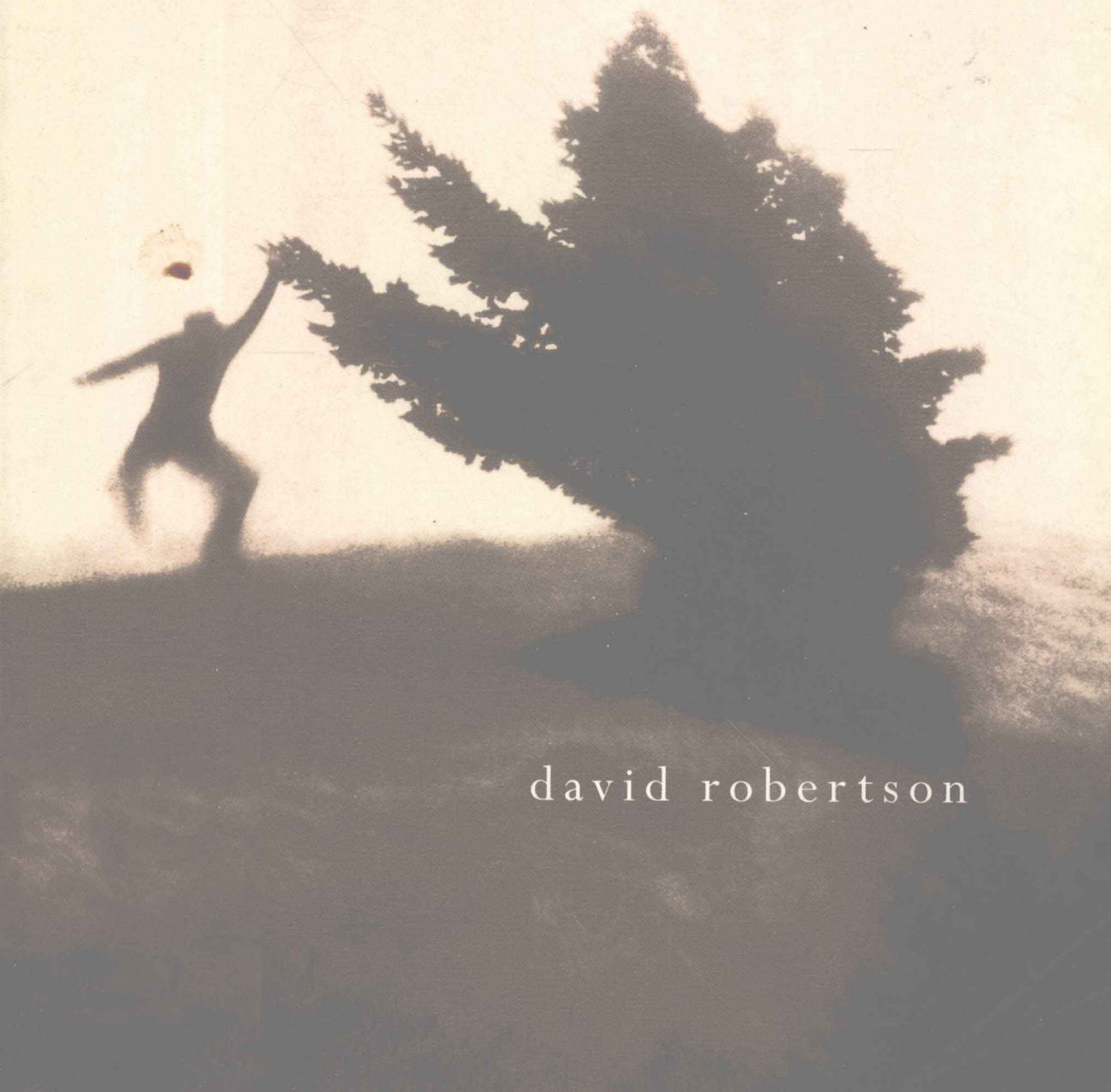


# Real Matter



david robertson

DAVID ROBERTSON

# Real Matter

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MAPS BY JACOB P. MANN

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*Real Matter*



*For the students of English 184, 187, and 233.*

*“The closer you get to real matter,  
rock air fire wood, boy, the more  
spiritual the world is.”*

Japhy Ryder in

JACK KEROUAC, *Dharma Bums*

## Preface



The closer we came to the town of Independence in California's Owens Valley, the more I realized I did not know how to write about Mary Austin. Austin lived in Independence and other towns in Owens Valley for a few years around the turn of the century and wrote two books about the valley that I liked very much, *Land of Little Rain* and *Lost Borders*. She had to go in my book. The question was, how to do it.

