

SIXTEEN VIEWS OF THE BOURGEOUS:  
AN HOMAGE (MINUS TWENTY) TO HOKUSAI'S THIRTY-SIX VIEWS OF MOUNT FUJI  
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1.

Mist fleeces the day's mountains into the mostly hypothetical. Ravens, all sudden gloss and caw, slice through like sleek black jets.

2.

June, and I'm spending the month at The Banff Centre in Alberta, Canada, for a self-directed writing residency. I'm here in part because as an aspiring concert pianist during my teens, one of my fantasies was to take summer master classes in Banff. Exploring the grounds for the first time when I arrive, I soon discover the cluster of music huts below the sharply-angled shadow of Mount Rundle--an image I recognize with an uncanny pang. I suddenly remember a brochure whose glossy pages I often daydreamed over--pages filled with musicians and artists, *grand jete*-ing ballet dancers, and swoon-inducing pictures of the Canadian Rockies. Where did that brochure come from? Did my piano teacher give it to me? Or did I send off for it myself? Who *was* that girl who wanted nothing more than to practice piano all day long in one of those huts? It's like bumping into my young self during a time travel glitch, thereby risking a potential violation of Star Fleet's Temporal Prime Directive. Sometimes, as I'm writing in my room with my window open, faint curlicues of music wisp up to my room in fragrant spirals of sound.

3.

Day after day, I stare at the mountains, visually tractor-beamed onto them like some cyber-stalking lovestruck creeper on FaceBook--obsessively studying all of the beloved's different facial expressions by combing through their profile pics, helplessly clicking *Like, Like, Like* . . .

4.

After each meal, I take a picture with my iPhone--each time, the same picture from the same spot--to track the mountain range's rapidly shifting moods and costumes. I've been posting these images as visual updates to FaceBook. I've also been thinking about Hokusai's famous wood-block series, Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji. Are my iPhone snaps a playful, post-modern homage to Hokusai? Thirty-Six Views in the age of mechanical reproduction? All of this makes me wonder, though, if there's something too easy/too instant about our point-and-click lives. Have we rendered completely irrelevant the artistry, for example, of Hokusai's meticulously graven images? In our glib and now-rote insistence on the failure of representation, has our cultural moment become all self-conscious artlessness and no art? And is our tendency toward fast food representation (instantly made, shared, consumed) a spineless mimesis or a rigorously mirrored critique? Still, even if it's a little Borg-y, there's an attentiveness to the moment, an electric spontaneity, a communal sense of call and response in the networked sharing

of thought and image. The spider plucks the interwebs as if to say: *Look at this! Look at this!* Linked-in responders call back: *I see! I see!* Even Hokusai, with the wood block print, was ultimately creating a mechanical reproduction for mass sharing.

5.

A cloud curls up like a plump white cat on the sharply-slanted slope of Mount Rundle early in the afternoon and naps there until suppertime.

6.

The first day out after days of rain and writing, I clamber down Tunnel Mountain into the town of Banff. I walk by the Bow River, visit Central Park, circle around downtown a few times, and take pictures from the Bow River Bridge. Late in the afternoon, I spontaneously decide to explore the Bow Falls Trail. Manic from sunlight, giddily overstimulated, and stupidly dehydrated, I find myself completely turned around and alone in the woods on one of the lesser, unpaved hiking paths. Naturally, I begin to obsess madly about bears. Saner parts of my brain realize I'm still close enough to town for bears to be more of an anomaly than not, and I'm sure other hikers and tourists are nearby, even if I can't see them. I fret about having chewing gum on my person. I take my bear bell out and clip it to the lanyard on my backpack, but its ineffectual jingling just makes me feel silly. Saner parts of my brain realize my fretting isn't even really about *bears*, per se, but about not having my *bearings*. About feeling lonely, unknown, unmoored. Like an astronaut floating in the heart-stopping beauty of outer space on the end of a single slim umbilical.

7.

Just below Bow Falls, there's a rush of cool air flecked with effervescent bits of the Bow River churned and frothed into a refreshing spritz. The falls widen out into a large pool, which then forks northward into the Bow River, and southbound into the Spray River. At this point of widening, snow-capped and snow-striped peaks rise up out of the water into a Wedgewood-blue sky like hallucinatory meringue. Confectionary clouds puff above like nozzled wads of whipped cream, caramelizing the snowy peaks below with burnt-sugar shadows. It's an overwhelming confluence of almost-too-pretty-to-be-true things in stylized concert with one another--a sort of surrealistically over-the-top Rococo minuet.

8.

In the dining room, backdropped by a dark armada of fast-moving clouds, Japanese twin toddlers deploy their bananas as telephones. One pokes out eyeholes in his slice of cheddar, then regards me from behind his mask of cheese.

9.

