

Open Skies

Last winter, one early evening in March, the sign in front of St. Peter Lutheran Church in Whitefish, Montana had an eye-catching message: Feel broken? Three nails fix everything. The sky was dark ahead, a storm was on its way. I kept walking.

A week and a half later, on a Tuesday at half past eight in the morning when a new dusting of snow had yet to be shoveled away, I jumped and almost spilled my tea on the sidewalk. Three footprints in the snow obstructed my path. Not boot prints, but bare footprints, each one of the little five toes having melted clear dots in the thin snow. Whoever it was, they had high arches. And probably very cold feet.

Another week and two days later, April Fools' Day, my morning snow report, "Deep thoughts by Rhyen," warned of unusual mountain conditions. Governors of Montana would be doing handstands on the ski slopes. And all Blue runs would be closed because Sasquatch, having just woken from his hibernation, wanted to sunbathe. Skiers best beware.

Two days later, on an evening walk to the lake, I found a rock the size of my palm that someone, I want to know who, chalked the words "Thank You." For a moment I held the rock in

my hand, considering whether to pocket it—to remember the right here and the right now. It was a smooth river rock, easy to hold. I wonder, now, if the chalk has run clear.

Then, faster than I realized, all the snow dried up and Sasquatch got his wish: sun for days. Little daffodils poked through the ground and the river's current was urgent. It was time for spring cleaning and, walking back from the grocery store with trail mix and lentils, I watched my neighbor throw a taxidermized moose head from his second-floor balcony into the back of a pickup truck. The moose, with antlers as long as my legs, stared up at the blue sky, unblinking. Maybe he knew rain was coming soon.

That night I read a poem by William Butler Yeats called "Meru." The sentimentality of poetry makes my skin crawl, and I cannot remember what possessed me to even read it. Plus, Meru is 7,000 miles away from Whitefish. But Yeats' lines reminded me of that moose and whatever scene he now unwillingly surveyed. I imaged his headless body roaming the brush in some wooded expanse searching for a lost, severed head. "And he," Yeats wrote, "despite his terror, cannot cease Ravening through century after century, ravening, raging, and uprooting that he may come Into the desolation of reality."

Two nights before I left Montana, I cooked a piece of salmon and opened a half-empty bottle of wine that someone new I had met left behind. "Opening a bottle of Portillo is the mark of being in good company," the back of the bottle read. "Enjoy this wine, get lost in some good, old-fashioned conversation, and lose track of time." Sitting on my porch, I lifted my glass. Cheers to you, Montana, my new friend. Sometimes I convince myself the wind responded.

And then, after three months in this new state, I closed the red door to my little bungalow and left. It was raining and my suitcases got wet.

On Monday, June 14, the Flathead County Police blotter reported a variety of disturbances that had occurred across its 5,000 square miles and 100,000 residents. Here's a short summary of the day:

7:29 a.m. Kalispell Black bear trespasses and shelters in neighbor's property after scouring a boat dock twice over for morsels.

10:12 a.m. Lost pilot's license found in Evergreen. Skies all clear.

10:29 a.m. Marion homeowner association president alleges an individual came out of a house and poked him in the chest.

2:15 p.m. Intoxicated adult found asleep in a Kalispell gas station, clutching a beer.

6:41 p.m. Kalispell man reports elderly woman for threatening to make his cats disappear. All six remain accounted for.

12:16 a.m. Car hits moose in Whitefish, meat donated to a food bank.

There are between 50 and 300 moose in Flathead Valley, all of which have been spotted in the last five years. It costs \$50 to apply for a moose hunting permit in Montana and another \$1,250 for the permit should your application be accepted. In 2022, moose hunting season across the state will last for 72 days between September and November, ending the Sunday after Thanksgiving. I'm still curious, how many nails does it take to fasten a moose's head above a fireplace? Just three?

Regardless of the nails stashed away in some drawer, you cannot shoot your moose until you find one. Your perfectly polished shotgun and strong, flexing muscles ready to haul your catch are nothing unless you can read the clouds. It's simple, really.

So here's what you need to know. With cooler temperatures, bulls are more active and vocal during daylight. The fall marks an end to their rutting—or mating—season and the forest is

on high alert for those seeking last minute mates. Fall is the season of pure survival, after all. Desperate, bulls lead a ravaging hunt of their home. Don't you worry, they are oblivious to your stalking.

But maybe you're unlucky in September and October. The clouds are all wrong, too many bulls found their matches, or maybe you just cannot find the time. By November, when the leaves have fallen from the brush and all that rain has turned to snow, visibility is on your side. You can spot the moose in their habitat from miles away, dark and bulky against white landscapes. The moose will be looking for willow flats and conifer forests for the winter--just take your shot and claim your prize.

