

# mountain

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# MOLTING

**I am alone in a one-room cabin** I have rented on the shores of a small pond in the Montana wilderness. Moose soak in the marshy waters below my porch and the stars are knife slits in a dark canvas. Twenty-three years old and two years out of college, my goal for the summer is to dig deeper into who I am, imitate Thoreau, and think about what I want to do with the rest of my life. When we are young we believe that life can be planned.

The cabin has no electricity and no running water. Oil lamps provide light, a wood burning stove warmth, and a large propane tank powers a stove and small refrigerator. I haul potable water from town in an orange, 20-gallon plastic jug and take showers from a suspended utility bucket with a spray nozzle bored into the bottom of it. No phone. No email. No nothing.

**After I write my first rent check I have 17 dollars left in the bank and feel lucky.** I spend my time exploring old Forest Service roads, wandering through fields of wildflowers, fly fishing remote creeks, picking mushrooms in burned-out forests. I sit for hours and listen to the fire crackle. Mule deer snort as I fall asleep. I rise with the sun, heating water for coffee and a shower. I pick berries. Play guitar. Bounce my voice around the cabin. A fawn is killed by a mountain lion outside the cabin one afternoon and I hold her as the dying light drains from her eyes. I bury her the next morning. I start to understand the vast difference between being lonely and just being alone. Alone feels full—you can stand a spoon in it. Lonely is a thin puddle and a fallen electrical line.

To pay the hundred dollar rent each month, I wash dishes three nights a week at a restaurant in Whitefish, 20 miles to the south. The soapy olive oil water mists off the pans as I spray them. When everything is clean, I place my large, orange jug in the basin and fill it with water from the long-necked faucet. I eat my shift meal and drive back to the woods watching for deer in my high beams.

The next day I drive to Tally Lake, just a few minutes up over Hippie Hill, down across Logan Creek to the deepest lake in Montana—492 feet. Tally was the original homesteader. **I follow the curve of the shore, wading in the blue water and notice a rope swing. I grab it, pull back and jump, plunging twice into the cold water, the sun and sky reflecting in the ripples,** drifting away from me, a boy thinking about how he wants to be a man. There is not one choice that is not only and utterly about me.

On the drive back to the cabin, I stop and reach for my fly fishing rod, an old bamboo setup my grandfather used as a boy in New York. I wander through the woods to Logan Creek. Here's a nice riffle where trout might be hiding and I sit on a polished rock while I prepare my line, then stand and cast into the moving waters, trying to float the caddis into the deeper pools downstream. The sun beats down on my shoulders and I take off my shirt. I cast and mend my line, watch the bug drift, drift, drift... waiting for a strike. Suddenly, I am struck with the desire to take off all my clothes. I place my shorts and sandals on a rock and stand knee deep in the bubbling water, casting for fish. It feels good to be naked—if a little stupid too.

I return to the cabin late and fishless. I am peeling away layers this fine summer.

by Brian Schott