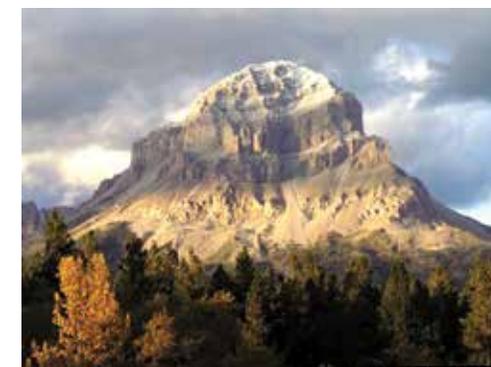


On

Crowsnest

Mountain

By Laura Trunkey



### Air: The Molecular Chorus

**WE ARE CARBON DIOXIDE, NITROGEN, AND OXYGEN.** Argon. We are whispers of trace elements: elementary helium, iodine, krypton, neon. We are ozone. We are nitrogen dioxide, ammonia and xenon, methane and iodine, nitrous oxide. We are carbon monoxide.

We are carriers of waves. Of light and sound. We are harvesters harvesting: pollen, spores, sea spray, and smoke. Dust. And we are gatherers of vapour, skimming across water, gliding over grass. Creators of clouds.

We are still.

Or we are storming, with charged solar particles sent down to strike, flaring ribbons. Ripping night.

And we are surging through the veins of the living. Predator and prey, we are carried in their blood. We fill lungs. We are breath. Echoes we recall, always. A gauze of thoughts and memories.

On Crowsnest Mountain stand a man and a woman. Him breathing steadily, to still his speeding pulse. And her, fast and quick, she is gasping. She is summoning. So we hurl ourselves towards them, those mouths wide open. We go gusting, in.

## Part I: The Father

**THERE ARE SOME WORDS IT'S BEST NOT TO** think about. Which is why I elect to think of only one: *rock*. Like the ones piled underfoot, a goddamn avalanche waiting to happen. Every lunge forward accompanied by a backwards roll, gravity directing its attention to my ass. Is this scree, then? And are we adding a dimension to the boy's epic adventure stories, experiencing it for ourselves? The boy and his stories. The boy. Like a fucking minefield, this train of thought.

Erica is oblivious to the inherent danger of the situation. The hazards involved. Middle-aged bodies tumbling and cracking open. Blind to the obvious, because she sees a point to us being here. A reason! As if reason is anything but a faulty construct. Reasoning. Reasonable. "It is reasonable to feel this way given the circumstances." From now on, reason will be banished to that writhing snakepit of things best left unspoken and unthought.

Replaced with this: *lichen*. Germanic-sounding, no? Spoken by a man in leather breeches pulling goats towards the market. Lichen being the staple of a goat's diet. Licked off rocks with its scrub brush of a tongue. Mountain goats survive primarily, predominantly, on papery plants. Recalling the source of this fact is a risk not worth taking, so instead I will contemplate the amount of lichen one goat must lick in a lifetime. And whether lichen's hue is related to nutritional value. Or flavour. Is it safe to assume that kids, like human children, consider white more edible than green? And does the abundance of orange lichen suggest it is consumed as a last resort? And since when is lichen orange? Or black? Could it be that lichen is the only existing black vegetation? Besides the blackberry. Which might not be considered vegetation

to begin with, and for which *black* is a misnomer anyway, the berry being as purple as Erica's tam.

The infamous tam-o'-shanter, most hideous of head coverings. Do Scots even wear such things anymore, or are tams for tourists only? This tam purchased by Erica in the Glasgow airport a decade ago. Though the Glasgow airport, and all memories related to the summer the boy was twelve, will not be called up. Period. Whether or not they are triggered by tam-wearing. A tam, if reflected upon without sentimentality, is nothing more than a Scottish beret. Authentic berets being just as obsolete as authentic tam-o'-shanters, worn solely by the sort of affected American expats who lug their easels daily to the banks of the Seine.

I have just snorted aloud. Must have, because Erica has turned to face me, blocking my ascent, and because the low-level buzzing that has thus far accompanied the climb has ended. The buzzing in question being Erica herself. Or more precisely, her monologue about what we are looking for. About *whom* we are looking for.

I shake my head. "Go on."

And on she goes. And on and on. Not that I can decipher meaning. I have learned to block out the dangerous wound-ripping words of my wife.

Except. She's not moving, still facing me and trying to create that thing she always declared to the boy was all-important: eye contact. I am practically powerless against this. "Huh?" I say. And I really am listening now.

"You know what I'm thinking?" Erica asks.

Oh.

Yes, I could say, I know precisely. Excuse me as I plumb the depths of my subconscious. We'll haul everything up, then watch it expand to grotesque proportions, gather up noisemakers and form a parade.

