



BEFORE THE MOUNTAIN

Poems by Sara Eddy
Photographs by Dominique Thiebaut



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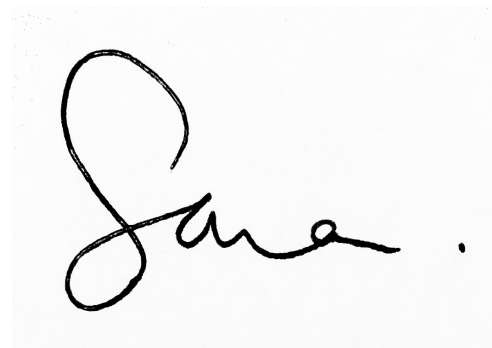
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This book pairs the landscape photography of Dominique Thiebaut with poems by local poet Sara Eddy. Thiebaut's photos are lush, romantic visions of the Pioneer Valley, in Massachusetts, frequently featuring the Holyoke Range, the Summit House, the city-scape of Northampton, the quiet splendor of Mt. Pollux, and other valley sites. The photos reveal a deep love for the area felt by an immigrant: Thiebaut's French roots display themselves in his work, contributing a feeling of global elegance. In contrast, but somehow also complementary, are the poems of Eddy, who is a life-long native of Amherst. Born in Northampton and raised by the banks of the Fort River in South Amherst, her poems respond to Thiebaut's photographs with a combination of almost familial comfort with the landscape of the valley and a deep curiosity about the geologic and human history of the places depicted.

I first met Dominique when we worked together on a year-long grant-funded food research panel made up of faculty, staff, and students doing individual projects. Perhaps because the subject was food, the group came together quickly almost as family, and Dominique's skill as a photographer documented our meals, activities, and friendships. His exhibition of landscape photography at Amherst town hall came as a welcome revelation, then; his artistic work is lush, emotional, and mesmerizing, and after wandering through the exhibit I felt that I'd seen my home in the Pioneer valley with new eyes. It was thus with delight that I accepted his invitation in spring of 2019 to collaborate on this book of photographs and poems.

We come to the valley from opposite directions, almost, but with equally deep love for the mountains, farmland, and greenscapes. Dominique's photos reveal a deep love for the area felt by an immigrant: his French roots contribute a feeling of global elegance to our little piece of New England. My own contribution here is that of a native: I was born in Cooley Dickinson hospital, and raised by the banks of the Fort River in South Amherst. The subjects of these photos--the Summit House, Mt. Pollux, the Holyoke Range--feel very much to me like my oldest friends, those who know me the best. Many of my poems are considerations of the history and geology of these "friends," while others explore my own history and geology, as it is rooted in these pieces of dirt and rock, basalt and clay.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sara." The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial 'S' and a period at the end.

Asking Sara to join in this project was a natural choice for me. We both have the same love of the Pioneer Valley, where we both live, each on a different side of the Connecticut River. I was introduced to her elegant poetry during a year-long project in which we both participated at Smith College. Sara started every meeting by reading a poem she had crafted the week before, short delightful moments when I started enjoying and appreciating her poems' accessibility, and her sense of humor. Sara speaks of the same landscapes I capture in my photographs. In this book, her poems, quirky and profound observations of everyday, are often printed on top of my photographs, a deliberate choice to pin the stories into their own theater. Sometimes a photo inspires a poem, as in "Tess at Mt. Pollux," and sometimes a poem becomes the reason for an excursion and photo shoot, as happened with "Skinnydipping," which prompted me to visit Musante Beach and Chesterfield Gorge on bright fall days.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dominique". The signature is cursive and elegant, with a large initial 'D' and a period at the end.

Your Whole Life

you have lived in the valley,
even when you didn't--
even when you pretended a city
steely and grey could be your home.
Even then you imagined
the bodega awnings
into leafy canopies, and the
cascading commuters into
rivers stopped up at stoplights,
jaywalkers leaping like fish.
Maybe you strayed overseas
and loved another landscape,
gave it your soul and tried out
an adolescent romance, but
your heart has always been here,
one foot on Mt. Castor, the other
on Mt. Pollux, the twins calling out
succor and safety to sailors,
granting them passage home
blessing them with a constellation's
infinite confidence: you will find
your way back, always.

Before the Mountain Itself

Draped in widow's weeds
the moon watches us
scrape our foolish lives
out of the bowl of the valley;
she feels the tender flutter
of tulle and velvet clouds
across Mount Holyoke
and remembers tram cars
carrying the elegant rich
on a wire up the mountain
to the summit house--hubris
and leisure, crinoline
and top hat. She remembers
toolmaking and bricks,
baby carriages and hats,
all the feeble industries.
She sees King Philip's war,
Metacomet's sons
sold into slavery,
back further to the Pocumtuc
hunting deer on pine needle
blankets. She ranges back

to the Triassic,
the terrible sundering
celebrated in lava
confetti, making the ridges
and outcrops of the mountain,
a volcano then, with
wooly mammoth shoulders.
Before the mountain itself,
the moon loved Pangeia,
when One was All.
We think we are her favorites,
special children chosen
for her tides and shine, but we
are just one tiny story, and
in her shroud tonight
she mourns a mere century
of madness, a sacrifice
to industry and plastic gods:
We are little creatures
who made castles
on mountains and thought
the world would never end.





