

Growing Space

by Mike Blouin

Roadside snow mounds tend to metastasize in Massachusetts starting in late January, fed by overworked plow operators battling to make the roads passable. On the quieter streets, ruddy-faced children clamber over these huge piles, constructing elaborate snow forts or playing King of the Hill.

When I was seven or eight, my neighbor Lauren and I dug a cave into an especially giant snow pile. The snow had been packed tight by the plow, so we used garden trowels to chip it away. It took hours, our hands red and nearly numb inside our thick gloves, to dig a cave – a tunnel, really – deep enough to fit inside. Only one of us could squeeze in there at a time, so we took turns shimmying into the cave to dig deeper.

The sun was fading when the tunnel collapsed on me. The hard snow squished my face and pinned my arms against my body. Darkness swallowed me. Panic seized every nerve ending: I thrashed and kicked as hard as I could, my wild screams muffled by the snow tomb. I fought my way out in five or ten seconds, lay there breathless in the shambles of the cave, and stretched out like a snow angel.

Being trapped in the snow is the first time I remember feeling the power of space. I had unwittingly stumbled upon one end of a spatial spectrum: the pole at which confinement is complete, movement a memory. It felt like death. I still fear confinement, though whether this incident caused my fear or simply confirmed it I don't know. But as I approach thirty, my relationship with space has grown increasingly complex, conflicted. I long to get to know a spot on the earth well, to settle down and cease moving from place to place. But there is also an animal desire to thrash free, to keep the space that surrounds me (both real and figurative) wide and open.

I encountered vast, open space for the first time at age eighteen as I drove with my father across the country, to California and college. On the sixth day of our road trip, my father and I descended into the Southwest at dusk. In the long-wave radiance, the sky and earth took forms we had never witnessed. Ancient castles of red rock littered the landscape. Mountains faded out of focus in the twilight. We pulled onto the shoulder, shut off the engine, and got out of the car. We could *feel* the space now: there were no birds, no insects buzzing, no leaves rustling, no planes overhead – only the feeling that we were surrounded by this endless mass of air. My father and I lost all capacity for complex speech, describing the wonder before us as “unbelievable” over and over again, under our breaths and mostly to ourselves. This was

something new: space felt boundless in a way I had never experienced, and it left me breathless and giddy. It felt like love.

In that moment, on my way to college, life felt boundless too. Adult-imposed restrictions that delimited life previously would soon become distant. I was on the cusp of the unknown, crossing into a territory of infinite possibility. Driving west, soon to shed the last vestige of my previous life (my loving father), I couldn't articulate this, but I felt it in the shivers that ran down my spine.

After college, I had no intention of leaving the Land of Infinite Possibility. Through a series of ambitious networking gambits, I found Gloria, a 50-year-old ranch owner in Northern New Mexico. We spoke once on the phone and came to an agreement: I would help out on the ranch in exchange for room and board. My parents, clearly perplexed by my choice to leverage my college degree for unpaid ranch work, smiled and nodded through gritted teeth as I explained my plans. But nonetheless, in late June they drove me to the airport and I flew to Albuquerque.

Gloria picked me up from the airport at midnight and we drove two hours to the ranch, alternating awkward silence with polite, forced conversation. Her home, built of adobe and wood painted bright blue, sat at the end of a long dusty road. As we pulled up the driveway in the dark, still strangers, we both questioned our judgment. But the next morning we climbed up a mesa behind her house and gazed upon the Rio Chama below and the mountains in the distance, and that feeling I felt only in the Southwest flooded my chest. This was love, still.

But as the weeks went by, life came to feel stagnant and hemmed in – the work more and more tedious, Gloria's small home suffocating. Though the landscape remained open, I started to feel claustrophobic. So in August, I made a few weak excuses, and took off. Gloria and I remained on good terms, but we lost touch after about a year.

I continued in this manner throughout my early twenties. After New Mexico, I chased after a few passions – the outdoors, teaching – and set about exploring these new spaces. But each time I started to settle, life began to feel small and predictable, and I bolted. I moved to the West Coast, twice, and by way of five cross-country road trips set foot in each of the contiguous 48 states. In the five years after college, I held seven jobs, leaving each by my own volition, restless and anxious for something new. A steady job, permanent home, and family life felt distant and vaguely frightening. Fear of confinement dominated my life.

I met constricted space once more, and came to know it far more intimately, in Yosemite National Park. There I taught for an environmental education organization, leading a new cadre of students around the park each week. Together we forded frigid rivers; we learned about trees and rocks and history; we meandered through buzzing meadows in the shadow of mile-high granitic batholiths. And each week, we crawled through the Spider Caves.

The Spider Caves are only 30 yards or so from a popular, paved path in Yosemite Valley, but they are unmarked and unknown except by staff and participants in our program. To enter, you must descend straight down into a skinny black hole, feeling for footholds while hanging on

to what's left of the bright world with your upper body. Inside it's black, not dark. Your hands and feet become abstract nouns.

The first time I entered the Spider Caves, for staff training, I was third in a line of eight adults. I looked down into the lightless hole and my chest tightened with adrenaline, my head became light. But I had to go: it was a requirement of the job, leading unsuspecting children into this tunnel of terror, and I had to learn the route. So I descended, my breath coming shallow and rapid, into the dark maw.

There's a part of the cave that gets so tight you need to slide through on your side, feet first, arms above your head. It's called the Birth Canal. Here it's common to feel irrevocably stuck, and just when you're starting to really panic, just when you want to punch and kick at the sharp granite walls, your feet find space, your knees bend.

For the first few weeks leading groups I hid my terror with the professionalism of a paid actor. Heeding our organization's mandate, I led students through the cave without lights. I went first, instructing the first student in line where to put her feet and hands. She would inch forward, turn around, and relay the message to the next student. And so it went: 45 minutes of high-energy terror. There would always be one or two kids who panicked when the cave got tight, who were sure they were stuck forever and would probably die in there.

To my surprise, I came to see something worthwhile in all this. Kids came out the other side of the Spider Caves triumphant, giddy, with new confidence. And it changed me too: gradually I became more confident and comfortable in tight spaces. I knew the cave's crannies and curves well, but never too well. In time it became a sort of friend, the type you marvel at, fear just a little, but respect and trust. Beyond confinement and fear I found connection, and maybe even a kind of love. Not the same love I found in the wide open spaces of the Southwest – this new love required work and time – but equally meaningful and important.

Perhaps growing up is like this. Perhaps, after we've had our kicks in the Land of Infinite Possibility, some measure of confinement is required to find comfort, confidence, connection, and love. I feel atavistic pangs of terror as I surrender, bit by bit, the freedom of my early twenties, but I think there's something worthwhile on the other side. If I'm to have any chance at finding love that lasts, it will require patience and effort. To find love like this, I'll need to stop thrashing, finally, and stay put.

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