"Do you know what *I'm* thinking?"

I say instead. And Erica takes a deep breath as though she's been waiting for this all day. Like the students who come to review classes at the end of the semester, expecting I'll reveal the secrets of the final exam. But I'm not the kind of man to satisfy expectations. Erica, of all people, should know this.

"What?" she says quietly. Memories are standing on each other's shoulders, straining to break through to the surface.

"I'm thinking about this," I say, expanding my arms to encompass everything: the rock pile called mountain, the gathering clouds, Erica, myself. She's almost trembling now. Leaning forward so far she might tip over. "I'm thinking how useless it is to be here."

She just looks at me. Tenderly she looks, like the snake charmer that she is. The memories slip past their mesmerized captors. The loss of our son to weeks at summer camp, to trips to his grandparents, to the cluttered confines of the basement in his teenage years, to his parallel universe of priorities, to his friends, to a city that was too far away. What can I do to stop them? What can I say?

"You look ridiculous in that fucking hat," is what I come up with. And with this, she does turn from me. She starts climbing again.

"I'm finished," I say to her back. And I sit and stare at the ground beside me, trying to fill my head with only what is there. Rock, I whisper. Rock, rock, rock, like I'm meditating on the sound of it. Like a rock, rock hard, hard rock, rock on. Am I doing this correctly? Rock solid. Solid as rock. Don't rock the boat. Sinking like a stone. Stones in the pocket of goddamn Virginia Woolf. Enough! Rock. My Rock. Erica. Erica. Erica.

She's far ahead now, near the sheer limestone chimney. She shouldn't be alone up there. She shouldn't be here

to begin with. It's not safe. It's not right. And it's not going to change anything. But try saying that to Erica. Same for him, try talking sense into that boy. Nothing doing. Can you ever rein in a person like that? Can you ever them from themselves? You can't, is the answer. So don't even try.

## Part II: The Mother

**I'M FINISHED, SAM SAYS, AND MAYBE HE** only means he's finished climbing, that he will go no farther, but it's also clear that he's finished playing along. He's not given up faith, just his show of faith. Real faith he didn't have to begin with.

But there are a host of reasons our son would abandon his tent, his car, a pot caked with macaroni and swarmed by flies. And why he would walk to Chinook Lake and throw his hiking boots into the water. And his pants. There are reasons why our son would turn from the lake then, and go elsewhere. Into the forest, or up a mountain. Away. Why he would not wade into the water until he was well beyond his depth, exhausted, his inhaler forgotten in his glovebox, this boy of ours who could barely swim.

That Nicola had just moved from their apartment was a devastation, but our son was not desolate. *To the Light-house*, pressed open on his sleeping bag, means nothing. An assigned text for school.

The discarded pants (is there anyone to identify that these were pants he was actually wearing?): Carhartts patched with duct tape and containing, in their pockets, not stones, but the Ford's key threaded onto a twist-tie. Also a water-wrecked photograph folded in half then half again, and two yellow guitar picks. Also a phone card imprinted with Nicola's name. Also his wallet. But this is not evidence enough. Sam may maintain that the only possibility is the one that is most *realistic*,

but Sam is not a mother, and does not feel the heart of his child beating in his gut.

They've been searching since yesterday and haven't found a body in that lake.

I can feel Derek here.

Crowsnest was what he talked about the last time he called, from the pay phone in Blairmore City Campground—two hours on the highway all it took for his great escape. He was camping, but promised he'd be back in Lethbridge when we arrived. This call made the day before we left Victoria with the intention of driving eight hundred kilometres to help him fill his empty apartment.

The first time he called to talk about Crowsnest, he was seventeen and I thought he had met a girl. His voice lilting on the telephone, those breathy pauses. Guess what I just did? he asked. And I was almost certain that I didn't want to know. This was after he spent his first summer away with his friend Carl. Roughing it for two months in the Kananaskis—herding kids up hills, onto horses, out of trouble. Driving home through Crowsnest Pass, the boys had been pulled from the highway and up the dirt road to the mountain's base, transfixed.

Derek didn't make it to the top that first time. The ascent started too late, the wind was high, the rock cairns blended with their surroundings so that they were almost imperceptible. The boys couldn't find the route, and so they tried to cross the scree to the other face. It wasn't until they were halfway that they understood the impossibility of that feat. And by that time, to quote our son, they were scared shitless.

When he told me all this, I thought about Sam. Or more precisely, I thought about going AWOL from a

high school dance, then parking on the edge of town in that rusted pickup of his and expecting my father's face to appear, pressed to the glass, at any moment. I thought about how fear has a way of marking the beginning of a love affair.

