

Walkabout

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Nature floats my name
I go
Not to shy away
But to see

I went alone into nature. I did not go to escape anything, although the solitude was perhaps the most important part.

I went to strip away the routine and the mindless interaction. I felt caught up in a web of everybody else's lives but my own. I went alone into nature to lay my mind bare and look.

Coming face to face with the natural sublime in the past has given me my deepest feelings of mortality, insignificance, and meaning. This time, I wanted to try pinning those feelings down. I asked myself who I am, who I want to be, and why. Am I meaningfully different than the nature around me? The writing that follows is a poetic transcript of my tendrils of thought as I grappled with what it means to be me. I tried to capture the unfathomable beauty and power of nature, but I did not succeed, at least not completely. If reading this gives you even a fraction of the joy writing it gave me, I will be happy. I hope you enjoy.

Envy

My painfully temporary body sits
Upon a loyal redwood log
That even in death does not yield.
It is laid to rest among friends
And though our flesh is different
I mourn its end and celebrate the future
Straining up around us both
From darkness to light
Infinitesimal now, but not for long
Their power will come.
No true ends or beginnings;
Is this envy?

Bird's Eye View

Beginning with clarity,
Gentle cotton balls float on a painted sky
A child's art project somehow realized
Too perfect to be real
Skies only look like this in your mind.
Nevertheless
Pliable green capsules
Hiding the secret of creation
Duplicated infinitely
Each hopeful sprout
Furiously synthesizing

Thicker the spine becomes
More prideful
From supple
To self-assured
A trellis of support
Thrumming as it approaches the heart
Beating slower than mine
Still beating

Radiating from the heart
The buttressed guard
A cobblestone sheath around a beautiful garden
These hearts have been broken too often
Protect or die.
Sinewy bark furrows writhe
Down
Down
Spiraling like a double helix
Plunging richly into pungent earth
Soaking roots in ambrosia
Life is euphoria

Succession

From times before thought
Timeless spring yearns to the sky
Rushing into air

Apart

I sit in a what feels like a pulpit
Though this holy place was old
When religion began.
Young cedars tease each other
Confidently stretching their lanky limbs skyward
Laughing
Carefree

A grizzled old timer
Presides over the gaggle
The hint of a knowing smile tickling his branches

To them it was nothing
Simple rote
But simplicity hides multitudes

I quietly ask the group of pals
Still coolly conversing
To clue me in

The wind scolds me bitterly
I am ignorant.
Something deep within stirs
Dormant
Deep
Waiting to be freed

Breathing

The morning
Damp and bright
As soothing as a caress
Smelling of sweet fresh growth
A rush of excitement after a long wait
Scented air, smoky with dense cedar,
Courses thickly in an endless loop
Nose, lungs, blood, body, blood, lungs, nose
Somewhere within the cycle
The intangible me is revitalized

Love Song for No One

I sit in this cathedral
Booming with silence
Whispered green secrets
Echo in swishes and starts
A conspiratorial blanket of sound.
Trees converse in a wash of chatter
Birds scoff
A pensive hummingbird
Tilts its fragile head
And hums right past me.

I am Not included.
This forest
A jazz virtuoso, playing alone
Deep in the throes of improvised creation
Mystifying complexity
A stream of consciousness made manifest
Haphazard at best
Chromatic, erratic
Licks and runs that match no musical scale
In short, chaos

But
The grid of chords triumphantly returns
Lending meaning and beauty to cacophony
The tension is instantly lost to the wind
Like gossamer in a breeze

An overlay that unlocks the depths
Of what is and why
A complete metaphor
An incomplete reality

How to find it

Ripples

At nineteen I cannot begin to comprehend the syrupy sweetness of a butterfly's life. That poor beautiful insect fully savors each day of its two week lifespan. At nineteen I cannot begin to comprehend the lifespan of a Douglas fir, its centuries-long ascendance from green tuft to eager sapling to weary behemoth. I can never. But it does not hurt to try. I can gain determination from an alpine fir, beaten down by snow year after year until strong enough to resist. I can gain spontaneity from a ladybug, blindly exploring until I find something compelling. I can slow down by watching a butterfly flit around draped lichen and realizing that in the trees' eyes, I am as aimless, beautiful, and doomed as the butterfly is in mine. I am not special. If I lose myself in the endless concentricity of true nature, I will not be able to forgo today for tomorrow. As I write, seconds are slipping through me. Draining away, but it cannot be helped.

Questions I Have

What is me and what is more,
Where do worlds collide, and
How to see the humanity in alien nature?

