Here’s a story: In 1978, before my parents were parents, they stood with their longtime friend, Dick Martin, on the banks of the North Fork of Bull Lake Creek deep in the Wind River Mountains on Wyoming’s Wind River Indian Reservation. They watched the white water pound through the outlet of Milky Lake. Two days and 10 miles before, a friend had dropped them at the end of a two-track dirt road, and they had set out with compasses, maps, and fly rods to bushwhack their way deep into the mountains, beyond trail markers and campgrounds. They had humped it on rough horse trails that faded into the broken braids of elk trails, which brought them to Milky’s inlet, where they had made camp for a night.

Next, they planned to forge a path over and down ridges into the next major drainage, the cleft of the South Fork, headed for Alpine Lake. Finally, out, to Saint Lawrence Basin, where Martin’s truck waited some 25 miles away, the keys tucked into a nook in the back bumper. But first, they had to ford the outlet at Milky. So, on this third day, they had broken camp and struck out for the crossing. On the map, this had looked simple. It wasn’t.

Milky is high and glacial, nestled in granite smooth as gemstone with shores of gray rock that plunges beneath the surface of the opaque, turquoise water. The rock is young, geologically speaking, and had only recently begun to break down; towering, meandering hulks of stone and thick brush, deadfall, and stands of dark timber forced trails out and around the shores of the lake, making a direct passage between any two points almost impossible. Though the three hikers
were familiar with the terrain, they’d had to bushwhack for five hours to cover the single mile to
the outlet.

They had finally emerged from the timber, only to be confronted by the roar of the water
as it gathered force above a granite chute fifteen yards across before plummeting down a series
of waterfalls taller than they were. My mother shifted her weight, running her fingers along the
straps of the green Kelty backpack my father had given to her the previous year, before they
were married. Her cross-eyed, inbred toy poodle Muffet whined and looked up at her. The small
dog’s curly gray coat was matted with pitch and pine needles she’d picked up as she’d bulled her
way through the dark timber. My mother’s arms ached from repeatedly picking the poodle up to
carry her over snarls of deadfall.

My father ran a hand over his wild brown curls, then cocked his thumbs against his lean

“We can’t cross here,” my mother said.

“Not a chance. It’ll be calmer closer to the lake.” Martin pointed upstream.

Deafened by the pummeling water, they tiptoed back up the outlet towards the lake along
the edges of the torrent with Muffet on their heels. The water flattened and began to smooth
about two hundred yards above the chute. There, at the widest point, the currents were already
starting to pick up momentum though they still appeared to belong to the lake.

The crossing was broken into three parts by long islands of granite emerging from the
water. Laden with their packs, the trio waded from the shore to the first island, then the next, the
water thigh deep, frigid, and hazy with the turquoise sheen and sediment of the glacial lake. With
Muffet under one arm, my mother felt for the bottom, seeking the surest footing, the soles of her
boots sliding over the uneven, unseen slick rocks. The dog’s small gray feet paddled frantically above the water as the currents swirled and pulsed around them.

So they came to the third crossing, and thirty feet of water swept between them and the far shore. They could not see any trace of the bottom, just gray granite disappearing into the greened reflection of the sky. Martin, who was a head taller than my father at six-four, decided to jump in and see how deep it was. He dropped his pack and sprang into the water. It clapped closed over his head, and he bobbed sputtering to the surface with his blond hair in his eyes; his feet had never touched stone or silt as he sank.

Swimming wasn’t an option with their heavy packs, so they spent the next few hours fashioning a makeshift raft by lashing together a handful of deadfall pines. It would not support their weight but could carry one backpack at a time. They picked a point of departure upstream from where they wanted to land on the far bank, for the current was too strong to swim straight across. All three of them stripped to their underwear, bundling their thick pants and sweaty t-shirts into their packs. They stepped to the bank and paused, craning forward from their toes to look down into the opaque water.

