

advances as usual, looking as if it were not that ocean in which dropped  
 things are bound to sink—  
 in which if they turn and twist, it is neither with volition nor  
 consciousness.

1921, 1935

## An Octopus

of ice. Deceptively reserved and flat,  
 it lies 'in grandeur and in mass'<sup>5</sup>  
 beneath a sea of shifting snow-dunes;  
 dots of cyclamen-red and maroon on its clearly defined pseudopodia<sup>6</sup>  
 made of glass that will bend<sup>7</sup>—a much needed invention— 5  
 comprising twenty-eight ice-fields from fifty to five hundred feet thick,  
 of unimagined delicacy.  
 'Picking periwinkles from the cracks'<sup>8</sup>  
 or killing prey with the concentric crushing rigour of the python,  
 it hovers forward 'spider fashion 10  
 on its arms'<sup>9</sup> misleadingly like lace;  
 its 'ghostly pallor'<sup>1</sup> changing  
 to the green metallic tinge of an anemone-starred pool'.  
 The fir-trees, in 'the magnitude of their root systems',<sup>2</sup>  
 rise aloof from these manoeuvres 'creepy to behold',<sup>3</sup> 15  
 austere specimens of our American royal families,  
 'each like the shadow of the one beside it.  
 The rock seems frail compared with their dark energy of life',<sup>4</sup>  
 its vermilion and onyx and manganese-blue<sup>5</sup> interior expensiveness  
 left at the mercy of the weather; 20  
 'stained transversely by iron where the water drips down',  
 recognized by its plants and its animals.  
 Completing a circle,  
 you have been deceived into thinking that you have progressed,

5. "Quoted lines of which the source is not given, are from Department of the Interior Rules and Regulations, *The National Parks Portfolio* [1922]" [Moore's note]. In the summers of 1922 and 1923, Moore traveled to the northwest and, on the first trip, climbed part of the way up Mt. Rainier (also known as Mt. Tacoma), in Washington State. On the mountain, a large alpine meadow, Paradise Park, overlooks the eight-armed Nisqually glacier. The poem was originally conceived as part of a longer piece that Moore split into "An Octopus" and "Marriage."

6. A tendril-like protrusion of the cytoplasm of an amoeba, used for locomotion or food gathering.  
 7. "Sir William Bell, of the British Institute of Patentees, has made a list of inventions which he says the world needs: glass that will bend; a smooth road surface that will not be slippery in wet weather; a furnace that will conserve 95 per cent. of its heat; a process to make flannel unshrinkable; a noiseless airplane; a motor engine of one pound weight per horsepower; methods to reduce friction; a process to extract phosphorous from vulcanized

indiarubber, so that it can be boiled up and used again; practical ways of utilizing the tides" [Moore's note].

8. "M. C. Carey, *London Graphic*, 25th August, 1923" [Moore's note]. *Periwinkles*: both edible snails and the purple flowers of an evergreen groundcover.

9. "W. P. Pycraft: *Illustrated London News*, 28th June, 1924" [Moore's note].

1. "'Ghostly pallor', 'Creeping slowly' [line 209]. Francis Ward: *Illustrated London News*, 11th August, 1923" [Moore's note].

2. "John Muir" [Moore's note]. Naturalist and conservationist (1838–1914).

3. "W. P. Pycraft: *Illustrated London News*, 28th June, 1924" [Moore's note].

4. "Ruskin" [Moore's note]. John Ruskin (1819–1900), English art critic and essayist.

5. "'Thoughtful beavers', 'blue stone forests', 'bristling, puny, swearing men', 'tear the snow', 'flat on the ground', 'bent in a half circle' [lines 45, 52, 144, 211, 215, 216]. Clifton Johnson: *What to See in America* (Macmillan [1919])" [Moore's note].

under the polite needles of the larches  
 'hung to filter, not to intercept the sunlight'—  
 met by tightly wattled spruce-twigs  
 'conformed to an edge<sup>6</sup> like clipped cypress  
 as if no branch could penetrate the cold beyond its company';  
 and dumps of gold and silver ore enclosing The Goat's Mirror<sup>7</sup>—  
 that lady-fingerlike depression in the shape of the left human foot,  
 which prejudices you in favour of itself  
 before you have had time to see the others;  
 its indigo, pea-green, blue-green, and turquoise,  
 from a hundred to two hundred feet deep,  
 'merging in irregular patches in the middle lake  
 where, like gusts of a storm  
 obliterating the shadows of the fir-trees, the wind makes lanes of  
 ripples'.

