AFFIRMATION: ACADIA

Driving the unfamiliar curves of Route 1A, I watch a cotton fog reveal the day instead of sunrise. I can not see much beyond the road, but I follow the spruce-soaked air south and east, anxious for a glimpse of Acadia.

The parking lot at the Precipice trailhead is empty, and mist conceals the cliffs that stretch above. A short flight of wooden steps leads from the parking lot to the beginning of the path, where a large sign warns that this is not a hiking trail, but a technical climbing route not meant for children or the inexperienced. I begin walking the damp trail, which narrows as I near the mountainside, where the actual upward movement begins.
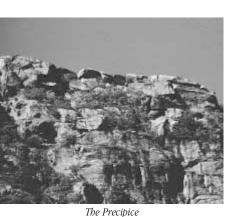

The Precipice

Between the fog and last night's rain, the rocks and boulders that make up the first part of the climb are wet and slippery. I have to use my hands, my fingertips grow raw, long dormant muscles strain from my hips to my shoulders. My breath grows louder in my head, which is fuzzy from an uneaten breakfast and a sleepless night of long-distance phone calls. Seven states and seven hundred miles between this new home and the last, between where I stand and where I could have stayed, having found a reason. But reason comes too late, and early morning desperation has led me to these rocks. The fog in my head converges with the fog in the air, and I stumble, scraping my knee through my pants. I wonder how intelligent it is to continue, alone.

Despite the blatant cautions, perilous conditions, and clouded view, I can not resist the lure of the Precipice, this place I had come so far to know. I follow the fog upwards along the paths of glaciers.

After the boulders, the route becomes a series of narrow ledges, switchbacks, and vertical ascents. I am guided by metal rungs and bars that are bolted to the rocks, spaced an arm's reach and a knee's lift apart. At sudden moments there are no handles where it seems there should be, and I have to make my own way, and then the bars return. Metal ladder, narrow ledge, iron handle, another cliff face. I pause between ladders to rest and check the progress of the view. The sun is burning through the fog at last, promising a hot August day. I begin to sweat, grateful that the mist prevents the east-facing metal and rock from becoming too hot to touch. The fog conceals perspective in all directions, yet I can feel the echoing height between where I stand and the parking lot below, and I begin to think that I can accept not being able to see. What I can see is the fog itself- individual particles of water, suspended on a whispered current. The mist condenses on my skin, salt mingling with salt. I hear a metallic cry from behind the fog, and I remember the falcons.

Recovering from near obliteration due to pesticides and other chemicals, peregrine falcons have called the heights of the Precipice home for a decade. The trail is usually closed during the nesting season from April to August. I am lucky to have found it open. Peregrines dive for their airborne prey from high ledges, and do not like to have anything above them. Is it a similar instinct that leads us to pull towards a higher place, to sustain the illusion of rising from whatever we call ashes? Can we climb away from what we leave behind?

The final cliff juts upward, the giant forehead of Champlain Mountain, and the last of the iron ladders brings me to the top, where a short walk from cairn to cairn leads to the summit. The view has cleared to the west, where Cadillac Mountain is a naked pink wall streaked with conifers. To the north, tongues of fog roll off the ocean onto the rooftops of a yawning Bar Harbor, and filter the sun to the east. It is still early; I am alone, breathing the salt-stained air one thousand feet above the Atlantic. I turn north and leave the half-hidden view for those who are now making their way up the mountain, and the fog closes, polishing the granite ground behind me. I look down upon the sea that has followed me up the coast, up the Precipice, and know that this is no escape. This is affirmation: Acadia. — *Catherine V. Schmitt*

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