Except the work hardly ends there.

The first step in mounting a moose head is to prepare the hide. The fur must be thinned around the nose, lips, and eyes. Often, a moose's skull is cut in half to transport the beast, preferably with large antlers, to a taxidermist. There, fiberglass will reattach the skull plate and you, the proud owner of this head, can decide whether the antlers should be removable. Be practical: will the antlers fit in your truck? The taxidermist will work accordingly, for a price.

Next, the mannequin mold of your moose head will be made, including a set of glass eyes. Do you want your moose looking left? Right? Straight ahead? Will he be mid-chew, a branch fastened in his teeth just as when you shot him down? The eyes are no place to skimp costs. Your moose should have a piercing stare. You did, after all, make eye contact with him when you took your aim.

Now, your tanned hide will be sewn, mounted, and tightened across the mannequin's form to minimize future shrinkage. With a little airbrushing around the nostrils and a swab of polish across the antlers, your beast lives again. So, where to hang him?

Ten days after the June collision between a car and a moose in Whitefish, I touched down in the State of Gold and Silver once again. We, my father and I, landed in the middle of a heatwave. The 105-degree sun did not bode well for the next five days we would spend backpacking, but we were assured that temperatures in Glacier National Park would be cooler.

Our first night camping, just around the bend from the Belly River Ranger Station, we watched a moose jump—rather, step—over a fence into a pasture with two horses and a mule. Though the bull was hundreds of feet from us, we flew backwards, quickly aware of its size and speed. Even the horses, busy biting at the mule with the big donkey ears, stopped their teasing.

The next morning, toothbrush still in hand, my path to the camp cooking area was blocked by a moose, slowly stripping a bush of its leaves. Instinct kicking in, my father and I stood there hunched over and frozen just 10 feet from this creature. He had dark, beady eyes and he looked, ever so slightly, to the left and right. To my father and I, to the friends we were camping with, and back again. Left and right. The bull's dewlap, a flabby piece of skin hanging from its neck, swung back and forth. As if in silent communication, we stepped backwards, fearing we may have made the animal feel trapped.

The bull kept chewing, chomping, and stripping more leaves. I don't know how long we stood there, but eventually, a twig of leaves still between his teeth, the moose meandered forward into the brush. The trees rattled and rustled as he passed.

From a high trail two days and at least 40 mosquito bites later, we watched a bull lumber into a clear glacial lake and swim across the shorelines below. Only its head and two great big antlers were visible above the water, but his speed was remarkable. Moose, our guide told us,

could dive beneath the surface to eat freshwater grasses. A swimming moose, I thought, how odd.

Though we had walked many miles since the ranger's cabin on our very first night, I swore it was the same moose, following us as we ambled across its home terrain. In a way, we were living just like the moose. Each day settling in a new camp, weary and hot, to wake and do it all again. Up the mountains, into lakes, and across streams we all went, swatting away the flies just the same.

In 1962 the Montana State Highway Department received permission from author Alfred Bertram "Bud" Guthrie Jr. to use the title of his book, "The Big Sky," to promote the state's new and unobstructed infrastructure system. Published in 1947, "The Big Sky" tells the story of three men traveling up the Missouri River from St. Louis to Montana in search of blue skies, fertile earth, and wild land.

In the introduction to "The Big Sky," Walter van Tilburg Clark, another writer of the American West writes, "This is a book about a mountain man, and if American mythmaking had followed anything like the true ancient pattern, the mountain man would certainly be our number one Hero by now." Tell me, do you have a mountain hero?

Except, Clark argues, the mountain man is a flawed character: he is too gruff, too dirty, too interested in women, and cares far too little about children. "The short road to a place in the American pantheon," he writes, "apparently takes the candidate, hat in one hand and lollipop in the other, through ladies' drawing rooms and children's hours. Unless he is content to become Unworthy Foe."

“The Big Sky” ends on a solemn note, solidifying the pitfalls of the mountain man to that of such a foe. Having killed someone, protagonist Boone Caudill—named after Daniel Boone, a mythical American frontiersman himself—is on the run. He stops at his friend Dick Summers’ farm in Missouri, unsure where to turn. Summers tells him: “There was beaver for us and free country and a big way of livin’, and everything we done it looks like we done against ourselves... We went to get away and enj’y ourselves free and easy, but folks was bound to foller and beaver to get scarce... We ain’t seen the end of it yet, Boone, not to what the mountain man does against hisself.”

With all that land, the endless reach of Montana’s big, blue sky, the men had gone and lost their way. The Big Life felt endless, and so the men blindly followed a trail of trees of game. With saws and axes and rifles full of ammunition, what could have stopped these mountain men? Not the trees and certainly not the beavers. Could they go on uprooting the solid, untouched ground beneath their feet until they reached the very end of the earth?

