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WATERMAN FUND ESSAY WINNER: Valley of the Bulls: "I have a red backpack. Is that a bad thing?"

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Waterman Fund Essay Winners

Valley of the Bulls

"I have a red backpack. Is that a bad thing?"

Jenny O'Connell



THE *COLLECTIVO* DROPS US AT THE TRAILHEAD AT THE END OF A BUMPY dirt road. The gate is locked. A park ranger steps out of the thatched hut at the entrance and nods to a large stone wall. There's a moment of confused gesturing (*Over it? You want us to climb over it? Yes, over it. Really? Yes, really.*), and then we're hoisting our backpacks up and over the wall and scrambling after them. Lucy has been one of my best friends for a decade now, and she knows that when I invite her and her boyfriend, Eric, to meet me in Peru and say, "Maybe bring a backpack just in case," it means, "Bring the good s---; we're going somewhere." In this case, it's the Cordillera Blanca, the "white range": more than 700 glaciers; several peaks above 19,000 feet; and Huascarán, the highest mountain in Peru, its summit the place on Earth with the least gravitational pull.*

We buckle our packs to our bodies. Adjust trekking poles. We stand together and look down the deep, ancient valley carved out by glaciers. The trail along the stream erupts in yellow flowers on its way to the mountains, which reach toward the cloudless sky. There is no blue like Peruvian blue. We are giddy, each of us smiling the kind of smile I haven't been able to find in a long time, wild-eyed, a hint of freedom on our faces.

Eric cracks puns and snaps photos of birds, training his lens at dots in the sky that he hopes are condors. Lucy points out waterfalls and tries to pet a calf that is grazing next to the trail. We play a game we call "mountain or cloud" as we walk, and we often lose. I spend most of my time on the verge of tears. The mountains appear to me like the faces of friends—inviting, challenging, each with its own personality—as the valley turns. From time to time I pull out the map, orient it to my compass, point out drainages and ruins. Step one to not getting lost is to stay found, but I am not a great navigator. My personality constantly works against me. I have a short attention span, and I get dumbfounded by beauty. "We must be *here*," I say, as if I know.

Yesterday, the woman behind the desk at the Huascarán National Park office asked if we wanted a guide. It was more a statement than a question. The itinerary we'd chosen was a three-day trek with an elevation gain of 1,200

* See Christian Hirt et al., "New Ultrahigh Resolution Picture of Earth's Gravity Field," *Geophysical Research Letters*, 40, pages 4279–4283.

Jenny O'Connell's knockoff-brand North Face down jacket tag read, "Never Exploring," instead of, "Never Stop Exploring." So, she yelled, "Never exploring!" when she climbed Chocu Pass. COURTESY OF JENNY O'CONNELL

meters up to the 5,100-meter Chocu Pass—just under 17,000 feet, higher than any of us had ever climbed. Eric pointed at me. “We have a guide,” he said, and I looked back at the woman with an expression on my face that I hoped was like confidence. She squinted at me as if deciding whether to say something. Then she shrugged and handed me the map. I had just come off a trip guiding sixteen high school students through the Andes outside of Cusco. I’ve been an outdoor guide for the last ten years—leading backpacking trips, rafting Class III and IV rivers, sea kayaking Atlantic swells, teaching expeditionary skills in negative-degree winters. I can carry a heavy pack over long and arduous terrain, cook a fine backcountry meal, set up a base camp, and treat most injuries. But the six times I returned to trek the mountains of Peru, I’ve seen only one other woman in charge.

We don’t realize how slowly we’re moving until a couple from Switzerland passes us, twice. They hike by at a fast clip, speaking to each other in bursts of French, their small backpacks comfortably anchored to their backs. The woman is sick from a parasite and has to make frequent stops to vomit. “We might never come back here, and the glaciers are melting,” the man explains when we catch up to them. The woman nods, pale but determined. I squint after them as they disappear uphill and try to convince myself the bag of wine in my backpack is worth it.

The mountain guide who works at the front desk of the hostel we stayed at in town picked up my pack this morning and frowned. “*Pesado*,” he said. *Heavy*. He asked about our route, and when I showed him on the map, he looked at me, calculating. I remembered the time Evan, my outdoor mentor, asked me to teach a college-level whitewater canoe course with him; how I, never having whitewater canoed before, showed up to a training class full of men and introduced myself in such a way that Evan had to defend me. *She’s actually very capable*, he had to say, and I’d made a silent promise to never speak about myself that way again.

Such a tenuous line between confidence and danger. No matter what language you use to describe yourself, the mountains have the final say.

That night, after we’ve pitched our tent and summoned the last of our energy to hike to a green glacial lake as the pink alpenglow slid upward across the mountaintops, after we’ve cooked our heaviest dinner and boiled water from the stream, we linger outside the tent for just a moment, our breath freezing in the air. The Incan constellations, I tell Lucy and Eric, are not made up of the stars themselves but the dark spaces between them. The stars are the heavenly river of Mayu; the swathes of black sky, the silhouettes of

animals who come to drink. I lie awake for a long time after, listening to the slow breathing of my friends. My eyes will never be wide enough to catch the strange stars turning slowly over our heads. I do not think my heart was made to withstand such a thing.

