

THE WAY BACK HOME

Up early for a try for the top. How light we feel without the packs. I recall a rodomontade by Jack Kerouac "... in that flash I realized *it's impossible to fall off mountains you fool* and with a yodel of my own I suddenly got up and started running down the mountain after him ..." I am butted again by the wind, and squat lower and hold on. Perhaps on the way down . . .

But finally there it is, and worth it —

Alpine summit
all the clouds going
the same place

The air is light and incredibly bracing. It smells of snow and rock, old and unsullied. We can't breathe enough of it in, after the smoke and catarrh of the keening. We speak in great fogs which dissipate instantly. I can feel the chill deep in my lungs, and it is a calm thing, something good. I want to carry that with me all the way down the mountain, back through the city, through the country, through the air, all the way back home.

Alpine meadow
in the center of the bowl
little me

down the mountain —
the bumpy flight
of a falcon's shadow

wolf scat . . .
the dog and I
both stop

IN THE DARK

The crossing is even slower going back. We are told an airstrike took place just over the border last night, and the area remains unsafe. From up here on the ridge we can see the cratered valley. A few vehicles are left behind, smoking, but all else is quiet. The driver asks around, and we agree to go on.

after the bombing
random flights
of swallows

The bus pulls in at M., a gritty industrial town, to bright sunshine. We decide to stop. At a café a

few blocks away Z. spots someone he knows, and soon we have a place to stay. We drink beer and tell the story of our journey. Though we hadn't discussed it, we both omit the morning's passage. Already I have trouble seeing it clearly in my mind. Clouds roll in and a cold rain begins to fall. It is the kind of rain which swallows light, and we make our way to our friend's crowded apartment very late and very much in the dark.

out on strike
the uncomfortable hang
of his hands

night lightning
the silhouette
of TV aerials

Balkan lunch —
the blade of the knife
licked clean

ONE ANOTHER

The next morning clears, and I walk along the river, kicking marrons into the water and watching them float downstream. The current is swift, and they are out of sight in seconds.

From across the river the aromas of strong coffee and roasting meat come in from the Turkish quarter, and I am pulled in that direction.

vaulted bridge
a stranger stops to light
my cigarette

The sun multiplies itself throughout the bazaar

in the caches of beaten and burnished metalware, the cobblestones, the rounded piles of fruit. I squint and pretend to look at some rugs in the dark of a tent. I am offered apple tea, which is soothing and hot, and makes me aware that for all its brilliance it is a cool day and I am slightly shivering. The shopkeeper is friendly and well-read, and we spend a pleasant hour discussing, in English, the impossibility of ever coming to understand one another.

a foreign tongue—
the grounds of coffee
in the demitasse

small talk
the curl of smoke goes wild
just over his head

hazy moon
the Muslim woman's eyes
behind her veil

NO PLACE

It gets greener as we move closer to home.

It is balmy when the bus pulls in, though it is after sundown. We stow our duffels beneath the seats of the village bar, drink local beer, listen to Leonard Cohen on the PA. The leaves have been gilded during our absence, and the street lamps light up the undersides. Young girls, born after the songs were first recorded, sing along out of tune and rhythm, and with laughter. When the owner makes signs that he'd like to close, we walk the small town center, not yet ready to go home. We are still within the bubble of this trip, and are resisting its bursting.

returning home
the chessmen have maintained
my lost position

The next morning we arrive at the airport in plenty of time, then sit in a smoky bar without saying much. The airport is brightly lit, generic, not any place specific but a place between places; really, no place.

the morning star
over the mountain--
longing for home

goodbye hugs
all the places
where we touch

crowded terminal
the begging man talks
to himself

OF THE WORLD

I suppose I slept, and have some recollection of ragged dreams—of the glinting of multiple suns, of firelight and wine, of planets and the baying of wolves. The man in the next seat jostled me each time he shifted. His gold incisor shone when his mouth fell open in sleep. He was grizzled and smelled of goat, a nomad bereft of his flock, on his way—where?

V. met me at the airport, and what I spoke was jumbled together, a mass of images without focus. I slept more in the car, and all night and into the morning at home. At my late brunch I find she has been having a journey of her own.

home from abroad—
on the kitchen table
the atlas of the world

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