What spot could have merits of equal importance  
 for bears, elk, deer, wolves, goats, and ducks?  
 Pre-empted by their ancestors,  
 this is the property of the exacting porcupine,  
 and of the rat 'slipping along to its burrow in the swamp  
 or pausing on high ground to smell the heather';  
 of 'thoughtful beavers  
 making drains which seem the work of careful men with shovels',  
 and of the bears inspecting unexpectedly  
 ant-hills and berry-bushes.  
 Composed of calcium gems and alabaster pillars,  
 topaz, tourmaline crystals and amethyst quartz,  
 their den is somewhere else, concealed in the confusion  
 of 'blue forests thrown together with marble and jasper and agate  
 as if whole quarries had been dynamited'.  
 And farther up, in stag-at-bay position  
 as a scintillating fragment of these terrible stalagmites,  
 stands the goat,  
 its eye fixed on the waterfall which never seems to fall—  
 an endless skein swayed by the wind,  
 immune to force of gravity in the perspective of the peaks.  
 A special antelope  
 acclimated to 'grottoes from which issue penetrating draughts  
 which make you wonder why you came',  
 it stands its ground  
 on cliffs the colour of the clouds, of petrified white vapour—  
 black feet, eyes, nose, and horns, engraved on dazzling ice-fields,  
 the ermine body on the crystal peak;  
 the sun kindling its shoulders to maximum heat like acetylene,<sup>8</sup> dyeing  
 them white—  
 upon this antique pedestal,

6. " 'Conformed to an edge', 'grottoes', 'two pairs of trousers'—'My old packer, Bill Peyto . . . would give one or two nervous yanks at the fringe and tear off the longer pieces, so that his outer trousers disappeared day by day from below upwards. . . . (He usually wears two pairs of trousers)'—'glass eyes', 'business men', 'with a sound like the crack

of a rifle'[lines 28, 61, 79, 111, 115, 226]. W. D. Wilcox: *The Rockies of Canada* (Putnam [1903])" [Moore's note].

7. A lake. The phrase was originally used by Wilcox to describe Canada's Lake Louise.

8. Flammable gas used as welding fuel.

'a mountain with those graceful lines which prove it a volcano',  
 its top a complete cone like Fujiyama's<sup>9</sup> 70  
 till an explosion blew it off.  
 Distinguished by a beauty  
 of which 'the visitor dare never fully speak at home  
 for fear of being stoned as an impostor',  
 Big Snow Mountain is the home of a diversity of creatures: 75  
 those who 'have lived in hotels  
 but who now live in camps—who prefer to';  
 the mountain guide evolving from the trapper,  
 'in two pairs of trousers, the outer one older,  
 wearing slowly away from the feet to the knees'; 80  
 'the nine-striped chipmunk  
 running with unmammal-like agility along a log';  
 the water ouzel<sup>1</sup>  
 with 'its passion for rapids and high-pressured falls', 85  
 building under the arch of some tiny Niagara;  
 the white-tailed ptarmigan 'in winter solid white,  
 feeding on heather-bells and alpine buckwheat';  
 and the eleven eagles of the west,  
 'fond of the spring fragrance and the winter colours', 90  
 used to the unegoistic action of the glaciers  
 and 'several hours of frost every midsummer night'.  
 'They make a nice appearance, don't they',<sup>2</sup>  
 happy seeing nothing?  
 Perched on treacherous lava and pumice— 95  
 those unadjusted chimney-pots and cleavers  
 which stipulate 'names and addresses of persons to notify  
 in case of disaster'—  
 they hear the roar of ice and supervise the water  
 winding slowly through the cliffs,  
 the road 'climbing like the thread 100  
 which forms the groove around a snail-shell,  
 doubling back and forth until where snow begins, it ends'.  
 No 'deliberate wide-eyed wistfulness' is here  
 among the boulders sunk in ripples and white water  
 where 'when you hear the best wild music of the forest 105  
 it is sure to be a marmot',  
 the victim on some slight observatory,  
 of 'a struggle between curiosity and caution',  
 inquiring what has scared it: 110  
 a stone from the moraine descending in leaps,  
 another marmot, or the spotted ponies with glass eyes,  
 brought up on frosty grass and flowers  
 and rapid draughts of ice-water.  
 Instructed none knows how, to climb the mountain,  
 by business men who as totemic scenery of Canada, 115  
 require for recreation  
 three hundred and sixty-five holidays in the year,

