FAR FROM THE MADDENING CROWD

Don Scheese

I LIVE IN a glass house atop an old volcano somewhere in northern Idaho. For several months of the year I look at clouds, mountains, rivers, encounter various kinds of wildlife and a few people—and, occasionally, report fires. I'm a fire lookout.

With each sunrise my house is flooded with light, and I wake up to it, along with the sounds which accompany the dawn. The wind accelerates, rippling the windsock which hangs from the southwest corner of the cabin. A rock wren trills maddeningly as it flits from perch to perch. Several golden-mantled ground squirrels clatter over and beneath the volcanic rubble, searching for last night's dinner scraps.

In early July a snowbank still clings to the mountain's north face. I walk down to it and with some gritty snow scrub the sleep from my eyes. Slowly, then, the world comes into focus, and I take in the view, the poems of geography surrounding me.

Dim with distance, the Montana Bitterroots to the east and the Selkirks to the north form rugged horizons. Closer to home, to the south, loom the lower Clearwater Mountains. The wheatfields of eastern Washington stretch interminably into the west. Immediately below, the river snakes through the valley on its way to merge with the lake. At this time of the morning both are a deep blue, darker than the sky, part of the mosaic of colors—conifer and meadow greens, golden and russet browns, rockslide reds and grays—spread over the landscape.

Chilled by the breeze and snow, I scurry upstairs to the cabin and tug on some clothes and boots, then mount my backpack with an empty six-gallon water container secured to it. Time for a walk down the two-mile trail to the spring.

The first half-mile is over the volcanic talus that forms the mountaintop. It's heavy metallic rock, and my boots clank on the slabs,

smashing the morning silence. But that's all right—the harshness of the sound actually enhances my sense of solitude, reminds me of the fact that, at least for the moment, I have the country to myself.

Along the trail are signs of spring. Beargrass have begun to flower, their creamy lampposts of pannicles lighting the way. Glacier lilies are also in bloom, each yellow lily pendant on a single slender stem. Niched between angular cuts of rock are purple-blue clumps of mountain penstemon. And farther down, basking on the sunny south-facing slope, flash a colorful assortment of other wildflowers—foxfire, orange agoseris, sulfurflower, lousewort, hawkweed, lodgepole lupine, bush penstemon, pearly everlasting, sandwort, mariposa tulip, and yarrow.

Purple bear scat, full of huckleberries, triggers my memory—of an encounter several summers ago, not too far from this trail, with a cinnamon brown bear. Taking a shortcut to the alpine lake on the other side of the ridge, I headed cross-country over the open slope, only to meet a shaggy hulk rustling in the chest-high beargrass. The bear, an old fatty, grunted, looked up, and for one transitory enchanted moment we locked eyes. Then I ran like hell.

At the spring, under the cool canopy of the larch, hemlock, and subalpine fir, mosquitoes and tiny flies buzz-bomb my eyes and ears while I tank up on water. In the shade of the draw I tread carefully past the thimbleberry, mountain bluebells, and queencups. Then, emerging from the shadows, I begin to retrace my trail, trudging slowly uphill, the sun now over the ridgetop so that at least my calves bask in the warmth. Breathing hard and steadily I slowly fall into the rhythm of the hike, adusting to the fifty pounds of water sloshing around on my back.

Ascending the last-half mile of trail, the steep section, I pause for breath on a shelf of the ridge marked by a parallelogram of four stone obelisks. Legend has it that this alpine monument was erected by Indians many years ago to commemorate the site of a brave's vision. I always stop here, just above the weathered silver snag overlooking the site, and let the breeze blow away the bugs and dry my sweat. In a way this Stonehenge has become a mark of my passage too.

By mid-July summer has arrived in the mountains. The airspace of the lookout is thick with horseflies, flying ants, yellowjackets, bees, and other bugs. The heat pounds the cabin, the catwalk, the rocks below. Cicadas sing insanely in the sun. Heat waves shimmer off the slopes. Images melt, the world becomes liquid. I seek refuge inside the cabin, and with the windows fully open and a constant breeze I'm able to strike a balance between tolerance and somnolence. Too comfortable,

and it becomes hard to stay awake.

