




crested butte magazine

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Complimentary



ODE TO OFF SEASON

By Molly Murfee

I shook my fists at the sky as the curtain of moisture balled into hail, snow and then rain, drowning the red-rock heat I'd so desperately traveled to find.

"Sto-o-o-p-p-p!" I begged, yelled and cried at any god, goddess or great spirit that might be listening.

Days before, I'd paced like a caged animal in my tiny Crested Butte home while the rain-snow pelted outside, and my soggy mood sharpened until it threatened to peel the paint off the walls. It was April, or maybe May. A glaciated mountain's worth of roof-slide snow still threatened to seep in through my windowsills. The frozen gray lint of the sky concocted every variety of icy substance known to

man or beast, and threw it about in fitful bursts.

I felt like a mad woman. My bones ached from seven months of winter. I longed to be warm, to wiggle my toes outside of woolen socks, to get sunburned and touch real dirt. So I packed the truck and barreled to Utah, only to find that in the great swath of rain-snow, the canyons were flash flooding.

At times praying seems too feeble a request. I resorted instead to screaming at the top of my lungs.

This is what spring off-season can feel like. It's an excruciatingly slow, insanity-inducing transition. Winter refuses to let go, digging his frigid talons in even deeper, baring his white fangs and spitting



sleet in our faces. A friend turned foe.

In one of these moments, risking a saunter in a small burst of sunshine that interrupts the battering shards, I hear them. The first red-winged blackbirds. To me their sound is synonymous with the rain-snow – the first herald of our returning creatures, their melodious trilling breaking the chill. For after the wind has blown hard enough, the more dainty face of spring begins to shyly peek through. Life is returning.

The great V's of the sandhill cranes, like specks of pepper high in the sky, further zip open the clouded heavens, and the rusted barn door of winter slowly creaks open in their wake as they migrate from

the expanses of the San Luis Valley to the arctic north of Alaska.

Robins follow – those burly members of the thrush family – sometimes pecking through the thin lace of new-fallen snow in search of meager springtime fare. Their red breasts blaze, like cheery ponchos from Mexico, reminding us that despite all current appearances, there are places in the world that are actually warm.

I didn't always notice these things, portents that life was returning. I didn't always know to look forward to the creaks and crawks and songs, as the birds, species by species, slowly returned to their summer home.

I learned. And mostly I learned to prepare. Now October signals



sleet and survive frostbitten nights, and sometimes even days. Every morning I rush outside and crouch in the dirt to see if another spring tendril has found its way from earth toward sky. It's like a month of Christmases.

Life is returning.

My walks along Peanut Lake Road, sometimes the only melted "trail" in town, take on the same nuance of childlike discovery. The first blade of grass poking through the matted remnants of the previous summer. The delicacy of the first spring beauty and determined dwarf bluebell. Glacier lilies popping from the swampy edges of receding snowbanks. The ambrosia of their petals enlightens the tongue.