9. Volcano and highest mountain in Japan.  
 1. Bird that walks along the bottom of mountain

streams in search of food.  
 2. "Overheard at the circus" [Moore's note].

these conspicuously spotted little horses are peculiar;  
 hard to discern among the birch-trees, ferns, and lily-pads,  
 avalanche lilies, Indian paint-brushes, 120  
 bear's ears and kittentails,  
 and miniature cavalcades of chlorophyllless fungi  
 magnified in profile on the mossbeds like moonstones in the water;  
 the cavalcade of calico competing  
 with the original American menagerie of styles<sup>3</sup> 125  
 among the white flowers of the rhododendron surmounting rigid leaves  
 upon which moisture works its alchemy,  
 transmuting verdure into onyx.  
 Larkspur, blue pincushions, blue peas, and lupin;  
 white flowers with white, and red with red; 130  
 the blue ones 'growing close together  
 so that patches of them look like blue water in the distance';  
 this arrangement of colours  
 as in Persian designs of hard stones with enamel,  
 forms a pleasing equation— 135  
 a diamond outside, and inside, a white dot;  
 on the outside, a ruby; inside, a red dot;  
 black spots balanced with black  
 in the woodlands where fires have run over the ground—  
 separated by aspens, cat's paws, and woolly sunflowers, 140  
 fireweed, asters, and Goliath thistles  
 'flowering at all altitudes as multiplicitous as barley',  
 like pink sapphires in the pavement of the glistening plateau.  
 Inimical to 'bristling, puny, swearing men  
 equipped with saws and axes', 145  
 this treacherous glass mountain  
 admires gentians, lady-slippers, harebells, mountain dryads,  
 and 'Calypso, the goat flower—  
 that greenish orchid fond of snow'—  
 anomalously nourished on shelving glacial ledges 150  
 where climbers have not gone or have gone timidly,  
 'the one resting his nerves while the other advanced',  
 on this volcano with the blue jay, her principal companion.  
 'Hopping stiffly on sharp feet' like miniature ice-hacks—  
 'secretive, with a look of wisdom and distinction, but a villain, 155  
 fond of human society or the crumbs that go with it',  
 he knows no Greek,  
 'that pride-producing language',<sup>4</sup>  
 in which 'rashness is rendered innocuous, and error exposed  
 by the collision of knowledge with knowledge'. 160

'Like happy souls in Hell', enjoying mental difficulties,  
 the grasshoppers of Greece  
 amused themselves with delicate behaviour  
 because it was 'so noble and so fair',<sup>5</sup>

3. "W. M., 'The Mystery of an Adjective and of Evening Clothes'. *London Graphic*, 21st June, 1924" [Moore's note].

4. "Anthony Trollope's *Autobiography*" [Moore's

note]. Anthony Trollope (1815–1882), English novelist.

5. "'Rashness is rendered innocuous' [line 159], 'So noble and so fair'. Cardinal Newman: *Historical*

