

Final Cascade

My mother once called about a dying man I'd never spoken to, a man to whom I don't know if she'd ever spoken either. She called, crying, and described to me the erosion of this man's body, and then she did it again, and again, throughout the twentieth year of my life.

If I had still believed, as I did till age nineteen – and as my mother does – that some things are eternal, and death is not final, would I have cried for this stranger like my mother did?

I like to announce that I don't fear death. I say I feared it when I believed in heaven, but no longer believe, and no longer fear. Because the comment is self-serving, and because I generally offer it with a smirk, I accept that some will always think I'm lying. I'm not.

To my right, the slope rose under snow and pine, while winter-bare aspen covered the valley floor to my left. Snow piles ran like guardrails along the highway, and snowshoes hung from the sides of my backpack, bouncing like oversized earrings. It was my first time on a snowmobile (I'd rented it), and I felt shocked at the assault of sound screaming from the thing – how it split the silent forest. But the wilderness took no more notice of me than it would've had I been tiptoeing.

The Uinta Mountains of Utah stood empty, untouched this February day. Highway 150, snow-packed, and closed to all but ATVs through winter, carried me twenty miles without site of another rider. Ahead, snow-dusted rocky peaks towered over pine-crowded faces. Above the tree-line, powder caked in places, highlighting geological layers like wrinkles. It was clear what had long ago earned one of these rocky caps the official name "Bald Mountain." At thirteen I didn't care and soon forgot, but on my snowmobile at twenty-three, I wondered which of the peaks in view the other boys and I had, a decade ago, compared to our Scout leader's head after he once pointed to it and announced its name. The balding man – Roland – hated looking forty years older than he felt; I'm sure he regretted giving us such artillery.

Six years and six feet of snow separated me from the highway, the slopes, the entirety of the Western Uintas as I remembered them from my last visit in 2003. Snowflakes grew and visibility dropped as I climbed, almost unnoticeably, to ten-thousand feet. The pyramid-peaks ahead disappeared when clouds choked them out. I sped up and cracked my face shield to keep my glasses from fogging.

We dropped our boxers. "Count to three, Roland," the other boy said over his shoulder. I threw my arms up and shouted "Freedom!" across Scout Lake, and my voice echoed off adjacent slopes.

Ten-thousand feet up in the Uinta Mountains, lakes are cold in July. This was late October. A ring of ice reached into the black water from the shoreline, snow on the dock covered my bare feet, and a breeze rolling off the lake cut through our adolescent bodies, tightening skin. We had Camp Steiner, the highest Boy Scout camp in the United States, to ourselves. For all I

knew, it was illegal to be there, as it had closed for the season. Roland wouldn't have checked before taking us.

"Gads-sheesh! You're both nuts!" Roland stood fifteen feet behind us on the dock, wrapped in a blue winter coat, wind tossing the gray hair on the sides of his wrinkled head. "What am I going to tell your mothers when you float up?"

The other boy rubbed his hands together in the wind. "If my mom was here she'd push me in."

"Oh, Casey," Roland said to him, "your mother loves you. Nobody else in this world maybe, but *she* does." And then, laughing, he counted to three.

It was like rolling off a bunk-bed in my sleep.

My toes hit soft silt, and my hands reached instinctually back for the dock, but I dunked my head underwater and pumped my arms and legs to move forward beneath the surface.

Like trying to swim through a solid.

The lake crushed my lungs and forced me up, but I flailed on, threw paralyzed arms forward again and again, unable to feel when my hands broke the surface, unable to feel my legs kicking. I wanted to get to where I couldn't touch bottom, to lose the silt-thick floor and swim.

Ten yards from the dock I treaded water, yelping. The other boy rolled and splashed, whooping – celebrating or suffocating. "Roland!" he blurted between breaths, "Look! A whale!" He inhaled sharply, dove forward, and raised his winter-white hind-parts above the surface.

"Oh geez." Roland turned his head to the forest. The boy came up coughing. "I tell ya – your mother loves you!" the middle-aged man shouted. "Don't know how, but she does!" He breathed into his cupped hands, then lodged them in his coat pockets and bounced on his toes, chuckling and shaking his head.

A minute later, I pulled my blue body out of the water, planting my chest in the snow on the dock before throwing a knee up and rolling into the ice. I quickly stood and pulled my underwear on. My numb fingers fumbled to straighten the elastic waistband and failed. So, with shoes in one hand and clothes clamped under an arm, I ran barefoot back to camp in twisted underwear.

The winter-dressed teenagers and adult leaders gaped as I jogged into the clearing between tall pines, the other boy not far behind me. They shook their heads – said we were crazy – while we stood in front of Roland's industrial space-heater in our underwear, that bubble of warmth in the middle of the forest. Sensation crept from my shoulders and hips down my arms and legs, and finally into my fingers and toes in a crescendo of pin-pricks.

