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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.