

A View from Ute Pass

by Erin Robertson

*You cannot cram this scenery into the compass of a block-book;
it requires a large canvas, and the boldest and broadest handling.* -Bayard Taylor

A. The Gore Range

The sheer rough lift of this
fault block range
takes the wind right out of all
the close-in city folk
who stumble, seeing it
piercing and clawing the sky
with its mishmash alphabet soup
of spires, peaks named after all kinds of bad weather,
not to mention the bugs.
Your eye might follow
the slow slope of snow from the north
south to the distant point of Powell
and the prominent but not-warranting-a-name peak
raked by avalanche chutes plummeting straight down,
past the arrowhead notches and
ripsaw ridges cut by smooth fins
of even more rock.
You watch cloud shadows slip down snowfields,
bottoming out at the Blue,
then start working your way back up again,
pillows of glacial outwash and
soft grey smudges of sage
yielding to the vibrant green-gold aspen,
to the near-black brooding spruce-fir,
to the snow-softened rock,
then, only, to the sure azure slab of sky.

It's a range named for a man of excess,
for stabbing and piercing,
for the triangle of spears.
Ireland's Sir St. George Gore
lost all semblance of saintliness in
America, just went by George.
He hired on Jim Bridger
and about 40 others
and a fleet of wagons and horses and guns
to haul him through the West,
a sporting expedition
slaughtering game over 6,000 miles.
At the end, even James Kipp of the
American Fur Company
took exception to his arrogance,
offered a pittance for his leftover supplies
to convey his contempt.
Gore, enraged, wealthy enough he needed nothing,
made public display of his disdain:
burned it all out of spite -
his fur-lined commode,
his bathtub with engraved coat-of-arms,
his journal and his violin -
everything but the trophies and guns.
A bad man's name on a beautiful place
he never set foot in -
that's what we Anglos like to do.

While Colorado's other ranges were being dug up
and the forests cut down in the mad rush for ore,
most of the Gore Range looked on quietly,
too rough and rugged for easy entry,
too poor in metal to attract much notice,
lucky to be spared,
to hold the Colorado River's heart above the fray.
Even now, as Tweto *et al.* say,
"uplift continues".

B. Eagles Nest Afternoon

On June first when the aspens are just dotted,
the clouds lodge against the mountainside
and our family rambles,
explores the mere fringe of the place.
The boys balance on fine beaver-made terraces,
and we learn to tap the grandfather spruce three times.
Cataract Creek tumbles down with a milky roar,
drumming out all thought but being,
and a dipper zips by,
bows, flashes a white wink our way.
Grey catkin fuzz gives way to
pendant golden-spangled anthers:
summer isn't far.
On the last hill before home
we find more pasqueflowers than we've ever seen,
give up on stroking them all.
It's a short hike, barely inside the boundary,
but enough to yield a bit of
wilderness treasure.
Driving out past Heeney we stop, gape, picnic
watching a real eagle's nest,
adult and fuzzy young safely caught in our scope.

C. What Wilderness Does

Yes, it does all those soul-filling things,
all that beauty-revealing, space-creating,
renewing, recharging, reinvigorating stuff.

And more:

it gives you a sense of scale you need
to remember what it is to be a humble little human animal,
dwarfed by peaks and distance,
at the mercy of lightning and avalanche.
It makes palpable how tiny your breath is
in the big space of here now.

Wilderness is not just some spiritual tonic -
it is political, an Act of restraint
in this land prone to excess.

This Eagles Nest is not just some symbolic retreat,
Solitude's home;
for 85 years we've truly protected it,
since the Gore Range-Eagles Nest Primitive Area's birth.

Wilderness designation wasn't smooth, wasn't a given;
it never is.

There were highway proposals and water grabs,
acres added and subtracted,
lawsuits filed and won.

To his credit the Forest Service's Freeman stood fast,
pushed I-70 out despite the seduction of an 11-mile shortcut,
summed it up by saying,

"We have all the land now that we will ever have" -
insisted on keeping it whole.

Wilderness isn't just a line drawn once,
it's a binding commitment to hold that line,
a promise to maintain first-class air, and
to conserve the West's most valuable resource,
something Eagles Nest gushes with:
water.

And 133,000 acres without engines even
allows for a Bighorn Creek that is still aptly named.

There will always be battles, greed,
restless hands reaching,
stubborn campfire rings and housing developments,
too many people, too much poop,
hungry bikers, and Denver's thirst,
but there are also you warriors
and friends, who must battle back,
who must hold that line.

C-Prime. Of What Wood

150 years ago
Bayard Taylor was running late.
He gambled on a shortcut,
trusted for a moment
thousands of years of Ute familiarity
with this land he just rode up on.
Along the way his party found
their own nest of eaglets,
sage-grouse with chicks,
trees mapping the route
and the Utes who mapped it,
and finally the breathtaking view
of the Valley of the Blue
we take in today.

It was before railroad linked the coasts,
before the first white man climbed Longs Peak,
before the Ute Removal Act;
back when only 6,000 people called Denver home,
when Colorado Territory was seven years young.
But already in that short time
plenty damage had been done:
forests felled, water fouled,
beaver gone and bison scarce,
the land pocked by scars.
Even Taylor, a blatant booster,
was openly appalled at the destruction he witnessed.

I think he'd like seeing us here now,
celebrating a bit of "the sublime wall" preserved,
our "cheerful energy" and "agreeably free and unconventional" society
bearing out his theory about the Colorado type.
Unlike Gore he traveled light,
slept on fir boughs instead of a ponderous brass bed,
brought along only one spoon for six men.
He saw the value in doing with less,
praised the company of Mr. and Mrs. Silverthorn
and their rough cabin-hotel decorated with newspaper ads,
reminded us, "Mountain life soon rubs off the veneering,
and we know of what wood men are made."

Here's to the wild Eagles Nest,
to all you friends who make the time
to be humbled by its presence,
to stalwartly guard its heart,
and gladly let urbane veneer fall away.