

# Mountain

*An Evolutionary Epic*



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William Carney

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*In memory of*

*Sam Ciofalo,*

*mountain man*



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# Preface

During my lifetime, our species has delved its deep sources in space and time with growing accuracy. We now hold a common creation story that reaches forth from the first instant of existence to our own precious ‘moment in the sun,’ wherein we marvel that we are in fact descendants of light, constituted of stardust and still nursing on the radiance of a star. It’s a creation story capable of spanning all others, bridging stubborn human differences and beginning to heal our long, painful and ultimately illusory separation from planet and cosmos, and perhaps even from one another. This is the story that *Mountain* sings.

Our wide-eyed wonder at this new awareness has found its temple in the earth itself, and its icon in a simple, space-born photograph of our one azure home, singularly emergent from the dark expanse of the universe.

During my lifetime, our species also has steadily desecrated this temple. We’ve recklessly extracted and exploited the planet’s ‘resources,’ reshaping material reality to fit human wants that we also intentionally refashion into ever more whimsical and rapacious hungers. We’ve heedlessly spread our populations, wastes and toxins throughout the world, endangering both ourselves and the integral systems that support all life. We’ve shredded the sacred texts of planetary experience scripted in the genes of the innumerable species that we have driven to extinction, unread and often unknown. We have threatened creation with weapons of instantaneous oblivion, casually bantered.

And now our unthinking combustion of fossil carbon has triggered changes to the earth's climate and oceans that will forever alter the planet's 'way of life,' intensifying the impacts of all our other derelictions.

During my lifetime—lived within what we hold to be an exemplary democracy—our species has collectively chosen *not to see* what it is doing, not to recognize its place in creation as a conscious and responsible power and to act accordingly. By demagogues and dollars, we've led ourselves astray. We've intentionally looked away. We've chosen to be blind. But also in this lifetime, we have felt from time to time the awareness of the entire planet come alive and transfigure in a single moment—looking back at the borderless earth from space or watching the threadbare truths of the cold war dissolve onto the rich compost heap of history.

We inhabit such a moment of seismic insight and heroic challenge. Our worldview is shifting—and with it, the world we live in and create each day. Perception is that sharp a tool. Vision is that powerful a motivator.

The hopefulness of the poem is rooted in this moment and in three imperatives it plainly presents us: to know our place on earth and in the universe, to act responsibly based on that knowledge, and above all *to see clearly*. Or more precisely, in the spirit of both art and science, to see clearly over and over again—to actively allow an ever iterative clarity to evolve and to inform our actions. For our cosmic creation story is also the story of our own creativity, and both remain unfinished and unfathomable.

## How you might approach this poem

The poem pursues these basic themes through a simple story of young backpackers in the high Sierra wilderness. For a week, each evening around the campfire they listen to the story of the universe unfold, and they share in ‘songs’ the stories of their own unfolding lives. It’s all written down in June’s journal. Here’s a typographic Rosetta Stone for following these multiple voices:

The body of the poem, the campfire **universe story** told by Dave the naturalist, is set in ‘Garamond’ type, like this preface.

The **individual songs** of Jose, Lily, June, Mo, Vince, Marta, Gwen and Meru are set in this ‘Optima’ typeface (*italicized when they speak as a group*).

*Finally, this ‘Baskerville Old Face’ oblique font marks the **personal notes** and entries of the journal keeper, June. It also carries June’s voice through her duets with Mo and in her brief observations laced through Dave’s narrative.*

This is, of course, a big story and a big poem, but one arranged to be inviting. You may read it as presented, day by day, tracking the various voices and motifs as they interweave, resonate and develop. Or you may wish first to focus separately on the big-picture cosmic ‘fire’ episodes, or on the sparks of individual ‘songs’ (read in their nightly groupings or followed character-by-character), or on June’s individual quest and questionings—and then consider how these diverse strands interconnect.

