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Northwest Perspective

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41th
Fourth Annual



Reading **Northwest Perspectives Essay Contest Winners**

Writer and journalist Karen Karbo, who judged the contest, will introduce the winners. Karbo's most recent book, **Generation EX: Tales from the Second Wives Club**, was a finalist for the 2002 Oregon Book Award for literary nonfiction.

First Place: Kristina Johnson of Bainbridge Island, Washinton, for "Slow Rivers"

Second Place: Bonnie Dodge of Twin Falls, Idaho, for "Controlling the Flame"

Third Place: Susi Klare of Walton for "The Death He Wanted"

Presented by **Oregon Quarterly**, the magazine of the University of Oregon, with support from the University of Oregon Bookstore.



Thursday, June 5, 2003 · 7:30 P.M.
Alumni Lounge, Gerlinger Hall, University of Oregon
Introduction by Guy Maynard, editor of **Oregon Quarterly**
Free and open to the public. Light refreshments served.

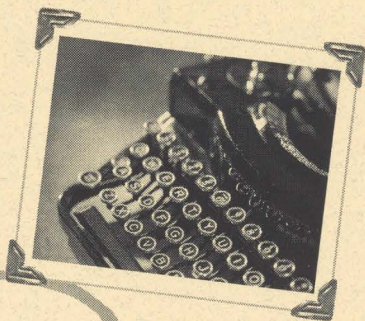


Oregon Quarterly

The magazine of the University of Oregon



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BOOKSTORE



Reading

OREGON QUARTERLY
Northwest Perspectives
Essay Contest Winners

Kristina Johnson

Bonnie Dodge

Susi Klare

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Introduction

It takes a while to read ninety-six essays. That is three or four books' worth of essays. But I did read every word of every entry in the 2003 *Oregon Quarterly* Northwest Perspectives Essay Contest (ninety-six entries is a record number, by the way), as did *OQ* assistant editor Brett Campbell: from Number One (based on when we received them at our office), observations of beauty and decay while jogging in Hawaii, to Number Ninety-six, musings about an annual road trip undertaken by the writer's elderly parents. I love reading these essays, every year. I hustle to get my "regular" work done — this business of putting out a magazine every three months — so I can set aside an hour or two a day to take up a spot on our guiltily soft office sofa and read five or ten essays. Though this year the overall quality of the essays is the highest ever by a significant degree, the essays still vary widely in the skills with which they are written and subject matter they cover. But I enjoy them all because, through them, I'm shown a broad spectrum of experience about the Northwest and writing, two subjects that fascinate me. One of the most intriguing essays this year was a 1,700-word paragraph that begins "What is the Northwest?" The writer was full of ideas and history and passion, but the piece lacked the shape and development, and, ultimately, it seems, the skills that mold strongly held and thoroughly explored ideas into good essays. It didn't make our top twenty, but I'm glad I had the chance to read it because it made me think about the Northwest in a little bit different way than I ever had before. And I'm glad the writer wrote this piece because it contains the rough material of a great essay. I hope he or she sees it through.

What makes a great essay? Great ideas, openness to where those ideas take you, a structure or flow that engages the readers in that process, clarity, honesty, care — and then some creative juju that makes all those things work together in a way that gives readers chills or makes them laugh or touches them in some way that leaves them feeling enriched. The three essays in this book — the top three from the ninety-six we started with — all have those qualities. Karen Karbo, the fine Portland writer who was our judge this year (picking the winners from the ten finalists we sent her), said these three stood out because they are rooted in the Northwest but are not provincial, because they use the essay form economically — making every

word count — and because they moved her. Congratulations to these three writers for having the heart and skills to move us.

I'd also like to congratulate the other seven finalists, who had to have many of those qualities to rise to the top of the six-inch pile of manuscripts we sorted through: Dina Rozelle Barnett of Portland for "At the Movies," Terrence E. Carter of Eugene for "My Discovery of Place," Trista Cornelius of Portland for "Polaroid Love," T. Fox of McKenzie Bridge for "Home Waters," Charles Goodrich of Corvallis for "The Fluid and the Concrete," Jamie Passaro MS '01, of Eugene for "Seventeenth and Lawrence," and Bonnie J. Yocum of Iowa City, Iowa, for "Looking for Sacajawea."