Seven days in, and I wake up in the middle of the night, heart pounding, convinced I'm doing my writing residency entirely *wrong*, that I'm wasting time and opportunities, and that all the poems I've written so far are completely hopeless. In fact, the entire project from which I'm attempting to generate these hopeless poems is, I realize with the epiphanic lucidity of 4:00 a.m., completely hopeless as well, and my hopeless-project-generating brain is (why did I not see this before?) the *mothership* of complete hopelessness. By now, I'm crackly-skinned and feverish, nose-diving my way toward a full-fledged panic attack--smoke spiraling out of my engine, gas tank ready to explode into flame. I desperately forage for Ativan in my one-quart TSA-approved Ziploc baggie, only to discover there's only one left. I debate saving it for "just in case." Just in case of what, I'm not sure. Maybe psychological Armageddon? I go ahead and take it, which initiates a shit-storm of anxiety about future and worse incidents of middle-of-the-night meltdowns. Waiting for the Ativan to kick in, I open my window to let in the cool mountain air. Where are the deer who like to nibble on dandelions outside my window? Where do they go at night?

10.

In heavy mist, the scent of pine turns brighter. The train whistle's a smooth round pebble radio-waving infinitely outward in its pooled milk of mist. Locomotive wheels rattle the track: *Clacketty clack. Clacketty clack.*

11.

Dinner, and the mountain range is obscured into nonexistence by rain and mist. The horizon seems curtained by heavy shantung silver silk. There's a swirled nebula of grey in the bottom left corner, backlit by a half-hearted pock of sunlight. Before long, though, the mist begins to dissolve, like cotton candy on the tongue. Bit by bit, the curtain fronting the mountains goes from opaque, to semi-sheer, to sheer. It's like watching a Polaroid develop while eating a bowl of Madras Rutabaga soup. The Polaroid's a metaphor. The soup isn't. The soup's so delicious it makes the entire surface of my tongue squirm with pleasure. It makes my lips tingle. It's so delicious I eat it *accelerando*--each consecutive spoonful coming faster and faster on the heels of the last. By the time I reach the bottom of the bowl, the mountains have broken through the last gauzy bits of misted veil and we have all achieved a certain level of clarity.

12.

Pilot Mountain's peak grazes and pierces the soft dark underbellies of low-flying clouds. Even though it's sunny everywhere else, blue-gray rays of rain downspout onto the mountain range like streams of water squirting from pin-pricked water balloons.

13.

I'm eavesdropping during lunch. A young woman tells a table full of Canadians about her road trip through the United States. "I drove for, like, forty hours," she says, "and it was all flat. Not like here." She gestures out the window at the Bourgeaus which obligingly thrust up out of the horizon in bright blue clarity--peppermint stripes of snow glittering in the sun. A few minutes later she notes, "I didn't like South Dakota. It was too kitschy and touristy. But the Badlands," she adds as an afterthought, "were nice."

14.

On the Sulphur Mountain gondola, I ride with two Chinese women, a mother and a daughter. Their red plastic name tags indicate they're on a Charming Holiday. We're being strung up the side of a very tall mountain--like a clear glass bead on a metal wire--in an ovum-shaped capsule that holds four. The daughter, middle-aged, keeps changing seats in the gondola, making it lurch until it starts to feel less like a glass bead and more like a trembling raindrop wobbling on a wire. Finally settled in, she eyeballs me rigorously, confers with her mother in Cantonese. "Chinese?" the daughter asks me. "Japanese," says the mother. "Half Japanese," I say. They discuss this animatedly among themselves, occasionally gesturing in my direction. The mother reaches over and pats my arm. She pulls out her gondola ticket and points to it. "How much you pay?" Extremely pleased by my answer, they laugh happily as we slide by Mount Brewster, which seems to be trying on a whimsical hat made out of clouds for size.

15.

Alternating ravens smoothly yo-yo up and down wind's taut flicked strings.

16.

At the Sanson Peak Meteorological Station on top of Sulphur Mountain, a Golden Mantled Ground Squirrel poses for pictures, then sits and gazes pensively toward the Bourgeaus from a rocky outcropping. The afternoon cycles rapidly between rain, sleet, mist, and hot blasts of sunlight. With each change in weather, the mountains are completely reinvented. The Bow Valley vista is so beautiful it makes my heart hurt. But it's really those shapeshifters, the clouds, who haunt me. There's no place I'd rather be than high in the mountains, brushing up against the clouds. At the same time, I have an uncanny sense of trespass--a sense of having intruded someplace not necessarily meant for me, or maybe even for human beings in general. I feel uneasily enthralled by clouds. Ethereal yet dangerous, they distort and disrupt space, time, perception. There's something otherworldly in their shapeshifting fluidity, their transformative powers, the ontological ease with which they move between being and nothingness. And so I take a cue from the Golden Mantled Ground Squirrel. I stop taking pictures, put away my camera, and find a quiet place to sit by myself. I think of the unlikelihood of being here. I think about the unlikelihood of anyone being anywhere. I think about being and not-being. I think about nothingness. I think about being and not thinking. I stop thinking and try to simply *be--*

slowly opening myself into pure aperture in this numinous house of clouds, this blue-domed spirit jar, this lonely summit of misty hosannas.