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## The Mystical Ridge

Dylan J. McKevitt

Cedarville University, [dylanmckevitt@cedarville.edu](mailto:dylanmckevitt@cedarville.edu)

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## **“The Mystical Ridge,” by Dylan J. McKevitt**

### **Instructor’s Note**

Dylan’s assignment was to recall a person or a place and describe it over time in order to show “characterization,” differing emotive qualities that create a sense of roundness. This was an imaginative paper whereby the writer must create the illusion of place or person using concrete details, tags, or repeated images that give a sense of change. How does Dylan create the emotive qualities of place as he wanders to the ridge? How does Dylan capture the sense of change from one moment to the next? Identify the “tags” or repeated images that create emotions. What are those emotions?

### **Writer’s Biography**

Dylan McKevitt is a sophomore Geology major from the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. He runs cross-country and track outside of a busy class and work schedule. Dylan loves the outdoors and enjoys woodworking and reading in his free time.

### **The Mystical Ridge**

During my teenage years back home in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, I was restless. That in and of itself didn’t make me different than any other confused or changing young person. What made my situation unique was that I could not go hang out with my friends down the street, jump on the internet and chatter emotions and opinions over social sites, or numb my churning mind and soul by lounging in front of a big screen and thumbing controller buttons for hours on end. I lived in the back country, with no running water or electricity or cell service, surrounded by gravel roads, logging trails, and hundreds of acres of wilderness- trees, swamps and mountainous terrain. My nearest neighbor was a hippie a mile down the road. So my

restless heart, upon finishing a hard day's work, had only one outlet- going for a walk.

And walk I did. I grew to intimately know the miles and miles of woods around home. Of course I had my favorite spots: the old-growth Hemlock Stand just behind the sheds with its chattering red squirrels and spongy humus; the Yellow Dog River a short bike ride down the road, where freshly-gnawed sticks wedged up against the bank as unfinished beaver dams, and plump silver brook trout rolled at the water's surface, breaking the dawn's calmness; the gravelly, washed-out, two-track, dead-end Ho-Chi-Minh Truck Trail that had more wolf and deer tracks than tire tracks, lined with loaded blackberry bushes that held their tasty treasure into the late fall. But these pale in comparison to another location.

One fall, I must have been 16 or so, my heart was exhausted. The stress of schoolwork, athletics, trying to find my niche in a group of classmates who didn't understand me, that I was isolated from, struggling with what type of man I would become and how I'd become him, and constant financial and family struggles formed an unbearable weight. And it wasn't remedied by the gray-cast skies that hung stagnant over my house. I had to get away into the embrace of the woods to think and set my mind back on level ground. So, late one weekend afternoon, I strolled down my driveway and across the gravel road. I packed light with only a walking stick in hand and a piece of gum to chew on, attempting to leave my concerns and worries at home.

At first it seemed I had. Stresses passed with my fading footsteps. Thoughts about overwhelming school projects and how my family would afford to fix our junk car vanished. Yet my heart's load didn't lessen. Those worries and concerns just took on a new form, or maybe they were finally stripped down and exposed. It was irrational, something I couldn't wrap my mind around. It was a sense of sadness, grief, loneliness... a melancholy gloom that sneaks into my heart every late fall and swells up- ugly, unbearable, feeding off of my surroundings. Those cherished rivers and streams that had gurgled so

happily now slowly slide along beneath bare banks with no trout to break the surface. Blackberry bushes grow brown and brittle with a few shriveled black crusts remaining. The maples, oaks and birches stand crooked, dead, bone-dry inside for lack of blood. Their beautiful, multi-colored cloaks of only a couple weeks ago now lay molding on the forest floor, colors leached into the damp soil. The pines sit quietly in their own shadows. Trunks and empty branches are coated in hanging lichen and mosses, putrid-green in the dim light, thriving in a cold, damp fog that leaves water droplets clinging to the slimy bark. That thick, heavy gray air... summer's dying breath. It hangs still and silent like a burial shroud. And then comes that wind... It tears away the few remaining birch leaves, dropping them curled and brittle like yellowed desert parchment. It whispers of the coming winter and consuming grays and whites, of the summer vigor that has sadly once again been sentenced to an unjustly long banishment. It foreshadows short gray days and long nights, huddling around the kitchen table listening to the radio or straining to read by the light of a kerosene lamp, constantly shoveling wood into the woodstove, embracing the warmth and dreading the backed-up suffocating smoke it was sure to puff out as the winds whipped outside.