The book was about writers who go on trails and come back to write about their experiences. I knew then most of the writers I wanted to include. Fitz Hugh Ludlow in Yosemite in 1863, Clarence King range hopping from the Great Western Divide to the crest of the Sierra Nevada in 1864, Gary Snyder and Jack Kerouac on Yosemite's Matterhorn Peak in 1955, the same two on Mt. Tamalpais in 1956, and the threesome of Gary Snyder, Allen Ginsberg, and Philip Whalen doing a circumambulation of Mt. Tamalpais in 1965. I would put all these latter-day hikers in historical perspective by going back to Moses and the Israelites trekking across the Sinai Desert.

I even knew that I wanted one chapter to be different from the rest. I would put it right in the middle of the book. In all the other chapters I would hike in some famous writer's footsteps, keep a journal, take photographs, and integrate my notes and my photographs with some literary history and literary criticism. In the middle chapter, however, I would go off on my own. Not only that, I would take a highway instead of a trail. And it would not be to the top of a mountain. It would be my favorite section of one of America's greatest roads, Highway 50 through the heart of Nevada. That would also mean that I would go out of state. All the other routes were in California. I wanted to do this chapter for contrast. I wanted to know what I would see when by myself on a way that did not go to a summit. What would happen when I went up and down between two arbitrary points, Nevada's borders with California and Utah?

But we were on Highway 395, not Highway 50, and the issue was Mary

Austin. Mark Hoyer was driving. He was writing a dissertation on Austin and the Paiute people of Owens Valley and wanted to do some on-site research. I remembered how helpful Mark had been when I could not get the chapter on the circumambulation of Mt. Tamalpais organized. "Make the chapter itself into a circumambulation," he suggested. Which I did. So, as we coasted the Sherwin Grade into the town of Bishop, where Austin also lived briefly, I admitted, "I can't figure out how to get Austin into my *Real Matter* book." Mark replied with a suggestion so simple that I knew immediately it was right, "Since your book is about trails, why don't you use the "Mesa Trail" chapter of *Land of Little Rain*?"