How strange to see yourself in a casket.

It's a rare diagnosis. Only five in one-hundred-thousand people will suffer from Lou Gehrig's disease – Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, or ALS. The disease is a sentence to progressive paralysis and early death. Nine in ten diagnoses are "sporadic," or uninherited, writes Philip Reilly in his 2004 book, *Is It In Your Genes?* That is, in ninety percent of cases, ALS springs into a family, steals a sister, or an uncle, then disappears.

But the other one in ten cases is “familial” – inherited and passed on genetically. This ten percent of diagnoses puts to siblings and children the decision of whether to be tested, whether to flip a coin and see their own future. This form of ALS affects only one in two-hundred-thousand people.

Finally, one out of every two-hundred-fifty people on this Earth is an identical twin.

So, to attend the funeral of your identical twin, fourteen months after he’d been diagnosed with *familial* ALS, is a statistical anomaly on the order of one in fifty-million.

How strange to see yourself in a casket. The twin skipped the viewing.

My mother sounded dispirited: “Sunday, at church, Roland had a cane.” It was late 2006.

“Oh yeah?” I said – or something similar – dully, from my university apartment seventy miles away. Of course he had a cane. We knew this would happen. In months of her calling about a man whom neither she nor I knew – Roland’s twin brother, the first of the two to experience symptoms – had she really not known she was calling, crying, about Roland all along? Of course he had a cane, and it would be a wheelchair soon, I almost could have said.

By this time, at age twenty, I felt as distant from Roland as I did his twin brother – that eroding stranger with a familiar face to whom I’d never spoken.

I turned onto what had been, in summer and fall, a dirt road, but what was, in February, a snow-carpeted isle. I drove my snowmobile much too slowly, sinking while fading left toward a small pine, then stopped to avoid being sucked into the sinkhole at the tree’s trunk. An attempt at reverse dug my tail-end deep into the snow.

Dismounting, I met powder to my thighs. I crawled a few feet and removed my helmet and backpack, then pulled the damp sleeve of my snowsuit up over my leather watch. 11:15 AM. Five hours until the rental office would start wondering about their unreturned merchandise – and hopefully come looking for it.

After forty minutes of using a snowshoe like a shovel to dig around the machine, my palm blistered through my glove and burst. I tried reversing again, but sunk deeper still. I rolled off the seat onto my back; the snow made a wonderful bed.

The scene above smeared and dripped across my glasses. Flakes fell heavy, straight at me; tall pines in my periphery formed odd lines, curving, surreal, as if captured by a fisheye lens. Minutes later, I realized I’d been drawing air through my mouth, silently, like when lying in bed afraid to move, for fear of what? A slow progression of wind sifted the needles at the tops of the pines, the sound like water moving toward and past me, without going through me. The air sat stagnant, weighted, at ground level.

There’ve been places in which I’ve felt both invisible and watched. The two sensations blend to one uniform feeling that is haunting to contemplate. And, in my teenage years, the feeling had become more pronounced with each trip into the wilderness. Back when I believed in

such things, I interpreted it as the absence of God and a vulnerability to evil. For me, God was not to be found in the mountains.

Sometimes I've returned to such places with intent to spin around and stare it down – that evil, watching presence. Catch it out in the open, grinning. But that was not why I had come this time.

Soon, two passing snowmobilers stopped and easily – embarrassingly easily – maneuvered my machine out of its rut. I thanked them, and mumbled something about it being my first time. Then they arced up and down the slope on the side of the highway before disappearing around the corner. The screaming of engines disappeared, as if sucked into the canyons.

On snowshoes, I hiked beneath the overhanging sign: *Camp Steiner*. Scout Lake and the campsites would be a mile ahead.

I pulled my sleeping bag tight around me from the inside. Roland's propane heater had been turned off by now (to conserve fuel, and out of fear of poisoning us in our sleep). Or, it may have been absent this trip, if it were summer. Six years of camps fade together in my mind; parts of scenes are clear, but their assignments in time are not.

The structures we slept in, roofed, rectangular, but lacking one wall by design, were perhaps ten feet from open-faced entrance to back wall, and twenty feet wide. We called them cabins. Each of the thirteen campsites in Steiner had at least one, and some had three. Logs – smoothed, stacked, intertwining at the corners – formed the three walls and fifteen-foot vaulted roof, and wooden planks served as sturdy bunks. The walls were a guestbook and forum. Initials, names, hearts, penises, later crossed out, later still retraced, deepened – year after year altered and re-altered: *I Love Barbara ACDC Your Mom BOOBS!*

I think it was late October, like my icy skinny-dip had been. Roland's blue tarp hung over the entire open side of the cabin, blocking us from early winter. Beyond it, the embers of our campfire likely still pulsed orange, like a heartbeat in the forest. Above the tall curtain of pines that circled the campsite, stars glowed so bright they looked unnatural.

