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“Thou Hast Made My Mountain to Stand Strong”

Sally T. Taylor

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Isaiah twenty-five, ten: ‘‘... in this mountain shall the hand of the Lord rest.’’ Holding lean and sandy valleys, preeminent, in spring they gather in congeries of cragged shadows, great mountain chains, ranges and monoliths, whose jagged peaks lift up toward luxuriant light.

Slides of gray shale slip and shine along the light, and boulders, like behemoths of the mountain, tip against the layered walls. A cave’s mouth whose darkness conceals the hungry eyes of a lean predator, waiting like famine in shadows, yawns crookedly from across the wooded spring.

Coming to the crispness of another spring, here life thrives. Timber jays and magpies draw light as they wheel and glide. Coyotes move through shadows, and raucous squirrels scale the white fir and mountain ash for remnant cones. Deer appear like ghosts, lean and fearful of the day. Moss-antlered elk whose life, once stalked by bear, cougar, and wolf and whose young once filled the high mountain valleys now spring through oak brush and thicket, over logs that lean beside the swollen stream. In the early light, the yellow flower of the Curlleaf Mountain-Mahogany scatters sun in the shadows.

Up from a dark draw and above the shadows, the aspens flutter like Christmas tinsel whose sweet green reproves the somber fir’s and mountain pine’s deep tones. Bearberries and waxflowers spring wild. Squaw cabbage and camass grow in the light meadows. Redfruited gooseberries feed the lean
curlews; and at treeline, bristlecone pines lean 
and twist, forever chilled beneath the shadows 
of glaciered peaks. On the windy heights where light 
icy crystals blow, only lichen lives long, whose 
rust, and grey flocking brightens the bouldered spring. 
“Lord, by thy favour thou has made my mountain 
to stand strong.”² Down from the desolate mountain 
peaks, cataracts somersault between the lean 
chasms walls. Over the sharp-edged cliff they spring 
and fan to waterfall veils, leaving shadows 
of moisture under the overhang. Streams, whose 
pebbled beds run bright beneath the crystal light 
flow swiftly, winding through fern forests and light 
meadow grass, gaining strength along the mountain 
slopes, to roar toward the valley floor. Water, whose 
substance gives survival or death for the lean 
desert life, now crashes free through the shadows, 
imbued with the power of the mountain spring. 

Hundreds of centuries past, before this spring, 
before the sad dimming of their savage light 
when beaded lives became a song of shadows, 
and great legends were lost among the mountain 
ledges, hills were filled with a race, bronze and lean, 
people who reverenced the living earth, whose 
keen eyes saw that all things had puha³ and whose 
prayers thanked the water for sharing from its spring, 
thanked the mountain for pinon nuts from its lean 
crop, and thanked the sun for its great gift of light. 
Where are those wanderers lost from the mountain? 
Where are the shamen⁴ who told tales of shadows? 

They are there when the owl cries from the shadows 
and when, almost unseen, a meadowlark, whose 
song belies its common wings, gilds the mountain 
air with tonal wealth. They are there in the spring 
when late crusty snow melts softly in the light. 
They are there with the stippled trout and the lean
doe. Can mankind now let all living things lean
toward a holy peace and fill frightening shadows
of the night or black terrors of death with light?
"I will lift my eyes unto the hills," yet whose
hand will soothe but His who formed each stone and spring,
each lake and gentle bay and great grey mountain.

Oh Father, Thy mountain of man is most lean.
In his frantic spring, he stumbles through shadows.
Thou, whose name is peace—give him Thy holy light.6

—Sally T. Taylor

Sally T. Taylor, an assistant professor of English at Brigham Young University, won first place at the Eisteddfod
Festival at BYU in February 1984 with this poem. The poem was later published in A Little Light at the Edge

"The sestina, the most complicated of the verse forms initiated by the twelfth-century wandering singers
known as troubadours, is composed of six stanzas of six lines each, followed by an envoy, or concluding stanza,
that incorporates lines or words used before: in this case the words (instead of rhymes) end each line in [a
definite] pattern... The earliest example... is, in fact, a double sestina: Sidney's 'Ye Goatherd Gods.'
"The poem [has]... two sets of six-line stanzas, with a triplet concluding the whole. The same six
key words end the lines of each stanza; their order is always a permutation of the order in the stanza just
preceding; the pattern is 6 1 5 2 4 3, i.e., the last word of line 1 of any stanza is always the same as the last
word of line 6 in the preceding stanza. Line 2 always ends like the preceding stanza's line 1; line 3 like line 5;
line 4 like line 2; line 5 like line 4; and line 6 like line 3. All six key words appear in the triplet in the same
order as that of the first and seventh stanzas." (The Norton Anthology of Poetry, 3d ed. [New York:
W. W. Norton, 1970], 1418, 153.)

1Psalm 30:7.
2Psalm 121:1.
3An Indian word meaning supernatural power.
4An Indian healers or wisemen.
5Psalm 121:1.
6Final note: all lines have eleven syllables, following the pattern set by Sir Phillip Sidney (1554-1586).