— Guy Maynard, Editor, *Oregon Quarterly*
June 5, 2003

The Death He Wanted

By Susi Klare

Jake's voice came through our answering machine without a trace of the usual Jake jive. The message was to cancel his fifty-fifth birthday party and to tell my husband that the men's group couldn't meet in his yurt. Jake's voice was as lowdown as I'd ever heard it. I called him right back.

"Oh man, this is too heavy," he said. "I can't use my arm. I got a bad feeling about this."

"Is there anything I can do?" I said. And because it was Jake and because Jake often complained that no one cared about him, I added, "I mean it, Jake. I'll come into town. You call if there's anything."

The next call came from the hospital. "Sus, they did a brain scan, they want to keep me here, they say I could get totally paralyzed any minute. No way, man, no way. I won't let them cut me again." He sounded paranoid and panicked. Before I could say anything, Jake said he had to go and abruptly hung up.

An hour or so later he called back. "I made it home," he said. "Man, it feels good to be safe in my yurt." Jake had a wooden yurt tucked in the shadows of a tangled yard. One round room with a tiny bathroom attached, a space cramped with clutter — piano, keyboard, guitar, congas, his ongoing writing projects.

"This body's a junker," Jake said. "Not worth fixing any more." His voice was gentle, as if tenderized by the nearness of death. The final diagnosis wasn't in yet — the MRI showed lesions on the brain — but in light of the melanoma removed from Jake's arm one and a half years ago, I think we both knew the cancer had spread to his brain. And it wasn't just cancer. Twelve years earlier there had been back surgery and still his back went out regularly. He'd lie in bed for days, nothing to do but wait out the pain. Across the round baldness of his head you could see one long scar, a string of white stitches where five years ago he'd had brain surgery to drain an infection. Then came a seizure and epilepsy. Jake had glaucoma, carpal tunnel, severe neck problems . . . the list goes on.

"I'll go to the forest to die," Jake said. "I'll stop eating."

This was a heavy-set man with a bad back who had pedaled a bicycle from Eugene to New York following hemorrhoid surgery. Jake did what he set out to do. I pressed the phone to my ear and pictured what Jake was saying. I saw him crawling on thick forest moss. Jake in a lovely green uncaring world. I thought of rain. I thought of mosquitoes. I thought of cold nights, but not cold enough. Hypothermia's not the worst way to go, but it was almost June.

"I don't know, Jake," I said. "Sounds like a bad idea. It takes an awfully long time to starve to death."

The diagnosis was in. As his oncologist put it, brain cancer can take the form of either meatballs or sauce. Meatballs are operable.

Jake had sauce.

"Was it real, Sus?" Jake said over the phone. "Your offer to help?" He asked me to find out how he could end his life before it became intolerable. Already he was losing the use of one leg.

I called Jake's doctor who referred me to Compassion in Dying. The director explained Oregon's Death with Dignity Act. Jake could request a prescription for a lethal dose of barbiturates as long as his decision wasn't based on depression, inadequate care, or inadequate efforts to control pain. Two doctors would have to agree on a terminal diagnosis of less than six months to live. They'd need to verify that he was of sound mind, his decision voluntary and rational. I called Jake back to explain the law as best I could. The protocol had plenty of safeguards to prevent abuse of the act, which made for some confusing details.

I would help Jake jump through the hoops.

The women cleaned the yurt. Friends and lovers from his past and present. They cleared out the clutter and rearranged what was left of Jake's life. The men hauled off the piano and built a wheelchair ramp. They repaired the path to the driveway and fixed the rough spots where a frost-heaved brick could lurch Jake out of his wheelchair.

I drove the thirty miles from my home to Eugene. I walked up the new ramp. The railings had flower boxes. Shafts of evening sun lit the petals and led through the screen door into Jake's yurt. Inside was completely different from how I'd last seen it. Opposite the door, a hospital bed. To the left a futon couch, to the right Jake's small desk and computer. An empty wheelchair. Everything clean, everything organized. Jake in an upholstered armchair. I sat in the wheelchair.

