

CHAPTER I

THE CRAZY MOUNTAINS

Much Madness is divinest Sense—
To a discerning Eye—
Much Sense—the starkest Madness—

—Emily Dickinson, #435

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time

—T.S. Eliot, "*Little Gidding*"¹

The vast expanses of central Montana have an edge and a suddenness. Along the Yellowstone River, sandstone rimrocks line the horizon. Beyond these rims, the flats, benches and swells of the high plains, arid and mostly treeless, yet gold in autumn with prairie grasses, define a precise division between a yellow earth and a youthful sky. As a boy I was told that 'Montana' meant land of the shining mountains. Mountains, especially the Crazy Mountains, seem to explode here into the blue as a child might draw them.

The Crazy Mountains tower isolated and crown-like out of the surrounding plains, reaching heights of some seven thousand feet above the Yellowstone. This tall island range is located in south central Montana between the Great Divide of the Rockies to the west and the Great Plains to the east, between the Missouri River to the north and the Yellowstone to the south. The sharp wedge of Crazy Peak, the highest in the range, reaches 11,214 feet above sea level. To the east, across the Great Plains, one will not find a higher peak on this continent. South, across the Yellowstone, it is true, the nearby Bighorn, Beartooth, and Hilgard ranges have taller peaks, but due west, beyond the Rockies, only a few of the famous

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volcano peaks of the Pacific Cascades attain greater heights, Mt. Hood being only twenty-five feet higher. To the north, one must travel far into the Canadian Rockies to find higher ground.

Geologically, the Crazies probably formed about twenty-five to fifty million years ago when the much older Elkhorn Mountains eroded and built up a vast plain to the east.² One hypothesis has it that as the depositions grew, pressing downward on the Earth's magma, an upward intrusion eventually broke through the lower layers of sedimentary rock, melting and cutting across these layers, finally forging an intrusive mass, called a 'stock,' with radiating dikes flung outward from this core. Although on the flanks of the peaks there are remnants of slightly baked metamorphic rock, the upper layers of sedimentary rock above the intrusive mass have long since disappeared and glaciers from the previous ice age have carved the ridges of the Crazies sharp until these mountains look anything but mound-like. On a map, however, the vestigial oval outline of the original intrusion remains.

Once home to grizzlies, wolves, bison, and, a step farther back, woolly mammoths, giant sloths, and saber-tooth tigers, the Crazies now support elk, black bears, goats, mountain lions, wolverines, deer, antelope, Yellowstone cutthroat trout, golden eagles, great grey owls, a passing loon, and possibly an occasional grizzly roaming between the Yellowstone and Glacier ecosystems. Standing isolated between the ecosystems of the Great Plains and the great mountain chain of the Rockies, the Crazies could tell a unique ecological story. Some rare plants are found there such as Pink *Agoseris*, *Agoseris Lachshewitzii*. Maybe they sport unknown plant species. Maybe they shelter rare animals and insects. Who knows? Life on Mars has been studied by scientists far more than life in the Crazies.³

The first Native Americans in this region used the Rocky Mountain Front to guide them along a route from Alaska to the south. Archaeological evidence suggests some of these earliest people from the Clovis tradition eleven thousand years ago were drawn east to the foothills of the Crazies whose tall peaks provide a similar signpost of guidance.⁴ Perhaps this is the most original meaning of travel by highway.

Sometime during the sixteenth century, the Absarokee or Apsaalooke people, literally, Children of the Large-Beaked Bird, migrated from the area of northern Minnesota or Wisconsin, "The Land of Forests and Many Lakes," to North Dakota, where they remained until the late 1600s or early 1700s when Chief No Vitals had a vision at Devil's Lake. In it he was said to have received tobacco seeds and told to plant them in the mountains. Under the guidance of this vision, the Crow people, so-named by the whites because of their description in sign language—the flapping of bent arms—migrated to south-central Montana and north-central Wyoming where

they were near many mountain ranges, the Wolf, Bighorn, Pryor, Heart, Beartooth, and Absaroka mountains. The Crazy Mountains lie in the western portion of the Crow heartland.