Crowsnest was never a phase. Even Sam realized it, because he didn't tease the way he did about everything else. *How are those violin lessons?* When the instrument had for weeks served no more than a decorative purpose. *When are we going to have something to hang in the hall?* While fiddling with the still-sealed tubes of oil paint Derek requested for his birthday. Even when the spark was still alive, Sam didn't let up: *What?* Every dinnertime our son came to the table with microwaved slabs of nut loaf. *A vegetarian, still?*

But when Derek talked about the mountain, we both just listened. In that sense, we were a united front. We both, though hesitantly, supported the Lethbridge move, Derek going to school in Arthur Erickson's dungeon masterwork: a slab of cement dug into a coulee. And all, it seemed, so he could be closer to Crowsnest. *Romantic*, Sam snorted, though only to me. *He can drive there at night so its face is the first thing he sees when the sun rises.*

We did that ourselves. Drove yesterday from Creston to Chinook Lake, and then slept in the car at the base. To be closer, I said. Maybe Sam agreed because he thought I meant closer to the searchers.

Now, there sits Sam against a boulder, his arms crossed tight over his chest. The backdrop like one of Derek's photographs: the Seven Sisters in a row, a wash of greens and greys. Some things need to be seen to be proved real. And other things are even more unbelievable close up than the story of them ever can be.

Like this mountain, and that our son climbed to the top. How many times?

I understand the draw. Everything is sharper up here. The smell is like scorched dust lodged in my throat, and the clouds throw jagged shadows that ripple towards me over the rocks, then bite the warmth from my skin. My pulse throbs wildly. But I won't be deterred. Because if I reach the top, I'll find Derek alive.

The day before we slept at the trailhead parking lot, we slept in the Creston Valley Motel. This was after some fellow hikers found Derek's clothes. I lay on the floral bedspread watching Olympic highlights, and Sam sat beside me, alternately holding his head in his hands and staring at the side of my face. My body was aching from a day in the passenger seat, the air conditioner broken just outside Osoyoos and Sam fiddling with the knob, refusing to open the windows as the desert sun beat through the glass. Not an actual desert, he had said as the licorice at my feet melted, as my skin baked, as my temper flared. After the police called, he had given up and opened the windows wide.

Halfway through a Michael Phelps montage, Sam switched off the set. "What do we do next?"

"Find Derek." It was that simple.

"Erica!" he said—he shouted. And then he started to cry.

For a while I tried to come up with something to say, but there was nothing. I closed my eyes. I fell asleep. And when I woke, it was to Derek. The smell of him at least: warm and thick, like damp wool. A sign we were close.

The bedside phone was on the floor, its cord stretched into the bathroom. "Denial," I heard Sam say. "How long do I let this last?"

But the next morning, when I told him I wanted to climb Crowsnest, that I wanted us to search for Derek our-

selves, he only pressed his fingertips against his eyelids for a moment.

Derek is on the mountaintop; in my mind, I see him clearly. There's his hiking hat—that pilled orange toque with the pompom on top. Also the Scarpa boots, with the bells I made him tie to his laces to scare off wildlife.

But the Scarpas were found in the lake.

Because Derek had taken them off, wanting to let his feet breathe. He's in his sneakers, his camera swung over his shoulder on that threadbare Guatemalan cord.

Except that the camera was in the tent, beneath his pillow, the searchers said. And the toque too. The filthy hat that I threatened for years to make disappear, I had buried my face in yesterday, inhaling the scent of my son.

And so I have to disassemble that picture, to pull away the pieces that don't fit. When I see what little I'm left with, I ask myself: is this really what I believe?

Yes! I respond, aloud, at once. *No* comes the echo from deep within me, from the part that is collapsing. Why would Derek's clothes be in Chinook Lake if he didn't go in there himself? And why would Derek go into the water when he can't swim? Is it possible that Derek is where everyone believes he is: tangled in the weeds at the bottom of that lake?

I shut my mind to the answer, keep climbing to the place that holds on to my son. But here, at the base of the towering chimney, the rocks are too steep to climb on their own and the chain fixed to them is slack. The missing bolt becomes apparent when my foot slips from its hold. And then I'm sliding down scree, slamming to a stop against a large rock. This pain I feel isn't from the fall, it's from the picture expanding to fill my head. It's

from the realization that Derek is never coming home. And the possibility that he wanted it that way.

And there is nothing I can do about it. Nothing for me to do at all except to lie here, until I am desiccated by the sun, turned papery as lichen. Until I am caught by a gust of wind and blown away. Until I see it, standing at the top of the chimney like an apparition. A young, lone goat.

### Part III: The Witness

**GRAZING ON THE RIDGE, I WATCH THE** climbers.

Careful, Mother says. Be the rocks, be the air, be not there.

*Afraid of humans?* the old ones say, as I duck away.

They do not hide, so why should I?

