

# HUNGER AT THE MOUNTAIN

Kurt Caswell

## I

Camped in Death Valley near Furnace Creek in late December, I cannot imagine this place as a deep depression in the earth's crust. Badwater, a few miles south of here, is 282 feet below sea level, the lowest point in North America. What I see instead are the Funeral Mountains rising sharply on the northeast side of the campground, and out across the wide valley to the southwest, the great Panamint Range, with 11,049-foot Telescope Peak. Nor does the temperature here this winter hold the promise of deadly summer sun. On July 10, 1913, Furnace Creek achieved the second highest temperature ever recorded on earth: 134 degrees Fahrenheit. But at night in my tent I pull the drawstring of my down bag closed against the cold, leaving only a small hole for breathing. Instead of the deep, sweltering bowl that is Death Valley, the vision before me could be any place high in the Andes or in the foothills of Himalayas, a sharp wind funneling down from the snowy crags. Beyond this discrepancy, a single thought comes clear: this place I am in—one of earth's lowest, hottest, driest, most inhospitable landscapes—is also one of the most beautiful places I've ever seen.

It was not easy to get here, and it will not be easy to get out. I have left my family and friends, left the excesses of holiday food and cheer and gift-giving for one purpose: to complete the New Year's vision quest with the California-based School of Lost Borders. We are eight men and women who will go out into the desert to fast for four days and nights; two guides, Angelo Lazenka and Emerald North; and two guides-in-training, Jennifer Yamamoto and Robert Wagner.

The vision quest (also called a "wilderness rite of passage") is an initiation ceremony by which one marks a major life change. A marriage for example, or a divorce. The death of a loved-one, or a birth. The transition from childhood to adulthood, or from adulthood to elderhood. Marking such life changes is a vital part of many cultures, including native peoples in North America. But the vision quest at the School does not rely on any one tradition. It is a collage of traditions refined by the collective experience of the School's guides, and its founders Steven Foster and Meredith Little. The vision quest under their tutelage consists of three stages: four days of

preparation, known as “severance;” four days of fasting in a wild landscape alone, known as the “threshold;” and four days of group work to interpret and understand the threshold experience, known as “incorporation.”

Severance (to break or separate) is both real and symbolic. A faster may use the vision quest to end a relationship for good with a person, a place, or a memory. Or in acknowledgement of the change a faster will undergo during the vision quest, they symbolically sever all bonds with their former life and former self. The person who departs for a quest will not be the same person who returns. This stage often begins long before arrival at the fasting place, months before, sometimes even years.

Another key aspect of severance is the formation of a personal intention. Counter to the popular notion that a vision quest evokes a mystical experience or encounter with a spiritual realm, Foster and Little assert in their book *The Book of the Vision Quest* that “You must be very clear with yourself about why you are leaving everything behind and going alone and hungry upon the Earth.” This clarity, usually formed into a statement, guides the faster to his vision. It does not come magically. Foster and Little write, “You would have to *want* to change and then go about doing whatever was necessary to secure those changes.” Embarking on a vision quest means undertaking hard work.

And what is a vision? According to Angelo Lazenka, “it’s the naming and claiming of what an individual already knows is the gift they have to offer the world. It’s as simple as that,” he said. “There’s a sense in me that as we move through our lives, we can uncover or excavate deeper and deeper the gifts we already possess. I think rites of passage are a way to really honor the necessity to die to everything that wasn’t serving, or needed to fall away. It’s that last excavation or uncovering so you can see what gifts you have to bring to your community, family, people, and culture.” In this regard then, there is no flash of light or ray of wisdom from heaven. The faster goes out alone with their intention, and returns to the world to make good on it.

The threshold stage is the time alone without food in nature. What happens out there is between you and the wild land. You take only the bare minimum to survive: a sleeping bag and a shelter (tarp or tent), one gallon of water per day, warm clothing, a journal perhaps. You go out and sit alone upon the earth. You leave behind your many life roles: parent, employee, friend, sibling, tax payer, citizen. You face no thing and no one but yourself. You are, perhaps for the first time since you were born, nothing more than a human being.

The incorporation stage is the rest of your life. In the short term, each faster returns from the threshold to tell his story to the guides and the rest of the group. The guides help to interpret and validate the story in a process called “mirroring.” The faster then takes his story and returns home, knowing that its meaning and his understanding of it will shift and deepen, probably for years.

These three stages of the vision quest ceremony mirror the three stages of the mythic hero’s journey: departure, passage, and arrival. The passage of the mythic hero is a physical journey to be sure, an outward one, but it is also fundamentally inward. When the hero makes his descent into the underworld (remember Beowulf enters the lair of Grendel’s mother), he is also making a descent into the unconscious, the part of himself where all his fears and secrets are hidden. He must do battle with these fears and secrets (his demons and monsters) and in overcoming them, ascend to the surface with new powers and wisdom. “If only a portion of that lost totality could be dredged up into the light of day,” writes Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, “we should experience a marvelous expansion of our powers, a vivid renewal of life. We should tower in stature.” Furthermore, that “lost totality” the hero dredges up is not only valuable to himself, but also to his “whole generation or [his] entire civilization.” The hero defeats his demons and claims power for himself, and then offers this power as a gift to his people. In so doing, he shows them the way to their own power. This is what Lazenka meant when he said that a vision is “the naming and claiming of what an individual already knows is the gift they have to offer the world.” The idea of “gift,” Lazenka said, “implies that it was not yours to begin with. It was gifted to you. Your attributes, your qualities, your passions were given to you. And you need to give them back.”