The boys told mildly vulgar jokes inside the cabin, and I didn't think they were funny. Every one of us called himself a Mormon; was no one else uncomfortable? I expected such talk from some in the group, but a few of the voices that crawled out of the dark, emboldened by the distance from home, or the elevation, or the darkness – a few of the voices jolted me as I recognized them. To be clear, I was no exception to general rules of teenage boyhood, just as obsessed with girls and porn and masturbation as any of them, I'm sure. But those were dark secrets of mine. I recall times when I hoped I'd grow up to be the Mormon Prophet (imagine an altar-boy wishing to be the Pope), because I craved a permanent connection to God, some final and irreversible evidence of his existence. As a teenager I assumed – in despair – that I was the only of my peers engaged in something as *deviant* as masturbation, and when I learned I was not – as my fellow Scouts were prone to forthright discussions after sunset – I felt we ought to be ashamed and penitent, not celebratory. So, I pulled my sleeping bag tight from the inside,

perhaps in an attempt to insulate myself from celebrations of what I feared I was, but didn't want to be.

Roland laughed longer than the boys, but not louder. His stifled chuckle resurfaced after others' had stopped. When Roland laughed, which was often, I think it was about more than the joke or scene at hand; he laughed at being in his fifties and fitting in with teenagers.

"Ok," he said, "I've got one." I remember Roland's joke, although not word for word: Three young boys, back in school from summer vacation, report what they did over the break. The first says he'd gone to his grandfather's farm and seen the "moo-moos," to which his teacher replies, "Tommy, we're in second grade now, and we use big boy words. What you saw was a cow." The second boy reports that he'd seen a "choo-choo," and the teacher corrects him, telling him he'd seen a train. Finally, the last boy stands. He looks nervously from the class to the teacher, then back, and says: "My parents took me to Disneyland, and I saw Winnie the Shit!"

The Scouts reveled in the implicit permission to say *shit* again and again in repeating Roland's punch-line. I don't remember what I thought of the joke. It seems so mild now, and I know I found it less offensive than other jokes the boys had offered that night, but I didn't say words like *damn* or *hell*, let alone *shit*. I swore only twice – and in the same sentence – before graduating from high school. This night in the cabin was near the time I drove down a Main Street at midnight throwing CD's like frisbees out my car window, purging my collection of swearing, sex, and screaming. The greatest albums I ever owned bounced off telephone posts into supermarket parking lots.

As the jokes escalated, building off each other, I grew more uncomfortable, till finally, a foreign voice erupted quietly in the cabin.

"Guys, that's enough." It was Doug, another leader, nicknamed Mom, with his only words all night. I don't recall another sound.

The next morning one boy whined of having the fun killed by Mom the night before. Roland looked over both his shoulders, then lowered his voice and leaned toward us – a circle of greasy-haired, dirt-streaked teenagers in lawn-chairs, warming hands and feet over a smokey breakfast fire. "You know what?" He raised his eyebrows nervously. "I was just about to tell another joke!"

I felt relieved he'd been cut off.

In late 2005, Roland walked into a Costco with his wife, Susie. When they realized they'd left her purse in the car, he said he'd grab it. I imagine the echo of dozens of shoppers, carts rolling on cement floor, an intercom announcement – *tilapia on sale in seafood* – as he turned back toward the exit, intending to jog. He planted his foot, but his legs would not move. I wonder if he looked back at Susie to see if she noticed, or down at his legs.

Two months later, when a doctor diagnosed his twin brother, those momentarily obstinate legs must have suddenly become, in retrospect, malicious.

"Susie'd been telling me for years I drag my leg." He sighs into the phone. "This had probably started to manifest itself a long time ago."

I'd been afraid to call and have this conversation. What would I say? *I'm wondering about your brother's death, and yours to come.* Dying was miles outside the realm of things I felt comfortable talking to Roland about. My mother must have mentioned to him that I meant to call but was nervous to, because this morning, the middle of March, 2009, he called me. The first thing he said, after telling me I could ask him about *anything*, was, "I have a joke for you." He told a Pearly Gates joke, about newly-dead souls.

Although he attended his brother's funeral, Roland did avoid the viewing. It was in March of 2007, and Roland had been diagnosed a couple months earlier. Everyone knew that.

"I wanted it to be about him, not me," he says.

And he knows his friends well. When he didn't show up, some called his home and said they'd gone to the viewing looking for *him*, not his brother. I understand; to me the entire funeral sounded like a rehearsal, especially with Roland already using a cane. That's why I didn't go.

"People don't know how to act," he says, forgivingly. Some approach him in the supermarket and start crying before they get words out. Some say, frankly, unimaginable things – like a woman at the funeral who jostled, "Pretty soon, I guess you're going to be where he is!"