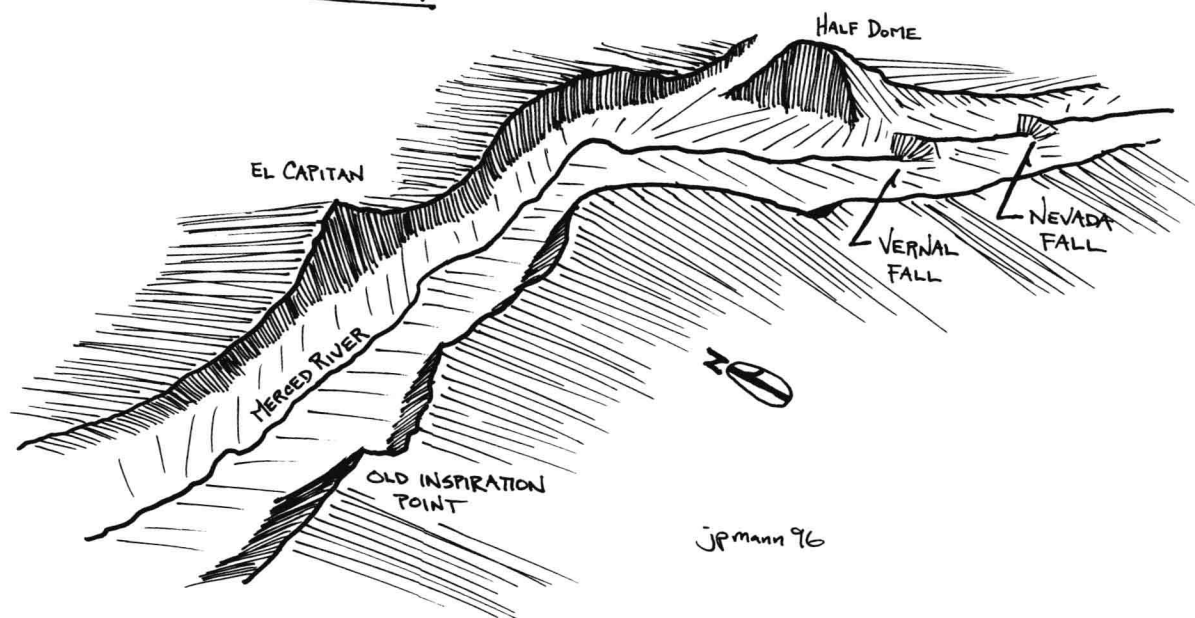
## Acknowledgments



The first thank-yous go to Jeannette Robertson and Sean O'Grady, because they said I could make a book out of what I thought was only a handful of hikes. The next thank-you goes to Mark Hoyer, who rescued two of these chapters from considerable disorder. After that comes round upon round of people. In what is surely a futile effort not to leave out someone, I have picked out some categories. There are the people who accompanied me on hikes: Sean O'Grady again, Eric Paul Shaffer, Andrew Kirk, Chris Ransick, Mark Hoyer, Stephanie Sarver, Katrina Schimmoeller, Chris Sindt, Frederica Bowcutt, Melissa Nelson, Maryann Owens, D Jones, Harold Glasser, Mark Wheelis, Bruce Hammock, Vince Crockenberg, Paul Noel, Valerie Cohen, and Michael Cohen. Hal Faulkner gets thanked because he was on the Matterhorn hike and because he helped me see the way a camera does. Other photographers I am particularly indebted to are Ted Orland and Jerry Uelsmann. David Rothenberg gets thanked because he was on the Moriah hike and because he edited "Side Trip" for *Terra Nova*. Tom Lyon, editor of *Western American Literature*, I thank because he originally turned down chapter 5 and thereby eventually made it much better. In the category of editors also goes Casey Walker of *Wild Duck Review*, who helped me rearrange chapter 2. In the English department at the University of California at Davis are Joyce Wade, Peter Dale, Karl Zender, and Jack Hicks. In the Program in Comparative Literature is Scott McLean. At Yosemite are Dave Forgang, Norma Craig, Barbara Beroza, Steve Medley, Linda Eade, and Jim Snyder. In Independence is the staff of the Eastern California Museum. Then there are the people who granted me interviews: Val Taylor and John B. Free at Home Farm and Richard Moreno in Carson City. And the last are equal to the first: thank you to Gary Snyder and Philip Whalen for helping me see.



# YOSEMITE VALLEY



jpmann 96

## Contents



*Preface ix*

*Acknowledgments xi*

### 1 • A SECRET AT THE HEART OF THE UNIVERSE

*Location of the Secret 2*

*Content of the Secret 8*

*Wild Heart 17*

### 2 • VALUE IN MOUNTAINS

*Tracking Clarence King*

*through Space and Time 26*

*You Can't Fall Off Mountains 35*

*Tracking Moses on His Way*

*to Sinai 42*

*Photographic Reclimb 46*

### 3 • LOST BORDERS

*The Mesa Trail 54*

*Saturated with the Elements 59*

*The Language of the Hills 62*

*Mrs. Walker 65*

*The Soundness of Nature 68*

### SIDE TRIP: THE LONELIEST ROAD IN AMERICA

*The Road 78*

*Fences 81*

*The Terrain 83*

*Nowhere 85*

*Home Farm 87*

*Mt. Moriah 90*

### 4 • THE CLOSER YOU GET TO REAL MATTER

*Real Matter 100*

*The Practice 101*

*The Hike 104*

*Dharma Bum 107*

*Beat Christian 111*

*Hershey Bars 113*

### 5 • COMING ROUND THE MOUNTAIN

*Before 122*

*Stages 1–10 123*

*After 138*

### 6 • REAL MATTER, REAL SELF

*Real Self 148*

*Unreal Self 149*

*With Moses on Mt. Sinai 150*

*Heroes on Vision Quests 152*

*Honeymoon in the Sinai Desert 154*

*Appendices 161*

*Literature Cited 171*

*Index 175*

C H A P T E R   O N E

# A Secret at the Heart of the Universe



## LOCATION OF THE SECRET



During the summer of 1863 the East Coast intellectual and writer Fitz Hugh Ludlow entered Yosemite Valley at the conclusion of a transcontinental journey with the painter Albert Bierstadt. Six years earlier Ludlow had gained notoriety with the publication of *The Hasheesh Eater*, a chronicle of his experiences as a drug addict, and by 1863 patrons of the arts had begun to note how grandly Bierstadt presented on canvas the monumental scenery of the American West. Their trip overland to California was designed to solidify their emerging reputations by giving Ludlow new material to write about and Bierstadt bold new vistas to paint. Ludlow sent accounts of their journey to the *Atlantic Monthly* and later gathered the published articles together in a book entitled *The Heart of the Continent*.

