

The Mountain

Before

My mountain climbs up the side of the car window like mist. A steep slope ombred in greens and golds and rusts.

I always find my mountain.

I always mark my mountain.

My mountain that always lets me know I'm home.

After

The summer after my grandmother dies, I don't mark my mountain. I don't look for it as we pull onto the road or even after we park in the dooryard at my grandparent's house.

I only notice it the morning I leave.

The morning I go to the hospital to see my grandfather.

After this morning, I will never see him again.

I look for the mountain, but it is shrouded in mist.

Hiding.

As if it cannot bear to see me go.

The Dooryard

Before

Crunch of gravel under tires. The slab of white granite threaded gold with mica. Petunias in the cast iron planters; their spicy scent my grandfather loves and my grandmother hates.

The garage doors open wide.

After

I linger in the car and when I do emerge, my feet drag over gravel. The quick crunch replaced by a slow turn of each stone. No petunias in the planters.

The garage doors closed tight.

The Front Walk

Before

My body picks up speed and the crunch of gravel quiets as my feet meet smooth concrete, sloping slightly down.

This is a place of mountains and ridges and hills, a place where the topography of the land pitches you forward, sometimes rising to meet you.

Sometimes waiting for you to fall.

After

I linger just inside the front door.

I watch visitors make their way down the walk.

I don't want any more bodies in their house sucking up the air, every breath one less for my grandfather who is, besides my mother, the only one left.

He is braver than I am. Choosing to rise, with great difficulty, and make his way to the front door. He opens it wide to voices and all the air immediately rushes out of the house.

I cannot bear it.

I stay behind the door.

Hiding.

The Family Room

Before

My grandmother reads tea leaves.

My aunt bakes boxes of blueberry muffins.

My uncle's laughter fills the room.

My grandfather stomps his boots inside the door and wipes his forehead with his handkerchief.

My mother and father tell stories.

My sister and I sprawl across the slate floor in light that streams through the sliding glass doors.

After

My aunt is gone.

My grandmother is gone.

My uncle is gone.

My grandfather is gone.

My mother and father are quiet, hushed.

My sister and I are alone in the empty family room, our chair legs scrape echoes off the slate floor.

The Kitchen

Before

My grandmother.

She stands at the sink or the stove. Her sleeves rolled up; light catching the gold of her bracelets and rings.

Onions. Bread. Sauce. Lemon cake. Tea.

Blue and white dishes stacked in the cupboards.

Clear plastic jars full of cookies.

After

My mother cleans out the pantry and donates all the dried goods to the food bank.

The blue and white dishes go to my sister.

The table in front of the window, beneath the lace curtain, goes to my mother.

Summer sunlight filters into fall then winter, illuminating empty space.

The Guest Bedroom

Before

I sleep in a twin bed beneath a knitted blanket the color of cream. No matter how carefully I watch my grandmother straighten, tuck and fold that blanket, I can never get it right.

I sleep beneath a print of *Christina's World*.

I sleep with the windows open, listening to the low rumbles from the logging trucks on the road.

Before, the room fills with the sounds of cars, trucks, crickets, peepers and coy dogs on the mountain.

After

My aunt came back to her childhood home.

My aunt came home to sleep in her childhood room.

My aunt came home to die.

My mother took *Christina's World* and hung it in her house.

My mother gave me the cedar chest that always lived in that room.

After, the windows are closed and locked.

After, the room is silent.

The Fancy Room

Before

It is the quietest, cleanest, loveliest room in their house. It holds all my grandmother's treasures:

glass the color of leaves or cranberries or robins eggs, Wedgewood, porcelain birds, and painted trays.

An antique chandelier hangs in the center of the small room. It gives off a soft, warm, welcoming light that beckons you to come in but not to stay.

After

My father sweats and swears on a ladder in the middle of the fast darkening room. He holds a saw above his head. He is trying to take the chandelier down, but my grandfather, who never did anything by halves, has secured it and it will not budge.