Which is what the job of a fire lookout consists of, basically. Three or four times an hour I do a thorough check- look of my turf, an area about fifty miles in diameter. To become familiar with the country I quiz myself, rattling off the names of the peaks and drainages, keeping aware of the mills and quarries and isolated cabins whose activities produce what we in this trade refer to as "legitimate," i.e., permissible, smokes. Also in this category are burns authorized by Smokey the Bear—fires set by Forest Service personnel to eliminate logging slash.

So I keep my eyes peeled, checking out with the binoculars anything that looks "different." The time for greatest watchfulness occurs following a lightning storm, when smokes can and generally do appear several days afterward, after a spot ignited by a downstrike has had a chance to heat up in the afternoon sun.

Once I've spotted a fire and checked to be sure that it's in fact not some drifting mill smoke or rooster tail of dust or someone's authorized burn near a cabin in the boonies, I follow the standard routine for recording and reporting a smoke.

First I line up the Osborne firefinder with the base of the smoke. This is a cumbersome device mounted on tracks atop a wooden stand in the center of the cabin. Secured on its top is a circular map, with the lookout at its center and a metal band, on which the distance to the fire can be measured, stretched taut across the circle, forming its diameter. Around the circle are the degrees of the compass, which I read off when I've lined up the smoke with the cross hairs on the sights of the firefinder. Then I calculate the fire's location by relating the map to the country I'm looking at—not always an easy task, especially if the smoke is in relatively flat country where few distinguishable landmarks exist. This is when a lookout's knowledge of the topography becomes critical, because it's no fun for the fire crew to be thrashing around in the woods looking for a smoke whose actual ground location may be miles away. The standard for accuracy is one quarter-mile—that's how close the reported location of the smoke should be to its actual ground location.

And that's it, really, that's all there are as far as technical requirements go for the "job." Actually I consider it a vocation. Not a vacation, *vocation*: "The action on the part of God of calling a person to exercise some special function, especially of a spiritual nature, or to fill a certain position; divine influence or guidance towards a definite (esp.) religious career; the fact of being so called or directed towards a special work in life; natural tendency to, or fitness for, such work" (*Oxford English Dictionary).*

There's plenty to do besides "work." Shout poetry into the wind. Read (a lot). And, if one is so inclined, write. On a more mundane level, wash windows—all 144 of them. Swat at bugs. Try to outsmart the various varmints like the ground squirrels and mice and pikas who periodically raid the food cache. And (on the lowest level of activity) greet tourists from Iowa who demand to know: 1) Will the road to the lookout soon be paved? 2) Isn't there an easier way down? and 3) Don't you get lonely up here? (Answer to all three questions: No.)

Living up here, alone, in this glass house, casting aspersions on what passes for civilization down below, I come to recognize the importance of things—of chamois shirts with wooden buttons; of peanut butter, banana, and maple syrup sandwiches; of a bluebird in a jar.

There's also walking. "It is a great art to saunter," Thoreau once wrote, and I couldn't agree more. Mornings and evenings are the times to strut down off the mountain, to dispel the claustrophobia that has accumulated from living in a 14x14 foot cabin. Though there are moments of freedom to be experienced, vicariously, on the tower as well. Just by watching the birds, for example. The mountain bluebirds that nest in an outside corner of the outhouse zip from point to point, on errands for the nestlings that respond so plaintively to my whistles in the morning. Squadrons of barn swallows also patrol the montaintop, and I cheer them on as they swoop for meals (more bugs! eat more bugs!). On a larger scale, red-tailed hawks hover and screech in the wind over the river, and even an occasional osprey makes its rounds over the lookout. Turkey vultures assemble in the sky late afternoons, rising on the thermals, flying close enough so that with the glasses I can see clearly their ugly red heads. If one only has vision, there's a lot to see.

