

IT OCCURS TO ME, as I write this, that the foreword to this book might be better thought of as an afterword. "When you grow up, are you going to be a scientist or a...chef?" Eventually the term ended and I was on the windy mountain road to camp, still slightly worried that I'd made a wrong turn in life. My doubt, however, was shortlived. The camp delivered on its promise, concentrating all the idylls of youth: beauty manifest in lakes, mountains, people; richness in experience, conversation, friendships. Nights during a full moon, the light flooded the wilderness, so it was possible to hike without a headlamp. We would hit the trail at two A.M., summing the nearest peak, Mount Tallac, just before sunrise, the clear, starry night reflected in the flat, still lakes spread below us. Snuggled together in sleeping bags at the peak, nearly ten thousand feet up, we weathered frigid blasts of wind with coffee someone had been thoughtful enough to bring. And then we would sit and watch as the first hint of sunlight, a light tinge of day blue, would leak out of the eastern horizon, slowly erasing the stars. The day sky would spread wide and high, until the first ray of the sun made an appearance. The morning commuters began to animate the distant South Lake Tahoe roads. But craning your head back, you could see the day's blue darken halfway across the sky, and to the west, the night remained yet unconquered—pitch-black, stars in full glimmer, the full moon still pinned in the sky. To the east, the full light of day beamed toward you; to the west, night reigned with no hint of surrender. No philosopher can explain the sublime better than this, standing between day and night. It was as if this were the moment God said, "Let there be light!" The desert offered a pantheon of terrors: tarantulas, wolf spiders, fiddlebacks, bark scorpions, whip scorpions, centipedes, diamondbacks, sidewinders, Mojave greens. I found Eliot's metaphors leaking into my own language.