THE REAL HIKE BEGINS ON DAY TWO.

We stare nervously over our oatmeal bowls at the zigzag cut into the steep mountainside across the stream from where we're camped, and then we're packing our things, we're saying goodbye to the Swiss couple, we're climbing it. Eric's been sharing his altitude pills with Lucy and me, but we all feel it as we ascend, the thin air just one more thing to steal our breath away. A waterfall tumbles down a ledge to our right, next to a sign for a campsite that points straight off a cliff.

We move aside as a man wearing leather sandals and a bright, sun-worn Quechua poncho leads a mule down the narrow trail. "*Sulpaiki waiki*," I say as he passes, the only Quechua phrase I know, which means, "Thank you, brother." "Hello" might be more appropriate, but thank you is what I mean. His family has belonged to these mountains for thousands of years. The trail that will take us days to traverse he can cover in hours, in sandals.

At the top of the zigzag we sit and try to catch our breath. I hang my arm around Lucy's shoulders, and we look down at the dazzling green lake and the white-faced leviathan above it. "There's no way this gets better," she says, but as if to prove her wrong, two new snowy peaks appear a little farther up the mountain.

We're so transfixed by the view we almost don't notice the bulls.

"Um . . . guys," Eric says simply, and the urgency in his voice snaps Lucy and me to attention. Where the mountain curves into a bowl, we've ended up next to a large herd of cows grazing along a stream—and two of the most massive bulls I've ever seen. White-eyed and staring, they lower their horns and begin to walk pointedly in our direction. We scramble up over rocks, tripping on ourselves to get away. One of them stops but holds us in his stare. The other keeps coming. Up we go, up, until we've lost the trail, until the bull is satisfied with our distance. We eat lunch in the dry brown grass on a plateau overlooking the herd and try to piece together what we know about bulls.

"I have a red backpack. Is that a bad thing?" I ask.

"I thought that was a myth," says Lucy. "I hope that's a myth."

"I heard they have good memories," Eric says. We agree to avoid more herds at all costs. Even the females have horns.

Lucy asks about the way up the mountain. By now, I'm mostly guessing where we are on the map.

The first time we summit Chocu Pass, we squash through a wetland and clamber up the scree-covered hillside, huffing and sweating, pleased and surprised that we make it to the top without a great deal of difficulty. Cloud-smashed white sierras surge up from the valley floor around us, more than I've ever seen. We take a selfie at the top. *We must be in better shape than we thought*, we think to ourselves, and then Lucy spots a cairn on the ridge above us.

The second time we summit Chocu Pass, our faces are flushed, and breathing is much harder. There are even more mountains than before. They are called Andavite, Churup, Pucaranra, Chinchey, Tullparaju. Quechua names embedded with meaning: "copper gap," "uncultivated," "heap of red stones," "sharp grass," "mountain with snow." When we stand on the hillock and put our arms in the sky, it feels like we can scrape the top of the world with our fingertips. I keep a wary eye on the clouds, which have begun to gather and darken. If we get caught in a thunderstorm up here, there will be nowhere to hide. I'm wearing a knockoff North Face down jacket I bought in the city of Huaraz at the base of the mountain. The tag says *Never Exploring* instead of

Never Stop Exploring. "Never exploring!" we yell off the top of the world.

Relieved to be descending before the weather, Eric and I look for the trail down, but Lucy points to another cairn leading up a sharp incline with loose rock. For half an hour we hem and haw over the map. We scramble up onto boulders for a better view and frown at the valley below us, which looks all wrong. Lucy pulls out her phone, which has an app on it with a dashed trail line right above our little blue GPS dot. With no other option, we shoulder our packs and go upward.



Jenny O'Connell. COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

The third time we summit Chocu Pass—the *real* Chocu Pass—we are moving at a crawl above the snow line on a glacial ridge, postholing into drifts up to our hips with every step, and dusk is falling. Lucy's no stranger to mountains, but she's looking at this mountain as if it may swallow us, and I'm wondering if she could be right.

"This is type two fun," I say, trying to stay optimistic. "The kind that will be fun later."

"What's type three?" Lucy says. "I think I'm having that."

Plunging through the snow, foot by painstaking foot, I'm thinking about how we are lost at just under 17,000 feet with all the wrong equipment, squandering daylight with weather on the way, when I look up and realize I'm missing it: the blaze of orange sky behind us, a fingernail moon rising into blue, the sloping white shoulders of the mountains echoing back the colors in a muted glow. Everything is silent. We are standing on the spine of the world.

THE SMELL OF RAIN DRIFTS UP FROM THE ROCKS, MUSKY AND FRESH AS we stumble and slip down from the pass, peering through the darkness at our little blue GPS dot on Lucy's phone. Finally, Lucy spots the tiny tents lit up like paper lanterns in the valley below. We are going the right way. With each step I feel a growing sense of dread. For as long as I can remember, I've come to the mountains to escape the calamity of the human heart. The act of washing my face in a cold stream reminds me that mine is a body worth loving. When I walk, my mind rattles and then quiets, soothed by the rhythm of it. I keep a rock in my pocket to remind me of what I'm working on, and when I lose it I find another. To descend is to submit again to car horns and engines and people, to bright screens and incessant communication, to complicated schedules, to finite spaces with walls instead of stars.

