To a Mountain Lion

Robert Cooperman
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To a mountain lion, if it moves and breathes and it's not a bear, it's food: like me that turquoise Colorado day I barely noticed the trailhead warning sign before digging my legs into the uphill slope, blissfully snapping photos along the way for my out-of-town wife: scenes of the alchemical aspens, wind-driven gold.

I'd stashed my second empty water bottle when my bladder drummed like a thumping hare, but I knew, just knew, something big was panting behind me, the direction cougars prefer to attack from.

I wheeled: to shout, wave my arms above my head, fling anything hard and heavy, to hit and kick and bite. Nothing was there. But that sign had finally worked its splinter into my brain.

All the way back I heard something stalking me, its breaths a steel rasp; it stopped when I stopped, kept pace when I walked faster its low growl assuring me,

"You were lucky this time, but I'll be waiting."