

A Conversation with Strangers

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How do you learn the language of a landscape?

As I sit on the side of a mountain pass, my legs tucked underneath the highway guard rail, I find myself unable to focus on the emerald hills swooping beneath me and instead grapple with that simple question.

It should be noted that I do not consider myself an artist, and to label myself as a poet would be a generous thing. And yet as I sit on the top of this mountainside, I can feel the earth transforming below my toes and I hope only to not suffocate in my heightened senses and instead somehow translate what is before me.

I am not focused on the cement, cold from alpine air, pressed into my legs. I can only see clearly the vibrant and excruciating details in the earth around my ankles, my mind in a frenzy to distract from what is truly at hand. Instead, I want to understand everything before me while light can still strike my retinas and blood pumps from my scalp to my toes. To hear the whispers from every flower and billowing tree to grasp at any understanding of how such a beautiful place on the side of a mountain road could bring such a destructive end.

I should clarify—I am not dying.

But nonetheless I am, for the first time in my life, faced with what feels like the end of things, because I am viciously aware that on this mountainside *he* died instead.

So once again, I can only sit with my feet dangling off the highway, suffering the consequences

of a need to face the place where it happened, and ask myself—how do you learn the language of a landscape? Once I know the answer, perhaps I can understand the sweet song the wind sings as it whisks through the pine trees and be gifted the tale of his death.



We are twelve years old, staring down the gullet of a chute with our goggles strapped tight on our faces and our skis perched on the edge of the cliff. The only girl in a gaggle of boys, I am letting my nerves dance away from me on the snowflakes falling around us. I know that any fear I show will be mercilessly thrown against me around the dinner table that evening.

He drops first. Even at a young age, he slashes across boulders, leaps from headwalls, and attacks the snowy earth beneath us. And when he's at the bottom of the line, looking up at what he has just achieved, he calls out to me and tells me that *I* can do it too. (Admittedly, it sounds endearing in hindsight, but I'm sure it was phrased somewhere along the lines of "don't be a bitch").

We are sixteen, tucked under my parents' porch and clutching water bottles full of my parents' liquor. There are whispers of promises that it won't taste *that* wretched (it does) and before long we are mumbling about the future in between breaths of crisp mountain air.

"I'm supposed to go to college out east," I tell him, mourning the few winters I will have left at home.

“That blows.” He looks out, his face lit up by the moon peeking through the pines arching into the night sky. “I’ll be here.”

It is refreshing to hear him speak with pure passion about something as simple as snow. Here is a human six inches from the tips of my toes, content at the prospect of community housing in a ski town where wages are too small and hours spent coaching kids on the slopes are long. He will be fulfilled listening to his heart, and I am amazed. I only want to be brave enough to do the same.

We are eighteen and sticky with sweat. He stomps through deep snow on the hillside above me, insisting the hike will be worth it for the turns we are going to achieve, but all I can focus on is how heavy the skis are on my back and how the layers of tight fabric supposed to keep me warm are now damp with sweat and melting into my skin. Our faces, flushed pink and glittering in the afternoon light, stand out against the white wonderland swallowing us whole. If our heavy breathing were to ease and the crunch of the snow beneath our boots muffled, the world would be still and quiet except for snowflakes falling slowly.

“We’re going to get our passes revoked,” I call out to him, nerves soaring high at the knowledge that we are out of bounds and pushing far past my comfort zone.

He looks back at me only for a second and doesn’t bother responding. He knows the skiing that will follow will be some of the best of my life, worth every risk he is so used to taking.

We are twenty and I did not go to college out east.

“Think about how many powder days you would’ve missed if you’d gone.” His voice is scratchy from the cigarette pinched between his fingers.

I shake my head, clutching the cocoa in my hands. “My body would be less bruised and battered,

that’s for sure.”

He brushes my comment aside. “You’ve got to get hurt, it’s part of the process. Huck and pray, baby.”

I frown at him. “At least wear a helmet if you’re going to preach that mindset.”

“I will for this next project, that’s for sure.” He leans forward in excitement. “It’s never been done before, Ash.”

For a moment, I let my gaze drift away from him to all of the people crowded in the base lodge with us and a warped sense of pride spreads from my numb fingers to my freezing toes. It is our little secret, but soon it will be a legendary tale in this town that raised us. My friend, breaking barriers and pushing the sport to new extremes. I bite my lip and do not try to stop him—any fears I have will be fruitless to voice. My eyes lock back on his messy hair and orange hat, noticing that his own blue eyes are bright with certainty. It is so painfully clear that his mind is made up. *I do not try to stop him.*

I am almost twenty-one, sitting on a mountain road, and he is dead.

In his wake, I am once again asking: how do you learn the language of a landscape?

I was raised in these hills, toes kissed sweetly by the earth and the taste of pine air staining my tongue. The solitude of these mountains, tucked off the highway and bearing their flesh against the sun, whispered words of comfort for twenty years. But the same giants that stroked my hair and let me tumble down their spine claimed his life and I will not ever forget it. They are transient now, unfamiliar and unforgiving.

I throw a pebble over the side of the highway and watch it get swallowed by the trees. I want only to say hello to these strangers and speak to them again.