At its sharpest edge, the vision quest is a ceremony for learning how to die. You go out into the empty land and a part of you dies, the part that is not needed anymore. You return fully alive as your new self. But a symbolic death can come very close to a real death—it is dangerous out there in the wild. And you are alone. You come face to face with this unshakeable truth: you will, one day, die. This truth is necessary, because, as Campbell writes, “In the United States there is even a pathos of inverted emphasis: the goal is not to grow old, but to remain young; not to mature away from Mother, but to cleave to her.” This heraldry of youth is a kind of illness because it leads to the illusion of immortality. The only way beyond it is to acknowledge and accept the darkness that lies at the limits of the unconscious, to know in

the mind and in the body that this world, Campbell writes, “yields but one ending: death, disintegration, dismemberment, and the crucifixion of our heart with the passing of the forms that we have loved.” This knowing is the inheritance of all who pass from childhood to adulthood—we are born out of the bliss of the womb and into the sorrow of the tomb. Emerald North, the other guide I worked with, names this place “the plains of sadness.” The only way to live unshackled by the plains of sadness is to make an inward journey there and look around for a time. There is nothing to do with it. There is no way to get rid of it. Merely facing the darkness of oblivion offers surprising renewal and the release of one’s gifts. “When our day is come for the victory of death,” writes Campbell, “death closes in; there is nothing we can do, except be crucified—and resurrected; dismembered totally, and then reborn.”

A hero then is a man or a woman who is able to “die to the past and be reborn to the future,” Campbell writes, someone who is able to change, to mindfully make the transition to each new stage of life. To go on a vision quest is to become a hero.

During my short stay over the holidays at my parents’ home in south-west Idaho, family and friends asked me questions about the vision quest. It wasn’t easy to explain myself, partly because I wasn’t always sure why I was going. I’m not a champion of therapy, and I don’t take readily to feel-good group work. In fact I avoid both. When everyone is hugging and exclaiming their loyalty and love after a dinner party, I’m the one standing outside on the front walk eager for solitude and fresh air. I’m a skeptic generally, and at my worst that attitude can rise into dismissal and contempt for other people’s beliefs. With these admissions, it’s a wonder I made it to Death Valley at all. Yet I know that such skepticism can be a cover for weakness or unfulfilled desires. Hidden here is my admiration for people who live a spiritual life, and I want such a life for myself. Out there in the desert then is the purest experience, a personal encounter with whatever is or is not in the wild. A personal encounter with god. But how does one explain this to friends and family?

Another complication in answering the question “why” is that guided vision quests are expensive. The School of Lost Borders asks for a fee of between \$700 and \$1200 (you pay what you can between those sums), and on top of that you pay for travel, camping, and food before and after the fast. You must bring all your own camping gear. It’s hard to understand

paying this kind of money and getting nothing tangible in return, not even a decent meal.

Some of the questions I heard were invitations, and allowed me to talk for upwards of an hour about what I thought I was about to do. Other questions were aggressive and judgmental: “That’s a lot of money to sit in the desert and not eat. Why can’t you just go sit in your back yard?” or “Aren’t you already a man?” and “So after you’ve found yourself, what then?”

Other fasters in my group reported similar experiences. When Angela Ramseyer told her mother about her plans to go on a vision quest, the response was: “And you won’t be able to shower for how many days?” Pamela Stones, who has completed nine vision quests, told me she talks to very few people about her experiences. The term “desert retreat” is usually enough to satisfy most people she knows. Diann Hamant said a close relative told her that he’d be happy to lock her in his basement for four days without food and only charge her half as much. Inevitably, any interrogation becomes part of the severance stage, a small challenge that calls up the faster’s resolve and echoes the big test ahead in the wild.

## II

We make our chairs in a circle away from view of the busy Texas Springs campground. The place is a shallow depression in sun-seared soils devoid of vegetation, a mirror of greater Death Valley. It seems almost made for us, made for this purpose, to sit together and talk plainly of real things.

Already the group feels easy with itself, our bond forming fast around our common purpose. We sit in council, passing a smudge bowl, while Emerald breaks the clear morning with her rough laughter. Three ravens come in, circling our circle, and cruise off with a raucous caw-caw-caw. Emerald watches them go. “The raven thinks so,” she announces. This establishes a tone for us, for the way in which we will speak to each other—the exterior landscape and its creatures are an inseparable part of the interior landscape, the landscape of the spirit and the heart. It isn’t important here to ask science if this is so. We do not deprecate this agreement with trust or distrust in New Age ideals. None of us is truly or falsely holy. We are merely human beings who feel something that is hard to pull down into language when the ravens pass. “I just have to make sure you know,” Jennifer Yamamoto told me one evening, “I have no special powers or knowledge.”

