

Up There On Pikes Peak

Apr 22

I don't like to admit when I'm wrong. I'm proud like that, but Colorado is different. I was wrong about Colorado. But I have never been so glad to be wrong in my life.

My first introduction to the state of Colorado was a trip I took in the final moments of 2022's winter. Colorado is unique when compared to Connecticut. The majority of it is flat, void of forests and vegetation. A stark and unsettling contrast to the densely packed forest I grew up in as a boy. I had heard a lot about Colorado from my father, who, in his youth, was a long-time resident of Denver. He would talk fondly of his time there. My father never said he loved the state; in fact, the only thing I ever heard him say he loved was me. But the look he had, how his eyes drifted into space, how his face softened, even as a child, I knew he loved Colorado. I couldn't tell why he loved the state or why he kept it to himself. I never asked. It felt too sacred of a thing to ask a question about. So when I finally had the chance to go to Colorado, this state that had such an impact on my father, a man who practices stoicism so well that his picture is next to the definition, I had no choice but to go. I needed to know why Colorado had such an influence on my father. I wanted to know its magic.

I lowered my expectations of Colorado as a precaution. I wanted to see its magic but didn't want to be naive about it. I didn't wish for the child-like wonder I had developed from my father's stories to affect how I saw the state. I didn't want to judge it unfairly. I convinced myself that the stories I heard were exaggerations. So when my plane landed, I was prepared to soak in whatever Colorado had to offer, clean and fresh like a new sponge.

When I left the airport, I was beyond disappointed. Colorado was gray. Flat, with bipolar weather. Barren of any proper vegetation and covered by winding highways that slithered across the land. I was staying with an old friend named Josh. Josh had moved to Colorado after his senior year of high school. He didn't show it, but he was nervous when he moved. As I had come to learn, Colorado is not Connecticut, and like everyone, he was nervous moving to such a place so far away from the home he grew up in. But after the pandemic, Josh fell in love with the state. He even went as far as saying that he hoped to remain in the state after college, working and living here, and maybe, just maybe, grow old here. I was at a loss for words. He had gone crazy. As a writer, I pride myself on having something to say, yet I was left speechless by such an absurd statement. I had no retort. So I did the only thing I could. I nodded and said, "That's great!" before looking out the window.

Something must be wrong with the water here for a person to fall in love with this place.

After settling and an hour of rest, Josh took me to a national park called The Garden of the Gods. Admittedly, I had high expectations for this place because, with the name THE GARDEN OF THE GODS, you better be something extraordinary. We parked and began walking down the park's little dirt path where there were rocks, some big, some small. There was even a bush and a little tree. But after ten minutes of walking, I finally asked when we would get to the garden. "This is the garden," Josh said. To which I replied, "Oh my God. It's all rocks." No, instead of a typical garden with flowers and other colorful plants, there were rocks and surprisingly natural growing trees. To give credit, these rock formations were indeed something to behold, something I have only seen in cowboy movies and history books. They were long sunkissed rocks that pointed to the sky, thin at the bottom and fat at the top. I'll admit it made me smile, but I was still confused about why it was called a garden.

While walking through the garden, the trail led up to what I thought to be a small hill. It seemed to be nothing special, but when I reached the top, I was surprised to be struck with a bird's eye view over a small valley with a town in it. The intensity of the Sun highlighted the orange-stained rock, which made the whole scene look as if it had been painted. The icy cold wind blew through my sweat-drenched hair as if patting me on the back for making it to this sight. This was my welcoming party to the beauty of Colorado.

I am not a hiker, so when the news came to me that for my second day in visiting Colorado, we would ultimately be driving there, I welcomed it. Our destination was the famous Pikes Peak of the Rocky Mountains, a mountain that stands over 14,000 feet tall and has only two ways to reach the top: a trolley and a road. Josh had convinced me that the best way to experience it would be by road. For a while, he was right. The rich landscapes and beautiful nature were something I had never seen before growing up in Connecticut. The trees seemed more stubborn and firm, as if they were raised in different air and sunlight from the trees back home. They somehow seemed more wild and free, but that vanished when we reached the top.

To a person who has only ever read about or seen the view atop the Rocky Mountains online, words fall short of the intensity of the view atop Pikes Peak. The Land below me was the same one I traversed when I initially came to Colorado, and though I knew it was the same, my mind couldn't accept it. What I found to be so ugly and disappointing had a newfound, no, rather a hidden beauty that I had denied seeing. At that point, I finally understood the beauty of Colorado. I stood among the heavens, clouds at my feet, the thin air being sucked in by my heaving lungs, the sun warming my back, and those sweet cold breezes perfectly cooling me off before the sun cooked me. Every hair on my body stood at attention, my mouth salivating, the primal part of my brain reawakened. Every inch

of my body was screaming one singular message. I am alive. It was only then that I had truly arrived in Colorado.

I don't know why I felt the need to affirm the fact that I was alive atop that mountain. It may have been the delirium, but I believe there is something more to it. The world looks different now. How? I can't really say. What I can say, though, is that in the quiet moments, when my brain wonders, I'm back up there on that mountain. I'm staring at the blue horizon as the wind blows past me, not moving, not thinking. Just there, up on that mountain called Pikes Peak.