Martin and my father began ferrying the packs while my mother prepared to carry Muffet across; the dog was too small to withstand the current even if she had been able to swim instead of bobbing straight up and down like a cork. My mother lowered herself into the currents, sitting on the edge of the rock first, then sliding into the outlet with the bedraggled toy poodle under one arm, treading water to keep her head above the surface. Her breath was shocked away the moment the water enveloped her. She heard the current churning against rock, splashing against her body, pushing, pulling, insistent on movement, reckless and wild. Her pulse beat hard between her ears, pounded in time with the water. She gasped and sputtered but kept moving,
pulling and kicking for the far bank. She grasped the dog’s scruff with one hand and stroked with her free hand. The waters threatened to steal Muffet from my mother’s grip, to swallow the small gray dog whole. Above them, dark pines lined crags of stone that rose like waves along the swell of ridges – a sea of wilderness and wildness into which they had leapt. There was no turning back.

I have often heard my parents and Martin tell this story, grew up hearing it and others of their adventures in the wild country of Wyoming. And I was raised largely in that wild country, familiar with the twists cut fresh by riverbanks each spring, the haunts of my parents’ youth becoming my own. My older brother Danny and I have learned that it is worth the effort to go into the Winds. We began following our parents as soon as we were old enough to carry our own gear, strong enough to buck the miles.

The country is rugged. The Wind Rivers are nearly 100 miles long and boast over 900,000 acres of designated wilderness in the Bridger, Popo Agie, and Fitzpatrick Wilderness Areas as well as the Wind River Roadless Area on the reservation. Though traditionally enemies, the Northern Arapaho and the Eastern Shoshone tribes have worked together to protect their land, and the Wind River Roadless Area was formed in 1938 at the urging tribal leaders. It is both the first and oldest roadless area in the United States, predating the Wilderness Act of 1964 by 26 years. The Continental Divide abuts the area’s western boundary, making it even more remote. Few hikers and backpackers move on reservation lands in the Winds because they are rugged with unmaintained trails, and because permits that license non-Native access are required for fishing, hiking, and camping. The fee for these courtesy permits has increased in conjunction with rising interest in the area, from $25 for adult Wyoming residents in 1975 to $80 plus a $5
conservation stamp in 2011. Thus, the country remains remote and wild even though it has gained popularity in the last quarter century with climbers and backcountry enthusiasts.

It was this wildness, this unknown, that drew my parents into the Winds, and it is also at the heart of many of the stories I have grown up with. My father is fond of saying that when others asked him about how to go into those mountains, he would point to them in the distance and say, “There they are. Go.” I always think of this as sort of an invocation and a challenge, a charge to walk into big country not knowing what you will find there, which is what my parents did all those years ago.

When my parents met, my father was an attorney with the Fort Washakie office of Legal Aid of Wyoming, a federally funded non-profit law firm that provided legal assistance to low-income residents. He lived in a two-room cabin on the Little Wind River and came to know the land and the people of the Wind River Indian Reservation. Raised by his own father to push ever deeper into the Wyoming high desert near Hanna and north of Rawlins in the south central part of the state, where our family has a long tradition of camping and hunting, my father found himself drawn to the mountains. In the 1970s, prejudice against the Native American population and resistance to paying the tribes for the courtesy permits kept many locals from the area, and news of the bountiful fishing and alpine vistas had yet to trickle out of the state. Thus, the country was relatively untouched. My father was hooked.

It was country ripe for adventure, and he bought United States Geographical Survey maps to study in his cabin, spent every free moment with his friends fishing in the Winds, and asked Shoshone and Arapaho elders about the streams and lakes deeper in the mountains, the places where the horse outfitters didn’t ride, the places beyond the end of the faint trails, the places where few men had walked. My mother and Martin gladly joined him in this drive for rougher,
wilder, more distant wilderness, and they created their own stories of exploring the spurs of the mountains, where the land is remote, the trails ephemeral. My father was lean and brown, his hair not yet gone to silver. My mother was slim in double-knee canvas pants, her smile slightly crooked, the crinkle around her eyes not yet fully etched. Martin was tall and burly, his legs strong, his knees not yet stiff.

