



# To Fall, and Not Fall Down

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Amy Brakeman Livezey  
While the Sun Shines, 36" x 36"  
mixed media on panel

## To Fall, and Not Fall Down

I have stood inside the house of silence.

The path to get there wound through mountains: young, remote, unstoppable.

It smelled of winter on the way, the smoke of mingled woods. It followed the heartscent of Ponderosa pines. (Vanilla, as the fieldbooks note, though I swear by butterscotch.)

It flowed beside a river clear and swift, crimson with Kokanees carefully spaced for their final, essential dance.

It gifted me solitary mornings, walking quick to keep warm. It tossed me casually beneath one frozen night of popping stars and the black spaces between.

All of this I traveled at no particular speed, in the silences of natural things: sparrow-song and finch-flutter, night rustlings outside my tent. The whine of wind flying north up a narrow lake, ruffling up the pines like winter grouse.

These mountain-quiets speak for themselves, and also they may step aside, allow the foolish or the fortunate traveler to keep walking, and knock for admission to the house of silence. Inside coils a mystery that may be no more deep. But this one riles the soul. It slips through the skin and counts each nerve, and stays.

Sometimes, far from where I've made my home, I fall in love. I connect to landscapes the way I hear friends talk about loving particular cities — or people. So I've learned, by analogy, to understand what happened to my heart in the house of silence. I'm still learning how to come back from that, to carry it as a gift and not a grief.

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Mountain-quiet was enough. It's what I asked of those days, and they gave generously.

A long hot summer, frustrations at work, and the mounting anxiety of America's rawest nerves unsheathed had filled the mind, drained the heart. A dear friend asked: did I want to take a long weekend and roadtrip to Wallowa country? She's a lifelong Northwest native; in that early autumn of 2017, I'd been uneasily home here a dozen years. Neither of us had made it yet to that alpine and agricultural region, far off the principal arteries of big commerce.

So we followed that horizon until we reached the mountains' feet, and far too late one fast-freezing afternoon, we rigged a windbreak, made chilly camp and one reluctant fire.

My job is things like fire, hers is food. God we had amazing dinner that night. I don't even recall the menu. It was more gourmet than the situation called for, brilliantly so. What I remember is the two of us: beaten down by rising darkness and frost-singed fingers burning on too many shelter ropes, huddled at last outside the punch of the wind, grinning and toasting with tin cups of wine, while we waved away the damp fire's furious smoking.

Outside that hard-cast circle of light, the darkness slithered, wild as my dreams, and my nightmares. A suburban kid, I learned my nature-comfort with the early morning streets, park outshifts, and weedy culverts of civilization's inner seams. In really wild places, I learned by fear as much as craving, as much as love. So I worried that night I'd lie awake, afraid.

And I was afraid, when I crawled into my tent and found a comfortable spot and there was no work and no teetering nation to think on. Nothing but the breathing night. I was afraid, and

meantime that mountain quiet rocked me to sleep.

We did a lot of nothing that weekend. I wandered, mostly: alone, listening. Evenings, we came together for fire and fellowship. Our one real excursion sent us out again from the steeps for the length of a goldstunned afternoon, where suddenly we tripped over the last of the foothills, spilling out onto prairie.

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I had heard the name in passing, a half-remembered legend of the mountain west. So I knew I was heading that way, and still it felt like falling when I got there.

It's not hidden, in the way of mountains, plains and rivers, but my eyes are used to highway travel, to alphabets and metal signs.

The Zumwalt, we call it now, though what that is is not so simply told. It's a homeland of the Nez Perce, for one, and the carrier of brutal memories of colonial destruction we have yet to really even try to heal.

The Forest Service has a go at simplifying it: "One of the largest remaining intact tracts of bunchgrass prairie in North America." This, my settler-descended, science-slanted brain can find a hold in. Theoretically, I know about bunchgrass: the name describes the habit of growth, and refers to perennial grasses that build deep, rich soils. But all of that's in English, and in the centralizing speech of the Anthropocene. In the language of the regulated wild, requiring the triplicate-form protection of the very species that seeks its unqualified submission.

There may be other places on this earth where the silence settles so intense you can hear it, as if it were a single sound. I have met just this one, and it swallowed me whole.

Beyond the first mile, the road went to gravel: big gravel, requiring serious clearance. We had a map, but it was an unserious thing of vague gestures. In fourteen miles rattling along that road without sighting another human, we were sure we'd missed something. We asked each other — in that way of adventuring friends who won't be the first to call quits — if this was wise. And then, at last, there was a sign:

Zumwalt Prairie Preserve

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and a space to pull over, a disused barn, a few interpretive panels. A bit like us, they looked small here, out of place.

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I stepped from the car and froze: a prey animal; a praying animal. The silence, the sweep of it, immediately demanding.

When I moved I hesitated. I walked with the wary reverence you grant to a very large and very wild beast that's minding its own business. For the moment.

The track before me held, indeed, abundant evidence of coyotes, deer, and elk. And I hear tell — signs in surrounding towns declare it with bile — that the wolves have returned.

You could fill a book on wilderness preparation with the things we didn't carry down that trail. Start with the ten essentials: we had none of them. In the midst of immensity, we were unprepared in more than a metaphysical sense. We hadn't come out here with any intention. I had one now, though. When my prudent friend pointed out that she hadn't proper shoes for a real hike, "so let's keep this reasonable," I said all the right words. I didn't mean any of them.