We're not going to reach the valley tonight. Fingers and toes white with cold, we make an emergency stop on a small plateau still well above 15,000 feet. Piles of cow dung lay scattered in the grass, but this seems our safest option. The soup takes a long time to boil at altitude. Lucy's feet are frozen, and Eric lifts his jacket to fold her icy toes into his stomach. "That's love," I say. We are so cold we leave our trekking poles and dishes in a pile in the rain.

When I open my eyes, I can tell by the light that we've slept too long. On one side of me Lucy dozes, her long black eyelashes fluttering on the edge of sleep. Eric is on my other side, squeezed up into a ball. It was hard to get warm last night. I roll onto my stomach and pull the lighter from where I've stashed it in my breast pocket. Grateful I'd moved the camp stove just outside

the tent before I fell asleep, I unzip the fly and pull myself out to start the coffee. There, chomping on grass in the glistening morning, looms a humongous red bull.

We see each other at the same time. He snorts, stamps at the ground, and begins to charge. Grabbing the stove, I dive back into the tent. "BULL," I whisper to Eric and Lucy, who are wide awake now, and I hold out my hands to emphasize how big. We watch from the gap under the rain fly as his hooves clomp closer, his lips brush the ground. Out of sight, we aren't a threat. Closer. Ripping grass. Air through nostrils. And then the unimaginable happens. The bull's tongue appears under the tent, slippery and purple and as big as my forearm. He scoops the rain fly into his mouth and begins to chew. I turn my head toward my friends. The three of us lie flat on our stomachs, eyes wide, holding our breath, out of ideas. We are kids playing hide-and-seek, except the seeker is an angry, territorial, 2,000-pound bull. I feel it in my stomach, the laughter, and I try to stop, but it's the helpless laughter of children, the kind that feels forbidden, so of course I laugh harder. The bull is pulling at the fly now in sharp movements, our tent poles are buckling, and I am laughing and laughing, one hand over my mouth, eyes watering. Eric is starting to laugh, too. Lucy does not find it so funny.

The bull realizes our tent is not edible and lumbers on. Sensing our escape, we pack our things. The plan is to send Lucy first—in my opinion the hardest job, running out into the unknown—and Eric and I will follow, somehow, with the tent. Lucy climbs out, tripping on the rain fly, and makes a beeline toward a pile of rocks on the left. "There are five of them," she calls, before she's chased out of earshot. "No . . . six!" Our tent, miraculously, is one that can be packed up from the inside. It's a Peruvian brand, and as Eric and I slide our hands silently out under the noses of six bulls to pull up the stakes, as we unclip the tent body under the guise of the rain fly, I wonder if the tentmaker had thought of this. We look at each other. "One . . . two . . . three," Eric says, and we run for it.

Three sets of trekking poles, two mugs, two bowls, and one bag of wine are the things we lose to the bulls. We feel terrible about leaving them behind, but with each attempt to reclaim our belongings, the red bull grows more agitated until he's following us down the mountain and we are, once again, running. We don't stop until our feet are on the floor of Cojup Valley. Only then do we allow ourselves to laugh.

One jump across the river. We're high-tailing it down the dusty road out of the valley when around the corner files a massive herd of cattle. There is one way out. From within the mess of horns and hooves emerges a caballero in Nike sneakers. "*Passe*," he says, gesturing as if it's obvious we can go, as if we are holding him up, but we cower, paralyzed. "*Fssht!*" he says, waving his arms, and the animals move off the trail. We are struck by the mortifying realization that the beasts up on the mountain might belong to someone; that maybe we could have waved our arms and said, "*Fssht!*" and gotten our stuff back.

I pick up a stick from the side of the road and grip it in my hand. I am tired of being afraid. A great black bull lumbers into view. I raise the stick above my head. "*Fssht!*" I say. The bull moves. I go first, guiding my friends down the valley, away from the sloping white mountains and the white-dazzled air above them: a woman who has remembered her heartbeat, who has run through the valley of the bulls and been granted another day.

JENNY O'CONNELL earned an MFA in creative writing from the Stonecoast program at the University of Southern Maine. She guides wilderness trips around the world and is working on a new book, *Finding Petronella*, which follows her solo trek across Finland in the footsteps of a legendary woman from the golden fields of Lapland. O'Connell was a 2019 Maine Literary Award finalist.

Announcing the Next Waterman Fund Essay Contest

Writers! We invite emerging talent (those who have yet to publish a major feature or book) to enter our annual essay contest sponsored by the Waterman Fund. The deadline is mid-February for stories about how wilderness has evolved in the twenty years since the Waterman Fund formed. The fund memorializes Guy Waterman, an advocate of respecting and preserving alpine lands, and honors his wife, Laura Waterman, a writer living in East Corinth, Vermont. Visit watermanfund.org for all the contest details, or contact chris@chriswoodside.com. One of our missions here is to nurture new writers.