Luna

We kiss again
and I drive away
woozy through dark streets
overhung with sensate
trees and I feel
snakes and possums
watching me
from the gulleys.
The pavement hisses
at my tires, and I hold
my breath to listen.
Over the hill
at my little house
up comes the moon
full and obscene
she rises up
from my belly
into my chest
my ribs expand
and begin to crack
my heart is crowded out
my belly cramped.
The pain is exquisite;
I am undone,
I have so much to do.

Tess at Mt. Pollux

In a Cezanne dream, Tess lingers on the path
while Queen Anne's lace flocks around her.

Aix-en-Provence extends its borders
to include the New World, and she
is its dark lustrous focus,
the purple floret at the center
of the lace where a drop
of womanly blood stained an entire
species of plant for eternity.

Anne, she of miscarriage and rabbits--
how powerful still her blood
and the memory of her virile
angry failures. What
will be the lasting impact of Tess's
trip up the hill, her ascent toward
the one remaining tree at the crown
and the glorious view of mountains
and mountains and mountains?

Sisters

The Seven Sisters are dancing
in the fire this morning,
sure-footing it
on the ridge of the world.
The sky burns around them.
They want nothing
but to grab the clouds
by their tails
whip them into eddies
of frothy fur and
sing with them
the histories of Scylla
and Charybdis--
who after all were
just girls, near-sisters
loved by the wrong men.
The Sisters treasure the rock,
embrace the hard place,
they waltz on the edge of
the whirlpool with the monster's
hands in their own.
Their song is a wildness
for stoic Yankee ears.
Below them we
sail into danger
bound to the mast
and begin every day
expecting hard beauty.

Round Mountain

Long Mountain slopes up from the valley floor,
announcing the range, adjective to Norwottuck's
subject. It goes Long, Norwottuck,
Bare, Hitchcock, then the Seven Sisters--
those dancing little peaks--and finally Holyoke
as a period on this East-West phrase.
But between Norwottuck and Bare
there is an erasure, a verb removed,
a sentence fragment ghost mined
out of the chain for paving stones
and gravel. Did we think
no one would notice? Did we
think we had so many mountains
that we could spare one?
No one alive today ever saw Round, ever
hiked on its flanks or looked out from its

gentle peak. There are pictures, maps, postcards
of the brothers Round and Bare
making a clever notch for a Pocumtuc path, then
a trolley, then pavement up through
the Devil's Garden of rocks and over into
South Hadley. The ephemera is quaint,
a record of strange clothing,
grey faces, topographic circles
like pond ripples disappearing.
The space between Bare and Norwottuck
is an elision, an amputation, a violence.
You were a mountain to me, until
you were a mountain-shaped absence,
and there is no metaphor for my loss,
no words to describe the grief the valley
feels for the mountain: the words
have been erased, and
the first meaning of the sentence is lost.

The Municipal Building

The sun sets on town hall
and charges it with grandeur;
another day in small government
closes its books; the holders
of clerkships and managerial thrones
expel a sigh of gratitude.

Their civic fortitude, their passion
for pothole and passport,
traffic pattern and dog license
has survived one more turn.

And when the bigger dragons come
to threaten the city's peace,
the monsters of override and underpass,
they will be ready--they will stand for us,
they will do their best. This
is what the sun tells us,
throwing a spotlight from
93 million miles away
on the central municipal building.







An America

Give me an America
of picnic tables and ice cream
Jimmies and chocolate dip;
give me an America
of students gone home
for the summer, and
locals strolling softly
as evening cools off,
the pavement still
sun-warm and ticking;

give me an America
of migrant farm workers
picking cucumbers
and falling in love
chatting at the next table
about sublets and cheap beer;
pay them what they've
earned for hands weltd
necks sunburned and
traced with soil-lines;
make my America
light up like neon

on a Sunday night in August
when the sound of engines
dies down and the Miss Flo
will be closing soon.
Put in your last order
make it a large
and tip the server
for her patience
her far-away home
her tired, sticky
American beauty.



Summer Fling

Summer crashes in one day,
drunk as usual
full of crude jokes
and maudlin love poems,
and you can't help yourself:
he's a drug, he's a bad boy
he serves a heady
cocktail of nights
at 17, driving alone
past fields of fireflies,
the constellations
that held your hand through
heartbreak, through
the creak and snap
of growing up. Summer
keeps those stars
in his pocket, and brings
them out just as you tire
of humidity and air conditioning,
the too-obvious beauty
of peonies, zinnias, asters.
And you are seduced again,
your old body feels silvery
and touchable, and before long
you're drinking wine
naked by the edge of a pond,
planning your next good life.