If I'd let wisdom get a word in, or just unselfishness, we would have turned around when we first began to feel unmoored, and she got her first blister. Instead, I moved forward like the rawest, most oblivious hunter, tracking my own overwhelming need: here, it's all here, one more turning. The uncomfortable echoes of colonial settlement are only just reaching me now.

One more turning: from a green-fringed watercourse, yellowing with the trickle-end of summer, a bull elk startled. He was there already — wasn't he? He might have sprung from the land in that moment, frightened into clattering creation. He turned at the base of a hillock and was gone.

And he was not: his antlers, canted to one side, floated above grassy hummocks and balding outcrops of basalt. Hooves drummed into the distance for incredulous minutes.

I started coming back to myself a couple of miles in, paying attention to the weather and my friend again, estimating direction and looking for the way back. You could get so, so lost out here, I thought. And then, briefly, I did.

A trail marker was moved, or one was missing, and the prairie really does look endlessly repetitive, just the way the Little House books taught me. I'm an amateur navigator at best, and unused to actually depending on what small amount of that skill I possess. I stood blank and terrified for the space of a dozen stuttering heartbeats, before I understood that we must be close; all we had to do to find our path back was climb, and locate the barn. We followed a fence and a sightline back from higher ground, a quarter-mile unrolling toward forever.

In all that timeless journey, no wind spoke, while the great weight of sky deliberated rain. Grasses, gold against the black volcanic soil, laid their heads against my palms, a pleasant weight. Midafternoon, and no bird sang. No cars rumbled, no cattle muttered. The sky stole my breath into itself. My only real accomplishment that day: I did not fall down.

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I spent weeks out there, in that one afternoon. Briefly frightened into sense, mostly I spent that hike willingly annexed by a mystical sort of ecstasy. (Such stunned communion offers your soul to the cosmos and perhaps a bit vice versa, but is not a lot of use to navigation — or your companions. By the grace of that abandoned barn to steer by and her own good nature, my friend is still my friend.)

Shaken and shifted, I went back to the mountains, craving their bulk around me, and also despising how they shouldered shut the door to the house of silence.

I spent a long weekend, as my calendar reckons things, exploring an unmet corner of what's now Oregon, a state I call, with awkward affection, "mine." I returned on schedule, but my heart is slow to catch up. I lack a single home, the sort you're born to and return to, that might even miss you when you're gone. I have, instead, imprinted on wildly separated places. It's not random, but I don't know the rules either. I don't know when to expect it.

I think of the three good faeries granting blessings to the Princess Aurora, and imagine that I, as a non-princess, got just one well-meaning, slightly bumbling faery. She saw that my life, nomadic from the start, could not be held within a single home. So she gave instead the gift of quick and irreversible connection with certain shapes of land and sky and weather. Like falling in love with a human, it's crashing and glorious and invincible. And it's ruinous: to sever the physical connection shudders and sunders something in the self. What else to expect, from a faery's benediction?

The place that shelters my everyday is wrapped around a particular green drainage, and clustered along two rivers I depend on the sound and sight and smell of. I chose this Willamette Valley confluence, but not for love, and it did not choose me. We have grown to friendship, with effort and with time. When I find, elsewhere, that sudden recognition of souls, I try not to resent this subtler alliance that holds me. I've held it too, a decade and more, seeking out its sacredness, often failing.

Necessity is part of that choice, and so's inertia. Another piece is that sense of inevitable exile: I cannot, after all, live everywhere I love. The story I'd like to tell is that I've made my peace with that. That I come back every time, falling on my knees to the quiet beauty of the watershed I've adopted.

Love presents in many forms; this one, so far, is mostly about practice. I keep choosing to honor it, or maybe I mean "to earn it" — I keep choosing to stay.

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From the Zumwalt, I wished to bring back dreams. I woke halfway for many mornings after, searching behind the veil for that wide unconquerable sky. I went to sleep each evening craving sight of stars and singing silence of grass, inviting the prairie to swallow my sleeping self. It turns out I cannot command my dreams.

Nor the forward path of our fraying United States. Nor my own heart's gifting to wild love encountered. I try to walk these boundaries I have been given with what good will and grace I have learned and will learn yet. None of which can save, or command, or create anything at all outside myself.

But memory writes in curious, twisting paths. My waking thoughts are tethered to this place, and they return. There and gone again, on no one's schedule.

At first, they sounded like my speech. Three months back, I was cooking chili when I caught on to my own joy that such a place exists, that it can stop our tracks when we're not even there. That it holds for us the circle of wildness and possibility and the strange freedom of not knowing the future, which we cannot hold under our own power alone. I hope, I was thinking specifically, they never pave those roads.

Of late those prairie thoughts begin to sound like nothing much at all. Which is to say: like everything, like Mystery. I have stood inside the house of silence, and it has come, sometimes, to dwell in me in turn.



Tara K. Shepersky is an Oregon-based taxonomist, poet, essayist, and photographer. Her creative work explores the ways our inner and outer, individual and collective experiences listen, speak, and shape themselves to the land we live beside. Recent work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Shark Reef*, *Whitefish Review*, *The Hopper*, and *Cascadia Rising Review*, among others. Find her on [Twitter](#) and at [pdxpersky.com](http://pdxpersky.com).