For the next several days, each faster will work out the terms of his or her intention. The process takes about one hour per person. The faster

begins by talking about what led them to the circle. In some cases the impetus is clear. In other cases the guides must tease out an intention that the faster is unable to articulate. It helps that some members of the group have fasted before. What each of us is left with is a single statement that we may copy into our notebooks and hold in mind during the threshold time. The intention becomes a companion as well as a goal. Without it, the fast might be meaningless.

I do not have permission to tell anyone else's story. So I will tell my own.

I wait until the third day. I am not eager to talk about myself. I don't wish for anyone to uncover my weaknesses. Knowing that I'll be asked for a statement of intention, I have prepared one: "I am home." Maybe the statement will be enough, and I won't have to say much more. But no. I begin by telling the group that I want to reclaim a sense of home. That I feel lost. I wonder if I belong on this earth. I'm not suicidal. I mean that I don't feel connected or grounded. I recently went through a divorce, and ironically it was my ex-wife, an equine assisted therapist, who introduced me to the possibility of a vision quest. I think I don't want children. I've spent my whole life moving from place to place, and most recently moved from a place I had grown to love in southeast Wyoming, to a place I'm unsure about, west Texas. My new job teaching nature writing and literature in the Honors College at Texas Tech University is a fine career move. But I feel hypocritical. How can I lead students to discover a sense of place when I feel so out of place myself? Shouldn't I have chosen a home over a job? These are not original troubles, but this feeling has become a kind of crisis in my daily life because if I don't belong here on earth, I acknowledge, I don't belong anywhere.

Angelo and Emerald encouraged me to broaden my statement, to make it more specific. It becomes: "I am a warm, trustworthy, enduring, steadfast, loving man at home on earth." Although I hear murmurs of approval when I say it back to the group, I do not like my statement. It feels precious, too self-help, too exposed. I don't like reporting it to you here, although without it, my experience during the fast might be meaningless.

One more story is necessary if you are to follow my experience during the threshold time. Working out my intention in the group, a long pause went between me and my guides. I didn't plan to tell this story. It made its presence in my mind, and I began to talk.

In the Fall of 2002, in Southeast Wyoming, I went out walking behind my rented house on the Wyoming Hereford Ranch. I could see for miles, all the way to the wind generators lining Interstate 25 near Colorado. The sun was going down, and the wind was cold and sharp against my face. Angling down into a draw, I saw a jumble of feathers on the ground. Some great bird must have died there, and now after being ravaged by coyotes, the feathers shuddered in the wind. As I neared the place, the bird looked like a hawk, a red-tailed hawk, lying on its back. I could see the shape of the head turned toward me, the sharp beak, and the wings and tail feathers curved up into the shape of a bowl. As I approached, the dead thing transformed into something alive; the bird opened its mouth, exposing the hollow of its throat and its tongue. It looked straight at me. I heard a gurgling sound from the hawk like it could not breathe. Then I noticed something wound around the hawk, something binding it up around the middle and across its legs.

I picked up a small stone and jabbed the thing with the point of it. It uncoiled then and became a snake, reared its head at me, and struck twice as I took my hand back. A bull snake, I thought, a constrictor, not venomous. Should I leave now, let things go on as they had, or should I intervene? Then something rose up inside me, an angry desire to rescue the hawk, to save it, to save its beauty, perhaps.

I searched the ground for something to poke at the snake, but there was nothing. No trees or shrubs or anything to make a branch, nothing but grass and rock and sky. I hurried up the slope toward the fence searching the ground, and then I found it, a long length of shiny flat metal. I took it up like a sword, and carried it back. I reached in with the weapon and marked the snake on the back, cut it, and excited it, and it reared up against me and struck at me, and I struck back. It paused ready with its mouth open for another attack, the soft wet pink of its throat exposed and I stuck the metal between its jaws and twisted it, and the snake recoiled, and I felt my heart racing, my hands shaking, and I did it again, and then I rapped it hard on the head, and the snake seemed to tighten its grip as the hawk's eyes went wide and terror lived there, and then the snake fell, and rolled a little, and relaxed, and released. I moved to the side where its head lay on the earth, and I chopped at it and missed and hit the hawk in the wing. I met the hawk's eyes again with mine and I struck again, and I heard a high-pitched PING! that was the end of the length of metal breaking off and lying over there as the rest of it cut the snake's head, and blood moved out of it. The snake

went limp in the body now, and I lifted it with my weapon, and pulled it away from the hawk and cast it to the side. It writhed and rolled and looked alive, and I picked up a heavy stone and smashed it down on the snake's head and crushed it and left it there where it lay like a rope.

I sat crouched on my hams, my heart racing and cooling, the weapon still in my grip. I had not intended to kill the snake. But I did. And now I wanted something in return. I wanted the hawk to fly off. It didn't. It lay there like before, as if nothing had changed, as if the snake were still around it. As if I had not made a sacrifice to save it.

