

Barbara Edelman

Lytle Creek, for Wendy

On the second day,
on the way down,
we'll see the big-horned sheep,
scaling an upreaching arm of rock
toward the slanting sky.

What is it that brings you your wish?
Not prayer. I remember an evangelist
backpacker who tried to save your soul
on Sawtooth Pass. You told him you didn't have one.

Now you long for that Sierran terrain,
but won't be two nights without a phone,
away from your husband, so placidly attached to his new lover—
a machine at Cedars Sinai.

His legs won't let him sleep.
At the first slowing of breath
they start their horizontal dance—
as if his being would simply
roll over into hell
were his eyes allowed to close.

By day he wears those nights
like a new home on his back.

For you, there are still
the San Gabriels, muscular and naked,
ripping like bare fists out of desert,
their fleshy bases bathed in smog.
You call them the peach pit mountains
and study the switchbacks for sheep tracks
the long way up.

I'm reeling.
 The open slope in the sun is
 unrelenting. The sky tips.
 You gather rocks for your classes
 of gifted teens in cashmere sweaters.

I'd follow you into the wilderness
 and often have. You decide when it's safe
 to abandon trails. I trail
 happy and stupid as a child
 delighting in sights I can't name.

Against a scrim of afternoon light we follow the creek,
 its rock and tree trunks splashed
 with an orange rash of ladybugs.
 Packs down, we scramble
 a last half-mile to the top,
 but the view is cramped, obscured
 by neighboring peaks. We find a campsite,
 shadowy and lush. The creek sings-in
 its newest evening over rocks.

"I'm going to look for big-horns before dark."
 You carry the binoculars you bought
 for New York theater cheap seats.
 Fifteen years ago we passed them back and forth
 and never saw the same thing.

In the dark you return, expedition
 sheepless. We watch the stars that have multiplied
 a thousand times since we left the city,
 I remember the sky has layers and
 layers I don't want you to explain.

Toni Niemenin at Courchevel

1992 Olympic Ski Jump

I was a heartbeat and memory of flight,
Before breast milk or snow on a mountain,
Before geometry and the still pool of exhaustion,
Before the alarm clock,
Before the ice-eyes of other jumpers and the small
 fires inside my muscles,
Before the flutter in the gut,
Before the dip of melted wings,
Before the superlative hunger,
I knew this moment.

I am an embryo, a coiled
recollection, crouching now, and now --
sprung into the sky --
my body a finger that points to God,
still but for the small flutter of my left hand,
like a memory of when it was a bird.

All that I know is below me.
I am sixteen, I am Finland's angel,
and this moment - my life -
this moment, this moment
is the one remembered dream
that other people close their eyes to find.