Glittering crystal prisms. Brass fixtures glowing almost gold in the fading light. The porcelain globe resembles the soft milky light of the moon.

It is mine, but as of this moment, it sits unlit in a dark box in my basement.

The Bathroom

Before

Epsom salts.
Silver Fox.
Listerine.
Irish Spring.
Polydent.
Bag Balm.
Skin so Soft.
OFF Deep Woods.

Avon Lipsticks.

After

Empty shelves.
Empty linen closet
Empty medicine cabinet.
Empty shower.
Empty.
Empty.
Empty.

The Bedroom

Before

My grandfather's pants and shirt slung over the back of an overstuffed rocking chair.

My grandmother's clothes carefully hung up.

Country Western music coming in low over the stereo.

Readers Digest and National Geographic stacked on the bedside table.

My grandmother's jewelry shining on the top of her dresser.

After

Their clothes donated or burned in the woodstove in the garage.

Stereo silently covered in dust.

Readers Digest and National Geographic curled and sun bleached.

I sift through my grandmother's sweaters hanging in the closet. I touch wool and cotton but can't feel anything beneath my fingertips.

The Sun Porch

Before

Bright light on three sides from seemingly endless windows. The occasional vibration from a milk truck or a bailer rattles the shelves full of glass.

The space brims with trinkets and spare furniture; projects my grandmother abandoned; seasonal décor and left-over party favors.

It smells of dried flowers and potpourri.

After

My grandmother's lilac bush has grown so large, it blocks the light casting the entire porch in shadow.

The once vibrant glass is now muted.

The porch is old, dusty and sparse.

Toward the end of her life, my grandmother brought items back into the main rooms of the house. She filled empty spaces with bud vases and statues of birds in flight.

I have one of her birds. He sits on the chair rail in my dining room, his gaze always turned toward the sun.

The Upstairs

Before

It always felt haunted.

After

It is haunted.

The Pond

Before

Neighborhood kids, grandchildren, cousins,
tadpoles, frogs, trout, crayfish, heron, kingfisher,
water bugs, dragonflies, birch bark, oak leaf, forget
me nots, lily, lupin cattails, gravel, grass, moss and
mud.

After

Forget me nots, gravel, mud, and leaves falling,
falling, falling into still water.

The Garage

Before

Machine grease, metal, warm asphalt and wood
smoke: my grandfather.

Tools, rope, twine, wire, scrap metal, scrap wood,
nuts, bolts, washers, nails, screws, hooks.

As a child, I'd call and wait. If he didn't appear, I'd
go to the garage.

After

I go out to the garage the last time he goes to the
hospital.

I stand in the middle of his workshop, near the
wood stove that is now cold.

I call and call and call and call.

The Pasture

Before

Horses, cows, ponies, goats, ducks, chicks, grass,
Indian paintbrush, Buttercups, thistle, Pine, Cedar,
squash, peas, chard, cucumbers, tomatoes, gate,
split rail fence, birdhouses, stone wall, blue birds,
swallows, jays, partridge, starlings, groundhogs,
squirrels, chipmunks, coy dogs, bear, moose.

After

Garden gone to seed.

Pasture empty.

At the very far corner, near the back, at the foot
of the mountain: a pile of moose bones half
hidden by weeds

The Road

Before

Hay trucks, bailers, pickups, mail truck, Schwann truck, milk truck, logging truck.

Every time a vehicle passes, my grandparents heads turn and their hands raise in greeting.

After

I sit out under their oak tree. My son runs around the edge of the pond. His scream is a shrill call in the quiet.

The road is silent.

The Hill

Before

The gentle slope down to the stop sign.

The house, the garage, the pasture, the pond and the road at my back.

The mountain stays by my side. It rises and settles before gradually beginning to recede,

but I know I'll return.

After

Still the gentle slope then pause at the stop sign.

Still the mountain rising in my passenger's side window.

Still the house, still the garage, still the pasture still the pond and still the road behind me,

but now they are empty and with each passing mile, the emptiness grows as vast and wide as the forests of the north country.

I do not know when I'll return.