I reached in, mindful of the talons and of the sharp, hooked beak, and gathered the tail feathers like flowers in my hand. I pulled the hawk toward me, dragging it across the dry ground as it opened its mouth wider, its eyes were giant Os. Still it did not or could not get up. I went around behind it, crouched there as it turned its head almost all the way around, and I touched its powerful wings, pulled them out gently and stroked them and pressed them in, testing the muscles and bones. When I released them, they remained there, jutting straight up into the air.

If the hawk remained here into the night, something would come along, a coyote probably, and carry it off. My only other option was to carry it off myself. I had entangled myself in the hawk's story this far, and so why not take it to someone out there who could heal it? Or would it recover better on its own? Would moving it kill it? I felt both obligations at once: to leave it, and to take it with me. I waited. Evening fell.

I stood and walked home in the dark.

The next morning, I went back to the place. A hard frost covered over the plain, and it sparkled in the sun. The hawk was gone. Not even a feather remained. The snake was a string of bloody bones. Something had eaten it in the night. My weapon lay where I had left it. I lingered only a moment, and then turned and walked back up the draw. Ahead of me I saw a hawk perched on a fence post. The moment was somehow unremarkable, as if the hawk had always been there, maybe watching me. As I drew near, the hawk lifted off and flew over my head and back behind the hills.

After I told this story in the circle, Angelo said that I had saved the hawk, something I have never believed. He also said that the hawk, now freed, had devoured the snake that held it captive. "You have released yourself from the thing that binds you," Angelo said to me. "Not only that, but you have eaten of that thing, consumed its power over you."



Emerald said, “You have been so hungry for spirit! Now you must go out on your fast and become spirit.”

### III

*December 31, 2005—15 hours without food*

There is absolutely nothing I must do.

I am camped alone on a high flat up Hanaupah Canyon on the west side of Death Valley. The flat is 100 feet off the canyon floor and out in front of me is the edge that drops straight down. I’m tucked back against the mountainside. We spent the previous day finding our solo sites and packing out our four one-gallon bottles of water from base camp. I walked to the limit of safety, about one hour, a distance of time established by the School. I wanted to get as close to the base of Telescope Peak as possible, which towers over me now shrouded in purple rain clouds. It occurred to me on that walk that I was wasting time trying to make distance when I should have been searching for the best site. Headed up the side canyon to where my place is now, I discovered a fragile egg shell near the toe of my boot. Inside, the yellowed membrane curled away from the smooth interior. It might be a chukar egg, I thought. I saw a group of chukars on my way up the canyon. Of course I also thought of the hawk and snake. Because the vision quest is a self-made ceremony (no one is here to interpret anything for me), I decided the egg shell meant that I was on the right path. I climbed up onto the flat, left my water bottles next to a creosote bush, and placed the egg shell there too in an outcrop of dry grass. I am seated beside it now, the egg shell, seated in my Thermarest chair, my journal in my lap, my black skullcap pulled down around my ears, as the temperature drops with the clouds that now begin to spend their rain.

I retreat to my tent. The rain freshens the dry air. It smells so good. It’s raining hard now, slamming against my rain fly. Not everyone took a tent with them. A tarp is usually the only shelter a faster uses. I weighed the situation however—down sleeping bag, no food, and a forecast of rain, wind, and cold. I’ll only use it to keep dry, I counsel myself. I’m not cheating.

Inside, I sit in my chair and make notes in my journal. I take my time. There is nothing else for me to do. I use the few colored pencils I brought along to draw a diagram of my buddy circle, the circle of stones down canyon where another faster and I will leave a marker each day to indicate that we are all right. I go each morning; she goes each afternoon. I finish my drawing, and feeling bored and restless, I lie down and pull my loose sleeping bag over me.

Sometime later I wake up, but I don't know how much later it is, or what time of day. I unzip the rain fly and look out at the gray sky so close to the earth. It's still raining. I zip the rain fly down. I lie there shivering for a time. I think maybe I should heat some water on my backpacking stove. Drink something. But I don't bother. I make a few more notes in my journal listening to the rain. I have nothing to do. Emerald's words come into my head. Seated at the fire at Texas Springs she began to laugh in that loud, smoker's way that she cackles, and she said, "You're all going to be sitting out there soon in the desert alone. And there's NOTHING out there!"

The poem I copied into the back of my journal follows her words, Wallace Stevens' "The Snowman". I don't need to read it. It's lodged in my memory, especially the last two lines:

And, nothing himself, beholds  
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

Soon I'm waking up again. I can't remember falling asleep. It's dark now, and the sky is clear. The day has passed me by. Stars wheel overhead. Billions and billions of stars. I can see Orion and the Big Dipper. A falling star crashes through the night. Something else moving slow, a plane maybe. A plane probably. It's cold, but I crawl out anyway and pull on my heavy fleece anorak. I sit in my chair and fire up my stove, a tiny blue flame in all this blackness. The hot water warms me from the inside, and I feel suddenly happy and content. I heat more water and watch the blue flame die away. I hear an owl across the canyon. It's probably a great horned owl, but I'll never know.

I pull my sleeping bag out of the tent, lay it out on my sleeping pad and climb in. I lie there under the great sky, the fabulous stars, and after some time, an hour maybe, three hours, I don't know, I fall asleep.