Arapoosh or Sore Belly, a great war chief, spoke of this place in 1833:⁵

The Crow Country is a good country. The Great Spirit has put it exactly in the right place; while you are in it you fare well; whenever you go out of it, whichever way you travel, you fare worse. If you go to the south, you have to wander over great barren plains; the water is warm and bad, and you meet the fever and ague. To the north it is cold; the winters are long and bitter, with no grass; you cannot keep horses there, but must travel with dogs. What is a country without horses? On the Columbia, they are poor and dirty, paddle about in canoes, and eat fish. Their teeth are worn out; they are always taking fish-bones out of their mouths. Fish is poor food. To the east, they dwell in villages; they live well, but they drink the muddy water of the Missouri—that is bad. A Crow's dog would not drink such water. About the forks of the Missouri is a fine country, good water, good grass, and plenty of buffalo. In summer, it's almost as good as the Crow Country, but in the winter it is cold, the grass is gone and there is no salt weed for the horses. The Crow Country is exactly in the right place; it has snowy mountains and sunny plains; all kinds of climates, and good things for every season. When the summer heat scorches the prairies, you can draw up under the mountains, where the air is sweet and cool, the grass fresh, and the bright streams come tumbling out of the snow banks. There you can hunt the elk, the deer, and the antelope, when their skins are fit for dressing; there you will find plenty of white [grizzly] bears and mountain sheep. In the autumn, when your horses are fat and strong from the mountain pastures, you can go down into the plains and hunt the buffalo, or trap beaver on the streams. And when winter comes, you can take shelter in the woody bottoms along the rivers; there you will find buffalo meat for yourselves, and cottonwood bark for your horses; or you may winter in the Wind River Valley, where there is salt weed in abundance. The Crow Country is exactly in the right place. Everything good is to be found there. There is no place like the Crow Country.⁶

Sore Belly's eloquent testimony showed the Crow community good reasons for staying put, for caring for and dwelling in this place, a particular place with a proper name.

Naturally, as a result of No Vitals' vision, the Crow people had great spiritual regard for mountainous areas in general. According to Crow traditionalists, they quickly came to view the Crazies as "the holiest of holy places," "the mountain of mountains."⁷ The Crows thought of the Crazies, generally, as their "Helper"; they often fled into them for special protection from their enemies.⁸ As with other mountains, sacred power resided there

and sometimes radiated outward. So young men undertook vision quests there.⁹ High and rugged, the Crazies presented a challenging ordeal. However, according to the Crow culture, the greatest challenge promises the most help, so these Mountains were ambivalently named both Awahawapiia, "Mean" or "Rugged Mountains,"¹⁰ and "Bird Home Mountains."¹¹ Crazy Peak was called "Bad Mountain"; Granite Peak, "Snow Mountain." The dreams from fasting without food and water varied in significance. The greatest dreams, called visions, were used to interpret the nature of existence and foretell the future both for the individual and the tribe. Great visions received in the Crazies bestowed charisma and political power upon those who were visited by them.¹²

About 1858, Plenty Coups, between the age of ten and twenty, received his famous great prophetic vision on Crazy Peak after fasting for four days without food or water and cutting the end of his index finger off.¹³ In his vision, as interpreted a few days later by wise elders, he foresaw the displacement of the bison by cattle, the inevitable domination by whites, the displacement of nomadic tribal ways by white culture, and himself as childless and living in old age in a log house, not a lodge. The sacred helper animal in his vision, the chickadee, survives by being wily and attentive, and the Crow people needed to learn from this bird in order to survive. Pressed in on all sides by enemy tribes and believing what was forecast, the Crow allied themselves with whites, never making war against them. Partly because of this vision, Crow scouts aided Custer when he fought at the Little Big Horn.¹⁴ On the basis of his visions, his achievements in battle and skill in diplomacy with whites, Plenty Coups became the last of renowned Crow chiefs.

Among the various legends of how the Crazies got their name, the most common is that a woman left a wagon train near the town of Big Timber, got lost, went insane, and lived in the foothills of the mountains. However, I find it hard to believe that these mountains, these first definitive mountains of the Rockies, did not have a settled white name long before the wagon trains. The story that makes the most sense to me is the following: When the first white people came to the region, they asked the natives what they called these mountains. Not understanding each other's language, they had to communicate in sign language. The natives tried to tell them that they were a place of visions. The whites interpreted the signs to mean that these mountains were a place where people went crazy.¹⁵ Such a misunderstanding may persist even to this day.

After the trappers disappeared, but before my ancestors—homesteaders and railroad workers—arrived, ranches sprang up in the west. The Van Cleve family has run cattle and horses in the Big Timber and

Sweet Grass drainages of the Crazies for the past century. In the 1920s they began dude ranching as well. A third generation account, Spike Van Cleve's *40 Years Gatherin's*, is a lively portrayal of a region that "was never easy on people or horses, and it was tough to get by, but it marked its own with a wry humor, a streak of nonconformity, and an innate decency."¹⁶ The stories attest to a man who is sure of who he is. "I am a horse man," he says,¹⁷ and from the unexpected turns his writing takes, one can see that indeed he is. He also shows a deep love for the place and pride in western ranching life, and he enjoys sharing and showing-off the western experience with his visiting dudes.

