

TERRIFYING BEAUTY

The Truth and Complexity in the Beauty and Horror of Nature

by Hanne Van Dyck

From all the landscapes, mountaintops are predestined to rule. Men climb mountains to measure the size of mankind and the reach of their power against them. Although they are smaller in size, their willpower and spirit can get them to conquer the highest peaks. When the ego is not to be worshiped, a mountain represents the cosmic relation between the massive mass of stones that attempt to touch heaven and the tininess of the earth-bound ones.

Years ago she was driving through the mountains for months on the back of an old Russian motorbike. The stretching of her legs, while opening her arms, while screaming “I am the king of the world” was accompanied by the presence of a vivid image of herself hanging off a cliff-edge, waiting to be eaten by vultures. The feeling of completeness, nourished by the change of density in the air and panoramic views, got intensified by vertigo. It is the fear that transforms the beauty into the divine.

Her biggest fear is a dark forest, an indefinite boundless forest, the creatures it hosts and the sounds it releases. This inborn fear was intensified by a nocturnal trip to the woods of her youth. Although she knew the way by heart, and she didn't go far, it was hours later when she arrived home. She had been drifting in liminal space, experiencing a perpetual delirium fed by her panic. The angst for the woods disappeared by studying the wisdom of trees and understanding that this wilderness only exists within herself. That her imagination, her mind, is the main source of fear.

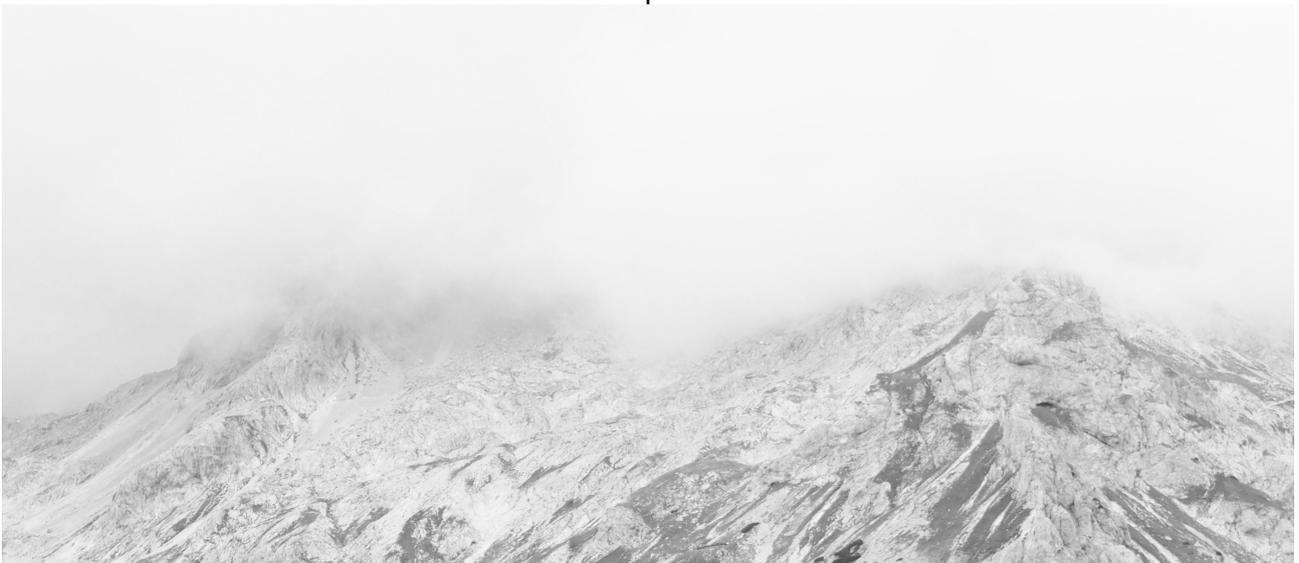
To her, the surface of the ocean was just a beautiful layer to hide monstrous creatures. Some of them were born while dreaming at night, others while dreaming during the day, but never were they considered imaginary.



On top of this, her mother told her that all the sewage ends up in the ocean. Thinking about sewage that tastes like salt made her stomach twist with disgust. At twenty-one, she experienced her first fearless swim in the ocean. By taking a diving course, she overcame her fear of opaque water. While the water made her weightless and her breath controlled her movements, her claustrophobia gently washed away. An encounter with a shark made her day. The deep and infinite sea now shows her the complexity of the universe, the fluidity of life instead of fear for its hidden world. All is connected, we are all stardust. “Who looks upon a river in a meditative hour and is not reminded of the flux of all things?”¹ Just like the stars that only appear at night, so is her fear.

“It is in vain to dream of wildness distant from ourselves. There is none such. It is the bogs in our brain and bowels, the primitive vigor of Nature in us, that inspires that dream.” (1)

She doesn't want to merge with nature, she doesn't want to go in search of the miraculous, she has no desire to become a bear (2), or carve a mountain (3). She is drawn by virgin nature and the idea of something pure. Which not necessarily means she is longing for utopia. While making images of nature during travels, all sign of human life is being zoomed out of her frame. Her pictures are denying the fear of the non-existing dream. They are made from very safe places, creating their own twisted memories and non-places so she can take home exactly what the commercials promised her.



When coming home from traveling, she feels fairsick for weeks. Especially when she has been lying under a palm tree. After climbing a mountain or walking through the desert, returning is less of a struggle because the experience happened in her body rather than in her head.

There is so much comfort in paradise. The empty beaches are our modern myths. Medicine for our fears of attraction to the unknown and inexplicable. By seeing a mesmerizing ocean sunset, it is proven that paradise exists. But just like a dream, an image is never a reality. Utopia exists, given it's a non-place with a mixed reputation. "It is an ancient search for happiness, freedom, and paradise. A fantasy of some exotic place away from our social burden, an island of cliché." (4) There is much truth and complexity to be found in the beauty and horror of nature and it's in researching one's relationship to the landscapes one encounters, that the question arises: what is nature anyway?



(1) Henry David Thoreau, *The Journal of Henry David Thoreau, 1837-1861* (NYRB Classics; Original edition, 2009)

(2) Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature and Selected Essays*, (Penguin Classics; Reissue edition, 2003)

(3) "Occasionally I am challenged. And in that case, the kind warrior must, must, must become a samurai. Must become so, so formidable, so fearless of death, so strong that he will win, he will win. Even the bears will believe that you are more powerful. And in a sense you must be more powerful if you are to survive in this land with the bear. No one knew that. No one ever friggin' knew that there are times when my life is on the precipice of death and that these bears can bite, they can kill. And if I am weak, I go down. I love them with all my heart. I will protect them. I will die for them, but I will not die at their claws and paws. I will fight. I will be strong. I'll be one of them. I will be... the master."

Werner Herzog, *Grizzly Man*, (Lions Gate Home Entertainment, 2005)

(4) "I want, somewhere in America on or near the Rockies, the backbone of the Continent, so far removed from succeeding, selfish, coveting civilizations, a few feet of stone that bears witness, carries the likenesses, the dates, a word or two of the great things we accomplished as a Nation, placed so high it won't pay to pull down for lesser purposes. Hence, let us place there, carved high, as close to heaven as we can, the words of our leaders, their faces, to show posterity what manner of men they were. Then breathe a prayer that these records will endure until the wind and the rain alone shall wear them away."

Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, (Olympus, 1995)

(5) Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Hans Ulrich Obrist & Olafur Eliasson: The Conversation Series: Vol. 13*, (Walther König, Köln, 2008)