*January 1, 2006—40 hours without food*

I wake in darkness. The night is 14 hours long, and it's still night, but I think it's also the next day. Diann Hamant gave each of us a sparkler to ring in the New Year. I remember mine and fetch it out of the side pocket in my tent. To the east, lightning pulses above the Amargosa Range. I stand there on the edge of the canyon, light the sparkler, and say good morning and Happy New Year to each of the people in my group, the fasters and the guides at base camp. Then I call out the names of all the people in my

family, and a few friends. "Happy New Year!" I say to them.

The sparkler dies and I'm cold again. I get into my sleeping bag and sit up in my chair. I heat more water and drop in an herbal tea bag. I think soon the sun will rise. It doesn't. I sleep again.

In the morning I think of breakfast. My stomach is empty and angry. I pour a packet of electrolyte replacement into my water and drink it. This is an optional supplement the guides offered us before departure. Since I have to cross a long flow of boulders on the far end of the flat to get to the buddy pile, I think it's better not to feel dizzy. I stand up. I feel dizzy. I sit down. I notice the egg shell there at the base of the creosote. How did it weather all that wind and rain of yesterday? I watch the morning bloom.

The sky is cast in clouds, and darker heavier clouds pester me to the west against the mountain. I decide after I visit the buddy pile, I'll walk up canyon. Robert Wagner told me that when he fasted here a year ago, he walked up to the snow line. And there's an old mine shaft up there to see. And water runs in the creek bed. The more I walk, I figure, the less idle time I'll have. The less time I'll have to feel hungry, to think of food. A human being can go for weeks without food, months even. So four days is nothing. Besides, this hunger in my belly isn't about food. That's what Angelo told me anyway. That's what I read in Foster and Little's book. This is a spiritual hunger. I nod to it, wishing I had a great big omelet with bacon. I fill my water bottle and strap on my waist pack with a first aid kit inside.

My buddy, Cait Cain, has left an indistinct stone on top of my large diamond-shaped stone. All is well. I head out. After the long night, I'm happy to be walking a good pace and soon I'm sweating lightly. The canyon is open and easy and I follow the two-track road up to its end. It takes me a couple hours, walking slowly with my empty belly. Clouds swirl overhead covering and releasing the sun. The mountain reveals itself and towers over me. It is so vivid in fresh snow I can hardly look at it.

It looks like the canyon ends here, but it turns sharply to the north. I sit down at this junction and drink water from my bottle. I could go back, I think, or I could go on. I don't know.

I go on.

Around that bend in the canyon, a few little brown birds draw my sense. I stand with my back to a sheer rock face facing the brush on the other side. The little birds move as one. I watch them. Each movement seems a vivid display. Behind me I hear wings, probably a raven. The ravens are

everywhere in Death Valley, and the sound of their wings is almost as loud as their voice. It could be the owl, I suppose, but not likely. I hear the wings again. I turn around, and nothing is there.

Then the nothing becomes something, and I know this just before I see it, the wings spread wide and the body hung beneath them, wide and rock-colored, the hawk falls and cruises that short distance to another perch on the cliffside, its red tail flaring like a fan to balance it. I stand there looking at this hawk. I hear myself talking to it as if I've already said what I've said, and now I'm listening from some other place. I don't know what I say. Some kind of request, or I plead a question, or I pray. I can see into the hawk's black eyes. They go all the way back to the Big Bang. And I can see its hooked beak, the killing force behind it, and then the mouth opens, the tongue a sharp dart inside, as the hawk screams at me. A little tremor goes up my back. I wait inside the echo and the hawk screams again and drops from its place in the rock, turns the canyon corner and leads me away.

I follow it. Moments later there is no hawk to follow, but I keep going, all the way back to my place, up the game trail to my tent and sleeping bag. I sit down. I record what I've just seen in my journal to make it real. I try to explain it. This hawk is mere coincidence, I think. The red tail is one of the most widely distributed hawks in North America, so if I am to see a hawk, it's likely to be a red tail. But I'm on the other side of my doubt now, and I can't deny my belief in this hawk, that it came from some other place, that it came to speak to me.

Some hours pass. The clouds come in like anger and force me into my tent. I lie in there shivering until I pull my sleeping bag on like a pair of pants. The wind comes up in the heavy rain and challenges the huge rocks I've used to tie out the corners of the tent and rain fly. One great gust comes in and fouls everything. I go out to secure the tent again. It's cold and the rain stings my hands. I finish and dive into the tent, wrap up in my down bag, pull my skull cap down over my ears. It goes on like this for hours. It gets darker and darker until I fall away into morning.

*January 2, 2006—65 hours without food*

I'm not on drugs. This vision quest tradition is not a peyote trip, that Native American ceremonial hallucinogen that so many New Age hippies seek out as an excuse for getting high. Nor does the quest utilize acid or LSD or the Amazonian spirit drug, ayahuasca. There is nothing going on here but fasting in a wild land. I repeat this to myself because when I wake

to the dawn, I wonder if the hawk was real. I wonder if people will believe me when I tell my story in the circle. Will people regard me as an attention-seeking liar who knows that there is no one here to dispute what I invent?

