



fieldnotes

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Cold Mountain

Stormclouds surge above the highest summits as we move steadily upwards against a backdrop of cliffs and the rubble of cliffs. Ten of us string out along a trail beyond treeline, moving deeper into the mountains of Colorado. No one talks, and as we cover ground I think about a stone woman. She appears in a chant we do twice a day, and I'm not sure if I'm supposed to be thinking about her. I'm not even sure I'm supposed to be thinking. Over the course of a rain-saturated three days our group has climbed from late summer into fall weather, led by a Zen priest and a mountain guide named Wolf.

My reason for joining them has something to do with a hermit who wandered Cold Mountain a thousand years ago writing poems on cliff faces. The gentle humor of Han Shan touched with sadness resonated with me, as did the way he shaved down his thoughts to almost nothing, leaving most of what he had to say unwritten. Since I first read the poems it's been hard for me to separate Zen from mountains, so when a chance came to accompany a group from the Crestone Mountain Zen Center on a five-day trek into the Sangre de Cristo Wilderness, I took it. For me it has meant hours of sitting in the dark under layers of wet clothes and wetter boots, trying to meditate. Being the only non-Buddhist, I've had some catching up to do.

We are making the final push to an unnamed pass below Hermit Peak, and my chest heaves as I draw in the thin air. When we finally top out at almost 12,500 feet the visual field unfolds to reveal a spine of peaks running far to the south. Behind us angles the summit ridge of Rito Alto, Spanish for high ritual. After dropping packs the group circles up to chant the *Heart Sutra*, something we do at each mountain pass. My printed copy turned to pulp in the heavy rains of the first day, so I read over Wolf's shoulder. The others know it by heart. Mostly in their 20s and 30s, many of them either live at the zen center or have in the past.

The chanting ends and the head of the center stands facing a distant peak in trekking shorts and wind shell, monastically black. He goes by his Buddhist name, Zenki, "Or you can call me Christian," he said when we first met. He has an open gaze

and what I've come to recognize as his Zen smile. Several years ago he received dharma transmission, a formal acknowledgement of his spiritual link to an unbroken lineage traced back to the Buddha. A scrim of snow extends below the clouds, and after a long moment he says, "There's a reason for the snow."

Those near him wait expectantly for whatever revelation might follow, while he keeps silent. Finally someone asks, "What's the reason?"

He answers simply, "Because it's cold."

Groans follow, and a woman says, "He's good at demystifying things." The heavy packs we've carried at a fast pace on steep, high-elevation trails have also done their part to demystify the experience. On the other hand, the *Sutra of Mountain and Waters* keeps me guessing. Zenki transposed it from various prose translations into a form we chant each morning. It's become a thread tying together our journey, and one passage in particular stays with me.

The blue mountains are always walking.

The stone woman gives birth to a child at night.

After leaving the pass, our group stops at the next trail junction and reaches a rough consensus. We decide to continue descending into the valley and then climb to San Isabel Lake, set in a glacial cirque at 11,625 feet.

On the first morning of the trip daylight disclosed snow covering the mountain crest above the Zen center. Clouds threaded uphill and mist tangled on the crags in perfect Cold Mountain weather. From the start we found the creeks running at flood stage making the crossings high and tricky, while the heaviest rains turned the trails into running streams. During a dharma circle shortly after starting Zenki said, "You don't need to make of something other than what it is. The sun glitters on a spider web and what it is, is sufficient." And he followed with, "The heat of the sun we feel on the body. It's the same heat we feel inside. Wild nature has already reached you through your senses. Listen to the creek running. Imagine the river that runs through you connecting to the waters that run outside."

In camp that night I shared a tent with Randy, a teacher with the center who knows his way around Zen and mountains. When he mentioned having lived in Aspen I asked if he had run into Hunter S. Thompson, and it turned out they had been neighbors. Randy once saw him on his way to visit a friend, riding a trail bike down a dirt road with a .357 holstered to his side and wearing a Nixon mask. "How'd I get off talking about Hunter?" he asked.