Skinnydipping

Slippery Dip,
that subtle spring,
it froze my toes,
while the sun put
its fingers to my scalp.
My friend took me there
and stripped to her cool white skin;
I tried not to look, but
she glowed in the summer sun.
People swam and picked
along the bank, some beautiful,
some pimpled, full-chested,
broad-hipped, all the kinds
of bodies, frightened and new.
And finally inevitably
a perfect young man fearless
on a rock across the stream.
My eye pulled down
the dark path of his body
to his toes, curled like a child's
on the lip of the rock.
Life is unending glory.
I turned my sight inward,
I thought only of the sun,
the water, that frightening rush,
and I stepped out of my skirt.

4:00 Thunderstorm

Another day of humidity
like a mouth,
holding us hostage to floor fans
and air conditioners,
machines of human comfort.
Any small movement is
a grotesque fleshy labor
of skin on sticky skin,
and we wonder
why we live here.
But finally clouds begin

to pile up on themselves,
the sky a rough sketch
of the mountains below.
At the horizon, we see
the edges blur over towns
and people on the other side
of the valley, a rough
thumb-smear that means
over there it is raining.
I saw that smudge long ago
from the back seat
of an American Rambler sedan
crossing the Plains;

I learned then that Here
where I am is not the same
as There--that someone else
might be the iris of the eye.
We are each of us alone.
Those clouds today, though
are headed this way, after all,
and that Rothko-line summer storm
will move over this town,
and all together
our here and there fields
will drink to the Autumn harvest.





Your Six
(for mhmb)

My friend says
“I’ve got your six,”
holding me up
and keeping me safe,
and in his shelter
I become a clock,
turning through the day
always facing noon or night
with his back to mine.
When the big hand is on the 9
and the small hand is
building a fire, we’ll sing
a song together
about what it means
to make a new friend
in your 50’s--time, like
the mountains, rushing
down on us, begging our
patience. When the alarm
goes off, we’ll be done
and ready for the feast
of time gone by and time
to come in from the rain,
dry your hair,
and begin again.



Fall on Norwottuck

Fall rolls over us, and the mountain
wears taffeta red, falling
sultry off her shoulders.
I hike her flanks with the dog.
The underleaves smell of earthy
promise, and the dog's nose
sees unseen vistas.
We splash in the runnels
that carve stretchmarks down her hips,
imagining that the trees care,
that they watch us pant and trip.
They talk to each other, you know,
through fungus that stretches
like bolts of velvet
beneath the surface;
the quiet makes me whisper
wait dog wait and he stops
ears forward, listening.
I am not designed for this language
like the subsonic rumble of elephants
and for once I am
not important, I am just
two feet with four feet
light on the earth.

Leaves

I've left the leaves unraked; the yard is
unkempt, a slept-in bed. I'm distracted:
other gestures claim my muscles.
I've got sonatas to play
men to flirt with, bread to knead
and the leaves can be gifts
for spring birds and butterflies.
Only my neighbors will care.
If I leave them long enough the mountain
will shrug off her dress and show the sky
her tattooed winter skin;
my yard will be rot and fertility
beneath the snow and
the dog and I--he with his nose
and me with my fast new mind--
will dance in the drifts.



Photo: Morning mist in the Connecticut River Valley, Holyoke Range, Amherst, MA.

In a Valley

people know their skies
with an intimacy nearly lewd:
safety-pinned to the mountains
they settle down over us
like a blanket fort--
they reach down to us,
caress us, go along with us.
Clouds descend daily
to stroke our cheeks,
settling like a mantle
on our shoulders.
More than a subtle flirtation,

this is love, the love of the lid
for the jar, of the vault
for the money, of the skin
for the bones. Does it
change us? On the Great Plains
the sky performs the arc
of parallelism, extending
endlessly in line with the earth
but infinitely never touching--
an austere and loveless bond.
But here in my valley
I lie down with cumulus,
I let it consume me,
I keep it company.



Sara Eddy was born and raised in the Pioneer Valley, attending the public schools in Amherst during the 1970's and 1980's. She received a B.A. in English from Connecticut College and an M.A./PhD. in American Literature from Tufts University, and after too many years away returned to the area

to become a writing instructor at Smith College. Her poems have appeared in *Zingara*, the *Baltimore Review*, and valley literary journal *Meat for Tea*. She has published two books recently: a book of poems about bees and beekeeping, *Tell the Bees*, published by A3 Press in October of 2019, and her book of poems about food, *Full Mouth*, published by Finishing Line Press.

Dominique Thiebaut moved to the Pioneer Valley in the 1980s, from Paris France. Like many residents, he never left the valley, and adopted it as his home, and currently lives in Northampton, MA. He is an avid amateur photographer, spending every opportunity to capture the beauty of our ever changing New England skies. More of his photographs can be found on Instagram (@modiniquet) and here: dominiquethiebaut.com/photography



ISBN



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