Alternatively, as with any wild environment, you may find yourself simply wandering through the book, guided by unexpected prompts and impulses, stopping frequently to rest and ponder seemingly random details—while bearing in mind the overall terrain, inter-related ecology, and possible destinations. Whatever your preferred approach, guideposts through the chronology of the universe appear in the book’s margins to assist your orientation. These are indexed in a ‘Storyline of Cosmic Evolution’ at the end of the text, together with a ‘Storyline of June’s Week’ and a ‘Key to Characters and Songs.’

But who is the *audience*, for whom is the poem written? Anyone, really. The story of the universe is the story of each of us. That said, the reader I invoked and imagined while writing the poem is a student, leisurely swinging on a front porch on a hot afternoon, as I once did, wending through a final summer reading assignment before returning to school or some other focused pursuit. So I would wish the poem to be a summer syllabus, background reading for the long work ahead.

Now, maps at hand, and with some sense of the topography and scenes to come, enjoy your ascent. And be aware, page by page, of the unfolding of your own life and consciousness in context with the evolution of the universe: how remarkable it is that the whole cosmos is this moment moving forward through your individual presence here within it, reflecting back its presence within you.

**Mountain**





MOUNTAIN

*here, reshaping self each step the shape  
of earth?*

*Rich cock-sure, crock-full, of answers,  
everything that we must be. Life just  
proceeds—spelled out, prix fixe, concrete.  
Just stick to the routine (said genes  
'conservative' by nature). Soon as  
he finishes*

*law school and me*

*pre-med*

*we're 'set,' we'll 'knot' ourselves up good (pre-  
packaged family man, 'responsible'  
his brand) for service, pilot prep  
for politics (the sky's the limit)  
hurtling through stratosphere—*

*eyes angle*

*down for balance here, crop up to catch  
this instant this immensity (as Stein  
said 'It's Picasso's world' first time she  
flew, planed fields of Normandy fragmented  
as stained glass below)—*

*then maybe kid*

*& settling into respective  
practices. Momentum*

*holds one whole.*

*Have faith in that. The way my body  
every step believes in gravity  
and thereby in*

*this rounding earth.*

*From birth, I think, I've felt this way.  
Imagine that. Imagine*

*back. Earth*

*tidal to all embryos, first pull  
to orient first sphere of zygote,  
then first neurons held in her liquid  
massage, then globe of eye first thrilling  
to red dawn of sunlight filtering*

*warm shallows, finally to join  
long descent, head first, to dive into  
full light and all encompassing round  
world around which mind now fitfully  
takes form.*

*Belief enough, I'm thinking  
how the planet spins me out, each day along  
each path, umbilical.*

*Could I do that—  
spin life from me, rotund as some domed  
temple centering sun-drenched & cypress-  
studded*

*landscape? I'm wandering.  
Doug fir the steeples here, Sierra  
granite rising into air. Think thighs  
the strength of mountains, calves turned taut  
& sinewed with each scene. I am  
geology the same and surely as  
these peaks I now ascend.*

*Dad loves the plan,  
daughter of his to carry forward  
family lines. First girl to get this far. Check  
that off (his backpack checklists late last  
night, his endless preparations). Last step  
for me to formally declare my  
major and intents:*

*Two questions no  
one's quested yet.*

*The answers here just  
air, fire, water, earth—simplicity—life  
then reconstitutes, stirs up towards  
consciousness, likewise forever stitching  
back together all creation. Walk  
this path this brief duration.*

*Whole life  
seems like  
I'm carrying—everything*

MOUNTAIN

*now on my back. (One false step, pack  
every which way teetering its queasy  
lodestones pulling me  
astray to plummet  
down core empty shaft.) Stomach, too, too  
stuffed—don't know what that's about—just want  
to say to all of it 'get out, get  
off.' (Me, too, I'm talking to.) No more  
Rich 'will do right by me' whatever  
happens. (That's Plan B. 'Big Bang directive'  
Dad would say.) But I'm not buying it  
now on, no way, no more. Eclipsed I am  
high noon, all phases  
off, all bets. What*

*if, what if, what if it iffing comes  
to this—no choices left—laid down one  
roll of tumbling mathematics in  
clichéic hay? Meaning, I must now  
find & thread  
lost needle back to task  
encompassing fields green of grain  
& sensuous wave, flag-like  
at mast-tip  
as proud prow rides forward through up-  
surging seas. So enter, sing in me  
deep mystery. So surge inside to guide.*

**First fire: *We are here***

*Dave*

First say who you are and why you're here.