"Wow," I said, looking around. "Nice cleanup."

"Yeah," Jake said. "The women have finally got me where they want me." Jake had a new laugh; it was kind and self-mocking. "This is good," Jake said. "This is blowing my mind." His brown eyes were wet, magnified behind the lenses of his thick glasses.

Jake didn't have a primary caregiver but he had friends who were willing to do what had to be done so he could stay home. One scheduled caregiver shifts, another taught us how to move Jake without injuring ourselves. Some gave him spiritual and emotional counseling, while others dealt with insurance, finances, shopping. There were over a dozen of us who coalesced into what came to be called the Jakezone.

With so many sharing responsibility, it was not that hard to fit caring for Jake into our lives. And then, as if by magic, caring for Jake became a big thing in our lives. The big thing. Jake's yurt was the place to be. It felt holy; it was a temple. Everyone felt it. Each person in the Jakezone has a story.

"We gotta move on this, Sus." Jake was on the phone telling me about going out to eat with his son, Jeremy. Jeremy had flown to Eugene from Boston for the second time since this had all started less than a month ago. They'd gone to New Day Bakery for breakfast, but Jake couldn't eat. He got the food on his fork, he could even lift the fork, but then something short-circuited and the food didn't make it into his mouth. Jake laughed when he told me the story, but I could tell he was worried.

Not about dying. I'd known Jake for over twenty years, and he appeared more at peace about the reality of his death than I'd ever known him to be about the reality of his life. What Jake feared was that his body would live on after he was gone. Or even worse, that he should be trapped alive inside it.

By law, Jake had to be the one to lift the cup to his mouth. He had to be able to drink and swallow on his own. His motor skills were dissolving and his cognitive abilities were showing signs of slippage. With parts of his brain blinking off, Jake was worried he might not have enough time left to create his own ending.

We were waiting for a doctor to make a decision. All the doctors agreed that Jake met the legal requirements for a hastened death, but getting two to sign the paperwork wasn't easy. We'd found an oncologist to sign, but he wouldn't prescribe. The doctors were scared. They wanted anonymity. I called the doctor we'd been waiting to hear from, the one we were counting on to prescribe. I said we needed to see him right away. I wheeled Jake into

the clinic. A nurse wanted to weigh him and take his blood pressure. I told her no, there was no need for that. The doctor came in and said he wished he could help. The doctor said writing the prescription would be a risk for him personally and a risk to his practice. The doctor said he was sorry.

The examination room had no windows. It was a small space for three people to breathe in and out. A small room for such a huge amount of sadness.

The doctor reconsidered. He had tears in eyes as he wrote a prescription for ninety capsules of Seconal.

I drove the prescription to Corvallis, an hour north of Eugene. None of the local pharmacies would fill it. By now it was late June, one of the first really hot days of summer. My armpits were wet with sweat when I handed the prescription to the pharmacist. He didn't seem to notice anything unusual about the prescription. I wasn't sure, but I thought he might be about to fill it on the spot. We were on day eleven of a mandatory fifteen-day waiting period between Jake's first and second official requests for a hastened death. I would have loved to bring the pills home to Jake that day. The truth is that most people who have used Oregon's Death with Dignity Act never even take the drugs. Just knowing they're handy is enough to ease their fear of an awful death. But I didn't want anyone to get in trouble in case of a witch hunt. I didn't want this pharmacist or anyone else to be called an accomplice. I told the pharmacist someone would be back to pick up the pills in four days.

We taught each other how to get Jake out of the wheelchair and walk him to the toilet. The wheelchair didn't fit through the bathroom door. You had to be sure he had both feet solidly planted before he tried to stand. You had to hold on to the belt around his waist. You had to make sure he used his left foot first when he went down the step into the bathroom. Lela showed me how she walked Jake. You slipped your left foot under Jake's right foot and then your leg became his. I loved how it felt to walk Jake this way. It was like a game kids would play together, but it felt even better than that.