This *feeling* that wrapped around my heart was familiar, but never before had it been so heavy. I was drowning. I needed relief. An animal-like instinct urged me towards higher ground, upwards to fresh air.

I'd been wandering along a small, snaking stream, the Little Garlic, my feet squishing over the soggy floor and decaying mushrooms as cedar boughs grasped at my flannel shirt. Now I forced my steps away. Dense conifers soon gave way to hardwoods, and the more open view revealed a pair of deep tire ruts overgrown with saplings and crisscrossed with fallen limbs; an abandoned logging road. Rotting stumps dotted the area, evidence of a select cut that allowed me to see the trail head off up along a hill. This was new territory to me, and with enthusiasm I pushed my legs up the winding trail, straddling dropped trees and muddy ruts.

Eventually the trail began to level off and fade, and I could tell the loggers hadn't touched this area. A few ragged, wind-sculpted coniferous behemoths stretched skyward from the virgin ground, too remote to warrant the loggers' attention. Some gnarled maples intermingled with the hemlocks, their roots often wrapped in a death grip around the fractured head of this granite mountain. Scattered ironwood trees rose from the thin soil, giving testament to the high elevation and grim conditions.

I could feel it. My unknown destination was close. Southward, a couple hundred yards distant, filtered light squinted at me from just beyond the trees. To this I hastened, crawling over a knoll of jumbled granite blocks, their cold, slippery edges interlaced with curling worm-like roots. A thicket of maple whips and shrubs greeted me on the other side. Bowing my head I bulled forward, the branches' bony fingers grabbing, pulling at my clothes as I tripped onwards with arms outstretched, waving, bending open a path. I finally broke free. In a single stride my shoes went from mushing on spongy decaying leaves and twigs to crunching on sparse, short, dry green lichen and firm bare rock. I looked up.

A vast emptiness stretched before my sight. Nothing but air lay beyond the straight precipice which extended to each side just feet in front of me. A few hardy shrubs hung in cracks along the cliff face, level with the tops of forest pillars that reached far down to the floor below. Naked hardwoods and pointed evergreens rippled in wind-driven waves for miles and miles arching to the horizon, rising here and there over hills like swells over the deep, dark ocean, blending to a faint haze on the world's edge. The winds whipped from the direction of the setting sun to my right, summoning in the chill of night. Shadowy fingers slowly reached northeastward to my left and drew a blanket of stillness and quiet over the land. Yet where I was standing glowed golden in the sun's late rays, and a few final birdsongs graced the air. In the illuminated branches behind me fluttered those little feathered bodies of joy and contentment. I slowly sat down, cross-legged on the granite platform, and just took it in.

The sky was changing. The falling sun left a fading halo of vivid hues, oranges and yellows and reds that blended into pastels of darkening purples and blues as my gaze swept to the east. A few thin clouds sat high and light in the sky, such a difference from earlier in the day. And a couple bright stars shone brightly, forerunners of a great company quickly approaching. The flat surface of Lake Superior met the sky beyond the sea of rolling wilderness to my far left.

I took a deep breath. Nature's chill, fresh incense filled my lungs. I closed my eyes. The heat of the sun-warmed rock rose through my jeans to my skin. Beyond me, all around me, the wind roared like an ebbing tide hailing from exotic places far off, not loud or overbearing but both close and distant at once, connecting this vast creation.

I opened my eyes. Dimness surrounded me now, but a few last sun rays graced the crowns of a dozen ancient white pines that reared up along this ridge. They were battered, half-bare or broken, some peppered with woodpecker holes. Yet they stood straight and towered over everything else like giant, proud, ancient sentinels nearly impervious to the passing years and seasons. And then their crowns too shortly faded, the birds fell silent, and the western sky welcomed the royal blues and purples from the east while more pinpricks of white light appeared.

"Wow, amazing," I said. I spoke quietly, motionless, eyes and ears still wide open, yet my breath took the life out of the wind, interrupted it and made it silent. For a moment the magic was broken. Then the wind gradually stirred back up. I understood. I was a privileged guest on this almost holy ground, and I had nothing to give and no words that needed to be shared.