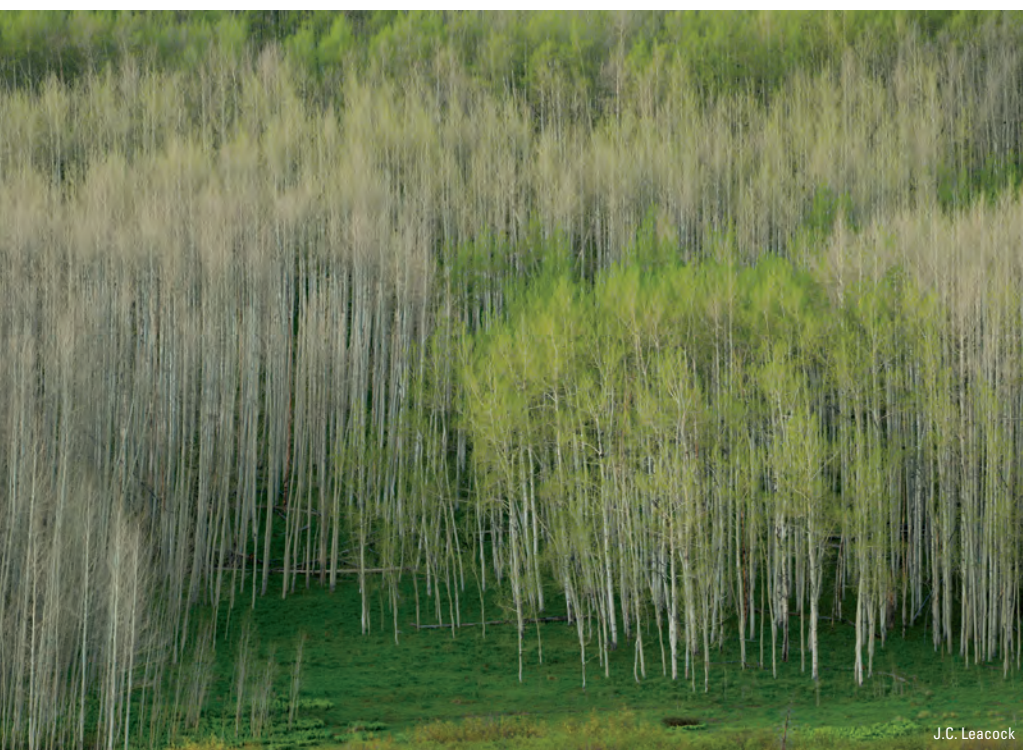
Spring becomes the subtle act of noticing. The first flying insect. The first bumblebee.

Summer, with its riots of wildflowers like the painted rowdies in Toulouse Lautrec's good-time brothels, is hard to miss. But spring is summer's shy sister, the sweet, virginal essence of new beginnings, still flirting from behind her veil.

In spring we pilgrimage to Cement Creek to catch the fuzzy purple vestments of the pasqueflower carpeting the ground beneath the lodgepole pine and sagebrush. Spring finds me roaming the Almont Triangle, getting down on my knees to plunge my nose into the low-lying bouquets of the many-flowered phlox and, after months of white, filling my eyes with the color of crimson paintbrush and arrowleaf balsamroot. In these places I find early salvation while feet of snow still loom on the distant peaks of Paradise Divide.

Spring is one of the gauntlets we pass through to earn our locals' cards. Surviving it becomes a collective badge of accomplishment: "Together, we prevailed." It's easy to love Crested Butte in the summer, when wildflowers rise to tickle our earlobes, the days are warm but not too, and a sunny deck with a cold beer crowns our day's adventure. Fall is no less magical, with crisp, cool mornings and a million aspen leaves turning yellow so the very air hums with gold. Deep winter offers bottomless powder days and the communal euphoria that trails them.

Spring, with its brutal fits of indecision, tests our love and lets us earn the right to call this place home. A lifelong partnership doesn't come only from honoring the easy parts: e.g. the partner who's all dressed up in sexy sundress, strappy sandals and sparkling



a visit to the local garden stores, where colorful promises of tulips, daffodils and hyacinths lay in dried, dead-looking bundles. At the season's last Farmers' Market, darting between winter's early fits, I seek garlic. Siberian (fitting, I think). Brown Tempest. Purple Glazer. I load garlic and bulbs by the small sackfuls, then rush home to engage in the odd act of hoeing in the fall. I plunge the bulbs into the cold earth, tuck them under a

blanket of hay to protect them from the sub-zero temperatures of January, and whisper "good luck" with a chuckle of expectation.

All but forgotten through the numbing winter months, the stout shoots of the garlic and tiny snowdrop come to save me amid spring's bouts of rain-snow. Their brave leafy spears pierce the layer of frozen granules. The first green of the season appears so fragile, yet these shoots face storms of