Someone else drove to Corvallis to pick up the prescription. Jake had the Seconal now but couldn't tell me where it was.

"Do you know where the pills are, Jake?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said. Jake's swivel armchair was up on a platform my husband had built to make it easier for Jake to get in and out of his seat.

"Are they in this yurt?" I asked.

Jake nodded.

"In here?" I opened the door to the cabinet with all Jake's other meds.

"No, not there," Jake said.

I named a few more places, then I had an idea. I asked if Jake thought he could play hot-cold. He said yes, and I walked around the yurt while Jake said things like cool, cooler, warm, warmer. All the way to burning hot.

Jake's brain was like a perfectly good book with an occasional page missing.

The cancer grew and Jake got weary. As grateful as he was for the caring and love he was getting, he'd had enough. He asked people to stop dropping by; he didn't want phone calls. Jake was ready to get out of his body. I got the call that Jake wanted me to come. I called his Compassion in Dying caseworker in Portland and told her it could be soon now. Throughout the past month, she and the director of the organization had helped us understand the Death with Dignity Act. They would come to support Jake and whoever was with him at the end.

Lela was in the yurt when I got there. A quiet summer evening, tomorrow would be Independence Day, the Fourth of July. Lela asked Jake who he wanted with him when he took the pills. Jake wagged his head back and forth the way he did when he felt overwhelmed.

"Jeremy," he said. "I just want Jeremy."

Jake's chin fell to his chest and he started to cry. We touched his arms. Lela rested her hand on his knee. Then Jake named his brother in New York, who, like Jeremy, had been flying to Eugene whenever he could. He said the name of his ex-wife. He started naming us all, all the ones who had been his caregivers over the past month. You could hear it in his voice when he named someone, how he was remembering that person, maybe some moment between them. Finally he just shook his head again, and said, "Jeremy."

That night Lela and I slept on the futon with Jake between us. I don't think anyone really slept. I cuddled as close as I could. It felt good to be touching Jake like that, and I felt sad when sometime in the middle of the

night he asked to be moved to his hospital bed. I fell asleep next to Lela and woke up once when he called my name. He knew what he wanted but couldn't tell me. We played twenty questions till I got that it was pain pills and which ones.

My shift was over at ten the next morning. I said, "I'll come if you want me for anything else." It felt like my job was finished, like I'd done all I could for Jake. Still, it was hard to leave the yurt. I said goodbye.

The rest of what happened comes from the stories of others. His son Jeremy was in the yurt, fresh off the airplane, and so was Jake's brother. It was six in the evening when the two people from Compassion in Dying arrived from Portland. Up until now they'd only met Jake on the phone. When his caseworker came into the yurt, Jake said, "I ask for the angel of death and they send me this Jew from Brooklyn."

Jake. Right up to the end.

At six-thirty Jake took his anti-nausea medication so he wouldn't throw up the Seconal. There was no way to disguise its bitter taste. The man and woman from Portland emptied the powder from ninety capsules. It came to about three tablespoons of sleeping sedative. They mixed the powder with a few ounces of room temperature water.

Jake's Eugene friends gathered together by the Willamette River, a short distance from the yurt. They sat on the ground in a circle.

Jake drank the solution down in four or five swallows — he had to get it all down in less than a minute or risk falling asleep too soon — then chased it with a shot of whiskey. He nodded out. Within four minutes he was in a deep coma.

An osprey circled his friends by the river.

Jake was pronounced dead at 7:20 P.M. on July 5, 2000.

He got the death he wanted.

Susi Klare lives with her husband near the town of Walton in the Oregon Coast Range. She started her writing career with advocacy pieces on behalf of the forest protection movement, but then switched to fiction in 1995. Last winter she finished her first book, a collection of short stories titled When Strangers Meet Naked. Some of the stories in that collection are published in literary magazines; two of them have won first place fiction awards. She was the recipient of a 2001 Oregon Literary Arts Fellowship.

Controlling the Flame

By Bonnie Dodge

Last week's rain made a mire of our country roads and I can tell by the tall, plump asparagus lining the ditch banks near my home that no one else was brave enough to venture out yet this morning. The sun has melted the frost in the wind and I am warm, so warm I remove my gloves and tie my windbreaker around my waist like a jogger.

