, is concealed by clouds that drift across its face, revealing and concealing in a seductive dance. It is a gentle slope, an almost spherical cone, that emerges from the clouds like a vision.

The ground is soggy with mud, which makes picking our way across the terrain more difficult. The other students are not the outdoors type. I overhear them talking about having never climbed a mountain before—a reality I cannot quite wrap my mind around after living for a time in Colorado. We have been literally displaced by the modern industrial world. We do not climb mountains named for gods to encounter the wild presence of life anymore—in too many of us it has been replaced by binge drinking or a gnawing sense of “quiet desperation,” as Thoreau put it.

One poor placement of the foot leads to being stuck calf-deep in the mud. This happens to one of the girls on a comically frequent basis. The going is slow as Seán Pól, the director of our program and an experienced mountaineer, helps the others pick through the terrain. He is also on foot-in-mud duty, which slows things down even more. The girls seem miserable but I feel exhilarated; wet and happy with the rain and mud.

The rain is getting worse though, and there will be other days to climb the mountain. We decide not to attempt the peak.

We cut across the ridge, aiming for a narrow valley inset with a

corrie lake that opens out onto pastures. There is a village not far from here, visible at the far end of the fields. There we will get in from the weather and have a drink, while we wait for a taxi to pick us up. The way down on the opposite side of the ridge is steep. Footing is difficult to find in the slick mud and stones. I find the going easier at a more reckless pace and leap from flat to flat like a feral goat, falling only occasionally where the ground was muddier than it seemed. I pick my way down toward the lake carved by glaciers from the mountain, and wait, gazing into the dark surface of the reflected mountain.

The mountain has eluded us today, dressing itself in rain and clouds. Perhaps it did not want to be found. But the point of climbing mountains, I have always thought, is not to reach the summit but to settle into its mind—to “think like a mountain” as Aldo Leopold put it. Thinking like a mountain means seeing from its perspective, at the pace of geologic time; it means seeing that the integrity of any one thing is dependent upon all the myriad relationships that support it. To think like a mountain is to become consonant with its dynamics, to enter into a mutually enhancing relationship with it.

The clouds clear again, the rain lessens and then stops, the pastures of grass and sheep open toward the sky. Everything seems more quiet and awake, washed in the sun-soaked rain on the fields. The mountain is all of these things and more—take away any one piece and the whole becomes impoverished. If I stayed on this mountain long enough, I too might become part of it, like a stone settling into the soil.

II.

The Chinese mountain hermit and Ch’an poet known as Cold Mountain (Han Shan) wrote his poems—of which we have 307—on rocks, trees, and walls sometime during the eighth or ninth century. He was likely born to a wealthy or noble family, but left his privileged life behind to wander in the wilderness. He settled on a mountain called Han Shan and took its name as his own.

The poet Gary Snyder, who translated some of Han Shan’s po-

etry, writes that when Han Shan speaks of Cold Mountain in his poems, which he often does, he is not only referring to the mountain, but to himself and to his enlightened state of mind. When Han Shan says, “Roads do not reach Cold Mountain,” he means it. It is a geographic “where” that encircles and intersects with an interior landscape of identity, perception, and mind.

Our place in the world is intimately bound up with who we are. We are situated beings and our survival and sanity depends on being able to live within the means and patterns of our ecosystems. The river of my native watershed in Massachusetts, the Ipswich River, is flowing through me even as I write this. I mean this in at least two senses. First, the Ipswich River is the center of an underlying pattern that forms both the ecosystems I live within and my mind—my mental landscape. I think not only in the English language but in Ipswich River language. Its sounds and currents, its herons and sandpipers, its stones and turtles and trees, are a language, a pattern of thinking and being. Second, I mean it quite literally in that it is the source of my drinking water and flows from the river, through my faucet, and into and out of my body. Like Han Shan, I might name myself Ipswich to reflect the way our minds grow together.

When I was a kid, I did not know I had a place. We lived in the suburbs, which seemed to me to be almost an anti-place: a monotony of concrete and commerce and not a whole lot else. My family used to vacation in Maine and New Hampshire at campgrounds, cottages on lakes, or ski trips to mountain resorts in the winter. As soon as we crossed the border out of Massachusetts, I was alert to the horizon, watching for the pale shapes of mountains rising from the road before us. The first glimpse meant we had arrived *someplace*, even if there were still hours left in the drive. But was it a place out there, or a place inside—an interior landscape of mind? Or is there any difference at all? It seems to be all one wild place according to Han Shan.

The shapes of mountains, barely distinguishable at first from the sky, eventually grew larger on these trips until we were no longer driving toward them but through them. In the White Mountains of New Hampshire, I would wait until we passed Cannon Moun-

tain at just the right angle as to bring out features from the granite cliffs: the Old Man of the Mountain. I tried to understand how he got up there, carved from the rocks as though chiseled. There was something far more impressive about him than Mount Rushmore could ever hope to achieve. Where Mount Rushmore was planned and designed as a sculpture, the Old Man was evidence to me of the inherent creativity of the mountain itself. It celebrated the mountain and the process that formed it, not a mere nation. It stood as a symbol for that meeting of self and place.