The hawk is real.

The sky is awash in dark clouds which cluster meanly along the mountain tops. When the rain breaks, I make the trek down to the buddy pile. I feel weak and light-headed most of the way. It takes me a long time to cross the boulder field, I walk so carefully. Cait delights me by leaving a piece of Mylar balloon battered by the desert. "LOVE" is printed in purple letters. To tell her I'm alive, I place a white stone that looks like a canine skull.

I have a job to do back at my place. Angelo and Emerald suggested that each of us make a "purpose circle," a ring of stones which we will try to sit inside from dusk to dawn on the last night and pray for a vision. Since part of my intention is about claiming home, Angelo suggested the circle is essential to my ceremony. "Experiment by sitting on the outside of the circle, and then jump inside and claim it," he told me. This is a self-made ceremony. It doesn't follow any tradition. The faster goes into the wild and invents a way to talk to god. I don't know why I've not accomplished this task yet. I have all the time in the world to make my circle. I keep avoiding it. The only flat place to make it is where I put my tent, which again I crawl into to escape the rain.

The wind comes up and shakes me, rattles the rain fly and unsettles my heart. I want sun and warmth and an easy life. I want food and beer and coffee. I spent three months weaning myself off caffeine to make this trip. For what? I feel a growing disappointment and frustration, an awareness of the obvious stupidity of my situation. It's dark outside and inside the tent. The day is becoming one long night. I hear Jennifer Yamamoto's words in my head: "The payoff is measureless."

I lie on my back with the tent door open and the rain fly vestibule closed. The wind kicks up the dry earth beneath the fly and drops it over my face. I smell earth. The wind surges violently, lifting the edge of the tent. I reach up with both hands and hold onto the tent pole that runs up over me in an arc. The wind slams me, and I grip tighter. This goes on for far too long. I don't know how long, until the wind lightens, the rain stops, and I crawl out into the evening.

The mountain is somewhere behind the clouds. I stand there staring at it. I can't take my eyes off it. I can't help but think it doesn't want me here.

I make tea and sit in my chair. I have nothing to do. I think about my purpose circle and decide I'll use the break in the weather and the remaining light to work on it. But I just sit there. The clouds are flying by the mountain and it looks out at me dressed in new snow, then disappears again as the clouds drop down, drop down, and cover everything. "Break up! Leave me!" I shout at the storm. I don't make a habit of talking to mountains or weather, but this comes out of my mouth without my consent.

The first hard drops touch the rain fly. I sit in the rain for awhile. The wind hits me hard, and I realize I'm the best anchor my tent has. I crawl in, shed my outer layer of clothes, and get into my sleeping bag. I don't plan to get out until morning. The wind hits me so hard the tent fills with air like a kite. I kick one leg out of the bag and assume the position. My legs spread eagle, my hands stabilizing the arc of the tent. It's dark now. I hang on with each burst of the mountain's breath. This goes on and on in the darkness, my hands exposed and freezing in the winter air.

The wind slams me hard and the tent lifts up folding me in it, then releases. I hold fast to the tent pole to keep it down, to keep it from taking off. The wind slams me. I yell out and hold on. It slams me. "YOU CAN'T PUSH ME OFF THIS MOUNTAIN!" I yell. I don't know where the words come from. I yell it again. The wind hits me. I yell it, then again and again at the mountain. The tears come down. I realize I am in danger. I have to get out of this tent before the wind rolls me up in it and drives me over the ledge, that 100-foot drop off the flat. I hear Emerald's voice in my head: "Oh yes!" she says. "You could die out there." I'm holding and yelling, laying on my back on the cold ground, starving to death, a poor, weak, nameless animal yelling out at the mountain and the darkness that wraps me.

Some new part of me springs to life. Think! I have to get out of this tent. I have to bring this tent down. I have to get my clothes on, my warm fleece and rain coat. My pants and boots. I can't go running off into the night in my underwear. I hold on to the tent with one hand, find my clothes in the darkness, get my pants on, somehow, I don't know how, stuff everything else under me and sit up with both hands now on the tent poles in the wind, raging. The wind hits me and presses the tent into itself. I unzip the rain fly and there! The sky is brilliantly clear and so beautiful. It stops me a moment. I see the wind running like horses up the mountainside. I latch onto the tent poles and pull down on everything, bring the whole tent down around me and break out of the hole.

Suddenly I'm on top of the tent and everything is all right. The wind flows around me, but it can't move me or the tent or anything inside it. I take my time. I don't know what to do or where I'm going or how I'll get there. I just start packing up. I reach back inside the folded fabric and root around for my headlight. I put it on and turn it on. I'm meticulous about everything. I find my backpack inside the tent. Everything goes into it, ordered in the way it came out. I put my boots on. I pull the poles out of the collapsed folds and fold them, put them into the stuff sack. The tent goes in after it. I wad it up and shove it in a little at a time.

