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Eulogy

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Dad told stories. He built the world. He built the home. He built me. He pieced me together with nights high in mountain meadows above the tree line, with stars burning through only a few feet of air to kiss my forehead, with grizzlies and wapiti and lichens that we could eat. James Taylor and John Denver on a Fender twelve-string traced the shape of my eyes, my ears, my mouth, my dreams. I am ponds outside Spokane, Hyalite Peak threatening snow, and the AuSable River where it still runs narrow and overgrown.

I still feel pine needles pressing into my naked feet, still taste lake water boiled over a fire to kill giardia, still breathe the smoke circling my head, weaving itself into my clothes and hair, carrying sparks that ascend to join their brother Orion, sister Pleiades. Sundown, the fire magnifies the shadows of lodgepole pines; shadows amplify the whisper of the creek bed. Mountain peaks he had climbed became the bigness of my dreams; the snow and hypothermia he had overcome, my need for a home; the grizzlies and mountain lions he had escaped, the hardships waiting for me.

Our family—the six of us—we were born the standard bearers of a great heritage—James Wallace, Jeremiah Johnson, Jedidiah Smith, Jim Bridger. Dad was numbered among these bearded mountain men. I would join them someday. Greatness ran through our veins.

Great lives face tragedy. My Grandpa died when Dad was sixteen. He served in World War II, the 182nd Airborne. He was born in the Adirondacks. He was a flyfisherman. He was numbered among the great. Dad became a man at sixteen. He drove his mom to work; he fixed his own car; he roofed his house.

Nine years old, I meet my tragedy: a head-on collision at fifty-five miles per hour on the way to go fishing with a friend. We all lived, some more than others. I still limp a little; his mom had a stroke and still struggles to speak simple sentences. There God touched me, scarred me, destined me. I will be numbered with my father and his father before him, like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Great lives are not to be lived; they are to be endured. Dad married young, his high school girlfriend as soon as she graduated three years after him. They married poor. She worked, he studied, and they lived first with his mother, then with her brother. Seven years they labored for the right and the means to eat off cardboard boxes in their own apartment. They paid the price of greatness in sweat and headaches.

Two thousand miles distant from Potosi Peak and clearwater creeks, from sage brush and pine smoke, stories become less omens of greatness and more the apparatus structuring the meaning of my day-to-day. The University rises up, another wilderness begging exploration, prophesying spilt blood and winter wind throughout the night. Predators stalk these darkened pathways through old-growth forest, waiting to deconstruct my sacred stories, to consume my meanings. Lines crack the windburnt skin of my face—too many nights under the moon without the shelter of bloodline.

Dad flew out last summer to share the thirty-hour drive from these cornfields to his mountains. I remember breaking the crest of a hill somewhere outside of Sheridan, Wyoming to encounter the Rockies for the first time on our trip westward. He pointed through the windshield, “Jeremiah Johnson rode this valley up to meet the Milk River near Billings.” I have history in this landscape. I have angry Scots and the French and Indian War, mountain men and Jim Croce. I have story.

This year I rode a bus further east through hills and pollution and deciduous trees. Three years of the University: my stories are being eaten by philosophy and term papers. Someday my father will die. He will join the great ones who have walked this land before us. I scratched out a eulogy from my bus seat.

I dreamt you died
And how I would feel naked in this world.
The songs I'd learn
To sing as we stood in your remembrance;
How mountains, trees, and snow
Fade without you.
Never again would I breathe that same air,
Sweat freezing on our faces—
Icicles attesting to the climb.
Never again to smell the coming of the dawn:
Ever in the darkness just before,
Ever my toes and fingers freezing.
No hope of reaching the top.
Until all is made new again,
Until new songs I learn to sing,
I miss you, Dad.