He used to tell the truth when they asked how he was feeling. "But I'd see it in their faces – they were sorry they'd asked. So, now, I say I'm feeling alright." He chuckles, as if at the naivety of those who'd believe him. "They say, 'Glad to hear it!' and we get onto something else." He doesn't want to be avoided. "I want them to be glad they talked to me," he says. "But you're someone I can tell the truth to, and the truth is, I feel shitty."

ALS used to be called "Creeping Paralysis," before it became known popularly as Lou Gehrig's disease, Roland tells me. In his brother, it crept up one leg, then into an arm, and finally across and down the other side. His brother lived fourteen months after diagnosis. His seventy-year-old mother died three months before his brother did. And, while she never noticed symptoms of ALS, in her DNA, postmortem, they found what they believed to be the error fifty-percent of her children had inherited.

When Roland asked me to lunch the first time, I was twenty-one, and on an undergraduate hiatus (from my resume: "I took a break from school to get in debt and get behind"). Although he needed a cane, his foot remained steady enough for the pedal in his truck, so he picked me up and took me to a bakery. We sat face-to-face in a booth, and he asked what had happened.

I told him God had been forcibly extracted from my mind, like a perfect tooth from my mouth, by a preponderance of evidence and a craving to know things – true things, like how species evolve, how old the Earth is, how mountains form and how long it takes. I told him, in different words, that there'd been no anesthesia for this extraction, that it'd hurt like hell. I explained that I'd stopped believing in God before I stopped believing in Mormonism, and I'd stopped believing in Mormonism only because I was forced to, as I no longer believed in any god. Like others to whom I've told that, he didn't think it made sense, said the sequence was backwards. I told him – if I recall correctly – that I'd believed in God for nineteen years, without once doubting, because I thought he was a necessary being; and then, suddenly, god was

superfluous, and I couldn't make myself believe in him any easier than I could make myself believe in any other unnecessary thing, like a chariot pulling the sun, or fairies pushing up flowers.

“Well,” he said, perhaps stubbornly, “I'm still expecting a miracle.”

“Roland, that doesn't happen with this one. Nobody survives this.”

I don't remember the rest of the conversation, only that afterward, I knew I liked him better before he was dying. His shaken gaze had felt like an accusation – like he was accusing me, quietly, of condemning him to everlasting death. Like I'd stolen his resurrection. I almost wanted to put my palms up, and shrug: *Hey, I didn't make the rules.*

My snowshoes seemed to sink deeper as I climbed higher toward the camp. I wanted to rest, but the silence aside from my crunching footfall deterred me. I wished I could soak it up – the quiet – but it was too concrete. It would've knocked me over.

Still, the mountains were unaware of me. I could collapse, die, – nothing would notice. Perhaps that's why I originally began to think the wilderness harbored evil. It was the first place I sensed a lack of intervention by any god, the first place I felt unknown and unnoticed. Geologist Daniel J. Jones published a bulletin from which I learned the Western Uintas rose from sea-bed to present heights – 13,528 feet – over the past *sixty million* years. The place has seen oceans above it and valleys below it. I am not much to see.

In 1955, when Jones published his bulletin, titled “The Rocks and Scenery of Camp Steiner,” the camp had been operating twenty-four years. Author Kerry Ross Boren compiled early stories of the camp in his 2008 work titled *Lest We Forget*, including one memoir from the first year it was officially open.

That 1931 summer was the first of twenty-six visits for a young Scout named Ray Ertman, a self-described sixty-five pounds with a forty-five pound pack. In a faded black-and-white from Boren's book, the adolescent Ray stands solemn-faced with hands behind his back, drowning in full Scouting regalia: pants to grow into; double-pocketed shirt, stuffed into a belt a few inches below his ribcage; a dark handkerchief; and what almost looks like a skullcap. That summer, the young boys marked fresh trails through the wilderness, and “discovered several ice caves,” Ray remembers. “The great surprise,” – and I quote in his poetic grammar – “was pools of water still frozen and when chipped was clear sweet ice to snack.”

The geologist, Jones, surely understood the Uintas differently than did Ray Ertman, but perhaps knew them no more or less intimately. Writes Jones, “The great valley glaciers that plowed down the valleys, carving and sculpturing the rocks as they went, began about one million years ago, and disappeared about 12,000 years ago.”

Glacial, as an adjective, is defined both by my word processor and a quick google as *happening extremely slowly*. I'd bet that definition was written by a human, not a tectonic plate. Glaciers move feet per day; from the perspective of the uplifting Uinta Mountains, the ice carved and sculpted slopes like enzymes move chemicals in and out of my cells – at a scale and speed beyond comprehension. Even the onset of full sheets of glacial ice, advancing from the poles in

cooler climates and lasting tens of thousands of years, was a fleeting moment to these peaks, a snowstorm in May.