When I hear stories about my parents’ youth in the mountains, about how wild they were in their quest for new country, I envy the abandon with which they gave themselves to the land. Sometimes, my parents tell me these tales around the dinner table, where I linger over my empty plate long after we’ve finished eating, still hungry for their words. Sometimes, we stand around campfires in the Wind Rivers themselves, watching the smoke curl up as the stories unfold once more. I know these stories. I have seen the outlet, new waters rushing through the granite chute, pushing against the banks. Still, I ask to hear the stories again and again.

My mother came to the far shore first. She clawed her way up the steep, rocky bank and lay panting on the cold granite. Then, she set to work finding a patch of dirt to build a fire while the men made their last trip. My father was beginning to suffer from signs of hypothermia, shaking violently, his lips thin and blue, the water leaching the feeling from his toes and fingers. Martin, a larger man, was better able to sustain the cold, but they were all wet and bone-cold as well as exhilarated, and they needed the warmth of a fire.

As the flames flashed into life, the men straggled to the shore with the last pack, and the trio gathered on the rock, shivering and laughing at their recklessness in the passing warmth of the fire and the mountain afternoon.
If the raft had tipped, they would have lost the packs and all their gear. If they had tired in midstream, the currents could have crushed them against rocks. But their bodies and grit had carried them unscathed across the outlet to the far bank, and now, there were miles to make. So they shouldered their packs once more and rushed headlong through the mountains, strong and untethered. That night, they would crash down onto Alpine Lake through quaky aspen stands, kicking loose stones down before them, and when they came to a wide, sandy beach along the lake’s shore, they would drop their packs and race to rig their fishing rods, seeing who could be the first to have a line in the water, leaving the tents and gear to be set up by flashlight.

My husband Rob and I spent our weeklong honeymoon backpacking in the Wind Rivers. I was twenty-four, four years younger than my mother had been when she jumped into the outlet. It was the second trip I’d made with my new pack, an internal frame maroon Gregory that Rob and my parents had given to me for my birthday. The green Kelty was left hanging in my parent’s shed, were it rests still.

Our route was one I knew well, but I’d always walked it with my parents, Martin, or Danny. And though Rob is handy with a map and a compass, had walked into Milky Lake with my family a few times and knew his way around the mountains, this was his first trip into the South Fork. I was the only one of the two of us to have traveled this ground before.

Everything felt fresh as I led the way, as Rob and I oriented the map against landmarks because my parents weren’t there to confirm that this was the same saxophone shaped tree that marked where we veered left off the game trail. But I was guided through this familiar country just the same, knowing exactly where to flick my fly, imagining my father coaching me like he had two summers before when I hauled that big cutthroat gleaming like a knife from the water,
seeing the reflection of my mother crouching on the bank by the big hole below camp, ladling water over her hair or running a fly line through her fingers.

In the two years that Rob and I have lived in Idaho, we have made a handful of backpacking trips into the mountains nearby, but I long for the Wind Rivers and the streams that I know. We often plan our return to Wyoming, itself a sort of leap of faith, one that rests on the choice of staying where we know the water, choosing the wisdom imparted to us even as that knowledge strips away some of the wildness we might otherwise seek on distant shores.

I do not know how far my leap will take me, if I will stay close to the traditional camps of my parents, of my youth, upon my return, or if I will use them as headwaters for my own discovery. I do not even know for sure if there yet remains deeper, unknown country anymore as more people come to the mountains every year.

On our honeymoon, Rob and I planned to make some excursions during the day to explore the facing ridge that broke in shelves away from Windy Ridge, but instead we stayed close to camp, stretched out in the grass with novels, and fished the known bends of the creek until we thought we recognized the fish we caught and threw back. We watched the running water that moved like a living thing. South Fork roared down from white peaks, tumultuous in granite where the white water ran wildly but followed the channels cut by the currents that came before. In the meadow, trees had split the hard rock, and the water slowed, lingered in sunlight and shadows of grasses, gathered sediment from that place before it split and leapt forward. And as the water slipped by in the sun, I contemplated the peaks in the distance, imagining walking up to touch the granite, to find the snow-cold headwaters.