I am a lucky man. I was born, grew up, and have lived all my life in what I figure is the prettiest country God ever made—under the Crazy Mountains at the western edge of the high plains . . . It's good country. Where a man can sit in his saddle and see, southwest to south across the Yellowstone Valley, the dark flanks and the white peaks of the Absarokas. . . . All across the west stretch the Crazies, and, swinging in the stirrups, a man has to throw back his head to follow their abrupt shoulders up to the white crests of the peaks. A pretty, clean country where a man can see a long way—and have something to see . . . Even the names sing. Creeks like Otter, Whitetail, Big Elk, Big Timber, Little Timber, Horse, Cayuse, and especially, Sweet Grass.¹⁸

The names sing, he suggests, because the country itself first sings to humans.

However, most of the stories he tells are from a by-gone era when the timber cut was comparatively of little account and went into making fine shingles, when the miners explored by foot and dug by hand, and the ranch hands rode a grub-line. He has a feel for the beauty of the landscape but one senses that for him people can affirm beauty only after paying their dues through a tough and risky struggle with nature. Speaking of the times he escaped avalanches, he writes:

Even so, though mountains can be damn dangerous, to me, who grew up at their feet, they can be friendly and strangely protective; but only if a man respects them. They demand respect. Get careless and they are unforgiving.¹⁹

In Van Cleve's writing and his life, the quick, easy, comfortable, safe, and convenient are to be avoided. They make one soft, lazy, impatient, and cowardly. Here is a person, representative of a people still flourishing in the West, who is confident about what he has built and does not quite see what is coming. He is, it seems, too close to the pulse of what he affirms.

Somehow the hereafter is the least of my worries . . . What could be finer than a bright spring day in the lovely country under the Crazies, at a long lope on a good horse, with the wind in my face, the smell of lupine and sage in the air, and a string of slick, spooky colts to be gathered. Hell, I've already had heaven!²⁰

Such a person is apt to resist the cheapening of this way of life that announces itself as wilderness 'protection.' Such protection would seem to lock him out of what nourishes the western way of life and keeps it healthy and thriving.²¹ I can imagine him saying that the Crazies are too rugged to harm. Indeed these words would seem to issue from his family's three generations of experience with the Crazies. Until the day he died, Spike fought wilderness designation of all lands, especially the Crazies.

Having grown up among people not unlike the Van Cleves, I, too, felt that the Crazies were too rugged to suffer much harm, until I discovered a newly bulldozed road in Cottonwood Canyon. Just the year before I had hiked the trail into what I was coming to recognize as a special place—a secluded, unnamed lake, nestled in a cirque with the peak's two thousand feet high cliffs embracing it on three sides. While in high school a friend and I had discovered this lake by mistake when we wandered off the trail. Goats were there that time, as they have been many times since, astoundingly high in the impossible cliffs, like little white mustard seeds, barely recognizable but for their seemingly unconcerned, playful movements. That time, too, lower down in Cottonwood Canyon, the trail wound and looped through meadows such as I'd never seen before nor have I seen since, completely blue with the blue of bluebells. Remembering the dark earth of the trail in those meadows, the moist, fragrant air, and the soft, warm sunlight, I can see now it was an eventful day, one that slides easily into mind and visits me often when I think about the Crazies, or other mountains, or Monet or Debussy, or what it means to have a good day. It was a day when the mountains relaxed, warmed and came near.

Now I came to make a return pilgrimage only to discover that the lyrical presence of the place was shattered. The trail that once teased me along had become a road, an ugly scar laid out straight. The groaning sounds of the bulldozer engine and the clink-clink screeching of the tracks and blade, actually gone, even now seemed to echo in the canyon: Earth twisted unnaturally over, showing crushed plants, exposed roots, and the gravel of gravel pits. Unwashed, scarred boulders caught, jammed, fixed out of time wearing expressions of horror. Trees knocked flat and bulldozed aside; the ones left standing gashed by the absent-minded pull of a lever. Though in mileage the road was built about halfway into the lake, I

felt that the whole had been ruined. Mountains so rugged I thought them invulnerable had been changed almost overnight.

