

“Thou Hast Made My Mountain to Stand Strong”

Ode in Double Sestina¹

Isaiah twenty-five, ten: “. . . in this mountain shall the hand of the Lord rest.” Holding lean and sandy valleys, preeminent, in spring they gather in congeries of cragged shadows, great mountain chains, ranges and monoliths, whose jagged peaks lift up toward luxuriant light.

Slides of gray shale slip and shine along the light, and boulders, like behemoths of the mountain, tip against the layered walls. A cave’s mouth whose darkness conceals the hungry eyes of a lean predator, waiting like famine in shadows, yawns crookedly from across the wooded spring.

Coming to the crispness of another spring, here life thrives. Timber jays and magpies draw light as they wheel and glide. Coyotes move through shadows, and raucous squirrels scale the white fir and mountain ash for remnant cones. Deer appear like ghosts, lean and fearful of the day. Moss-antlered elk whose

life, once stalked by bear, cougar, and wolf and whose young once filled the high mountain valleys now spring through oak brush and thicket, over logs that lean beside the swollen stream. In the early light, the yellow flower of the Curleaf Mountain-Mahogany scatters sun in the shadows.

Up from a dark draw and above the shadows, the aspens flutter like Christmas tinsel whose sweet green reproves the somber fir’s and mountain pine’s deep tones. Bearberries and waxflowers spring wild. Squaw cabbage and camass grow in the light meadows. Redfruited gooseberries feed the lean

curls; and at treeline, bristlecone pines lean
and twist, forever chilled beneath the shadows
of glaciated peaks. On the windy heights where light
icy crystals blow, only lichen lives long, whose
rust, and grey flocking brightens the bouldered spring.
“Lord, by thy favour thou has made my mountain

to stand strong.”² Down from the desolate mountain
peaks, cataracts somersault between the lean
chasm walls. Over the sharp-edged cliff they spring
and fan to waterfall veils, leaving shadows
of moisture under the overhang. Streams, whose
pebbled beds run bright beneath the crystal light

flow swiftly, winding through fern forests and light
meadow grass, gaining strength along the mountain
slopes, to roar toward the valley floor. Water, whose
substance gives survival or death for the lean
desert life, now crashes free through the shadows,
imbued with the power of the mountain spring.

Hundreds of centuries past, before this spring,
before the sad dimming of their savage light
when beaded lives became a song of shadows,
and great legends were lost among the mountain
ledges, hills were filled with a race, bronze and lean,
people who revered the living earth, whose

keen eyes saw that all things had *puha*³ and whose
prayers thanked the water for sharing from its spring,
thanked the mountain for pinon nuts from its lean
crop, and thanked the sun for its great gift of light.
Where are those wanderers lost from the mountain?
Where are the shamen⁴ who told tales of shadows?

They are there when the owl cries from the shadows
and when, almost unseen, a meadowlark, whose
song belies its common wings, gilds the mountain
air with tonal wealth. They are there in the spring
when late crusty snow melts softly in the light.
They are there with the stippled trout and the lean

doe. Can mankind now let all living things lean
 toward a holy peace and fill frightening shadows
 of the night or black terrors of death with light?
 "I will lift my eyes unto the hills,"⁵ yet whose
 hand will soothe but His who formed each stone and spring,
 each lake and gentle bay and great grey mountain.

Oh Father, Thy mountain of man is most lean.
 In his frantic spring, he stumbles through shadows.
 Thou, whose name is peace—give him Thy holy light.⁶

—Sally T. Taylor

Sally T. Taylor, an assistant professor of English at Brigham Young University, won first place at the Eisteddfod Festival at BYU in February 1984 with this poem. The poem was later published in *A Little Light at the Edge of Day* (Provo, Utah: Press Publishing, 1984), 61–63.

¹The *sestina*, the most complicated of the verse forms initiated by the twelfth-century wandering singers known as troubadours, is composed of six stanzas of six lines each, followed by an *envoy*, or concluding stanza, that incorporates lines or words used before: in this case the *words* (instead of *rhymes*) end each line in [a definite] pattern. . . . The earliest example . . . is, in fact, a *double sestina*: Sidney's 'Ye Goatherd Gods.'

"The poem [has] . . . two sets of six six-line stanzas, with a triplet concluding the whole. The same six key words end the lines of each stanza; their order is always a permutation of the order in the stanza just preceding: the pattern is 6 1 5 2 4 3, i.e., the last word of line 1 of any stanza is always the same as the last word of line 6 in the preceding stanza. Line 2 always ends like the preceding stanza's line 1; line 3 like line 5; line 4 like line 2; line 5 like line 4; and line 6 like line 3. All six key words appear in the triplet in the same order as that of the first and seventh stanzas." (*The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 3d ed. [New York: W. W. Norton, 1970], 1418, 153.)

²Psalm 30:7.

³An Indian word meaning supernatural power.

⁴Indian healers or wisemen.

⁵Psalm 121:1.

⁶Final note: all lines have eleven syllables, following the pattern set by Sir Phillip Sidney (1554–1586).