Sometimes it's not even necessary to look. Of late I've been visited several times by a female calliope hummingbird, no doubt attracted by the gaudily-colored windsock. It smashes into the windows, letting out occasional cries until, exhausted, its tiny green-and-purple body pulsates with each rapid heartbeat. Mercilessly analytical, I shoosh it out with a broom only after I've verified its identity in Peterson's guidebook.

Birds of another kind flock up here too—hang gliders, or, as I prefer to call them, loonies. These garish pterodactyls assemble themselves before my very eyes, lumber over to the mountain's edge to perch and wait for a powerful updraft, then run downhill and—hopefully—soar. Some ascend to altitudes over 10,000 feet, later slowly gliding to the open bottomland along the river.

Me, I'd rather walk than fly, so when the August heat becomes

intolerable I flee on my days off to the alpine lake beyond a nearby ridge. From the open slope looking back there are some panoramic views of the lookout, the mountain, and the river valley, before the trail enters the cool shade of the hemlock forest.

Summer, and sweet berries ripen in the wilderness. Hands purple, I gorge myself on huckleberries, ignoring the seeds caught in my teeth and the occasional spiders I eat along with the fruit. Why *not* eat bear style—thrusting an entire branch into my mouth, then thoughtfully swirling the contents around before spitting out the inedibles.

On to the water, a classic cirque—the lake walled in on three sides, seemingly dangling on edge before plummeting down its steep drainage. I stare incredulously at the remaining snowbank on the opposite shore (snow in August!), then dive in, always bracing myself for the shock of cold, always surprised when I discover that—hey!—it's not that bad. Then I remember that the lake isn't bottomless, as I've been told. Footlong cutthroat, leaping for flies, flash in the sun, then dimple the water on their return. And the lookout, and life in general, fade into nothingness.

Returning via the loop trail, clinging to foot- and handholds along the precipitous slopes, I drink till sated at the one steadily running creek, knowing that the rest of the way I'll be crossing treeless, relatively open—and thus hot—country. Still, what a cornucopia of flowers and fruit! Golden columbine, St. Johnswort, arnica, mountainspray, cross-shaped mitella, mountain valerian, syringa, paintbrush, splitleaf painted-cup, pink spirea, wild rose, fireweed, Rocky Mountain iris, leafy-headed aster, explorer's gentian, cusick's speedwell, larkspur, monkshood—all along a mile and a half of trail. And the huckleberries—how did Wallace Stevens put it? ". . . in paradise / Does ripe fruit never fall? Or do the boughs / Hang always heavy in that perfect sky, / Unchanging . . . ?"

September evenings, time of the long shadows and harvest moons, and autumn. More game. The elk and deer, having emerged from the cool cedar draws during the hot spells, now browse in the brush splashed with red, yellow, and orange. At a switchback down the road I meet a buck, and in the Arctic half-light of dusk I spot its silhouette of antlers, then listen for the clack of hooves and try to glimpse the flag of cottony white tail before the beast crashes through the understory. The ruckus arouses some red-tailed chipmunks and a Steller's jay, who caterwaul a general alarm.

Puffing up the lookout trail one more time, I pause for breath at a cairn built by an Indian youth, and take in the sunset—as always, the big scene, still the big scene. Especially at this time of year, when the

sky, full of smoke and dust and volcanic ash, produces a phantasmogoric display of reds, yellows, blues, even (I swear) greens, the kind of nineteenth century sunset a few landscape painters got down on canvas, when the eye was innocent and the land free. Then, ominously, dark birds flap through the sky, croaking for blood, and a den of coyotes, nestled in the draw below, wail like banshees.

From the top, in the lookout once again, the lights of town and the city glow like the embers of a dying campfire. Later still the northern lights will beam up to and drown out the lower constellations, their cold light anticipating winter's early arrival in the mountains.