When will it become clear,
Will it ever?
And, who am I to think I can understand?

Clean and Well-Lit

I see two paths
A pristine park loop carved from a city
Wrapped in ribbons of concrete and steel string
It is well-maintained, with good footing
And plenty of people
Safe
I see the whole thing
There is comfort in knowing

I see two paths
The other
A world away
Muddy and cramped
A soupy thicket
Mosquitos bicker
Brambles arc like fireworks
Dangling in the dark
Hard green berries scold patience, patience,
Just go
There is comfort in not knowing

5th of July

The blinding brightness
Of the morning
Is almost too pure
Last night unfurled celebration like smoke
Heavy with invented gravity
Red fireworks spattering
Against the darkness hues
By the memory of a sinking sun
Amused by our freedom
Brief popping
Sparkling showers lose their shine in memory
Tragedy

Tiny pieces of the sun
Feather along the waves
And I see what fireworks want to be
The coolly placid water
An endless topographical map
Crisscrossed with ridgelines
And valleys shaded blue
The white sun stares through the thin morning air
Arcing through millions of miles of dark and frozen
To shatter before our eyes
On this rugged snowmelt
A broken mirror searing our brain.

Why do we see ourselves in everything
Not made for us?

Water is a

Seep

Drip

Trickle

Rivulet

Brook

Stream

Creek

Tributary

River

What do you conjure?

Dark/Light

The damp face looms morosely
From the dappled alcove
Wet black moss
Draped in brown and green
This face this
Geological mishap
So dark
A lonely stoic
An outsider, a transplant
Hailing from some foreboding waste
Sentenced to solitude
Uneasy in the casually burbling forest
Deaf to the sunny chatter
The cold shoulder of depression
I remember the winter
When the days blurred
And every song was sad

But do not be too hasty
Do not write off the vigor of life
His dark arms cradle the children
Of the damp and dark

Attentive rows of maidenhair ferns
Quietly green, with stems of deep black
Upturned in admiration
Grateful for the darkness in their veins

The protector's tears seep
Through closed eyes
Joy and pain
Redeeming

Why, or Why Not

I do not question evolution's existence
Only its motive

Why should I care
If the world expunges us when we die
It does me no favors
To exist or never at all
The result is the same
Beyond the singularities of birth and death
Of our universe flinging itself open and
Snapping shut
The result is the same
Why should I care

Now your eyes glimmer
Through a barely contained grin,
“What if it all ended tomorrow?”

I would be devastated
I have already wasted so much
The clock's hands churn my gut

Devout

Maple leaves crowd forward
Straining towards the fire in the sky
Each leaf filtering a gasp of life
From the intervening

If a God existed
It would lay gazing with its hands behind its head
Up at bigleaf maples
Each shade of green a universe
A stained glass dome
Softly flickering
Echoing with reverent whispers from leaf to leaf

Canopy of creation
Radiating from within

Death at the Sea

The water takes you
To the sphere beyond even the natural
Where millennia calve from glaciers
And rivers run forever
Cleaving the land
From seeping snowmelt
To torrents galloping through scree
Like wild horses
Tossing their heads
Eyes bulging

Old and slow now
Riffles of their ribcage showing through
Meandering through lowlands
Centuries flaking with each
Fleck of silt whisked from the bank

From there to the sea
Twinkling
Sated
Recalling the freedom of youth
Twilight chases the gold from the waves
What is will be again

I followed; it was a trick
There will be no one to drive me home
This final evening
We who wish to evaporate

A smooth stone
Heavy in my palm

Juncture

Glum surprise
Four tents huddle where I'd
Hoped for none
My sullen solitude
Whines like a mosquito in my skull

"I'm not alone," I pout
"I can't appreciate –"
This goes on
I shoot dirty glances
But their friendly chatter
Replaces my conceit

For already I have forgotten
The warmth of friends just met
The contentedness that swells
Through company and laughter
I go over

Two embers kissing briefly
Flaring their sweet, doomed spirals
Up the blackberry sky

Hindsight

Lemony pine ambrosia
Bursts in my mouth
Young spruce tips
Citrus yellow, fresh green
Divulging their bright oils
To me, the intruder
Lingering on my fingertips

Dozens of stunted alpine firs
Totter like toddlers
Each winter spent pinned by snowpack
Plain in the buckles and corkscrews
Of their contorted spines
And still they play

Patient parents guide by example
Chaperoning the rambunctious youth
Smiling fondly in their piety
The beauty of our confusion

