

Gothic, Colorado

The snow crunches like stiff leather under his boots. He winds through the scrub pine and aspens, stragglers along the mountain tree line. An aspen trunk, bone white and skeletal in the winter, becomes a perch on which to steady himself. The snowpack is unpredictable here and he needs the rest as his lungs ignite with each gulp of freezing air. The sky above him carries the clear delicateness of winter and one, lone bird — a blush of winged red and orange against the startling blue. It is cold today, but not as cold as it should be.

He looks behind him to the tracks he'd left through the fresh powder the evening before. They are not the straight, assured tracks of the man he had been 50 years ago. A jagged, serpentine line of boot prints wind up the rise toward the one room cabin he built in the 60s. He had hewn it from the wilds around him. He had built it for her.

He has rested long enough and continues on, making his way to the measuring station he visits every morning and evening. It is the same pilgrimage, every winter, sick or healthy, tired or drunk, that he makes twice daily. Routine is important. It keeps the data collection pure and gives purpose to the loneliness.

He makes some adjustments to the equipment and pulls out his moleskin notebook, the month's snowfall measured there by tiny pencil strokes: little scratches made by a lead edge he whittles sharp with a pocket knife. Below him, stretches the valleys of the West Elk Mountains. Somewhere amidst the frost-tipped pines and the cloud cover that hangs like a wraith, lies the 1920s village of Gothic, a ghost town, his closest neighbor.

She had told him in their first year on the mountain that towns aren't just abandoned. There is always a reason. It was just too harsh here, she'd said, the isolation too severe for a healthy soul. They would adapt, he'd assured her. This was what they wanted.

He measures the night's snowfall: 2.5 inches and makes a note of the temperature: 6 degrees Fahrenheit. He is no scientist, but he recognizes what the data had been telling him for years: it is getting warmer. His side of the mountain is getting a permanent snowpack later and it is melting sooner. The data tells him what the monotonous passage of time cannot. To him it is the same: his bones feel just as cold, his ligaments strain just as hard, and his heart bears its hurt as if he had only lost her yesterday.

Memories of her work much like the data in his notebook, they are recorded in the gray folds of his brain as if having been etched there by a newly sharpened lead. He can picture her smile whenever he closes his eyes against the wind. He can still laugh at her little idiosyncrasies whenever he taps into the bourbon supply. The way she sang to herself while she crocheted. The hollow pings as she tapped her tea steeper on the side of the kettle three times every morning. He can still feel the pressure of her head in his lap as she lay on their cabin floor, the fever taking her in the night before he ever had a chance to signal for help. The unbearable weight of that head in the morning, after the life had left her.

He has tried to replace those memories many times, with the snow measurements of the winter's coming and leaving, with the day's temperature fluctuations meticulously recorded within a fraction of a degree. Now, 486 moleskins line up on the shelves he has made from fallen pine, but the memories of her remain just as vivid.

The morning's work concluded, he begins to trudge back up the ridge. The Morse code chirps of the solitary Red Crossbill echo through the cathedral of ice-choked trees. The bird's

song is carried a mile or more by the frigid air. The seasonal biologists, who travel here with the environmental scientists, have told him about the amazing radiations of this species and the subtle differences of their calls between the peaks and valleys of the Rockies and beyond. He only knows they feed on pinecones and, like him, they always stay for the winter.

Actual scientists, the ones who climb up to collect his data once the worst of winter breaks, tell him that his recordings are priceless. He and he alone has documented with unerring certainty the ravages of man's impact on the planet. He is glad to be of service, and glad his hobby has proven useful, but he does not have the answer for how to stop it. The planet will die of fever, just as she had, and the world, once beautiful, will become a graveyard.

He stomps his boots on the cabin's steps and retreats back into his one room isolation. He puts a kettle on the propane stove and feeds the steeper with loose leaf tea. He taps it against the side of the kettle three times. It is the only music he ever hears up here. Outside the wind moans and he bundles one of her hand-made quilts around his frail shoulders. He puts this month's moleskin back on the shelf with the others, and settles in to wait until the evening's measurements.