not practised in adapting their intelligence  
 to eagle-traps and snow-shoes, 165  
 to alpenstocks<sup>6</sup> and other toys contrived by those  
 'alive to the advantage of invigorating pleasures'.  
 Bows, arrows, oars, and paddles, for which trees provide the wood,  
 in new countries more eloquent than elsewhere— 170  
 augmenting the assertion that, essentially humane,  
 'the forest affords wood for dwellings and by its beauty stimulates  
 the moral vigour of its citizens'.  
 The Greeks liked smoothness, distrusting what was back  
 of what could not be clearly seen, 175  
 resolving with benevolent conclusiveness,  
 'complexities which still will be complexities'<sup>7</sup>  
 as long as the world lasts';  
 ascribing what we clumsily call happiness,  
 to 'an accident or a quality, 180  
 a spiritual substance or the soul itself,  
 an act, a disposition, or a habit,  
 or a habit infused, to which the soul has been persuaded,  
 or something distinct from a habit, a power—'  
 such power as Adam had and we are still devoid of. 185  
 'Emotionally sensitive,<sup>8</sup> their hearts were hard';  
 their wisdom was remote  
 from that of these odd oracles of cool official sarcasm,  
 upon this game preserve  
 where 'guns, nets, seines, traps and explosives, 190  
 hired vehicles, gambling and intoxicants are prohibited;  
 disobedient persons being summarily removed  
 and not allowed to return without permission in writing.'  
 It is self-evident  
 that it is frightful to have everything afraid of one; 195  
 that one must do as one is told  
 and eat 'rice, prunes, dates, raisins, hardtack, and tomatoes'  
 if one would 'conquer the main peak' of Mount Tacoma,  
 this fossil flower concise without a shiver,  
 intact when it is cut, 200  
 damned for its sacrosanct remoteness—  
 like Henry James<sup>9</sup> 'damned by the public for decorum';  
 not decorum, but restraint;  
 it is the love of doing hard things  
 that rebuffed and wore them out—a public out of sympathy with 205  
 neatness.

Neatness of finish! Neatness of finish!  
 Relentless accuracy is the nature of this octopus

<sup>6</sup> "Sketches" [Moore's note]. John Henry Newman (1801–1890), British theologian.

<sup>7</sup> Pointed staffs used in mountain climbing.

<sup>8</sup> "Complexities . . . an accident". Richard Baxter: *The Saints' Everlasting Rest* [Moore's note]. Richard Baxter (1615–1691), English preacher and theologian.

<sup>9</sup> "The Greeks were emotionally sensitive". W. D. Hyde: *The Five Great Philosophies* (Mac-

millan [1911])" [Moore's note].

<sup>9</sup> American novelist (1843–1916).

1. Though Moore had been reading James at the time of composition, she likely adapts this phrase from William Carlos Williams's *Kora in Hell* 21.2: "Neatness and finish, the dust out of every corner, you swish from room to room and find all perfect. The house may now be carefully wrapped in brown paper and sent to a publisher. It is a work of art."

with its capacity for fact.  
 'Creeping slowly as with meditated stealth,  
 its arms seeming to approach from all directions,' 210  
 it receives one under winds that 'tear the snow to bits  
 and hurl it like a sandblast  
 shearing off twigs and loose bark from the trees'.  
 Is 'tree' the word for these things 215  
 'flat on the ground like vines'?  
 some 'bent in a half circle with branches on one side  
 suggesting dust-brushes, not trees;  
 some finding strength in union, forming little stunted groves,  
 their flattened mats of branches shrunk in trying to escape'  
 from the hard mountain 'planed by ice and polished by the wind'— 220  
 the white volcano with no weather side;  
 the lightning flashing at its base,  
 rain falling in the valleys, and snow falling on the peak—  
 the glassy octopus symmetrically pointed, 225  
 its claw cut by the avalanche  
 'with a sound like the crack of a rifle,  
 in a curtain of powdered snow launched like a waterfall.'

1924, 1935

### To a Snail

If "compression is the first grace of style,"<sup>2</sup>  
 you have it. Contractility is a virtue  
 as modesty is a virtue.  
 It is not the acquisition of any one thing 5  
 that is able to adorn,  
 or the incidental quality that occurs  
 as a concomitant of something well said,  
 that we value in style,  
 but the principle that is hid:  
 in the absence of feet, "a method of conclusions"; 10  
 "a knowledge of principles,"<sup>3</sup>  
 in the curious phenomenon of your occipital<sup>4</sup> horn.

1924

### The Steeple-Jack

Revised, 1961

Dürer<sup>5</sup> would have seen a reason for living  
 in a town like this, with eight stranded whales

2. "The very first grace of style is that which comes from compression.' *Demetrius on Style* translated by W. Hamilton Fyfe. Heinemann, 1932" [Moore's 1951 note]. Demetrius (350–280 B.C.E.), Athenian politician and philosopher.

3. Phrases from a discussion of theology in *Medieval Mind*, by Scottish philosopher John Duns Scotus (c. 1266–1308).

4. That is, near the back of the head.

5. Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528), German artist.