This was the beginning. It is not the case that all the de facto wilderness in the United States receives the protection of legally designated wilderness. Much federal and state land, some nine million acres in Montana alone, remains in its original wild state but is not protected. Motorcycles and jeeps sometimes disturb its silence. Timbering, mining, oil drilling, irrigation and other resource development projects threaten to transform this land, destroying its wild character. The Crazy Mountains are among these de facto wilderness lands that have not been designated legal wilderness. For a number of years now, many of us in Montana have tried without success to get the Crazies included in a national wilderness bill. I hope that someday the Crazies will receive adequate protection.²² Beyond that, I hope that the Crazy Mountains and other wild places will challenge us to rethink, to weigh, our vision of technological culture. Is mining, logging, or other development of the Crazy Mountains really going to make them better or are they already as good as they can be, just as they are? In this book we will plunge into a philosophical examination of the various and far-ranging facets of this question.

Make no mistake: Although I am sympathetic toward cultural practices other than my own and at times adopt what seem like good ideas, I never have gone and never will go on a vision quest in the manner of the Crows. I would not know what to do with my dream if I received one. In a way that I cannot reject without rejecting myself, my training in the discipline of philosophy has taught me to use my waking hours in order to understand my world and the things around me. Yet we in the western philosophical tradition also have our visions. Vision, in fact, is the dominant metaphor in ancient Greek philosophy for which a philosopher ought to strive. According to no less a philosopher than the sober and ever practical Aristotle, the highest excellence attainable by humans is *theoria*, a resourceful and comprehensive vision of the world. Such a vision we will attempt here.

The Western tradition also has its *guiding* visions. From the seventeenth century on, the visionaries of the modern period foresaw that the age of technology would put reason or science to practical use. The culture of technology would use science to dominate nature.²³ The survey instruments used to plot the road up Cottonwood Canyon put mathematics to use. The engineers who designed the bulldozer put physics and chemistry to use. More to the point, the general idea of 'development', from developing lands such as the Crazies to imaging the planet as spaceship Earth, is to get something under control and make it produce for human purposes.

Using reason to dominate nature is a vision we now hear everyday, everywhere.

At its best, this guiding vision does not merely urge us to dominate nature for domination's sake, but for the sake of liberating us from toil and misery, relieving us of our burdens. And it is true that many of us in the middle-classes of industrialized countries—those blessed by modern technology—can thank modern medicine for making it possible for us to live and enjoy things such as the *Crazies*. We can thank the car that takes us to the trailhead, freeing us from having to walk or ride a horse for days before we finally arrive there. Back home, we can appreciate indoor plumbing that relieves us from having to fetch water from the creek or spring. When we think of the familiar objects of technological culture, such as washing machines, refrigerators, microwave ovens, automatic doors of supermarkets, we may say, "Of course, what more could there be to this vision than domination of nature for the sake of liberation?" Yet in the following chapters, we will wonder whether relief from all effort and every burden is good.

This relief is a negative freedom, freedom from, but, more importantly from the standpoint of this book, our culture also views technology as giving us positive freedom, freedom for. Technology will enrich our lives with the various goods of the Earth and beyond. A highway splitting the *Crazies* would yield its peaks and lakes as scenery without the toil of hiking or backpacking. Meanwhile, proponents of virtual reality promise to install cross-country ski trips in our basement. We as a culture believe that our domination of nature will yield, say, more leisure, and further we assume that technology will also fill up our leisure time with goods that will make us happy. But does the technological domination of nature really make our lives better? Does it make for the good life? We will examine these questions in the pages ahead.

One crucial problem with technological affluence is its lack of balance. Some twenty percent of Earth's present population of 5.6 billion people use eighty percent of the resources.²⁴ Moreover, to bring everyone up to the standard of living of those in the middle-class of western industrialized countries would require an estimated two additional planet Earths.²⁵ For reasons of social justice we ought to "live simply so that others may simply live." And these 'others' include animals, plants, species, ecosystems, and landforms. Thinking of others solely as humans is anthropocentric "just us" justice. Hence, we ought to live more simply for reasons of environmental as well as social altruism. However, technology too often subverts these two good moral concerns. So we will have to meet this problem by pursuing another alternative. It is a twofold alternative and is the central theme of this book. The unsimple life, the life of afflu-

ence measured by a high and rising standard of living, while glamorous, is nonetheless misleading and ironic. Many of us feel this in our gut. Why is affluence so attractive and yet so disappointing? Examining this will weaken the hold that technological prosperity has on us. But we can do better than this by showing, secondly, that there are things other than affluence that are both simpler and genuine improvements, even and especially from the standpoint of those with too much. Under the currently prevailing vision, however, our understanding of the quality of our lives, the equality of people everywhere, and the quality of the environment—the good, the equal, and the wild—could not be more out of balance.

