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Donald Mace Williams

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# The Broadest Mountain

by Donald Mace Williams

Sierra Grande, New Mexico

Driving northwest across the antelope plains  
You see it flitting across the highway, south,  
North, south, where finally it stays, a hulk  
And bare on top like the Sangre de Cristo,  
Though just a captain to that four-star file,  
Not half as high in feet above road level.  
Its bareness and its broadness are its marks,  
The bareness bearing grass and not real tundra,  
Bare not from alpine cold that withers seedlings,  
But from the eastbound storms those westward caesars  
Seize for themselves, so all the snow that clings  
Here is a scab to scratch a mule deer's ankles,  
Too little to sprout any tree that could survive  
The mere subalpine chill on top. And broadness?  
What does that have to do with mountains? Putting  
Those nouns together is like saying a tenor  
Has the best low tones of his kind. It's true,  
The mountain fills a lot of sky, but only  
Left-right, not up-down. On its lowest flanks  
Grass grows, and plains weeds, plains flowers. Sliding up,  
Your eye comes to the first trees, junipers  
And piñons, dry-land darkeners, chest-high  
To a mounted man but looking from the highway  
Like shinnery to scuffle through while keeping  
Watch for a rattlesnake. They do get taller  
In their slow climb, and after, who knows, a mile,  
Trees twice as tall rear up, the ponderosas,  
Ragged and sparse but dominant. Up close,  
They would have thick boles and warm red bark gemmed  
With drops of resin. On and on the eye goes,  
Sideways much more than up. It's gradualness,

Taking its time, that makes this mountain broad.  
A leisurely mountain, a lazy one. And gentle.  
When pines, all trees, give up on finding height  
Enough for wetness without too much cold,  
The slopes, bare now, do not leap in new freedom  
Like hikers who have just set down their packs,  
But keep on lifting, easy, on both sides  
Without competing to be first on top.  
Top? It's too understated to be that,  
Almost. The slopes meet there like table leaves,  
Like mortised, friendly fingers, and if I  
Had climbed, too, I doubt that my legs would know  
For sure where to consider their work done,  
All is so unassuming, so restrained.  
A broad, slow rising mountain, and a low one,  
But with a timberline of its own sort,  
Not shown with tundra-brown on topo maps,  
Not perilous with crags, needles, and cliffs,  
But real, too high for any trees to grow  
In cold and drouth. I claim kin to this mountain,  
And, if my arms would stretch that many miles,  
Would like to wrap its whole wide form up in them  
And lay my cheek on its smooth top, and rest.