



Mountain Writing Competition 2024

1st Prize: Prose

Gifts, by Jo Austen

A smoky curl of breath composed of vapour crystals, not quite chilled enough to freeze, twisted its way out of her mouth. She put her hand up without thinking in an attempt to catch it, but it carried on regardless trailing up the path in front of them. An invitation to proceed. The path was dirty with stiff dry ruts that she knew would be a muddy quagmire come the Spring. The boots held on tightly to her feet, grabbing and pinching at her toes. They weren't hers; her footwear being deemed unsuitable. How was she to know you couldn't wear trainers? A black mark against her already but belonged to the one who had come before her. What did she think, she wondered, the new girlfriend wearing the old girlfriend's shoes? The boots wanted to go quicker than she could manage. They had clearly been here before.

'How long is the walk?' She asked.

'Have you had enough already?' He turned to look at her, his face was red, was that anger or cold or exertion?

'No, no, just wondered. You can't see the top.'

The clouds had clung to them since they arrived, there had been nothing to see but her breath and the path just a few steps above and below her.

'We can turn around if you want.' She knows he doesn't mean it.

'It's fine. I mean, I'm having a great time. Thank you.'

Around a corner and a bench appeared. It was slowly rotting back into the hillside, but they sat for a moment, she balanced her pack behind her, lifting the weight. She ran her fingers over the wood feeling the lettering carved into the surface. An A, an L, perhaps, and something that might once have been a pierced heart. For a brief moment, the landscape unfolded below them to show a barren wasteland, the colour washed out leaving a spread of grey that varied merely in its intensity.

'Ready to go on?' he said. It wasn't a question; he was already up and moving. She watched as he disappeared ahead of her, sucked into the hill. Her feet throbbed in a rhythm that jarred against the tap-tap of the boots on the track. The path wound on and up.

Around another corner and the first needle drops of rain arrived. Small and sharp, they stung where they landed. The path was slippery now, she slowed her pace, cursing the boots as they tried to make her stumble and fall. Moss, so bright she wanted to close her eyes, covered every surface, hushing away sound. Twisted trunks wrapped in a verdant coat; headless trees hanging with threads of green, skeins of living wool draped from bough to bough. Strands crept across her face and tangled in her hair, pulled her over to one side. Her face brushed against lichen-crusted stone. She smelt its leathery breath as it kissed her cheek before releasing her.

Disorientated for a moment, she thought the path had gone, but there, marking the way, was a berry, purple and black, hanging on a branch. She put it in her mouth and crushed it between her teeth. So sour, it made her shiver.

She took off her gloves and stroked a neighbourly fern, fingers entwined with fronds. More ferns unfurled on the banks, beseeching her to touch them all. No time for that. She waved at them and promised to return. She heard the sigh briefly before it dropped and was enveloped beneath the ground. The rain fell heavier now, thick round drops splashing one by one. She put out her tongue and tipped her head back to drink, grateful for the second gift.

Water bounced off rocks and boulders, merged and formed streams that raced past her. A small fish, dripping with silver and tiny pearls, mis-judged a bend and landed on a sundew plant with its sticky lips puckered up and ready to feast. She picked it up gently and placed it back in the new river. On it went, cascading down the hill. What joy it was to be here.

Onward she climbed. Another twist, another turn. So steep she had to scramble, hands against the earth. The rain stopped and the trees fell away. The path opened out onto a plateau with a small lake nestled beneath a scarp face. Wind ran in wide circles across the surface, shrieking at her. A small yellow tent had been erected and secured to the ground, skewered so deep with metal spikes that it made her gasp.

'Where were you?' he said.

He didn't wait for an answer but took the pack from her back to retrieve a billy kettle which he filled from the lake.

'It will be dark soon' he said as evening fell low and heavy around them. They ate brown food out of a colourful packet, backs to the elements.

During the night the wind grabbed and clutched at the tent, trying to wrench it from the ground, but it held fast. The sides slapped across her face so hard she thought she might bruise. She didn't think she would sleep, but she must have because now it is morning, and she can feel light and warmth through the thin nylon shell.

She unzips the tent and steps outside, bare feet on the earth. The only person in the world. She could stop time if she chooses.

The ground shimmers in front of her, a million spider webs suspended across the grass, a bride's veil made of babies' breath and tears. Her third gift.