If I look south, toward Hansen, I can still see snow on the hilltops. But here, a mile or two west of Twin Falls where I walk without slipping, there is no snow. The bramble along the ditch banks burned earlier this month tells me where to look and I follow its sooty trail like a child gathering Easter eggs. In less than an hour both of my plastic grocery sacks are full of fat green spears.

Years ago, my mother brought me here to hunt asparagus along this road that parallels the railroad tracks leading in either direction away from this valley. If I look west, the tracks turn into sagebrush. If I look east, they follow the canyon rim and eventually cross the Snake River, the only reason this desert is green. On mornings like this Mom and I would follow the road and nibble the tender green spears, a taste like spring grass on our tongues as we filled our sacks.

"Do you ever get homesick?" I would ask my mother, who spent her formative years in the small farming town of fewer than 900, Napoleon, North Dakota.

"Never," she would say as she slid her knife into the soft, damp ground, slicing a fat asparagus spear in two.

"I would think you would," I'd answer, slicing my own asparagus and tossing it into my sack. Occasionally, I'd look at the tracks and wonder what it would feel like to follow them until they took me to another place.

"There's nothing to miss," she'd say. "The nearest doctor is fifty miles away."

"Fifty miles is quite a distance," I'd agree, "if you have an emergency, if you need a doctor."

What I need right now is another plastic sack. I've only walked one side of the road and the asparagus, abundant on the other side, taunts me. I glance at it once, then twice before I decide to leave it for other hunters to discover.

Back at my house, the tulips and daffodils in my yard are in full bloom, eager to tell everyone in Magic Valley that it's spring. Before I put up my coat and gloves, I hesitate. I could grab a couple more sacks and go out to the ditch banks again. Instead, I fill my double kitchen sink with water and begin.

It doesn't matter if I'm going to hot or cold pack, the preparation is the same. The asparagus must be clean, the tough ends and scales removed from each spear. One final wash and then a decision: to leave them whole or cut them into one-inch pieces. Then boil for three minutes and pack them into hot, sterile jars just like my mother showed me.

As the eldest child and only girl in a house full of men, I follow instructions well. I know how to remove tough ends and scales as well as pull splinters from wounds and apply Mercurochrome and Band-Aids. I can hang a load of sheets even if my fingers freeze and iron the pillowcases before I put them away. I know the sound a house makes late at night when I'm mopping floors and everyone else is sleeping.

Last night, while my husband slept, I sorted my jars. I precooked the lids in boiling water with the same discipline I used to finish my homework, brush my teeth, and tend my brothers. Now my sterile jars sit on the counter, under a clean tea towel, ready for filling.

One more wash and my asparagus is clean. I fill the jars and tighten each cap with a damp dish towel. I flick the knob on the stove and watch as the gas flames flicker, hypnotized for a moment by the way the light turns hot blue.

Some of my friends think I'm crazy, preferring to cook with gas instead of electricity. It's hard for me to explain to them my fascination with fire, my need to control the flame. With envy I watch the way the hot flames dance when ignited, one great big poof before they settle down to a slow and steady roll. As I gaze into the fire, I know why the moth is drawn to the flame; there is excitement in the light, danger in things unknown.

When the flames stop dancing, I set the pressure-canner on the stove and one by one insert my jars. Before the water inside the canner begins to boil, I adjust the lid, making sure the pressure-canner seals. Then I set the gauge and lower the flame. Like a good girl, I've done everything the way I should,

avoiding all trick methods or modifications. No blankets, no aspirin, no vinegar-sugar-salt canning powders or unreliable methods.

If I tried any trick methods growing up, they were minor. While others were off making love and not war in San Francisco, I was tending my brothers in Twin Falls. My mother plucked feathers from dead chickens to supplement my father's income while I kept my room clean and finished the dishes before I did my homework or went out to play. A model student, I didn't skip school and made sure my parents signed my report cards before I took them back to my teachers. I didn't swear and ate my peas. The sting of my father's leather belt reminded me rules weren't meant to be broken. "You're the oldest," would justify each swing of his belt. "You should know better."