Like most visitors in the years immediately following the discovery of the valley by white Americans in 1851, the Ludlow-Bierstadt party followed an Indian trail that led from the town of Mariposa through the meadows at Wawona to a place high on the south rim now called Old Inspiration Point. From this platform, 3,000 feet above the western end of the valley, Ludlow thought that he had arrived in paradise shortly after its creation:

Our dense leafy surrounding hid from us the fact of our approach to the Valley's tremendous battlement, till our trail turned at a sharp angle and we stood on "Inspiration Point." That name had appeared pedantic, but we found it only the spontaneous expression of our own feelings on the spot. We did not so much seem to be seeing from that crag of vision a new scene on the old familiar globe as a new heaven and new earth into which the creative spirit had just been breathed. (Ludlow 1864, 746)

After describing for his readers the great walls of granite enclosing this "Scripture of Nature" (746), he turned his attention to the valley floor. He noted that to the west it opened out into broad canyons that led to the vast

field of light of the San Joaquin Valley. To the east, however, it “narrow[ed] to a little strait of green between the butments that uplift the giant domes” (748). The meadows below Inspiration Point gradually gave way to “a dense wood of cedars, oaks, and pines,” and finally even these hardy specimens disappeared in an amphitheater of lifeless crag, where “not a living creature, either man or beast, br[oke] the visible silence” (748). Responding to the constriction and eventual enclosure of the valley, as well as to the harshness of the landscape he saw in the distance, Ludlow’s thoughts became morbid. Yosemite at its eastern end seemed a closet where a guilt-ridden Nature had retreated to brood on the consequences of its cataclysmic acts. He and his companions were intruders who might unintentionally be punished for their audacity:

We were breaking into the sacred closet of Nature’s self-examination. What if, on considering herself, she should of a sudden, and us-ward unawares, determine to begin the throes of a new cycle,—spout up remorseful lavas from her long-hardened conscience, and hurl us all skyward in a hot concrete with her unbosomed sins? (748)

Later in their Yosemite sojourn Ludlow and fellow trespassers dared to open the door of the inner sanctum at the valley’s eastern end. They left their camp in the broad meadow below Yosemite Falls to explore the upper reaches of the main fork of the Merced River. Horses carried them the first three miles; after that they had to proceed on foot. The going was difficult. In some places they were “compelled to squeeze sideways through a narrow crevice in the rocks”; in others they “became quadrupedal, scrambling up acclivities with which the bald main precipice had made but slight compromise” (752). But they persevered, making their way through the narrows below Vernal Fall, then to the top of the fall by means of ladders placed there a few years earlier, and finally to the bottom of Nevada Fall. There they faced a seemingly insurmountable wall. Nature would permit no further intrusion:

*A Secret  
at the Heart  
of the Universe*



At the base of Yo-wi-ye [Nevada Fall] we seem standing in a *cul-de-sac* of Nature's grandest labyrinth. Look where we will, impregnable battlements hem us in. (753)

If only they could get out of the closeted canyon to the heights above, rather astounding revelations awaited them:

4

Eight hundred feet above us, could we climb there, we should find the silent causes of power. There lie the broad, still pools that hold the reserved affluence of the snow-peaks; thence might we see, glittering like diamond lances in the sun, the eternal snow-peaks themselves. . . . Even from Inspiration Point, where our trail first struck the battlement, we could see far beyond the Valley to . . . the everlasting snow-forehead of Castle Rock [identity unclear], his crown's serrated edge cutting the sky at the topmost height of the Sierra. We had spoken of reaching him,—of holding converse with the King of all the Giants. (753–754)

Such a conversation was not to be. In his disappointment, Ludlow came to a weary conclusion:

This whole weary way have we toiled since then,—and we know better now. Have we endured all these pains only to learn still deeper Life's saddest lesson,—“Climb forever, and there is still an Inaccessible”? (754)

The symphonic poem of Ludlow's experience in Yosemite consisted of two movements. The theme of the first movement went down and in. The metaphor of closet was the leitmotif. From Inspiration Point the walls of the valley seemed to close upon an unseen point, a place where Nature sequestered itself to ponder the dark secrets of its creation. The walls themselves were defenses it erected against human discovery of those secrets. The

second movement went in the opposite direction, up and out. Even from Inspiration Point Ludlow could see that the valley of the Merced led not to constricted caverns dark within the earth, but to the open spaces and bright light of the high mountains. That is the destination he and his companions truly desired. There, if they could only reach it, they would find the “silent causes of power.” Conversation with the “King” who abides there would surely disclose secrets worth knowing. But in actual experience they found the sublime inaccessible.