I assumed I was at least halfway to the lake. To my left, the large meadow I remembered from my teenage visits sat conspicuously, like a burned spot amid trees. Jones explains that all meadows here were once glacial lakes. That meadow experienced what he describes as every glacial lake's "inevitable disappearance" long ago, as mosses expanded in its center and aquatic plants crept in from the shore. Those plants died year after year, layering the bottom with carcasses, and soon the lake became a swamp, then a bog, and finally a meadow. Hiking past, it occurred to me that under six feet of snow a meadow and a frozen lake look identical.

The future of that meadow is this: The Quaking Aspen move in like a walking plant, all trees in the grove part of one great organism linked beneath the surface. Later, Earth growls and lifts or sinks the spot, or alpine glaciers form again and render the meadow indistinguishable from the rest of the slope, all of it sanded into one consistent pitch by ice, the massive earth-mover. Creeping or cascading – depending on the observer – the glaciers tear boulders free like scratched skin cells and deposit them at the base. There the abandoned rocks form a moraine, a dam for a future glacial lake when warmth returns and ice caps retreat again to the poles.

My path wound, and my movement became a tired, two-footed crawl. Ahead, the pines and firs appeared to collapse on the road I followed. I pulled from my pocket a map of Camp Steiner photocopied from Jones' bulletin, but found it only charted the lake and campsite region, not the dirt road leading in – probably because the road is easy enough to follow when not buried by snow.

I tracked into the trees, which grew just sparse enough I could comfortably move between them. Even without a trail I expected to run into Scout Lake, frozen and buried. In a worst-case scenario, I could retrace my steps. My snowshoe prints would not be eaten by birds.

On a Friday morning, I crawled halfway out of my sleeping bag, my back sore from the hard planks in the three-sided cabin, and searched my pack for a sweater. Shivering, I dropped to the wooden floor in dirty white socks, squeezed into cold shoes, pushed the corner of the blue tarp aside, and stepped down into the dirt under an icy clear sky.

Roland stood over a Coleman stove, large griddle warming for pancakes. The sun was up but hidden behind tall pines, and I think the ground was free of snow. But where the sun broke through the needles, the light shimmered in October frost like shook foil.

"You're up in time to help," he said, as I moved toward him, half asleep, arms folded. He poured Sprite from a can into a metal bowl, then stirred pancake mix into it. "My personal touch," he'd told me some earlier year. The metal whisk squeaked against the cold bowl. His leathery hands may not have felt the cold mine did; they were so damaged by his home-construction trade. Skin grew over nails in places, fingers bent odd ways, all damaged by hammers, or nail guns, or falling ladders.

"Want to do the eggs? Here." He handed me the carton without waiting for reply.

I cracked egg after egg into a bowl. The icy insides stuck to my fingers, quickly numbing them, and causing astounding pain. My breath rose in the air, face puffy, cheeks tight, dried out

from sitting too close to the campfire the night before. It was the first and last time I let myself get sucked into cracking eggs on a winter camp.

Roland poured the batter; it sizzled and spread. Minutes later, he cleared the griddle and stacked the pancakes on styrofoam plates. Some were perfect butterscotch; others had blackened edges, or full blackened sides. Unapologetic about burnt spots, he didn't even try to stack pancakes best side up. He had them on his face, too – burnt spots – melanoma, just off his eye, which eventually had to be removed. All those summers he spent in roofless houses, putting up walls, pouring cement – I used to fear he'd die of skin cancer, eventually.

Soon, he yelled to the cabins to wake any boys who hadn't yet trickled out from behind the blue tarp. Pancakes, scrambled eggs, usually sausage or bacon, chocolate milk. Some boys wouldn't get up, and for brunch they'd have Swedish Fish and Mountain Dew.

The next day we'd pack, then make a final hike to the rifle-range to unload all the .22 ammunition we hadn't used. We'd hang quarters and shoot holes straight through to make necklaces we never wore.

I don't think any of us boys have been back in half a decade, but Roland always went back. Even after he could no longer walk, he went back.

Frank J. Ayd's *Lexicon of Psychiatry, Neurology and the Neurosciences* describes ALS as a "progressive wasting and weakness of skeletal muscles." When motor neurons in the brain and spinal cord degenerate, muscles lose their source of stimulation. They atrophy, and erode. Roland tells me sensation remains, since sensory nerves are not affected. On average, says Ayd, death occurs three years after manifestation of symptoms, most commonly as a result of respiratory issues, when the brain can no longer tell the diaphragm to function. This is why Roland's brother died rather quickly, and in large part why Roland has not; the paralysis has not crept into his diaphragm.

