

## Seeing

In a small town in the Colorado Rockies, I worked one summer on a construction crew—four men or sometimes five, and I was generally the low man. The youngest and, frankly, the least skilled, I did a lot of grunt work—picking up and unloading materials, shovel work, cleanup, hauling trash. They all had pickup trucks except me, but there was a company flatbed I could use most of the time, and I took it home at night. Not much bigger than the pickups but the bed was wider and rested above the wheel-wells. When we weren't bringing in lumber or other materials, we'd load it up with the construction debris—wood scraps, dried cement chunks, busted forms and 2-bys, bad dirt and so on. Invariably it was me who made the dump run.

It was a county dump, an abandoned quarry, long ago drained out and close to filled in by now with rubbish. Well out of town and half a mile off the highway, it was at the end of a dirt road that went nowhere else. I took a full load at the end of the day. Dusk was approaching, and I was feeling anxious and looking forward to the weekend.

The quarry walls only dropped off ten or twelve feet anymore with the trash growing slowly upward. You could back right up to that edge if you were careful. A slight incline made it tricky, but if you worked the clutch just right and knew what you were doing, you could hang that truck bed just over the cliff edge and basically shove most of the pile straight off. The back half was easy enough to unload this way, but the front half—piled up against the cab—was

pretty much a pain; one piece at a time flung behind me or shovelfuls of chunks and pieces that mostly fell off the shovel. But I had a system. I'd set a six-by-four piece of weathered plywood—exactly the width of the truck bed—against the cab before piling everything on. And after I cleared off the back half, I'd pull the whole pile of junk on the plywood to the back of the bed where I could just shove it straight off.

So I got the back half unloaded and I took the big pieces off the plywood to make it light enough to slide. Then I tugged on it, but it barely budged. So I cleared a little more and tried again, and it moved a little more. Of course I was aware that the momentum of tugging on this thing would send me over the cliff if I pulled too hard or lost my grip. So squatting down, I kept one foot pretty much behind me to leverage against going in that direction. And I kept testing the weight of the pile, just rocking my weight against it and gauging the resistance. Finally it was sliding more easily, a few inches at a time, until I got it pretty close to the edge. With my feet firmly planted and carefully taking in the end of the bed and the drop-off beyond, I *knew* what I was doing. So I took a firm grip on the lip of that sheeting and gave it one more good tug. With no detectible resistance, that board slid free from under the pile like it was on ball bearings launching me backwards off the end of that truck like a high-diver at the Olympics.

Two seconds, maybe three. There was no resistance in the empty air I floated through. Facing upwards, all I saw was the dome of blue sky, no perception of where I was going to land, no sensations to react to, nothing to be done. I was completely at the mercy of this law we call gravity and I completely submitted. My entire life did not play back before me. There was no time, and no reason.

I landed flat on a piece of scrap drywall that was apparently the exact size and shape of my body. It rested atop the accidental arrangement of loose debris that actually gave a little when

I hit, as if designed to cushion my landing. Unhurt and strangely relaxed, I lay there, taking it in. It took me longer to realize what had happened—to register my extraordinary luck—than the time it took to actually fall.

Staring up at that luminous pale blue sky, a single object appeared in the periphery of my vision. The jagged spike of a split two-by-four intruded into that blueness, pointing upwards, extending vertically exactly between my out flung right arm and my ribcage. And that's when my entire *future* life appeared before me, a future I saw in glaring relief to its immense non-existence, contained in an instant, six inches to my right.

I cannot tell you how perfectly blue was that pale blue sky.