Each day comes packaged, beginning with the tinkling of a wake-up bell at 5:45 until the final bow around 9:00 at night. Normally, the only external structure in my life

are deadlines, so this takes some adjustment. Even on the trail we walk in silence for 90 minutes before lunch and 90 minutes after. And each meal is eaten in silence and ritualized to show respect for all aspects of food and its preparation. We chant before it's served, we chant as it cools, and after eating we pass around our bowls, which come back with hot water for cleaning. After sloshing it around and offering the proper prayer, we drink it down.

Reaching San Isabel we set up camp in a grove of spruce at treeline, and being the first rainless day we dry gear and explore the surroundings. As evening thickens the stormclouds return. After dinner we gather to do zazen, layered in down and fleece and rain gear. Grauple pelts the tarps, and we try crowding together until a shift of wind carries the rain inside. Wolf switches to the adjacent shelter to stay dry and I join him. He sits as solid as a Buddha statue with his back true and legs tucked into the proper knot. I shift and shift again in a futile effort to find a comfortable position until the bell rings and the session begins.

In the dark I face the silhouette of Hermit Peak set high against the night sky, while thunder rolls through the glacier-carved valley below. Ten of us sit unmoving as the storm builds and the air grows charged. Then from out of nowhere tears run down my face, taking me by surprise. Needing to keep still I let them fall, unsure what triggered them. Images begin to flicker, momentary flashes. First a sense of compassion for those around me takes hold, followed by thoughts of my sister's death. At that moment the first lighting forks onto the far summit and a deep rumbling fills the valley. A heavy stillness follows. And suddenly a searing flash illuminates the entire grove as lightning strikes close with an explosive crash. No one moves, waiting for the next hit. Then a bolt discharges on the high ridge beyond, followed by another. We sit in the dark as still as boulders perched on a mountainside.

The storm has passed by morning, and another round of zazen begins before dawn. After a long sit we do a brief walking meditation as the sky lightens. Then the bell rings and we return for the final session before breakfast. It's the fourth day and my stiff joints have begun to loosen. At lakeside we again chant the *Mountains and Waters* sutra, now under a blue sky. We sit facing each other next to green waters enclosed by cliffs and slopes grading almost vertical. Nearing the end I watch an upside-down reflection of the mountain while we chant,

There are mountains hidden in the sky.
There are mountains hidden in mountains.
There are mountains hidden in hiddenness.

We finish and I tell Zenki about the mountain hidden in waters. He simply smiles and says, "Hidden in plain sight."

Lines from the chant often trigger an association of some sort, so I ask if I should just let them go. He advises me to let them come and they will go away on their own. "You hold onto them," he adds, "when you try to let them go."

This reminds me of a story about two monks at a river crossing, and he immediately picks up on the reference. A young woman waited at the crossing, Zenki says, afraid to chance the strong current. When she asked for the monks' help they hesitated. Then without a word the older monk picked her up on his shoulders, to the consternation of his companion, and carried her across. After placing her gently down, they continued on their way. The younger monk was unsettled by what he had witnessed, and they walked several hours without speaking. Finally he asked the older monk why he had carried her when they were prohibited from touching women. The older monk turned toward him and answered, "I left her at the river a long time ago, why are you still carrying her?"

On the last morning we finish packing and prepare to leave. Zenki stands talking to someone, and as I approach he turns directly toward me with his Zen smile. "Scott," he says and pauses. "From out of nowhere."

We begin walking out of the mountains, and I find myself thinking about the stone woman again. By now I've learned she has something to do with form emerging from emptiness. But to ground the image, I tend to think of her as a cliff weathering at night, a single rock falling into darkness.

After dispersing at the end of the trip, Zenki sends us a follow-up poem from Han Shan:

People ask about Cold Mountain Way.
Cold Mountain Road gives out where
Confusions of ice outlast summer skies
And sun can't thin mists of blindness.
So how did someone like me get here?
My mind's just not the same as yours:
If that mind of yours were like mine,
You'd be right here in the midst of this.

"Well," he writes, "I hope this was not our last dharma trek along Rito Alto Road. Let's meet again in the midst of this . . ."