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Published in *The Christian Science Monitor*.

341 words.

Stars above Johnson Rock

Gerrit, my brother, watches for fires from a cabin on a wooden tower that rises 82 feet above Johnson Rock, a mountain peak in Northeastern Oregon. As I get closer to Johnson Rock on the winding mountain highway, I see less traffic and less human habitation. I turn off the highway and cross a concrete bridge, and it is the end of pavement for me. Powdery white mountain dust boils up behind me as I drive up the mountain through forest and meadows.

Western larch needles turn yellow, and aspen leaves, and alder and willow bush turn bright red against the dark green background of evergreen trees, ponderosa and lodgepole pine, white fir and Douglas fir and spruce trees. Colorful leaves blow in autumn wind.

Gerrit watches miles of meadows and forests below. It is almost the end of his work season, nearly time for him to shutter the windows of the small cabin and retreat to Sumpter to paint all winter. After he is off-duty for the day and down from the tower, we visit.

Before dark, I make my bed on grass bleaching yellow for the season. Gerrit and I have many things to discuss and years to review, and the night progresses, but I eventually say, "I have to quit for the night." I get into my bed on the ground. Gerrit retires into the small trailer he uses through the summer. The waxing moon sinks westward behind trees growing above steep rock bluffs falling away toward Vey Meadow.

We have no light pollution up here, none, not even a flashlight. Stars shine brilliantly above me. I am glad to be here, soaking in starlight. I sleep, but I wake every two hours and look a long time at new stars as the earth rotates and faces a new part of the sky.

Daylight wakes me. I get up and wait for sunrise. The early morning is cold. I want to soak up first sunlight. I feel renewed, brilliant with soaked-up starlight, enough to last a long time.