Ayd's *Lexicon*, published in 2000, offers, disappointingly, little more information about ALS than does an *Encyclopedia of Neuroscience* published thirteen years prior. That's the problem, Ayd stresses: "No cause, cure, or preventative means have been found."

But with regard to cause, what about that ten percent of ALS that's inherited – familial – like Roland has? Says the genetics expert Philip Reilly, isolating the roots of familial ALS has proven difficult. Out of ten patients with this type of the disease, two or three might have a mutation in one particular gene, and two others a mutation on a different particular gene, while the remaining five or six might not appear to have any mutations in common. The most ubiquitous of these mutations happens in a gene called SOD 1, and still, only twenty percent of people with familial ALS exhibit it. Complicating everything is the fact that some people who do have the SOD 1 mutation experience no symptoms of ALS (this despite of the mutation's dominant – as opposed to recessive – inheritance pattern).

Our understanding of the disease is further diluted. For example, researchers don't know how, exactly, a mutation in SOD 1 translates to degeneration of motor neurons. Reilly says that perhaps – and only perhaps – a misshapen protein, produced as the result of the faulty gene, effects "the size of molecules that can enter the cell." Potentially then, oversized molecular

doorways are ushering the wrong chemicals into Roland's motor neurons. But at this size, what is *wrong*? Wrong by a nanometer?

Roland would have got it right, had he been the contractor. I remember working at a site with him in my early teens for a few bucks cash, picking up wood scraps, carting wheelbarrows of garbage around. "She wants twenty-five feet and a half," he mumbled, shaking his head while kneeling on his tape measurer, a pen half-clamped in dried lips. "We're twenty-five feet and four – and I told her two inches won't make a difference," he released the tape and it zipped, "but she wants her two inches."

I'm fascinated by scale and size. The Creeping Paralysis has, at the molecular level, such a benign appearance. A set of three DNA base pairs tells a ribosome to attach a particular molecule – an amino acid – onto a chain of other amino acids, and that chain wraps around itself, becoming a glob of molecules, like a ball of loose string, but anchored in a specific shape by various chemical bonds. In biology courses we draw circles with little mouths and label these globs *proteins*, and when their anchored shapes cause our bodies to die instead of thrive we say the proteins have been formed *incorrectly*, and the ribosomes are picking the *wrong* amino acids to attach, because of *bad information* from mutated base pairs in the DNA. But at the molecular level, there is no right or wrong. As cells erode in function and form, it's only in a world orders of magnitude larger – my world – that meaning is assigned to the process. On the continuum of size from subatomic string to expanding universe, at only one point is the shape of a protein, or the order of base pairs in the SOD 1 gene, called *a tragedy*.

In Ayd's *Lexicon* is an entry titled "Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis/Final Cascade." The Final Cascade is the "irreversible, downward course" of the disease, of the body, "once clinical symptoms become overt." The irreversible downward course – to me this sounds like Earth Science rather than Life Science. The Final Cascade: I picture an avalanche, or a glacier carving down a slope.

In the year since Roland and I'd sat across from each other in a bakery booth, our communication had consisted of messages left on my phone, one inviting me to church, two suggesting another lunch date. I was busy – too busy for lunch, far too busy for a lecture. I feared another conversation like our last would further bury the Roland I knew, the teenaged fifty-year-old, the Scout leader who brought propane space-heaters on winter camps. But when I became less busy, I had no excuse to give myself, so I called him back.

It was October of 2008, four months before my snowshoe hike, and he could no longer drive, so I picked him up. He rolled out on what looked more like an electric scooter than a wheelchair. I held the passenger door like a chauffeur while he crawled into the car using his arms, his bottom-half twisted like licorice.

We drove to a Wendy's, where I'd three years earlier met the girl who – as Roland and I rolled into the drive-through – I was two weeks away from marrying. I'm sure I must have mentioned this to him, that I met her first in a Wendy's, but I don't remember.

We parked in front of a picnic pavilion, then ate in the car.

“Susie and I used to do this. Get food and come to this spot, right here,” Roland said, nodding. In my passenger seat he looked as he always had, his body whole.

Pleased about my upcoming marriage, he praised me for commitment, or maturity, or dedication, while I put fry after salty fry into my mouth. My fiancé and I’d been living together for a year, dating for three, and I’d grown cynical about the deluge of excitement expressed over the fact that, at twenty-two and twenty-one, we’d *finally* decided to get married – as if it signified a belated decision to start loving each other, to move past three years of nightly noncommittal fucking. (When my dad first heard the news, he put his arms in the air and shouted, “So, you’re making it official!” and my mom, when I was booking a Las Vegas package, said, with a twinge of distaste, “What’s the point of a honeymoon when you’re already living together?”)

But our fast-food lunch-date was memorable for what was not rehashed: my church attendance, or my lack of faith. I’d been awaiting the conversation-killer, and when it never came, I wondered if he’d just been caught off guard a year earlier when his voice and eyes had betrayed such thick distaste for my faithlessness.