*Vince*

'To be outside. Not always locked in.'

*Marta*

'I sculpt. I'm opening. To granite.'

*Gwen*

'To exercise, like, every part of me.'

*Meru*

'Me 2, aka, build memory.'

*Lily*

'Just free me up from city's load of hurt.'

*Jose*

'To help with healing not done yet.'

*Mo*

'Face facts. Go quiet. Hear earth out.'

*June*

'I'm June,' I say. 'I'm here to find my way.'

*Dave*

And I'm a naturalist, just loving this  
terrain of song—and all that walk it.

*Long silence brooding back on fires thought  
long gone—then rising like frog chorus:*

*All*

'Tell us. A story. Teach us. The stars.'

MOUNTAIN

You must first lose all other stories.  
Lose yourself. Or what you have been told  
you were. Only then you'll clearly see:  
You are the stars. Teach me.

*Caringly*

*he stirs warm embers, raising galaxies  
into the air. He lays another  
log.*

Watch this.

*Long time he waits.*

The fire  
washes off the wood. Let it wash you  
smooth as seashell or madrone, smooth as  
manzanita on these hills. Fit thought  
to wood, let fire polish down your words,  
fit mind to it. Then you may begin  
to see as fire sees. As stars see.  
Open out

your mind to be in

perfect state of possibility.  
Think state

of grace, all things aflow in  
unison as fire dances in caress  
of wind, each medium transforming  
mutual touch to something never felt  
before, yet older than these flickering  
mountains that embrace us.

Be open  
to such touch, be moved by flex and flux  
of stone (its mica insights), rush of  
river spraying spectrums, or sudden  
spark as cloud rolls loudly over peaks.

Let all things speak their lucid pentecost  
in us, all tongues like fire here rise up.

Thoreau says *Simplify*. You need that here  
just to survive. Hone down yourself  
to what fits best, then carry it long  
days as light as song. Try this to start:

*We're all arisen from the earth, and earth  
from stars, and stars from single burst  
of energy from which all time & space  
still radiates. No more. No less. That pulse  
still travels through your heart, still speaks  
in every breath magnificence in  
you expressed.*

Look inward as into  
still pool—empty calm mind of surfaces,  
be rid of boundary, deeply  
reflect stars shimmering within. Your  
eyes give back into the universe  
its knowledge of itself, as swim &  
glittering, deep well of time, wide ocean  
brimming light we've gathered round tonight  
to warm and reconnect. Our stories  
rise, brief sparks rekindling the skies.

**June's Song**  
*(altitude)*

So now  
                  they're saying  
take it  
                  easy, rest, adjust

to altitude, breathe in  
the thin

sky deeply—as if  
so much  
                  clarity

takes  
time

to reassemble, each  
breath reassembling

me.

I'm entering  
                  arrangements  
with a tree  
                  to keep me  
clear &

                  adequately  
structured, heart  
tethered

to earth, rooted

in air.

**Rules of the Road**  
*(we all agree)*

Do not disturb  
*the anima.*

Take only light,  
*leave only opera.*

Pay attention,  
*everything is free.*

No fires outside rings,  
*but burn within.*

No sweets in tents—  
*intensely dream.*

Know whereabouts  
*of friends.*

Lose yourself,  
*find your song.*

Let all things sing  
*respectfully.*

Put back exactly  
*what you see.*

Make room, make waves,  
*make way always.*



its own internalizing weight  
 more complicated elements. Spinning  
 together more & more

electrons  
 round centrifric nuclei to blaze  
 increasingly

13.2 BYA - stars &  
 supernovae start  
 forming other  
 elements

intense. Till iron  
 that can't combust

collapses star in  
 final sacrificial flash gone  
 supernova (*super new*)—that instant  
 energized enough to cook all  
 other elements. Then

strew them out  
 into  
 prolific space.