Of course, one could return from a hike up Cottonwood Canyon in the Crazy Mountains and conclude, “You can’t stop progress.” Most of us may have accepted that without even thinking about it. The Crazy Mountains, to the contrary, challenge us to rethink what seems inevitable about technology. They provide us with other measures of progress. They show us another way to *be*.

Etymologically, “crazy” comes from *crazen*, to crush. Originally it was related to breaking and shattering. The Crazy Mountains challenge the technological society in a way that may break and shatter the older vision of domination and materialism. In its place may arise a new vision of respect for things.

Such a new vision and story will surely seem crazed to many people aligned with the dominant culture of our time. The technological vision currently guiding our culture makes it seem reasonable to want to cut the trees, now seen as timber, in Cottonwood Canyon; makes it seem reasonable to want a higher income and larger gross domestic product; makes it seem reasonable to want to win the lottery. “Who wouldn’t?” When such a vision is reigning, all other visions and ways of life become marginalized. Anything counter to the prevailing culture seems silly, irrational, nonsensical, crazy. So, these mountains will teach us of a crazy vision and what I have to say here may seem unreasonable. But take heart, I am a friend of a truer, disciplined reason, as I said earlier. Crazy sanity is a virtue.

Part I: *The Spell of Technology* pinpoints the pivotal issue. The Crazy Mountains stand at the crossroads for our culture. We will either view them as a resource to get under our control, and thereby change them from their wild state forever, or we will protect them as they exist in their own right. We may well make this decision, as we have so many times in the past—having bought into the basic framework of technology—without due consideration. We may make this decision as if the matter were already decided, as if any alternative to the development of our resources were merely an academic question.

To make a reasonable case for what at first glance may seem crazy, we must understand the reasonableness of the case for development. We will begin on that ground by considering the rationale for the Cottonwood Ibox Timber sale, one of three timber sales proposed for the Crazies. We will also consider potential damage to the mountains from a perspective within the framework of technology. Then we will build a quite different account of damage and danger to the Crazy Mountains from a standpoint that acknowledges this wild range in its own right. By focusing on a particular thing, the Crazy Mountains, we will see how the technological order is incompatible with "things." If it were not incompatible with such "things," we would have fewer reasons to care about reforming technology.

Once we find the Crazy Mountains and things similar to them threatened, where do we turn for help? To examine and challenge the basic assumptions of our culture calls for a variety of tactics. We can and should use empirical information, cogent arguments, and comprehensive theories, but this is not enough. So we will also summon narrative and poetry to show the significance and powers of things that more abstract discourses miss. Chapter 6, "Granting the Thing its Eloquence," relies on my personal narrative to point out how the Crazy Mountains are able to claim us, and it points us toward another way to be.

Before undertaking this narrative account, we need to address the philosophical task. It is not all that unusual in philosophy, especially in the European Continental and the American Pragmatic traditions of contemporary philosophy, to begin with the concrete, raise the issues of the concrete to a reflective and philosophical level, and then return to the concrete, interpreting and approaching the concrete and everyday in a new and fresh light. So chapters 1 and 2 will begin with the Crazy Mountains, then chapters 3, 4, and 5 reflect philosophically upon environmental ethics and technological culture, and finally, chapter 6 returns to an evocative account of the Crazies. Finding a theory to help us comprehend the problem of technology and speaking of things in their own right are two nearly opposite tasks, yet all parts are essential to the greater whole. We will, indeed, arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.

Whereas Part I focuses the problem of technological culture and the Crazy Mountains, Part II: *Learning from Wilderness*, articulates the broader implications. Thus, Part II draws out the general lessons we can learn from Part I and develops what we need to learn if we are going to counter the culture of technology effectively. To go on does not mean to go back; nor does it mean getting to where we are presently headed. We need to learn to build again. Currently we are building a culture ordered by the consumption of commodities; our challenge is to find a way to build a culture which is both set in a context of technology yet ordered by things

as opposed to commodities. We need to learn to listen to our traditions again, to consider and experience things on their own terms again, and to speak of them in appropriate ways. Wilderness is our guide. The thing shows us where to put our shoulder or rather our mountain goat horns—our thoughts, words, practices, and collective actions—to the task of turning technology.