

Big Sky of the West

Kelsey Beyerly

Rediscovery or some sort of rebirth seems to be a motif of many people's college experiences. Growing up in the plains and suburbs of Colorado, the view of the mountains rather than the mountains themselves was home for me; I was only looking in. It took a vacation, well-coordinated and planned months in advance, to get our family's feet in some real unmedicated dirt. I was lucky, and I knew it in my noggin, but my heart was wandering. The coming-of-age quest to experience new places brought the usual entourage of new leases, new haircuts, and a new appreciation for the state that raised me.

The West sits as the heart of the American Dream—the land of promise and opportunity, but was I not experiencing the same profitable Front Range that prospectors did years ago? A land that is prosperous, that could feed tribes of indigenous and house the hundreds of ecosystems that thrive within its peaks and valleys and grasslands. The sky is big, and the world is wide. Grasshoppers and prairie dogs, mountain goats and little girls, can look up forever in a vastness that does not end, peppered with bulging storm clouds and layers of nimbus. Deeper and deeper the blue becomes the further you become lost in it. You think that there are other places, better places maybe because you grew out of your hometown. But not another place in this world has the same deep and promising blue expanse that the West swaddles you with.

The rush to do something, to be someone at 19 will consume you (nothing wrong with that). Thus, you are coaxed into the stampede of seasonal work, where adventurers will wander North into Alaska to test themselves against the Last Frontier, but sons and daughters of a clear Colorado sky will feel smothered by the withering clouds and endless bog. Alaska is a place where the sky is small, and in many places, touches the Earth. It is so close that you could reach up and wave your fingers through the low-hanging clouds. Unlike the colloquial American “West,” the one of cowboys and plains and hills and deserts, Alaska is a place where things go to die rather than to live. The cloudy days nearly resemble a much duller version of their native sky. But the cold gray will taste bland compared to the ripe sweetness of a sky back home. The sunny days are almost worse; the depth and reverence of the sky cannot possibly compare (and humans, by nature, love to compare), the clouds are altogether too close. Instead of lively cowboy jamborees and clear views of the Milky Way, gray brings decay and a damp stench of mildew. Damp and foggy days, while bearing no malice, bring wildlife and vegetation cycles in quick succession. Barren tundra, quick thaw, growth, decay, growth, decay, decay, decay. The land touches the sky, and they absorb each other, writing in a celestial balance. Humans would be ripped apart by such a chaotic and violent dance. Surely, people who've lived here for centuries have found a way to wriggle with this rhythm, but I, as only a Westerner and a fool, have two left feet.

I crave the steady and persistent foothills and gritty sandstone, where the animals are small and vigilant, and the drawings on the canyon walls last long past their artists. I want my land and sky separated. I want myself, and the place I attach myself to, to endure long past when my silly ideas and I die. I want to feel wanted, important, and I have no business in a place where the forces of nature make this town too small for the both of us. Alaska is too big, so massive, that I have no legroom there. All I can do is sink.

Back home, palisade peaches and deeply green watermelons are coming into season. High peaks have started to shed their green in favor of a lighter hue. The mountains shine in a new light now, one that's not behind a barricade of clouds and fog. An El Niño year is promised, making way for a hopeful credo of i70 enjoyers. Studying is a welcome opportunity, and visits to home are for relaxation. The seasons are changing, and the sky is a deep turquoise.