

The Land I Love

By Ryan Washburn

After his visit to Oregon Thomas Wolfe wrote a poem about his experience:

"From the Cascade's frozen gorges, Leaping like a child at play, Winding, winding through the valley, Bright Willamette glides away; Onward ever, Lovely river, Softly calling to the sea, Time that scars us, Maims and mars us, Leaves not track or trench on thee."

Someone once told me, "If you do not believe in God, go to Oregon and you will soon change your mind." I believe that this is true. I once dreamt of the beauty that the Northwestern United States possesses, and in December of 2004 I saw that beauty, not as a dream but as the next step in my life. I had ideas of what was waiting for me and a dream of starting my career and spending the next several years in Oregon. Unfortunately, only half my dream was realized, but the love for Oregon and all it has to offer will always be with me, like a sweetheart that has gotten away.

I have always had an interest in the west. Even as a young child watching old western movies, the idea of a life so rough, rugged, and untamed fascinated me. When I was a young teenager, the fact that it was literally on the other side of the country from my parents made the west appealing. As I got older, the idea of leaving home was still in the back of my head, but finding and starting a career took center stage. In the summer of 2003, at the age of seventeen, I decided to go to culinary school. This was my chosen path, and I feel it was my calling. Culinary school was a long, difficult road but I completed the academic portion. Then it was time to start my externship. After long thought and talking to several people, my thoughts of living in the west came back. I knew that the west was not as I had imagined as a child. And, the idea of

moving so far from my family was not as appealing as it had been when I was fourteen. But this was my chance; I now had the opportunity to live any where in the country that I desired. I decided that I would do my externship in Portland, Oregon.

The day after Thanksgiving 2004, I left Florida, a flat humid swamp, and headed west for a new life in Oregon. I was ready to start my career, and start my life. After a six day drive, we arrived my girlfriend, my dog and myself. I had dreamt about what I thought it would look like, but the images in my dreams could not compare to the amazing scenes I actually saw. As I drove into Portland, the city did not impress me much; it looked like any other city I has seen across the country. As I headed east on interstate 84 out of Portland to Fairview where I would be renting an apartment, I turned a corner and right in front of me was a mountain. I guess you could say that it was just like any other mountain, but to me it was different, this mountain, Mt. Hood, represented the end of my journey. The interstate seemed to run right into it, as if this was the end of the road. As I marveled at the sights, I noticed the Willamette River, and the Cascade mountains. These wonders seemed to be carved by God's own hands.

I had asked for the apartment to have a view of Mt. Hood, and as we started to unpack, I caught myself staring out my porch window of my apartment. I was caught-up in the song of the mountain. After I got a job and started working, I didn't have much free time, but the free time I did have I spent chasing the mountains song, the song drew me to the mountain and to the ocean. I don't think I spent one day off work at home. The mountain and the ocean called to me, as if they were fighting over me, fighting for my attention begging me to choose. I couldn't choose. I balanced my time between hiking in the mountains, sitting by the rivers and streams, and walking barefoot on the sandy beaches, exploring caves and caverns. Then the tide would rise

and hid them from the world for another short time, as if to remind us that those caves and caverns are still hers.

The mountains were close as well. On my drive to work in downtown Portland, if it was a clear day, I could look north and see Mt. Reiner, Mt. St. Helen, and even the Three Sisters. All three of these mountain formations are in Washington state, nevertheless, they are just as pretty as if they were in Oregon. Even though these other mountains were close, I still drove to Mt. Hood at least three times a month. There were days that I didn't even get out of my truck, I just drove and looked at the valleys and trees. However, most of my trips I did park and hike. I would hike for hours and never seem to get tired; never once did it cross my mind to turn back. I never thought "I had enough" or "it is getting late". Her song had me and as they say, "Once she's got you, you're got." And there was no doubt that I was "got."

The ocean was about the same distance from Fairview to the mountains, just in the other direction. The drive westward was different, instead of mountains, this was wine country. I saw a lot of vineyards and wineries on my drive to the beach. I visited several beaches until I found the one that I thought felt right. It was Indian Beach. The only way to get to Indian Beach was to hike two miles on the winding trails through the woods. The hike I didn't mind; the view and the experience at the end of the trail was worth the journey. Closest to the land there were rocks, small rocks, about the size of a walnut. These rocks were smooth from the pounding of the sea. Out further was sand and drift wood. This beach was not like any beaches back home in Florida. The beaches in Florida didn't sing. They didn't sing the song of hope that these beaches sang. The sound of the waves on the shore had the voice of a woman, a woman calling to the land relentlessly coming back for more. There were streams that poured back to the sea, these streams cut through the sand as if they were children running back to their mother. Rock formations

stood tall just off shore, stood and took the continuous beating from the surf, almost as if the rock was rebelling against the water, refusing to give in. On the beach there were caves and caverns that could be explored at the right time of day. When the tide came in these caves were filled by water, but when the tide was down you could walk inside and, feel the edges and walls of the cave, smoothed by years of the ocean's flow in and out. As I looked at the sunset over the water it seemed to never end. As the sun went down, it was like everything knew that night was coming. The birds huddled against the rocks. The people started disappearing back through the path. Even the waves' roar quieted to a whisper.

There are also several water falls in Oregon. Multnomah Falls was the closest to Fairview, so I spent a lot of time walking the paths that surrounded and led to the falls. I also enjoyed just sitting and watching the water fall. When I was a child I would read about fairies that inhabited forests and hid in the ground moss. Walking through the woods, I could almost imagine that there were fairies laughing and playing in the fallen leaves just around the corner of on the path. It seemed that just before I could make it around the corner, they would flutter off and hide once again in the ground moss and under the fallen leaves. There were times that I would venture off the path (even though there were signs that prohibited it), and I would cut my own trail through the woods and wonder about the people that had walked through the woods before there were State Parks and paved path around the woods. Did these explorers or natives see the same thing I saw? Were they as amazed as I was by the natural beauty? Or were they desensitized from seeing it so frequently they forgot what they were looking at?

This perfect world that knew came to end one day. I had to return to Orlando for graduation from culinary school. While there, a long term relationship ended, and I was forced to return to Oregon alone. After talking with my family, I decided that it would be best if I moved

to Indiana, where my father is originally from. Within two days of my return from Florida it was time to say goodbye to Oregon. It was not an easy thing to do; I think losing Oregon hurt more than losing a romantic love. When on my drive eastward I drove by Mt. Hood, she seemed to sing a different song, a quieter and more heart felt song than the one that welcomed me a short five months earlier. That was her way of saying goodbye. Even though I now live in Indiana, I hope that if I ever return to Oregon that I can hear her sing to me, sing that joyful song that captivated me and sprouted a love, not just a love for the mountain, but a love for Oregon.

Living in Oregon I learned a lot about life's beauty, and losing her, I learned how to find that beauty within myself. I am not afraid to die; for I've seen heaven. And if I never make it back to Oregon, I know that she'll be there on the other side.