***Gravity takes hold***

*Desirous fire—  
 all colors, all directions licking—  
 orange, green, violet. Resolve myself  
 now back to prime. Be Mondrian  
 contained. Straight-lined.*

See glint of such  
 event. See supernova blink again  
 in granite. Touch  
 stars exploding in  
 profusion. Their sharp shards. You hold now  
 in your hands. Feel

weight of elements  
 stars generate. And earth still pulls down  
 hard into itself to make

(as sculptor  
 might) of stone all things now known.

Then our  
 far-flung imaginings.

So touch of  
 gravity takes hold and molds far drift

## MOUNTAIN

4.56 BYA -  
*sun forms*

of stardust. First  
to nebulae aswirl  
with birthing new stars seeded  
rich  
with complex  
elements. Fingers of which  
toy inward round long vectors finding  
equilibrium of orbit.  
Over  
time  
snowballing self (dust  
to dust repeatedly) to stone.

4.54 BYA -  
*earth forms*

Then  
planetoid. Till strength  
of its own  
gravity self-sculpts  
round  
earth.

### *Hard reckonings*

Eons  
on and on hard surface gets hard pounded  
on. More  
missiles coming in as  
mounting mass more mass  
attracts. Till throbbing  
at its heart (pressed in by weight of self  
as self accumulates) young planet  
melts. And iron  
(again) at heavy end  
of mix pulls inward. Forming  
liquid  
core  
internalizing  
star-like  
bulking  
up enough to keep heat churning (stoked  
by nuclear decompositions)



MOUNTAIN

molten

moon

4.53 BYA -  
*moon forms*

to pirouette. Its orbit  
close enough to rip stone tides across  
still dancing surfaces.

*Temple & mausoleum*

Bombardment

winding down through time crust cools.

New moon

too small to generate its own deep  
circulatory heat

goes frigid

to hard core. Blank face

registering

3 BYA - *moon  
freezes*

the scars of impacts back three billion  
years. Sky's alabaster

mausoleum

quarried from earth. Preserving there last  
furies of dead stars.

While here earth's own  
stone pulse beats on (liquid and alive  
at heart regenerative). To push out  
continents

from molten trench. Inching  
muscularly through depths. To crash plate  
under plate. To raise

these mountain temples

jagged & ascendant with slow force  
of planet manifest in them.

You feel

that sometimes walking here. Earth slips up-  
ward into air

4.0 MYA - *Sierra  
uplift starts*

heart-hammering

construction

shaping stone to its own

domed & spiring cathedral.



MOUNTAIN

*flame-like*

*up cold mountain heights.*

Take that to dream on  
as you feel earth turn stone cold to face  
night down

sun's fire set. This planet's  
formative at heart. Forever  
being born.

3.3 MYA -  
*current*  
*glaciations*  
*begin*

Feel shivers of that truth  
in boulders here you might first take  
for black bears roaming night. Or remnant  
drift of asteroids

come long last to rest.

In fact left only centuries back  
by melting ice. This landscape's still snow-fresh.  
Look right you might see sculpture here not  
known before. Like temple artifacts  
unfinished yet

13,000 YA -  
*latest*  
*Pleistocene*  
*glaciers retreat*

inscribed with story.  
Long lines incised in granite tracing  
lineage that brought rock here. Stones carried  
on stone river bearing down to mark  
hard passages. Think ice

free falling  
down millennia from skies piled thick  
with cloud. Crystal on crystal down as if  
small stars. Outreaching galaxies  
come here to earth to work refinements  
on tall sacred towers telling all  
there is to know: Where

we come from. Where  
we need to grow and towards what purposes.  
And finally how to live—what round *earth*  
*ethic* might best route us up unknown  
hellacious slope

slip-knotted each  
to all against sure fall off vast  
deteriorating glacier



MOUNTAIN

*(and now) to feel myself, sweet morning  
song, my own to sing.*

*Got partnered with  
this Mo guy out from Washington.  
A lawyer yet. Some legal eagle  
eating at him. Burned out. Head down on  
grindstone. Bound so tight hurts me to see.*