A Zen koan asks, “What is your original face?” My answer: The Old Man of the Mountain. My first year after moving to Colorado, the Old Man’s face cracked and crumbled off. It was symbolic to me of my outdated sense of identity and place crumbling away. It left only the bedrock of wildness around which a new sense of self might constellate.

III.

Rain pelted down on the windshield. I sat in the backseat of the car, driving toward Grafton Notch State Park in Maine with my brother and his girlfriend, wondering if we would end up hiking in the rain. I enjoy the rain and have a habit of getting caught in it, showing up at my destination like a stray dog amidst all the dry and sensible people who remembered their umbrellas and ponchos. This summer in particular, I was in love with the rain. It started when I got soaked on my way to plan a graduate class discussion on sacred ecology. It felt appropriate. Rain brings us back to the simplicity of being—what could be more sacred than that? I have kept a poncho in my backpack ever since, but have never used it.

The last time I went hiking in these conditions was in Colorado, and the trail turned into a miniature river, winding down the mountain. I rounded a corner. Lightning cracked down about twenty yards on the open slope of stones and then vanished. The only trace of it was the space it cleared in my mind as though it had struck me down the center like a tree. I was not keen to try my luck again but felt like I was betraying the rain by wishing it away. The

mountains gathered themselves around us as we drove on. The rain finally cleared as we arrived, and the day warmed into something like good weather.

We scrambled up steep hills, across wide boulders slippery with the recent rain, and up an inclined stone, cut with foot and hand holds. These tricky places are always my favorite along a trail, especially when I am out of breath, as they provide brief moments of a more careful kind of work than walking. When we reached the last of these areas the incline flattened out along a tree-lined ridge overlooking Table Rock Mountain.

Eventually we came out onto a rocky precipice: the eyebrow. There were clouds, like mist, floating across the mountains around us. They wisped and curled above our heads, and I watched the face of the adjacent mountain contemplatively, thinking of Han Shan. Clouds and mountains like this always remind me of Chinese landscape paintings. I took a few pictures, trying in vain to get the lighting and shadows correct. I only got a few shots in before the clouds consumed the peak, surrounding us in the grey-green of mountain rain—clouds on pine on granite.

No thunder, no lightning; the rain was warm and washed the sweat from my face. It was pleasant for our descent but did not last long. Just enough to wet my shirt and refresh me. Cascade Brook, swollen with water but not quite a waterfall, streamed down stones onto its bed. I watched my mind flow down with the water, then carry on with it off the mountain toward home.

IV.

Mount Brandon is a mountain with two faces. The gentle slope we attempted to climb and were turned away from by the January rains is the site of the Christian pilgrimage up the mountain. The other side—the rough way up—I am told by a local folklorist, was the side of the older pagan pilgrimage when the mountain was still known as Sliabh Dagda.

It is this rough side of the mountain I climb now with Seán Pól in April, as I prepare to return to the United States. It is a warm

day—too hot for my wool jacket as we hike into the mountain valley. On its western slope Mount Brandon appears like an almost perfectly round peak of golden grass. The eastern side marks a strong contrast, rough and conical, a habitat for shadows in the crevices of rocks.

We hike into the glacial valley and from the ridge can see the floor dotted with corrie lakes. A few other hikers appear as specks on the edges. We wind our way down, passing between the lakes toward the slope of the mountain. Like the western side, there is no trail—not even one marked by wooden crosses.

Past the corrie lakes it is a scramble all the way to the top—the kind of pleasurable climbing that involves the whole body. It is not difficult to pick our way through and up. The slope is covered with rocks and boulders and the sheep have trod a narrow path. I follow their way and intelligence, hauling myself up to the next foothold.

As we crest the rocky slope we stop to rest and have lunch. The view across the valley is incredible. Beyond the valley, towns and villages dot the landscape—a patchwork of fields and roads, and open space. There is a smaller mountain peak across from us, which seems to be painted onto the horizon, almost close enough to touch.

We are not just climbing toward a mountain top. We climb toward the whole horizon and everything it encircles. And the view from Mount Brandon encircles quite a bit. As we reach the top—marked by a large wooden cross—where people mill about, snapping pictures of each other, the clouds have shrouded everything in mist. Every few minutes the wind parts the mist and the view becomes as clear as though no cloud had ever been there at all. The monotonous gray gives way to startling blue, both in the sky and the ocean, and to the brownish-green ridge below us.

Up in the mountains the true meaning of our sight becomes apparent. Seeing such beauty as this, we reach our evolutionary potential. Our eyes bring the whole world within us, revealing it to us just as surely as the clearing mist reveals the mountain. It is not just a landscape that stretches out below us—it is the mind of the place. What we do to the wildness outside us, we do to the wildness

within—and vice versa. You cannot have one without the other just as you cannot have Han Shan without Cold Mountain. Who could we ever hope to be without these wild mountains?

Up here, I understand. Every mountain is Cold Mountain. Everyone, sage or fool, is Han Shan. Wherever we go, the wild pulls us toward completion with the mountains and waters of this Earth. Every mountain is Cold Mountain, every river runs through us—yet no mountain or river is the same.