

Browsing Autumn

Laura, Juniper, and Amanda drove down the mountain to town on my day off, for music lessons and for groceries. I wasn't essential to the town trip, and I had mountain to continue exploring, so I hugged them all good by and walked through forest and meadows up the ranch we took care of for The Girl Scouts, in the Rocky Mountains. Sun shone warmly. I took my time, out to see all of the day I could see. Far up the ranch, the small lake, with granite cliffs rising above it, was as full of water as I'd ever seen it. We had had a good winter snow pack in the mountains, and we'd had plenty of rain, spring and summer.

Wild raspberries appreciate abundant moisture, and I appreciate wild raspberries. I scrambled up a huge rock formation of eroded granite to scant patches of dirt where ponderosa pine trees grew, stunted from lack of soil and twisted by wind. Prickly pear cacti grew up there, and mountain grasses and raspberry canes with bright green leaves, and ripe, red berries. I harvested and ate ripe, sweet, seedy raspberries. I climbed higher on and around jumbled boulders as big as rooms, as big as houses, as big as mountains.

Boulders and the stone they eroded from, the mountain itself, are vast colonies of life. Granite stone eroded to soil in every cavity in the still solid stone supports grass, forbs, wildflowers, brush, and trees. I picked and ate more raspberries.

Clouds gathered dark above me.

I walked across flat, exposed granite rock. Lichen grew so densely I couldn't see the pink color of the unadorned granite. Green lichen. Black, white, orange, grey. I chewed some green lichen, bitter and gritty. I climbed down the north face of the granite formation into a tiny meadow of grass, wildflowers, cacti, wild strawberry plants close against the ground, their berries gone for the year.

I walked again between quiet water of the lake and granite stone rising abruptly toward the cloudy sky. Three yellow boletus mushrooms grew

from detritus under small pine trees. I picked one and ate it slowly. Its delicate, fruity, lemony taste encouraged long, thoughtful savoring of each bite.

Reddish orange currants grew from tall bushes in front of huge grey granite stone. I admire anyone persistent enough to harvest the tiny wild fruits and make them into jelly. I harvested and ate a few and found them bland compared to the raspberries and mushrooms.

Rain began. I entered the open-faced, unfloored shelter built and maintained for Girl Scouts who hiked up the ranch to the lake some weekends. I lay down on granite sand and slept. Hard rain tapped the wooden roof above me.

Something chewed on the wood of the shelter and woke me. I got up and walked around the shelter, but I didn't see the chewer. Rain had eased, and the slow rain that still came down took a while to soak even the surface of my clothes.

I walked toward juniper trees west of the shelter and looked at the clean day after a rain storm. Grouse exploded on thundering wings from sparse clumps of grass that grew tall from coarse granite sand and flew east, landed, and blended to their background of lichen mottled rock, trees and brush. As soon as they were still, I couldn't see them anymore.

Clouds blew away and left clean blue sky full of sunshine.

In granite sand eroding toward the lake, I found white puffballs about the size of baseballs. I knew these puffballs as well as I knew the boletus mushrooms, so I picked one, peeled it, ate it, and found it delicious, as always..

I could browse north to Wyoming, eat what I find growing wild, sleep under trees, travel a while every day, and be halfway through Utah, alone and wild as the mountains by the time the snow begins to fall. This and other dreams of life in summer mountains illuminate my thoughts like sunshine lights up the day and causes life to grow.

Enough freedom and oneness with the mountains to wander alone for days is too lovely a dream to turn abruptly away from, though my feet already carried me homeward. Laura, Juniper, and Amanda had probably come back up the mountain. As wonderful as it is to be away from all

people for a while, if I tried to live wild, I would miss my family too much to bear.

I hiked down to the rough dirt road through the ranch. I walked faster, headed home, looking forward to sharing the day with Amanda, Juniper, and Laura by telling about my adventures and by listening to them tell about theirs.