

Mountain Thoughts

by John Muir

*Note: "Mountain Thoughts", written by Muir during the 1870s, were collected by Linnie Marsh Wolfe and published in *John of the Mountains* (1938).*

The Sierra

1. Mountains holy as Sinai. No mountains I know of are so alluring. None so hospitable, kindly, tenderly inspiring. It seems strange that everybody does not come at their call. They are given, like the Gospel, without money and without price. 'Tis heaven alone that is given away'.

2. Here is calm so deep, grasses cease waving. . . . Wonderful how completely everything in wild nature fits into us, as if truly part and parent of us. The sun shines not on us but in us. The rivers flow not past, but through us, thrilling, tingling, vibrating every fiber and cell of the substance of our bodies, making them glide and sing. The trees wave and the flowers bloom in our bodies as well as our souls, and every bird song, wind song, and; tremendous storm song of the rocks in the heart of the mountains is our song, our very own, and sings our love.

3. The Song of God, sounding on forever. So pure and sure and universal is the harmony, it matters not where we are, where we strike in on the wild lowland plains. We care not to go to the mountains, and on the mountains we care not to go to the plains. But as soon as we are absorbed in the harmony, plain, mountain, calm, storm, lilies and sequoias, forests and meads are only different strands of many-colored Light-are one in the sunbeam!

4. What wonders lie in every mountain day! . . . Crystals of snow, splash of small raindrops, hum of small insects, booming beetles, the jolly rattle of grasshoppers, chirping crickets, the screaming of hawks, jays, and Clark crows, the 'coo-r-r-r' of cranes, the honking of geese, partridges drumming, trumpeting swans, frogs croaking, the whirring rattle of snakes, the awful enthusiasm of booming falls, the roar of cataracts, the crash and roll of thunder, earthquake shocks, the whisper of rills soothing to slumber, the piping of marmots, the bark of squirrels, the laugh of a wolf, the snorting of deer, the explosive roaring of bears, the squeak of mice, the cry of the loon-loneliest, wildest of sounds. . . .

5. A fine place for feasting if only one be poor enough. One is speedily absorbed into the spiritual values of things. The body vanishes and the freed soul goes abroad. . . .

6. Only in the roar of storms do these mighty solitudes find voice at all commensurate with their grandeur. . . . The pines at the approach of storms show eager expectancy, bowing, swishing, tossing their branches with eager gestures, roaring like lions about to be fed, standing bent and round-shouldered like sentinels exposed. . . .

7. Sickness, pain, death - yet who could guess their existence in this fresh, abounding, overflowing life, this universal beauty?

8. Race living on race, killers killed, yet how little we see of this slaughter! How neatly, secretly, decently is this killing done! I never saw one drop of blood, one red stain on all this wilderness. Even death is in harmony here. Only in shambles and the downy beds of homes is death terrible. Perhaps there is more pleasure than pain in natural death, or even violent death. Livingstone declared that the crushing of his arm by a lion was rather pleasurable than otherwise. . . .

Bloody Canyon

9. Nature's darlings are cared for and caressed even here, and protected by a thousand miracles in the very home and brooding-places of storms.

10. Faint are the marks of any kind of life, and at first you cannot see them or feel them at all. But here is the blessed water-ouzel pleading, fluttering about amid the spray, and blending his sweet, small, human songs with those of the streams he loves so well. And many other birds who build their nests here, and the flowers with few leaves that bloom on the rocks as if fallen like snow from the sky.

11. And here the grasshopper jumps and springs his rattle, as if to say, 'Who is afraid?'

12. And the bumblebee singing every summer the songs sung a thousand years ago.

13. A flock of wild sheep move aloft on the crags of the walls, not lost and cast away, but seeming to say in fullness of strength and ease: 'Here we are fled, and here is our home and safe hiding place'.

14. One thinks of the redmen with flesh colored like the rocks, and sinews tough as the granite, who for thousands of years have dragged in files through these silent depths, clad in dull skins and grass, with mountain flowers stuck in their black hair and their wild animal eyes sparkling bright as the lakes.

15. Only the unimaginative can fail to feel the enchantment of these mountains.

16. Nothing is more wonderful than to find smooth harmony in this lofty cragged region where at first sight all seems so rough. From any of the high standpoints a thousand peaks, pinnacles, spires are seen thrust into the sky and so sheer and bare as to be inaccessible to wild sheep, accessible only to the eagle. Any one by itself harsh, rugged, crumbling, yet in connection with others seems like a line of writing along the sky; it melts into melody, one leading into another, keeping rhythm in time.

17. The cleanness of the ground suggests Nature taking pains like a housewife, the rock pavements seem as if carefully swept and dusted and polished every day. No wonder one feels a magic exhilaration when these pavements are touched, when the manifold currents of life that flow through the pores of the rock are considered, that keep every crystal particle in rhythmic motion dancing.

18. Tissiacks seldom have lofty domes to give grace to their strength. They are mostly stout, thickset mountains with spread bases for strength, because they have been born of two great streams and overflowed and much eroded. Glaciers eat their own offspring.

Books

19. I have a low opinion of books; they are but piles of stones set up to show coming travelers where other minds have been, or at best signal smokes to call attention. Cadmus and all the other inventors of letters receive a thousandfold more credit than they deserve. No amount of word-making will ever make a single soul to *know* these mountains. As well seek to warm the naked and frostbitten by lectures on caloric and pictures of flame. One day's exposure to mountains is better than cartloads of books. See how willingly Nature poses herself upon photographers' plates. No earthly chemicals are so sensitive as those of the human soul. All that is required is exposure, and purity of material. 'The pure in heart shall see God!'. . . .

Water Music

20. When in making our way through a forest we hear the loud boom of a waterfall, we know that the stream is descending a precipice. If a heavy rumble and roar, then we know it is passing over a craggy incline. But not only are the existence and size of these larger characters of its channel proclaimed, but all the others. Go to the fountain-canyons of the Merced. Some portions of its channel will appear smooth, others rough, here a slope, there a vertical wall, here a sandy meadow, there a lake-bowl, and the young river speaks and sings all the smaller characters of the smooth slope and downy hush of meadow as faithfully as it sings the great precipices and rapid inclines, so that anyone who has learned the language of running water will see its character in the dark.

21. Beside the grand history of the glaciers and their own, the mountain streams sing the history of every avalanche or earthquake and of snow, all easily recognized by the human ear, and every word evoked by the falling leaf and drinking deer, beside a thousand other facts so small and spoken by the stream in so low a voice the human ear cannot hear them. Thus every event is written and spoken. The wing scars the sky, making a path inevitably as the deer in snow, and the winds all know it and tell it though we hear it not.

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