Boone shot and chopped until all that was left to consider was himself. With nowhere to go, he had no one to point the blame. In the quiet, all Boone could hear was that great, big sky, taunting his foolishness. Clouds were settling in and thunder rumbled overhead. Boone needed shelter, and fast. With rain on its way, what could a gun with a few spare bullets really do?

I’m not sure the Montana State Highway Department read “The Big Sky” through until the end. Perhaps they too got lost in the dream of an open landscape, one where land and freedom could be synonymous. It was their American promise come true, after all.

I moved—temporarily migrated westwards—to Montana because my sky felt small. I had walked my streets and blocks in Chicago so many times over, dodging every stranger I passed

who dared to risk the city without a mask, that I craved space and unfamiliar sidewalks. So, I packed my skis, every turtleneck sweater I owned, and a pair of winter boots to head headed west, alone.

I worked as a ski instructor at Big Mountain, teaching students of all ages with cognitive and physical disabilities how to ski. I spent my free time talking to strangers on chairlifts, taking in their stories so I could forget about the cold.

One day, on an unusually sunny March afternoon, I was called in to teach. His name was Steve Combes and after suffering an accident some years back, he was relearning how to ski at 78 years old. An athlete and a skier all his life, Combes had lost mobility in his neck and so could no longer look to his left or right. In a sport based on the transition of balance, this was proving difficult.

Combes was tall, at least six-foot-four, with a big beer belly and a ski jacket older than me. He had just bought a pair of new boots and openly admitted, even proclaimed, that these would be his last pair. He would, quite simply, die before he'd need another. And per his demands, the day had a simple agenda.

"I want to fall over today," he told me, "to make sure I can get back up."

Not because of his ski skills but rather for his acute talking skills, we skied the same run three times, no more than 300 vertical feet in a lap, over the course of two and a half hours. After growing up in rural Illinois, Combes dropped out of college where he played basketball to fight in Vietnam. These days, He lived in a cabin somewhere in the Montana woods and, but for his wife who pleaded otherwise, only wanted to move higher into the mountains.

I asked, on one slow chairlift ride, why he had stayed. “Montana is the freest state,” he said. Combes had traveled the world with his wife—to the Philippines, to Kenya and Tanzania, to New Zealand—but to Montana he always returned.

Combes did fall over that afternoon, twice.

In 1977, Alfred Bertram “Bud” Guthrie Jr., our Big Sky author, moved with his wife to Choteau, Montana, just a three hour’s drive from Whitefish, where he spent his days writing in a room with a clear view of Elephant Ear Mountain. Guthrie would die here, in this town, after writing more pages, poems, and journals about his landscape than we could know. Of the view from his desk, he wrote:

I doubt the practical sense of claiming kinship to a mountain, but sometimes it seems to me that Ear Mountain and I are on a common journey, made relatives by times and vicissitudes. Of course its life will outlast mine, but I’d rather it missed me than that I grieved for it.

Guthrie was no Boone Caudill. Unlike his character, Guthrie saw the fault of intoxication with the promises of the big sky. Our ownership of the land will always be temporary, for landscapes have what we do not: time. As we gray and wither, lose our ability to look left and right, the mountains stand as tall and firm as ever before. To fight that, to tear down their spines and rip apart their organisms, is a futile battle.

So here, I must ask a question. Why do we, the lucky ones, find kinship with mountains? Why do others claim them as their own, draw borders around their bases, rip out trees, and carve trails down their bodies? And why do we kill moose to hang on our walls? What reminders do we need in the safety of our homes of days—the ones cold and wet, unbearably hot, with swarms of bugs, and gut-wrenchingly steep traverses—spent out in the wild?

I am no stranger to Guthrie's words. I have torn myself from mountains as if parting from the company of old friends. I have cried at their peaks and mourned their changes come spring. When I've returned after time spent away, I have felt their presence like an embrace, warm and steady, setting all right in my world once again. And I imagine that, one day, when my soul parts my body, you'll find it hovering among these peaks.

I admit, though, that these are romantic dreams of a landscape that can no less embrace me as it might one day grieve me. But a big, open sky is tantalizing. Sure, Boone may have lost his way, drunk by his access to endless land. He ravaged villages, women, and the wildlife, too consumed with his own power to consider the land itself. Yet, there must be a middle ground though, one between either losing our way like Boone or living our days under a small sky. So, how do we find that way forward?

Think again of the moose, one swimming across a cold glacial lake while his brother is tossed from a second-floor balcony into the back of a truck. When we destroy what is too similar to ourselves, what happens when we are the only ones left? Maybe you'll have three nails stashed somewhere in your garage, ready to fasten the pieces back together. But I don't wish for that kind of freedom. And neither, I think, do the moose.