Ludlow’s narrative is the most fully developed statement of a theme common to many other authors of the time. To Yosemite came travel writers and reporters from Britain (such as W. H. Russell) and from the east coast of the United States (such as Albert Richardson), tourists who later became famous (such as Ansel Adams), and tourists who never became famous (such as O. W. Lehmer, Emilie Sussman, William Baer, L. E. Danley, and one of my favorites, Cora Morse), whose writings are put away in library closets unless a researcher like myself retrieves them. That these people and many others like them, from such diverse educational and occupational backgrounds, continuously recapitulate Yosemite’s “secret” theme testifies to its imaginative power.

The idea that Yosemite’s mammoth rocks were Nature’s fortress against unwonted inspection was particularly popular. Lehmer asserted that at the doorway to Yosemite “mighty sentinels guard the entrance” (n.d., n.p.). Chief among the sentinels, according to Sussman, was El Capitan, “a huge rock standing out far into the valley,” which “seems to try to guard it from all trespassers” (1872, 4). Russell made the connection with keeping secrets explicit: “The peculiar and unique features of the valley seem to me to be the height and the boldness of the cliffs which spring out from the mountain-sides like sentinels to watch and ward over the secrets of the gorge” (1902, 29–30). If Yosemite visitors could only manage to slip past the guards into Nature’s hideout, they would arrive in a very special place. Baer thought of this place as kin to Ludlow’s closet. He felt that he and his companions, who arrived in Yosemite seven years before Ludlow in only the

*A Secret  
at the Heart  
of the Universe*



second season of tourist travel, “appeared like intruders into the realm of Nature’s secret repose” (Baer 1856). Other writers used images reminiscent of the second movement of Ludlow’s symphony. Richardson, when he arrived on Inspiration Point three years after Ludlow, thought that “Nature had lifted her curtain to reveal the vast and the infinite” (1867, 422). Lehmer directed his readers, if they would truly “appreciate the wonders of Yosemite,” to go to the place Ludlow tried to reach, “the awesome heights where the majesty of the Infinite sits enthroned on rock and snow.” But, in harmony with Ludlow’s theme of disillusionment, he felt it necessary to warn his readers that, once there, they will find other mountains “drifting away,” like Ludlow’s Inaccessible, “into that hazy distance which wraps in impenetrable mystery the mountain solitudes of the world” (n.d., n.p.).

In perhaps the most interesting permutation of Ludlow’s controlling metaphor of the Merced Canyon as an ever narrowing closet, a few writers thought of Yosemite not as a room within a house, but as a heart within a body. For Danley and many others, Yosemite was the heart of the Sierra Nevada. Arriving by train in El Portal in 1908, headed for “the snow-capped Sierras that rose abruptly before” him, he wondered if he could possibly “penetrate to their very heart in this comfortable manner” (Danley 1908, 18). Ansel Adams made the body bigger. He believed that Yosemite was at the heart of the entire earth: “The great rocks of Yosemite, expressing qualities of timeless, yet intimate grandeur, are the most compelling formation of their kind. We should not casually pass them by for they are the very heart of the earth speaking to us” (1949, foreword). Morse made the body within which Yosemite beats no smaller than the cosmos itself. “Ah Yosemite!” she declared in a statement that summarizes in a single phrase the complex of ideas Ludlow expressed more fully, “Thy heart holds the secret of the Universe” (1896, 7).

These authors believed that Yosemite is so situated, not just on but more importantly in the body of the earth, that it records the earth’s natural waves of meaning. Visitors to the park can put their ears to its granite and hear the planet whisper its inmost thoughts. In addition, for some of them, like



Morse, Yosemite also has truly cosmic connections. There used to be a sign along the southside drive into the heart of Yosemite Valley. It advised motorists what frequency on their car radios would give them road and weather information. Morse might well have wanted it replaced by another sign, one that read: Adjust Your Heartset to Yosemite's Beat "until the thrill of the pulse of the universe is felt and appreciated" (25).

Almost all early visitors to Yosemite shared a belief in the religious significance of the natural landscape. They also agreed that the religious knowledge held by landscape is not obvious, nor is the spiritual power it contains immediately available. So they whispered the word "secret," again and again. While they were not equally optimistic about the ability of human beings to locate this secret, all tacitly assumed that access to remote place equals access to secret. Hence, the importance of exploration if the way is not known, and the importance of trails once the way is known. Trails make it easier to get there if the going is difficult, and they make it possible to follow others who have gone there before. No need for everyone to reinvent the way.

*A Secret  
at the Heart  
of the Universe*