Humans are dangerous, Mother says. They carry sticks that call to death. Shoot fire.

And the old ones agree. *Be fearful of humans, but not of these two. Come out from your hiding place. Look.*

But Mother says no. Who can be sure a human is safe?

The old ones can. The old ones know.

Go, says Mother. Go away.

The old ones tell Mother these humans are lost.

But Mother says no. They are going the way the others go. Up.

*Yes, up,* the old ones laugh. *To the top to see the view. But that's not all they're looking for.*

No? I ask.

Away, Mother tells me. Go away.

She stays on the ridge to watch the man below. And I watch the woman, who climbs on alone. Streams of scree slide with her every step, in rivulets.

*Rocks can become rivers, the old ones say, a crest of rubble rushing. A crust of rubble covering. Everything. And silence folding into it all that crashes and collapses.*

## THE HAT

There is not another like it in the whole known universe – and yet it's here in this chain-franchised coffee shop, on the head of a squat, lace-collared woman, her hair fair, fine and fraying, graying. The hat is an explosion of crochet – woolly loops of rust and pumpkin puffing upwards like the crust of a soufflé or the pelt of an alien animal from a distant galaxy. It conforms to no known pattern. The bows and bobbles with which it is adorned will never be repeated in the wildly multiplying combinations of the world. The sullen young snigger nearby, a tattooed chorus of conventional rebellion with stapled lips and ear-lobes. They'd never wear That Hat. They wouldn't be caught dead. They want, intensely, to stand apart, to make their fashioned selves unique. But not with that thing on their head!

– Alice Major

*A cloud of dust obscuring any light that endures. The sunrise grey as dusk as the humans went on dreaming. An endless dream in an endless night under Turtle Mountain. In the town of Frank.*

*On that mountain that gave way, the old ones say, our relatives were grazing and gazing at the sky. They were caught in the current. They were carried with the river. Collapsing. And crashing. Everywhere.*

This happened long ago. But the old ones hold the story in their bodies. They have breathed it.

How?  
*Not fleet-footed as you, child. But we are wiser.*

They speak to the dead, Mother says, and the old ones concur.

*To ghosts.*

Ghosts of whom?

*Not whom, but what,* the old ones laugh.

What, then?

*Everything. Everything breathing and everything not. Every place. Every happening and happened. We find their traces in the air. It's all still there.*

Mother hasn't seen these ghosts, but she believes: the old know everything.

But I know things too.

Things that gather like storm clouds in my head. A word: *dead*. And the face of a man I've seen before. What does this mean? Then more: a grizzly and her cub on the shore of Chinook Lake. And him caught between them, plunging in to escape, kicking boots, shucking pants in his wake. Fear. As the sun sets, and the bears pace. And he tires of treading water.

And then a floating fullness takes its place. I clutch it close. But the old ones interrupt.

In a procession, they arrive at my side. *Do you know why the woman is here?* they ask.

Her son, I say.  
*And how can you tell?*

I know. Everything flaps loosely, unfurled in the air.

*Fleet-footed and wise,* they say, *can it be so?*

I need to see her closer up.  
*Yes, child. Go.*

When I climb, I collect. I take what is waiting, hanging there ripe and ready to pluck. I spin a story out of sky. I hold it tight. Is this right?

When I reach the chimney, she's there below. Look up, I demand. A silent call, but still she stands. Her eyes find mine. What do I do?

Hello, she says, then looks away.

No! Stay!

But what comes next? I've forgot.

I climb down towards her, and when I'm close, I see it on her face. Part of the story; all she knows. Oh.

Listen, I say, a mute command. Is there a way to show the rest? The story sits frozen, curled on my tongue. I take a breath.

The air floods out fast, thick with the soaring fullness of a son. A man. The woman gasps, deep and low. But how can I tell if she sees what I know?

### Epilogue: Air: The Molecular Chorus

**WHEN THE WOMAN PARTS HER LIPS, WE** rush through mouth to trachea, to bronchi, bronchioles, alveoli, lungs. And we are held there.

Oxygen diffuses into blood, and with it comes a story. For we are carriers: of the keening of a grizzly cub, its mother on her haunches. Growling. Charging. And a boy treading water who cannot see the shore. Who can stay afloat no longer.

There's a beat without breath as everything's absorbed, and then we're exhaled. With a wail, we're sent outwards, rushing free. And we're whirling, spinning, turning, we are forcing, gusting, pressing, pushing past: a silent hoofed messenger, his herd still and watching. Pushing past: a man who is standing, to climb towards his wife. Pushing past: a small group of searchers who have gathered on a lakeshore. They have gathered by a body of a boy. But what they've found is no more than a vessel, empty. His spirit isn't lost, but flows everywhere, just like us. Is part of everything, just like us. He's joined our chorus of the infinite. ☞

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