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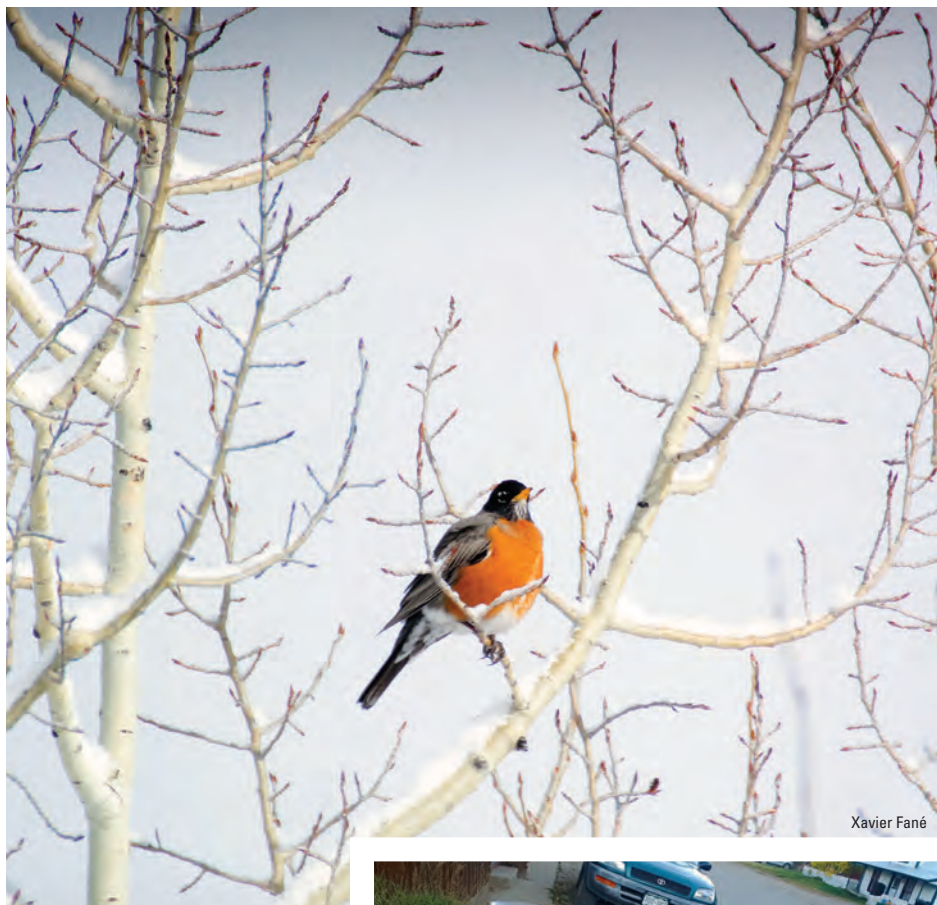
Broker Associate

970-209-1210

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Xavier Fané



Dawne Belloise

mood for a night on the town.

A true lover still sees the beauty of the beloved in her bathrobe, curled on the couch with menstrual cramps, sobbing at romantic comedies. This is a Crested Butte spring.

Yet spring also gifts us the magic of watching a world come back to life. The manic schedule of summer awaits, but now there is time. Time to sleep until you wake, with no alarm or purpose. To wander to the coffee shop for a frothy quad mocha with fresh hazelnut milk. Then to sit on a bench through noon, practicing your skills of eyeballing who is going over 15 m.p.h. To greet new babies who emerged between snows, and to scratch old dogs behind the ears.

Spring off-season, when you know everyone at the bar or on the street, is a time to chat with the liquor store clerk or a neighbor at the post office without rushing to the next chore. This is the “pause” button in an over-scheduled, over-burdened world of expectation and speed. Time crawls so languorously that even the single car on Elk Avenue intrudes on the absolute halt in the air.

The unfolding becomes so exquisite I don’t want to miss a single moment. The

first butterfly dries her wings on the warm rock of my garden border. The first bluebird, equal to a rainbow in fresh promises and hope, flits through air that is misted with vapors rising from mud puddles, still-damp streets and saturated earth. I hear the trill of the first broadtailed hummingbird as he scouts for flowers. The first aspen leaf tenderly unfurls the shocking chartreuse that is even more fleeting, even more precious, than the gold robes of autumn. I watch the snow melt and the creek rise, until the tumult of water crashes through town with a soaring energy of becoming – finally – unleashed.

The air fills with an electrified green current, and we walk around with our jaws gaping, as if this miracle has never happened before. **cb**