I'm done with this place. There's nothing left for me here. I heft up my backpack, buckle the waist belt and head down the flat. I don't know where I'm going. I keep as close to the mountainside as I can because I don't know how far it is to the edge, that long drop from the flat to the canyon bottom. My light doesn't beam very far. I stumble because I'm walking too fast, it's night, I've not eaten in days, and the wind is whipping me in the back. I stumble and go down on my knees. I get up. I walk on a few paces and the wind knocks me down again. I get up. A creosote bush comes up out of the darkness. I step behind it into a depression in the ground and sit down.

Sheltered from the wind, I rest a little. I feel safe here. I sit. I think about nothing. I slump down leaning in against my pack. Without warning, the wind stops. It's still and quiet and the sky is a beautiful stillness of stars. An hour goes by. Maybe two. I feel calm again. Tired now. My eyes are heavy. There is no reason to sit here like this all night. I line the depression in the ground with my tarp, inflate my sleeping pad, roll out my bag, and climb in wearing all my clothes. The ground accepts my body right away. I fit perfectly in this little crevice. I look up at the starry starry night. I think of nothing. I sleep until the sun breaks open the next day.

*January 3, 2006—90 hours without food*

Glorious morning. I wake to the sun-strike at the top of the canyon rim. I lay there in the crevice for a long time, the sun edge moving down, lighting everything. For the first time in many hours I feel hungry. Not empty, but the kind of hunger that comes when you're happy. I think of how close I am to food and friends. I have this day, the night, and then in the morning I'll pack up and walk in to base camp. I feel like I've done it. But I'm not ready to go yet. I have work to do.

I put on my boots and walk back up the flat to retrieve my water jugs. About a hundred yards from the place I abandoned in the night, I find two

of the empty gallon jugs lodged under a creosote. They must have taken off in the wind, despite the heavy rocks I'd placed on top of them. I pick them up and walk on. There are my full gallon jugs of water where they should be, and beside them, the egg shell is there, just where I put it four days ago. I stare at it for awhile. It seems not possible. How did it hold its place in that wind? Do I leave it, or take it with me?

I take it with me.

In my new place near the crevice the day unfolds before me. I strip down in the warm sun and lay my clothes out on the ground. I lay my sleeping bag out too. I build my purpose circle. Inside the stone ring, I spread my tarp out where I will sleep this night. I've borrowed a rattle from Angelo, and I set that down inside the circle. I find dry grass beneath a cluster of creosote, gather up just enough, and form it into a nest. I set the egg shell inside, and set it near the rattle. A friend has given me some sweetgrass to burn. I place that too in the circle.

Night arrives. The sky is mostly clear and promising. I get into my sleeping bag and sit up in my chair inside the circle. I rattle the rattle, making a nice rhythm in the dark. I say goodnight and thank you to the other fasters, to the people at base camp, to my family and friends, to people long gone. It feels good to say thank you and call out their names to the mountain. It's all very simple and quiet. Time goes on so slowly I can't sense it anymore.

I put the rattle down. I'm tired and easy. I hear Angelo's voice: "If you fall asleep, you fall asleep." I decide I'll fall asleep. But not here. I get up and put my bed down in the crevice that saved me. The shape of the earth here is the shape of my body. I sleep.

*January 4, 2006—108 hours without food*

Day breaks. I disassemble my purpose circle, as I will the buddy pile, to leave no mark of me behind. This egg shell came from here, and so I leave it here. I shoulder my pack and walk in.

Not far from base camp I hear the drum. It awakens something inside me. I feel it in my heart, my throat, my mouth. The guides and one other faster who has come in before me wait at the threshold circle. The drum gentles me in. Angelo says, "When you are ready to take on all that you've been give out there, step into the circle."

I step in.

Robert and Emerald bathe me in sage smoke. I close my eyes. I hear Emerald's voice, quiet now and so beautiful. She brushes me with feathers



and fans the smoke over me, speaking to me, a whispering voice that I hear in front, behind, to the side. The sun is warm and the mountain is friendly at last. Her voice, her words become smoke and I drift away with them and then return as the smoke becomes words again with the drum tone that rises into a final strike and I hear Emerald say: “This-man who-has-come HOME!”

#### IV

“Mirroring” is the process by which the faster comes to understand his story from the threshold time. The faster tells his story in the circle, the guides retell the story they have just heard. It’s that simple. The story’s meaning is already there, and the guides illuminate it. “[The vision quest] has so little to do with the guide,” Angelo told me, “and so much to do with the person. It’s really focused on the faster. That’s why Steven [Foster] used consciously the metaphor of midwife. A midwife supports this birthing, but does not try to change or fix anyone. The guide is a part of it, but not the focus of it. And I think that’s essential to the work. It’s why I keep doing the work. Because it’s not about me.”

Each guide mirrors in their own way, using their particular strengths. The process can be like a conversation, or it can be like getting a talking-to, or it can be like theater. Emerald often uses song—it seems she knows a song to sing for every occasion, for every story—and she uses her powerful voice, she drives her voice directly into the faster’s body like a medicine forcibly swallowed. Her eyes penetrate too. She will stand, walk across the circle, and take something the faster is holding (a drum and an apple, in one case), and use that instrument as a tool in mirroring. She is inescapable, and everywhere at once in the story, drawing the disparate pieces she has just heard and assembling them into a beautiful whole. As forceful as she is, she is also nurturing. She cradles the story as if it were a baby to be loved.