*Wanting to compose response to Rich:  
'I started out to hurt you, too, but  
find here heart now opening, as petals  
one by one arch back from calyx wide  
to sun (as russet flesh of lily  
trembles flame-like next to stream, pulsing  
heart of granite garden) inviting  
anxious bees their bumbling explorations—  
as once your eyes would light & linger  
on my skin, blouse slipped down shoulder all  
to see. That's me this morning, water  
rushing over stone. Just missing you.  
I only know I am  
alone.'*

**Jose's Song**  
*(whole planet)*

Nowadays I'm working  
solar, talking everyone's  
redemption. No other way  
we're going to make it.

Each time I cut a length  
of wood—say, reinforcing  
rafters, or for blocking—  
I feel my father watching  
down on me like when

I was a kid. He'd all the time  
be on me how when measuring  
each fraction of an inch makes  
all the difference. 'Measure  
up,' he'd say. 'Just measure

up, before you cut.' Up here  
I'm thinking he'd be out  
measuring the distances  
like star to star. Like when  
his eyes would shine back at

me telling him these trillion  
organisms crafted ocean salts  
to silicon they laid down  
as they died so we someday  
could lay photovoltaics out

on rooftops glistening like tar  
to catch fresh sunlight in  
so we can read—or he could  
power up his shop. Life hands  
life on to other life. Each time

I put a panel down, I see that  
old Apollo photo—whole planet  
swimming through black night,  
deep blue, awash in light we  
keep returning to, each dawn

spun round. And think: Each  
moment somewhere it's now  
dawn, the people waking up  
to do the work that must be done.

**Mo's Song**  
*(metrics)*

Better believe  
up on the hill  
lawmakers need  
their taxes done

with fine precision.  
That's where I come in.  
I'm *good* at it,  
make it so it

adds up metrics  
they want. It's laws  
& numbers cause  
the world grow round—

no rhyme nor reason  
only bottom  
line. I've bottom-  
fished, I've floundered

with the best of them.  
Come up for air  
sometimes like here.  
End up back down.

That's it. All told.  
Rewrite the code.  
Grow up. Grow old.  
Embrace the cold.

**Lily's Song**  
*(mom gardened)*

Mom gardened  
 all the time. Out  
 back brick rubble  
 she would turn  
 to beds, sweet  
 peas twining over  
 everything, deep red  
 tomatoes we could  
 eat like apples from  
 her hands. Must've  
 been some kind of  
 therapy I'm thinking  
 that black dirt she'd  
 sink her fingers in,  
 such relish & release  
 from all day turning  
 back white sheets  
 just so for finicky  
 rich folk. But what do  
 I know? Could just be  
 plain simple love  
 the way her fingers  
 felt upon my scalp  
 each Saturday she'd  
 wash my hair out, getting  
 ready for the week —  
 'No child of mine  
 not going to shine.'  
 Man came to ask,  
 wasn't she proud  
 of such a garden?  
 She'd look away.  
 (She'd say to me,  
 more like be humble  
 what earth does.)  
 Then just to please,  
 'Go on now! Mercy! Only  
 workers here're the bees.'

**June's Invocation**  
*(as under earth)*

Face up to night, not so much to  
observe, but to  
let be  
in you all you  
can't know.

Let dark come in  
where dark resides  
already, back

behind bright eyes  
as under earth roots move  
& mycelia

do their  
relentless work  
connecting

everything. Let night  
move miracles in you beyond  
all comprehension. Then

let in the stars

for what they are, unlikely light,  
learning in time

to concentrate dark  
hydrogen till it  
ignites.

Reach out  
& stir old ember  
galaxies.

Then turn yourself  
to rest in darkness.