I hate this place, I screamed in my head and held my breath so he couldn't see me cry, counting the days until I was free.

When I turned eighteen and free to leave, I didn't go very far. Working days and going to school at night, I wasn't going to pluck feathers from chickens at a bird-processing center late into the night when I should be home with my children. Or turn my daughter into the hired maid. I was going to graduate and make my own rules. But that was the late sixties and I attended a junior college in southern Idaho. It wasn't Boston or Berkeley and back then, in the conservative agricultural community I called home, most women earned their Mrs. degree before they finished college. My lofty ideas landed me an associate's degree and a husband before my twenty-first birthday.

The pressure gauge on my canner begins to jiggle and as if programmed, I know what to do. I turn the gas down and adjust the flame. If the flame gets too high, the pressure inside the canner will rise and the canner will explode, flinging asparagus against the walls and at the ceiling. If I'm lucky enough to avoid getting burned by the escaping steam, I'll have a kitchen full of broken glass and boiling water to mop up. My morning's work will be for nothing, my asparagus ruined.

My pints rattle in the water boiling inside the pressure canner and my kitchen is filled with the sounds of jars cooking. They've been processing now for twenty-five minutes at ten pounds of pressure and they're almost ready. When the timer buzzes, I turn it off and, just like I'm supposed to, remove the canner from the heat.

I know women who would take the still hissing canner to the sink and run it under cold water to hurry the process. Or buy their asparagus at Albertsons along with their milk and cigarettes. But that's something I can't

do. Instead, I take the still hissing canner to a safe place away from the flame and allow the pressure to come down all by itself.

I know women who've escaped this conservative community I call home. Unlike Napoleon, we have yellow pages full of doctors and dentists. We even have twenty movie theaters. But we don't have an IMAX or a Red Lobster, and Highway 93 is the only road that connects us with Sun Valley and Las Vegas. Many of my friends have left, but I could never run away. Like one of China's golden daughters, my feet are bound by responsibilities I can't shake. And as each year passes, I discover there's no place to go.

When the gauge reads zero, I open the lid and carefully remove my jars, setting them on the counter to cool. Later, I will test them, tapping the center of each jar lid with a spoon and listening for a clear sound to ring.

Ping, ping, ping. My tapping spoon tells me each pint has sealed; each jar is perfection. One jar looks pretty enough to enter in the county fair. Who knows, I might even win a blue ribbon. But for now, I'm content to line the shelves of my pantry with my jars of asparagus, pretty maids all in a row.

But there's always that moment just before I turn down the heat, just before I remove the canner from the stove and take it to a safe place, that my hand wavers. I stare at the bright blue flame, liking the way it dances, licking at the sides of the pot and leaving behind a thin black line of soot. And just once I'd like to turn the heat up as far as it will go.

Bonnie Dodge's work has appeared in Sun Valley Magazine, Rawhide & Lace, and Calico Trails. She lives in Twin Falls, Idaho, where she is working on revisions to two novels and numerous essays.

Slow Rivers

By Kristina Johnson

I'm inside a crevasse on the Diller Glacier. This is how deep-sea divers must feel; I'm afraid I'll never emerge from these silent blue caverns, and at once, I'm drawn farther down, deeper into the past. I'm dangling from a long rope. I can see where it cuts into the lip of the crevasse above me. Somewhere just beyond that lip is my belayer, my ticket out of here if I break a bone or am too tired to haul myself out with the fangs of my ice tools. As I look up at the crack of sky, water rains down on my face. The glacier is melting.

One day, thousands of years ago, soft feathery flakes of snow fell here. At first they landed one by one on the bedrock. Then more flakes fell, pressing gently against the first ones. Layers settled upon layers. The days stayed clear and cold. Each morning, the mountain unfurled its inky shadow onto the same blanket of white. Weeks passed. Snow crystals broke under the weight of more snow crystals, finally hardening and turning to ice. In the valleys below, mastodons pawed the snow, hunting for grasses. The whole earth was different then; rock was buried by ice sheets miles thick, and continents were made of frozen water.