Gratitude

It took two days
To drive from the Sound
To the North Cascades
Through twenty miles of riverside thicket
Red alder, ash, spruce, salal
Woven tightly
Pursed like listening lips

It took two days to trudge
Nine miles through the dense
Cathedral of low westside old growth
Then seven more
Zigzagging upward
Like a foraging ant
Passing through biomes
To the ridges, the peaks, the lakes
A spread rivaled only by the stark glacial peaks
Sawing the pale fabric of the sky across the valley
Primeval teeth

I wonder at the visions
The hacking of this rugged trail
The sharing of this holy sanctuary
It only took two days to top the world
To dig my boots into the backs
Of everyone who came before

Subterranean

Missing hurts
Especially when it can never be the same
A hole inside
Dulling
A tender nub of fading memory
Aching
Knotted heartwood
Hot tears like falling leaves

I am a searing glacier
Shrinking under the thousand eyes of the sun
Smooth and pillowy from afar
But rending
Rending

Sap

Bugs flit lazily
Glowing like beads of amber pitch
Alive in the afternoon hum

All sound is muted
Movement too
The day has cast a vapid yellow spell
A heavy blanket of golden warmth
Stilling all to torpor
Soothing all to silence

Rest
Lay back on the august grass
Let the smile crinkle your skin
Without knowing why
Do you smell the drowsiness?
Closed eyes
Summer sighs
My smile widens
I have melted away

Recipe

- 1 week alone
- 1 notebook
- 81 switchbacks
- 3 foul blisters
- 2 cans animal spray (bug and bear)
- 1 tent (too big)
- 1 pair boots (too small)
- $\frac{1}{2}$ love for nature
- $\frac{1}{2}$ love for people
- many questions of identity and purpose

Combine in backpack and walk until legs turn to jelly and back aches. Continue to verge of craziness. Return home, rinse, let rest. Pick through the pages of nonsense to find the little bits that mean something (maybe). Treasure. Repeat when worry and confusion return.

A Walk in the Night

Help me
I have walked in circles
I do not know
Where to go
What to do
Who to be
I do not know

Your peaks and valleys mirror mine
Your lakes freeze and melt with my anguish
Motes of your moonlight
Alight upon me like snow
But I am not yet pure

Do I stop looking or
Do I stop asking

A baby bird falling from its nest
The air will not catch
Help me

A Moment

I take a moment for
The poor sprout
Slowly drowned under winter snows
Seeds hidden in the frozen dirt
Blind desperation under slate skies
It suffered
Barely held on to its fragile DNA
And just at the end
After an eternity of cold desolation
The darkness disbanded
Streamed away under the seething sun
Imagine the joy!
The sprout stretched its young arms
Up to the creator –
Who turned away
As my careless heel
Crushed its hard-earned life out in the silt.

I take a moment

Lying Awake

Voices in the wind
Murmurs threading boughs and ridges
Distant chuckles from the streambed
They coo to me
Promising company
Apathy comes easily alone
Everything changes with two

Gait

Twin waterfalls chandelier
Tinkling crystal jumps from
Stone to stone
Whirring under tunnels of snow
To rest in tranquility in a glacial heelprint
An alpine pilgrimage

Cautiously
And some time later
The pensive lake spills out
Releasing itself to jubilation
Chirping and gurgling
Giggling and twirling
Somewhere past the bend
This time I do not follow

After

Crisp air
Delicate with ice and fir
Harmonizing with the weak moon
Piercing
Like the eagle's scream
High above the cirque
A forbidden palette
Somehow wistful

As I am
Walking home alone
In the dark

Nightswimming by R.E.M.

I'm not sure all these people understand
It's not like years ago
The fear of getting caught
The recklessness of water
They cannot see me naked
These things they go away
Replaced by every day

Nightswimming
Deserves a quiet night

No Way to Know

The glacier lily's bloom
Has two faces
One to the sky
One to the soil
A pretty diversion
For its leaves are what is sweet
Coyly hiding in plain sight

Apparently the trick to finding
Four leaf clovers is to stop looking so hard

Stadium

The meadow flutters
Singing in the evening light
A low roar of anticipation
The great bloom awaits

Marmots bound
Chipmunks skitch
Hummingbirds halo curiously
Trying to place me

We all bask in the pooling sun
The denouement
Another sublime end

The critters file away to their cozy homes
I stay and watch

Blue

Frigid wind rattles the tent
Incurably cold
Too asleep to move
Too awake to sink under waves of toasted bliss
Purgatory
Until the huffing deer
Dash any dream of sleep