I gingerly stood up and stretched tall, flexing my legs to get the blood back into them. It was time to head home. I slowly turned my back to the cliff and began to push back into the brush when a flash of red caught my eye. I stooped and stared. It was a hand-sized scrap of fabric, faded, thinned and torn around the edges, snagged on a root. A tent fragment. "So..." I silently said to

myself, “I am not the first person here! But who...?” My eyes swept the area for clues, but nothing else stood out.

In the thickening darkness I hurried home, in such a single-minded rush that it wasn't until I got back at the kitchen table and settled down to dinner that I realized I'd left something back on that ridge. No longer did a lead weight hang from my heart. My mind was clear and the engulfing gray haze had been swept away. I'd gained something too, although I didn't know it at the time.

Mid-winter came with three feet of snow in the woods, perpetually gray skies, freezing metallic-tasting air, and an emptiness broken only by a random gust of wind or zigzagging line of mouse tracks terminated at each end by small, dark holes. It came with monotonous days spent rotting in classrooms, frustrating work and failing snow blowers that sent tempers flaring. It came with an instinctive tugging on my heart, growing stronger and stronger with each passing day. I had to obey. And so I strapped on my Alaskan style snowshoes and took another pilgrimage to that mystical ridge.

Once again I wove through the cedar marsh, ducking under the snow-laden boughs and shuffling carefully along buried logs to cross over the ice-covered Little Garlic. The abandoned logging trail appeared as I emerged into the hardwoods, its twin ruts now barely visible in the snow blanket's contour. Subtle mounds marked underlying stumps like headstones. A bleak calm stood guard over... nothing.

I gradually marched up along the logging trail, snow crunching under-shoe the only sound. As the trail leveled off though, an amazing transformation took place. Even though the trees were fewer and scattered, scarred and wind-burnt, a sense of timeless life permeated my surroundings. Surprisingly fresh deer tracks punctured the windswept snow drifts. By this time of year they usually would have moved out of the area, closer to the lowlands near the lakeshore, and with the lack of sign elsewhere I thought they had. Now I imagined a few remaining grizzled old bucks striding this ridge and surveying their

vast kingdom one last time before following the rest of the herd.

I stepped gingerly over the uneven knoll, careful not to wreck my snowshoes on the rocks. The snow blanket thinned closer to the cliff, even blown down to leaves in some places. I glimpsed the weathered tent fragment poking through a powdery dusting, an out-of-place red blaze. Like a tripwire it sent anticipation and excitement flaring up inside me.

I forced my way through the ice-coated, tangled shrub-wall to once again stand in awe on the bare rock. I was respectful and did not speak this time, but just listened. The sky sat completely cloud-covered, an even gray, the sun a dim orb whose filtered light barely illuminated the vast rolling sea of trees. Heavy snow snakes lay draped over bare branches; bunches of green needles sat iced-over, stiff as blades. The drab white terrain blended with Lake Superior where ice had extended out from the shore. Beyond, a flat, frigid blue ran to the horizon. It was as if the land had been swept clean and primed, a blank canvas awaiting the blooming colors of spring that were sure to come.

Still standing strong were those ancient white pine sentinels. And still blowing was the wind, colder now than before but purer, cleaner, having stripped away the last scent of stagnant decay from the valleys. White crystal flecks burst tingling against my bare face, driven by the wind and causing my eyes to water. Besides its low, pulsing roar and random dried and yellowed birch leaves rustling lightly on their branches, there was no other sound. The land rested and was purified, patiently awaiting spring and the continuing cycle as old as creation. The land did not speak. In its silent majesty hung peace and confidence, the fruit of some sort of unshakeable faith.

Years later and far away, with new stresses and concerns threatening to drown me, that picture remains vivid in my mind. I imagine things have changed. The lookout spot has probably been strangled with brush, and the trees may have grown taller to block the view. A few of those massive white pines have probably fallen to rest

after their faithful watch. Maybe that tent piece still flutters in the wind. Maybe it's gone. But the memory hasn't changed. I close my eyes and see myself, feel myself standing on that snowy ridge. A stranger may have thought the place heartless and harsh, but I knew it better. And in some way it knew me and had become part of me. And I, it. No red tag marks my passage. No sign tells my story. As much in the present as the past I whisper to the ridge, "I will return someday." I feel a light tug on my heart. "And I can never forget you. Will you remember me?"

A muffled roar reaches my ears, and gradually grows. Then suddenly the wind is both close and far off, carrying a timeless promise on its wings.