

The Mountains Will Be Here, Always. By Grace DePaul

We pull into the trailhead a handful of minutes past midnight, our tires slowly rumbling over the gravel pathway, stones crunching beneath the weight of the Jeep Cherokee. Turning the headlights off completely, we blindly park alongside the other handful of cars that have settled beneath the trail marker for the night, each housing hikers prepared to wake before dawn to begin their 13.2-mile hike to the summit of Dix Mountain.

After spending the last five hours driving across the state of New York, the final hour we had entered seclusion from the rest of the world. Pine trees grew dense on either side of the road, the towns we passed through grew further apart, and cell phone reception was abandoned miles behind. As we drove towards the Adirondack Mountain range, signs of civilization declined, cities were forgotten and traffic unheard of—only the peaks of mountains jutting out from the horizon guided us like the North Star to our destination. The Adirondacks are situated in the northeastern region of New York State where forty-six high peaks form a circular dome as a result of the alpine glaciers that dragged along the Earth's surface over five million years ago, carving their jagged slopes and gouging their smoothly, sunken valleys.

They say the Adirondack Mountains are made of ancient rock more than a billion years old—they are new mountains formed from old rocks.

We silently step out of the car and try to muffle our movements so as not to wake the other hikers, knowing their days will begin in a matter of hours. They recharge in the back seats of their cars, sleeping bags cocooning their bodies. It has been a warm August day, and the hot air still circulates among the branches of the trees at the base of the mountain, rustling their leaves as we hurriedly place cushions in the backseat of the Jeep—our personal Hilton Garden for the night.

Through the windshield, I spot a few lingering stars strewn across the sky and crane my neck to realize that there is an inky black patch of emptiness that has formed just above the towering pines. Scattered across the darkness are the stars, filling the atmosphere with pinpricks and pockets of light. Momentarily, I am reminded of Vincent van Gogh's *The Starry Night* and understand why he wished to capture the night sky. However, instead of the ornate, gold frame that houses the painting against the sterile white wall of the Museum of Modern Art, the trees at the mountain's base have perfectly aligned to enclose tonight's starry night free of charge.

They say ninety-seven percent of the human body consists of stardust—I am a new human formed from old dust.

Perhaps we are not so different, the mountains and me.

The next morning, we rise at four a.m. to get a head start on our ten-hour hike. I pick at the bag of trail mix that sits wide open on the passenger seat, scouring for M&Ms and almonds, willing the sleepiness away by crunching on the chocolate-covered candies. Throughout the early hours

of the morning, I remember hearing the faint rustle of backpacks sliding on shoulders and catching the blinding brightness of headlamps as they flickered to life. Most of the remaining cars at the trailhead are empty—hikers having already started their ascension, many rising no later than two o'clock in the morning.

Sometimes I think that there are secrets that the Earth keeps only for early risers to uncover.

There was once a time in college that I consistently woke every day at five o'clock in the morning to run and discovered how the rest of the world ceased to exist before the bustle of eight a.m. As my feet pounded against the cracked and crumbling sidewalks of my abandoned college town, the sun threw pastel pinks and deep oranges across the sky above me. I always thought that maybe the sun is in competition with the artist. Its palette kept a mystery and colors confidential until the moment it appears and light scatters, radiating through the clouds. With time, the colors evolve and turn to deeper shades until it fades completely in only a matter of minutes—canvas wiped clean. Perhaps artists are envious of the sun, knowing they could never compete with the way it rises each morning and produces a masterpiece that sends millions of people snapping photos in admiration of its work. Before eight o'clock in the morning, the deadened streets only hold the most peculiar people. Runners are amongst them, but also those who sleepily walk home from long overnight shifts and those who rest their heads against bus stops, rising early to catch the downtown line. For a moment, cars simply do not exist. The Earth reverts to life without humans; the trees can breathe in peace, the wind flows with few inhibitors, and the moon and sun can be seen in the same sky.

And yet, all evidence eventually expires. Earth's performance is only for the eyes of the early riser. At one point, I thought it was a secret kept only between the Earth and me, but I suppose some have caught on.

Dix Mountain is not an easy climb; there is no secret about that. It is the sixth highest peak in the Adirondacks and rises 4,840 feet into the air. Its steep terrain and long distances deter many people and leave some wandering through the woods on sprained ankles like wounded warriors. Yet we lace up our boots and enter the tree line in complete darkness, hoping the sun will rise and warm us. During the first few hours of our hike, we scramble over slippery roots and scattered rocks until we come to a few flat meadows, patches of deep mud, and rushing streams.

"Step right through it," I was told. "Whatever you do, do not widen the path."

I approach the muddy section of the trail to find clear evidence of muck that has swallowed past hikers' boots, leaving deeply sunken imprints and remnants of their struggle.

"Why don't we just walk around it?" I question, deciding that this was the most logical thing to do and not wanting to lug around caked mud on the bottom of my boot for twenty more miles.

"The trails are meant for the hikers, beyond that belongs to the woods."

I always thought that the trails reassembled veins, surging against the sides of the mountain. They weave their way through the woods, allowing hikers to flow in and out and ushering life to its summit. To widen the veins would throw off the function of the entire system, leaving traces in areas that were not meant to be trodden. The trails may be a gift given to hikers from the mountains to use only temporarily. Footsteps accumulate on the pathways, leaving evidence of human existence. Each hiker's boot print presses into the dirt, chronicling their climb—their story. In doing so, the trails ensure that the story of the mountain remains preserved as well.

I hesitate but allow my boot to sink into the mud. After giving it one good yank, I pull it back out and continue onward.

Just after noon, we finally emerge from the dense pines and find ourselves clinging to massive boulders situated on the mountaintop. Perching on the rocks, we eat our peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, momentarily resting our legs on the summit of Dix Mountain. From where we sit, the ridges of the peaks look like waves in the distance, threatening to come alive and submerge us in water. They protrude from the horizon, fixed from millions of years of accumulated metamorphic and igneous rock. But they look as though they could float, shifting just as gracefully as the stratus clouds that are now level with our eyes.

Peanut butter and soft bread stick to the roof of my mouth as I finish the last bite of my sandwich and begin to wipe some of the dirt from my legs. The muddy strokes on the back of my calves look as though dirtied paint brushes dragged along my skin, serving as a canvas for the mountain's masterpiece.

We eventually gather our bags from their resting spot on the summit and sling them over our shoulders once more. I turn my back on the remaining forty-five peaks scattered throughout the land and take my first step down the mountain, beginning my descent. And so, we stick to our trail on the climb back down, knowing that we are just passing through, that we are not permanent. Like the stars overhead, they eventually explode. The sunrise will fade. We will soon perish as well. But I think that maybe the mountains have the greatest chance of survival on Earth. Maybe that explains why the trailhead was packed with cars and campers. Maybe that is why we rose before the sun to start our climb. Maybe we return to the mountains to leave our stories in the steps we take, believing that they will outlast us all. Because perhaps when we are no longer, the mountains will be here to remind us of what we once were—always.