

Overture

On the Way Up

You have been climbing up the eastern face of one particular mountain—for all of your life it seems. Half-consciously, you have been expecting to reach the top, find a vast plateau, and then, one day, descend gradually and gracefully into a sun-drenched valley on the other side.

As you climb, you wonder about the high plateau above and beyond.

“How long is it? How wide? What’s really on the other side?”

You visualize the plateau with wide-open fields of tall prairie grass, wild horses running wild, and at night, unobstructed views of the cosmos. Then you imagine yourself on the far side of the plateau, sitting on a high bluff late one afternoon, a long-stemmed blade of grass between your teeth. You are looking down upon a lush river valley abundant with flowering fields as the sun descends slowly in the West, everything evening out into the horizon.

For a while now you have been anticipating that your rate of ascent should be slowing down. But, in some mysteriously powerful way, the act of climbing has made you feel stronger, even in the increasingly rarefied air. You can feel yourself reaching the peak.

“Am I 35? Or 53?”

You are ascending the last few feet. You reach the top of the cliff, make your strongest handhold, and pull yourself up and over.

For a few minutes, before looking up, you remain in a supplicant’s position, your forehead, hands, forearms, elbows, knees, shins, and toes pressed against the cool, smooth, flat stone of the plateau. Your whole body prickles.

Then, as prickling is succeeded by a warm glow, you arise powerfully to a full standing position. The air is thinner yet. The light and shapes before you are spinning and blurred momentarily.

Gradually, the motion stops and you are able to focus. You are disillusioned. The “plateau” on which you are standing is only a wide overhanging ledge. Forward and to your left, the mountain falls

away gradually, descending slowly into a jagged desert canyon of boulders and cacti. Behind you, the face you have just ascended is no longer visible over the edge. Forward and to your right, thick clouds obscure everything.

Straight ahead, ascending higher, steeper, and farther than you have just climbed, stands more mountain, mountain that you could not see in your youth. Giant jutting stone, turned on edge, slants powerfully and obliquely upward so far you cannot fathom its peak.

Initially you are disarmed by this prospect. You were expecting rest, peace, ease, not more intense climbing. But lightly at first and then, more strongly, you feel a pulling, as though the vast rocky mass is drawing you upward and onward. You are astounded by the beauty of raw rock heaved up by the shifting, buckling slates that must be somewhere down below. You are challenged by these immense forces and infused with renewed energy and strength, more strength it seems than you have ever felt before. You have no doubts now. One choice towers above all others. Your rest is over. You bound on, knowing that you are, still, on the way up.