I did steer the conversation clear of anything that would highlight distance between us. I admit that. My friendship with Roland was – and is – centered on simpler things: jokes, stories, swearing, cliff-jumping, skinny-dipping. Flipping the switch on the automatic doors at Target and watching from his parked Suburban as shoppers hit the glass. Riding in that Suburban, packed full of teenagers, while he peeled out on his neighbors lawn (that one brought cops to his doorstep, although I heard that when the woman who reported his plates learned it had been Roland, she felt bad for busting him). The Roland I know once hung upside down at roof level over concrete for fifteen minutes – his shoe caught on a single nail – and *that* Roland still laughs when he talks about holding statue-still, hammer in hand, so a passing mailman wouldn’t notice him. I never knew, and still don’t know, the Roland who’s about to die and meet God.

I stepped out onto the buried lake slowly, nervous to put full weight on my snowshoes. The thought of falling through to the dark water, being buried by not only ice but so much snow, terrified me enough to override my logical understanding of the impossibility of the event. Lacking trees, the lake was a tundra subject to driving winds the dense forest had been spared. I watched sheets of snow lift and run in the open space, maybe an eighth of a mile across. Large snowflakes had given way to small, wind-tossed ones, like cold powder stirring.

I hiked across a leg of the lake, avoiding the roaring middle where the wind frenzied. If there was evil in this wilderness, the center of this lake was where it danced. I averted my gaze, as if from a growling dog, and I did my best not to hear Greig’s “In the Hall of the Mountain King” on the wind.

Legitimately tense, and annoyed at my superstitious mind, I forced myself to hold still and listen. I took my digital camera out of my coat pocket and snapped a shot of the open space. It was, in fact, only wind and frozen water.

My eyes followed the contours of the lake shore, and I noticed that the dock from which I once made my naked plunge didn’t appear to be there, but I didn’t expect to see it under snow. More troubling, however, the lifeguard cabin I remembered was missing. Stopped in the empty

space, I studied my map, while snow piled in its creases. Parts of the lake didn't match to the shoreline as I saw it, although mostly it seemed to – the leg of the lake on which I stood looked perfectly represented. Still, I felt a creeping sensation I might be on the wrong lake. *Maybe I'm on a giant meadow* – a lake dead a thousand years. I quelled my concern. A map is a false reconstruction, not reality.

I continued along the far shoreline, then cut into the forest where the map said I'd find the campsite, called "Lake," in which we'd always stayed. But I quickly discovered the forest lacked any three-walled cabins. A strip of land split the large lake I'd crossed and a second smaller one – just as the map showed, and just as I remembered. *The cabins should be right here*. But the strip of land was too small – perhaps twenty-five yards wide between the lakes. I remembered it being five times that.

Confused, with fingers numb from holding the map, I wanted to throw the useless paper into the wind and trace my snowshoe prints back an hour's hike to my snowmobile. *Maybe they disassembled the cabins?* Or, they could've covered them with tarps at the end of the season, which might cause them to look like steep hills beneath the powder. No, at fifteen feet tall, they'd stick out like sharp pyramids, like peaks above the storm.

I stared stubbornly at the fifty-year-old hand-drawn diagram, now wet and torn. Jones had stenciled topography, and two hills on the map appeared to correlate with two I could see a ways off. I hiked straight through the center of them. A left turn should reveal a set of three cabins – not the ones I'd come looking for, but confirmation that I'd found the middle of the camp nonetheless. I rolled to the left around the hill, and then saw it.

"What the hell?" I said out loud.

The snow-packed highway cut through the forest directly in front of me, just off a small slope. It may as well have been an apparition. I ripped open my map. As I'd suspected, it wasn't possible to be looking at that highway if I was *anywhere* on the page.

I laughed, feeling not just disoriented, but actively manipulated, like I was part of some cosmic joke. But my non-belief in cosmic joke-makers left me with only lucid awareness of my ignorance of the wilderness. I pulled out a notebook, sat, jotted a few words, then bit into the ham and bacon breakfast burrito I'd packed. It was cold. I stuffed it away.

He camped there the first time when he was twelve, in 1957.

"That was when it was brand new," he tells me over the phone. "They'd just built it in 1952."

"I read it was built in the early thirties," I say.

"Oh." He pauses in thought. "Then they *moved* it in 1952. That's what it was."

Originally, Roland says, the camp surrounded a slightly smaller lake about a mile from the present location. Now that he mentions this, I recall taking a hike to that old lake one summer, the shore alive with newts that burst into the mossy pond as we approached. Grass had grown over the edge like early-season ice, and one boy in our group fell in, full-bodied, when the ground below him proved to be afloat.

