Peaked

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_Clara McRae\_\_\_\_\_\_

I will never forget the way my lungs burned. It was like somebody had struck a match and placed it in the back of my throat; I could almost taste the phosphate-sulfur blend. We had been climbing for hours, though the sun had only crept above the horizon a short while ago. It had been an “alpine start.” The alarm had gone off at 2:30 AM, and we emerged from our tents, groggily gathered materials that would be needed for the day’s trip, and hit the trail at 3:15 AM.

The first few hours were quiet, just the sound of our boots crunching over the varied terrain. Eventually we emerged from the dense forest and into the high alpine meadows. It was here that we stopped to watch the sun rise. The sky was a blend of deep pinks and oranges. One boy broke the silence, saying that it reminded him of the Death Star exploding. We all laughed, but even after ten minutes of discussion nobody was able to come up with a better description.

We continued on, and the terrain slowly changed from grassy meadows to loose shale. It then became evident how high up we were. The oxygen was thinner, and we were completely surrounded by opaque clouds. We had once again ceased to converse, only now it was due to labored breathing rather than lingering sleepiness.

Finally, we were within feet of the summit. As we climbed the last few steps, I remember thinking to myself: *It can’t be worth it*. But then, I looked over the edge.

Words have always come easy to me. There had never been a moment before this that I had found myself truly speechless, but all I can remember thinking was that I needed to sit down. I was beyond exhausted at that point, but it was more than that. Have you ever been on a chairlift or high ledge, mistakenly looked down, and needed to close your eyes? It was like this, but my eyes were glued open. I knew logically that the vastness before me could not have spanned more than a hundred miles, but in that moment I would have sworn that it was the entire universe. It was like I was on the top floor of the highest building in the world. It was like I was in an airplane, looking down out the tiny window. It was like I was on a far-off satellite, orbiting earth from miles and miles above. Everything that ever was and everything that would ever be was now laid out before me. Trees that looked like little pebbles, bumpy ridges resembling vertebral columns, glassy lakes that looked like delicate sapphire stones, it was all below me. If I squinted, I could almost see the outline of other stars and planets on the edge of the horizon. Distant nebulae and galaxies not yet touched by human eye. I was the tallest person in the world, and yet I was so small.

I have climbed many mountains since then, but none have left me with the same lingering sense of awe. I remember beginning our descent, everybody resumed talking and laughing, but I was silent. I could not comprehend the experience that we had just had; I could not find the words to piece together my thoughts and emotions towards it. I remained quiet for the rest of the way down, wrapped up in my own thoughts. I do not know if I will ever fully understand what happened that day, but sometimes, when I close my eyes and concentrate, I can almost see the Earth curve in the distance, I can almost hear my heart pounding in my ears, and I can almost feel my lungs burn.