Crack the fragile morning like an egg
Hang the yolk over the horizon
Last night's discomfort fading
Like the last peppery vestiges of darkness
Driven west by the sun

Lilac tattooed on my retinas
Blue morning

As August Ends

Imagine there were two
Sweetheart
A second god of tides
Pale in a dark sea
Casting soft emotion
Over one who used to love
Crying silently
Do not wake the others

Twin scleras
Wide with pity
You cannot look away from the boy
Crying in the driveway
The night hides so much loss
Would two reveal too much?
Perhaps it would

Nothing consoles
Like deep midnight

The Tourist by Radiohead

They ask me where the hell I'm going
At a thousand feet per second

Hey man

Slow down

Slow down

Idiot

Slow down

Slow down

Constellations

Looking up
Chill forgotten
I would have sworn there were
More stars than darkness
So many glimmering sequins
On the black diaphane
Drops in a downpour
Dissolving the sky

Alpine meadow
Late august
Trillions of berries
Cast in copper from the burnished sun
Endless permutations
Of life and color
No hint of the dirt below

Looking up
Chill forgotten
I would have sworn the two
Were somehow the same

Unwanted

Bruised clouds limp over me
Glowing through the treetops
I am irksome
Their forest
Their land
Their water
Despite this I am dry
Maybe mercy
Or maybe they see the end
We have inked for our kind
In which case pity
Either way
I am dry

Secret Ingredients

The meal I crave most
When I get home
Changes by the hour
Curious

My mind's eye presents
Spread after spread
I can't quite pin –

I had it wrong
It's not the food
It's the food when I get home

The Drop in the Downpour

The creek is almost too loud
Squeezing the air from my thoughts
Cerulean
Clearly hushing me

A mental bout
That I, of course, lose
I put my pen and notebook down
Turn in deference
The pulsing lures me close
Whispers in my ear
The sheeting water rearranges
Order in the swirling rapids
A select few rules must be followed

But that is not all
There was more to hear
Echoing in my sleep
Another message I could not understand

Do you remember

The apple scent of warm firs
Floating drunkenly on the breeze
Like a maple helicopter
Or tiny butterfly

I loved that shirt
The sports cars embroidered on the front
Weighty with nostalgia
Pitch pockmarking the bottoms of my feet
Blackberry juice on my fingers
Wood smoke drifting up
Another wisp in the dying light
The still-warm barbecue
Ticking itself to sleep
Dozing to the comforting hum
Of the grownups talking
Summertime

I would fall asleep on the hammock
And wake up in my bed

Days used to last forever
When I wore my shirt
With the sports cars embroidered on the front

Magic Blanket

How does the river
With its rough woolen noise
Sound so much like silence?

If I could wing
Above its speculative path
Above its red alders and mosses
Learn its dialects
Snow becomes ice becomes melt
Narrating the heroic descent
If I could listen, not only hear
If I could wing

A spirited conversationalist
Who never really speaks
The words do not come

Temporary

How to stop the inevitable crash
Back to before?

The comet roared through silence
Its arcing tail reflected in my eyes
Tugging at my heart
Like my little brother at my sleeve
As the night wind flapped around my coat
And fanned my mind
The present obliterated everything
For just that moment

Melting away
I lash out in desperation
It slips through my fingers
It slips through my sieve
It slips

The night is still

Temporary II

The comedown is the hardest
Wracked with self doubt
When you were up
Everything seemed profound

The flowers, the water, the dirt, the stars
The smell of warm fir, the cold splash of a snowmelt bath
Sunwarmed rock under your soles
Gentle ambience
And hours spent just sitting, looking, smelling
All of it howling through your veins
A solemn calling from all around

But as peaks turn alpine
Alpine turns forest
And the parking lot appears out of nowhere
You question your discoveries
Irrefutable moments ago
How magical was it
Really

A solemn calling from all around
Fading as I close the car door
Fading as I start the engine
Fading so quickly

Author

Alex Albrecht is a sophomore at Claremont McKenna College from Bellevue, Washington. He wrote these poems while alone in various natural places around Washington, with the vast majority coming from Glacier Peak Wilderness in the North Cascade Range. In addition to backpacking, he loves the ocean, making music, and reading. This is his first attempt at writing poetry. He would like to thank Claremont McKenna, the Appel Fellowship, Professor Mellissa Martinez, Professor Chloe Martinez, and his family and friends for supporting him.