“I loved it,” Roland says of his first summer trip to the mountaintop camp. “Buy I enjoy it even more now, after season.”

“I went up last month,” I tell him. “Hiked in on snowshoes.”

“Did you! What for?”

I say something simple, understandable, and probably untrue. I don’t say *I went because you’re dying, and I’m sorting out how to feel about it.*

“Did you get to the lake? Did you get to those – those cabins?”

I laugh. “No, I got lost. I’ve never been so lost in my life, actually. I found a lake, but it was the wrong one. I couldn’t find a single cabin, and I did try – I looked for them.”

“Oh.” He sounds disappointed. “Well. You know where you probably *were* – you found the *old* lake.”

I ask if he’s been up again lately, and he tells me that, four years ago, while struggling to hike the mild trail to the rifle range, he’d heard himself say, “This is the last time I’m going to be here.” The words had surprised him. It was before his brother’s diagnosis.

As the Uintas rose, “erosion attacked the newly formed heights.” Glaciers, mudslides, wind and rivers carried “a flood of quartzite pebbles, cobbles, and boulders” off their slopes, says Wallace Hansen, in *The Geological Story of the Uinta Mountains*. Those weathering agents spread this history across northeastern Utah, and into Wyoming and Colorado. Still, against the erosive assault, the rock rose, an inch in a million years, or a foot in an hour, and by twenty or thirty-million years ago the mountains had “a fairly modern appearance.” Says Hansen, “The stage was now set for the sequence of events that shaped the present scene.”

But earlier ages framed the eventual formation of these peaks. “All past geologic events,” he says, – even deposits of a particular quartzite two billion years ago – played a role. Looking back, geological history over two billion years is a grand cascade, a sequence of unstoppable, irreversible events, final in its absoluteness, its permanence. “Clearly,” says Hansen, “the landscapes, the rocks, and the processes that formed them both are not entities unto themselves. They are interdependent parts of an integrated whole, a continuum of matter, space, and time.”

Roland was wrong when he’d predicted he’d not make it back. In October of 2008, the month of my wedding, his son packed him into a van filled with grandchildren and camping supplies, and delivered him to 10,400 feet – the clear, cold air, the thin pines, the three-walled cabins. I don’t know if they took a wheelchair. it would have been difficult to maneuver through the trails. Perhaps his son carried him down to the lakeshore, and set him on the flat boulder I once lay on while searching those unnaturally bright stars for something outside myself.

“I didn’t stay overnight, but I got to watch my grandkids run along those trails and fish in the lake,” he says. “Being up there again – well,” he pauses briefly, sighs. “Steiner brought it all together for me.”

I don't know what he meant by that, exactly. My wish is that in the mountains he realized he doesn't need his miracle. How could one dread death amid rocks that have held shape for thirty-million years, form for twice that, their elements *eternal*, from any human perspective?

I also don't know if it was his adopted son who drove him to the top of the mountain, or the son who carries half his DNA, the grandchildren, scurrying over thirty-million-year-old rocks, a quarter each.

I put my notebook in my backpack and scaled the short slope down to the highway, right in front of mile-marker 33. I removed my now-cumbersome snowshoes, strapped them to my backpack, and walked. I knew the snowmobile lay between myself and mile-marker 34. With each turn I expected it, but rounding corner after corner, I found only forest.

The tension built (like in any good joke). I grew nervous that someone had stolen the stupid thing. Then, I turned a corner into mile-marker 32, sticking green out of white snow like a final punch-line. I shook my head in amazement, and retraced my path a mile to where the forest had spat me out. Half a mile in the other direction, my snowmobile sat, unstolen, beneath a layer of new snow. I hit the seat with my glove to clear the powder.

It was my second time on a snowmobile, and I'd become braver. The ride that took me only forty minutes in took ninety minutes out as I dropped off the shallow edge between stands of aspen and raced back and forth through prairies or lakes of untouched snow. Behind me, peaks reappeared above the storm I'd hiked through. The sun shone through gaps in a shifting canopy of low, dark clouds, and threw shadows of trees across the highway like stripes.

I can't stop thinking about the scale of things, the relativity of size, and of time. The proteins in a cell, in mine or Roland's, as compared to the person they are part of. Proteins move and die quickly; I am a slow, aged giant. Glaciers tearing away at impossibly enormous rock, and that rock just a sliver of the moving plate beneath. This universe, a flicker in a multiverse? Interdependent parts of an integrated whole, a continuum of matter, space, and time. A cascade – not here or now, but always, everywhere, from the beginning, and moving forward into what a human mind might call eternity.

I exist at a single point on a continuum from subatomic particle to nearly-infinite universe. Riding out in the sun on a snowmobile, I see from only there. I see the cascade, and I think it's beautiful, haunting, tragic, and inevitable. Final, yes, in its permanence.