Angelo can be as forceful as Emerald, but he seems to rely on a quieter retelling, the way a speaker can hush a crowd by speaking softly. He sits with his eyes closed while someone else is mirroring, seemingly to take-in the voices, the words, without the clutter of visual signals. In his turn, he might ask himself a question aloud: “What is present for me now?” I heard him say many times, and then he answers that question in the mirroring. The question is a cue, a reminder that to mirror a faster’s story is to embody it spontaneously, to animate it, to become the story for a brief time the way an actor becomes a character. Angelo often calls up related experiences from

the days preceding the fast, or reminds the faster of something they said casually around the fire one evening. The story does not begin and end with the threshold time. The fasters are always living their story, always working with the same set of questions and tensions. Angelo discovers these points of contention and allows that the threshold experience is a microcosm of everyday life. Being in Angelo's presence is to be seen and acknowledged. Every word he speaks is a validation of one's humanity—yours and his.

The group—the guides and fasters—is essential to this process. We witness each other's story to make it real. And each of us sees a piece of our own story in everyone else's story. The stories then belong to the group, as well as the individual. By the end of this process, I feel like I have known these people all my life.

Mirroring is just the beginning of this third stage of the vision quest called "incorporation." It is an entrance from the threshold to the rest of your life. "Soon you will realize," Foster and Little write, "that the only way to communicate the experience is not to talk about the vision but to live it." This is what fasting for four days in the wild is all about. The terms of your intention have not been met by fasting alone. The vision is only a glimpse of what is possible. The hard part is yet to come. "Your birth into the secular body of the modern world," write Foster and Little, "is the most difficult step you will take in the entire vision quest rite."

I told my story in the circle. First Jennifer, then Angelo, and finally Emerald mirrored me. The process took about 45 minutes.

"This is a man who during the storm speaks back to it," Jennifer said. And then she screamed my words out: "YOU CAN'T PUSH ME OFF THIS MOUNTAIN! YOU CAN'T PUSH ME OFF THIS MOUNTAIN!" She screamed it so loud and fiercely. That was me in the storm, I knew, and the storm returned to me again. The voice entered my bones, my heart and lungs, my blood. She loved where I had placed my tent, she said, in the only place I could build my purpose circle, that this move was the staking of my claim: "I belong here!" Jennifer said. "I belong here! I belong here!" The egg, she said, that was the place I had been, and I broke out of that egg, broke free of that shell of myself, and was reborn. "Oh yes," she said. "You died out there. And now you are home in every place you are."

Angelo stood up. He walked around the circle, put his hand on my shoulder, and continued around and around. This was me, is me, looking for a place to land, looking for a home. He walked the circle talking to me. "You saved the hawk," he said, "and it returned to save you." And then,

“Men have been hanging on to the side of the mountain for a long time. They had to. They had to provide. Feed their families. Fight wars. What ever. But that isn’t working anymore. . . . I honor you for bringing it down. Bringing it all down around you in the storm—the house, your life, the paradigm—for coming out through the hole, out through the tent. You were reborn. And birthing isn’t easy. Being born is not easy. . . . You did endure,” he said. “With the consent of the mountain. The consent of the land. You stayed. . . . I hope for one thing: that this experience comes so powerfully through your life that you can not longer deny the presence of spirit, the power of spirit that calls to you.”

Emerald sang to me: “I’m go-ing up to the mountain, and I’m not com-ing down ‘til morn-ning. I’m go-ing up to the mountain, and I’m not com-ing down ‘til morn-ning.” And from there I don’t have specific words, but an experience of being inside Emerald’s voice, that her words were notes swarming around me and I sat in the middle of them, powerful and grave and ugly, joyful too, and wild like a song. And then she said, “Hawk told you to go home. Go HOME! Stop wandering. GO BACK TO YOUR PLACE! Hawk screamed to you. Claim your ground! Claim the earth! GO HOME!”

It is easy to feel grounded and connected in the group after sharing and living together at such a deep level. But the group cannot stay together. Everyone must return to their lives. Everyone must take back what they have learned to their home community. Angelo and Emerald cautioned us about telling the vision quest story too soon, or too often, or telling it to someone who isn’t respectful or open, who may dismiss it. They said that each of us should anticipate a loss of vision, a sadness that comes when we realize that most of the rest of the world does not know and does not care what triumph we experienced in the desert. We each may lose our own trust in our story.

Then Angelo told the story of a woman who came to fast. Like me (perhaps like you) she was a skeptic. She railed against the vision quest, against her decision to take part in it. In the circle, she charged Angelo and Emerald with being charlatans. Her relationship with the group and the fast went on this way until after the mirroring process. At the closing council, Angelo invited each person to say whatever they had left to say to the group. When this woman’s turn came, it was obvious that something had shifted in her. She said simply, “This shit is real.”

You want to know if the vision quest changed my life. You want to know if a vision quest will change yours. You will have to walk that road for yourself, of course. I can tell you that my story in the desert is now part of everything I do, everything I say, everything I see. I can't now imagine my life without it.