The Diller Glacier hangs from the southeast side of Oregon's Middle Sister. In the saddle between the Middle and South Sister, at an elevation of roughly 7,000 feet, is a place known as the Devil's Parlor — perhaps because of its exposure to the fierce storms that sweep out of the west. The wind whistles through the peaks as though they're two broken teeth. This is where I like to roll out my sleeping bag, next to a little lake at the toe of the glacier, as close to the glacier as I can comfortably get.

My earliest landscapes were all like this: blue. Ice and saltwater and low arctic light. Two years after I was born I boarded a twenty-eight-foot Columbia sloop in my father's arms and sailed the Inside Passage from Petersburg to Juneau, Alaska. We glided past the great ice walls of Tracy Arm Fjord, listening to the thunder of calving ice. Our little boat swayed as a pod of humpback whales breached between the bergs. Our home in Alaska bordered the Mendenhall Glacier, a place John Muir described in 1879 as "one of the most beautiful of all the coastal glaciers." My mom swaddled me and my brother in snowsuits and took us skating on its frozen lake.

In our garage, my dad kept a stash of climbing tools. Stiff orange ropes hung from nails, and a set of shiny aluminum snow anchors leaned against a wall. His office upstairs smelled of sweet pipe smoke, and the travel books on his shelves bore exotic names. To this day, his nightstand stoops under the weight of dog-eared Himalayan trekking guides — evidence of his lifelong dream of climbing in Nepal.

Back then Ronald Reagan was president and my parents thought things couldn't get any worse. It was the 1980s; the Cold War was still on and hedonism threatened to become the national religion. My dad took scissors to the cord of our black-and-white TV, damming an endless stream of cartoon laugh tracks and cereal commercials, but also blacking out news coverage of Reagan's Star Wars and the Iran-Contra affair. My brother and I were bored. "Go play outside," my dad told us. We built igloos in the dark yard until it was time for bed.

As I grew older, I raided my dad's climbing gear — first relieving him of a worn Chouinard rucksack, then a pair of rusty crampons and a wooden ice axe. He took me on my first big mountain when I was a teenager. We camped at the base of the glacier, and he showed me how to melt snow for water and knotted a harness for me out of a long sling. We crossed a crevasse on a snow bridge. I was paralyzed by vertigo as I stood at the center of the bridge. Against my better judgment, I glanced into the fissure and saw that it had no bottom.

Years later, he met me in Ecuador with a duffel bag full of climbing gear. He prodded me to the summit of 19,388-foot Cotopaxi, one of the world's tallest active volcanoes. By mountaineering standards, Cotopaxi is a walk-up peak — it requires little technical skill but a good helping of physical endurance. Struck by the thin air, I stopped to vomit several times on the way up. My dad fed me crackers and words of encouragement. At the top, we peered into the mouth of the volcano and past it to the Pacific Ocean. The mountain cast a pyramid shadow onto the grasslands below — miles of canyons and wrinkles carved by its retreating ice. From that vantage, I felt omniscient as a god and as important as a sugar ant — I could see everything, but nothing could see me.

On the way to the Diller Glacier at dawn, my climbing group zigzagged across the cirque like a string of bright paper lanterns. As we kicked steps in the snow with our hard boots, our leader stopped to point down the mountain, to where this glacier used to reach. Twenty, even ten years ago, we wouldn't have recognized it, it was so much bigger. He shrugged. All the glaciers he knows are shrinking.

My dad reports the same thing. In Washington's Cascades, whole chunks of the peaks he used to climb are no longer solid ground — they've joined alpine streams and drenched the tulip fields in the valleys below. He wonders if he'll ever see Nepal. The country's become so politically unstable in the past two years that the State Department warns against visiting its popular trekking routes. The Himalayas are melting, too — swelling ancient lakes and threatening to flood villages and displace thousands of people. We've got to make our trip soon, my dad says, maybe this spring.

In the kitchen one morning, I find myself crying over the front page of the *New York Times*. Paul Wellstone, the only senator I ever really liked, has died in a plane crash just before Election Day. A new Congress is sworn in. In the grocery line, two women weigh the side effects of the smallpox vaccine. The U.S. prepares to invade Iraq.

What are we going to do? I ask my friends.

Move to Canada, is what everyone says.

What I want to do is move to the mountains — to sit above the wind-swept firs, squint down at the lights in the towns below, and not know what plague or war has unfolded for them today.

The newspapers mourn the collapsing icebergs of Antarctica. The Quelccaya ice cap in the Andes is retreating by a breathtaking 500 feet per year, and scientists say the glaciers in Montana's Glacier National Park will be gone by 2030. The whole planet is like an ice sculpture the morning after a party. We blame global warming for the mountains we're losing, and we're right. But in truth, it's hard to say what the glaciers would be doing without us.

When Lewis and Clark first laid eyes on the Oregon Cascades, the Little Ice Age was winding down, and the planet was warming up of its own accord. Even the Diller Glacier is just an adolescent squatter. It took up residence only 4,000 years ago, in the abandoned cirque of a much older ice flow, long dead.

I press my glove against the glassy wall in front of me. To my left, the crevasse splits into two tunnels, lighted like cathedrals by the narrow openings above. I think about the climbers who died last spring in a crevasse on Mt. Hood, not far from here. I half expect to find a body wedged at the bottom of this crack. For mountaineers, glaciers are often graves. Every year an unlucky handful are swallowed by crevasses. A thick fog rolls in and they lose their way. Or avalanches bury them, filling their mouths with cement-like snow.

Maybe this explains why we've come to think of glaciers as violent landscapes. If anything, though, these deep blue veins attest to the gentlest of the earth's gestures. Here water flows on a scale so slow the human eye cannot catch it — a molasses river, scouring canyons and moving mountains grain by grain. Sudden, violent things do happen on glaciers. Snow melts, a drop at a time, until — in one perfect instant — it loosens its grip and liberates a two-ton boulder, sending it bouncing down the mountain like a Ping-Pong ball. Glaciers change just like everything else. Their catastrophic events seem to explode in a matter of seconds, coming out of nowhere, when, in fact, they've been unfolding all along.

Geologists will tell you we're still living in the glacial era that's lasted forty million years. But as I lie in my tent in the Devil's Parlor, listening to chunks of ice the size of horses groan and heave themselves into the lake, I can't help feeling I'm witness to the end of something.

At night I dream I'm in the ocean, standing on an iceberg. Whales surface, then disappear under dark waves. Pieces of ice scrape each other as they migrate to sea. One of them floats toward me, and I see that my dad is standing on it. I stretch my arms out as he drifts by, just out of reach.

When I go to collect water in the pink morning light, I have to kick my boot through a layer of new ice, like cracking the glaze on a crème brûlée. I follow a set of tracks around the sandy side of the lake to where the frozen walls rise and I can go no farther. The glacier here is a roaring blue-white, sandpapery in patches where sediment clings. In the small hours, everything has turned solid again. Rock and ice are suspended, motionless — and it feels like it might just stay this way.

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2004 Northwest Perspectives Essay Contest

Oregon Quarterly's editors encourage writers to submit essays to the 2004 Northwest Perspectives Essay Contest. Entries should address ideas that affect the Northwest, should be nonfiction, should not have been previously published, and should be no more than 2,500 words. Entries must be postmarked by January 31, 2004.

First prize in the contest is \$500, and the winning essay will be published in *Oregon Quarterly*. The second-place winner will receive \$150, and the third-place winner will receive a \$50 gift certificate to the UO Bookstore. Those essays will be considered for publication in future issues of *Oregon Quarterly*. The three award-winning essays will be featured in a public reading, and the ten finalists will be announced in *Oregon Quarterly*.

For contest rules and manuscript submission guidelines, e-mail oldoregon@oregon.uoregon.edu, see our website, <http://www.uoregon.edu/~oq/> or send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to *Oregon Quarterly* Essay Contest Guidelines, 5228 University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403-5228. No phone calls, please.



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