

ON PATHS

82 shorter highcountry poems

CLIFF CREGO

*“We, the violent ones, we last longer.
But when, in which of all our lives,
are we finally open and receivers.”*

Rainer Maria Rilke

*for all those friends
who have given me refuge
along the way*



On Paths: Part I

The pass is clearly
in view,

but the way—
how impossibly confused.

Natural History

I pick up the axe
and in a split second cleave
the tree's slowly grown past
timeline back into the present.

Wood-metal sound and I feel
the awe of Peking Man flow
through me.

It is listening to these sounds
that keeps the sacred fire
a l i v e.

Special Delivery

Every day, when I go out
to get the mail,
I feel a secret desire
to find a letter that will
change my life.

It's time I wrote
that letter myself.

Getting Ready . . .

Getting ready, sorting gear
trying to prepare myself
for every eventuality,

as the day of departure
recedes further and further
into the distance.

The Waiting Room

The electronic door snaps open. First retreating, one foot reluctantly crossing over into the uncertain cleanliness of shadowless spaces, the other soothed into surrender by the soft rounded sounds of a mechanical movement of air.

The little room is empty.

*Was the music on before I entered?
If no one is listening, does it exist?*

Suddenly, a smile slides open, registering identity. I murmur something quickly as the smile folds back into the blankness of the white wall.

Sitting. Waiting. So striking how we first sweep the life out of a space and then try to fill it with half-hearted gestures, primal recollections, our way of secretly sharing with each other how wrong this all is.

Calendar photos of distant places, magazines overflowing with healthy, happy faces, and plants, ah yes, the obligatory plant in the corner.
Real or plastic? The question

of our time . . .

The next step of evolution?

The natural imitation
of artificial life, a camouflage
to protect from the loneliness
of neglect.

(Amsterdam, Holland)

Difficulties

On the way, it's very
difficult not to lose things,

but even harder not to
pick up more than you need.

The Color of Time

Losing one's youth is losing the
illusion of control over one's body.

Looking in the mirror, I feel alive,
vibrating—but all those gray hairs!

Uninvited visitors who have come to stay.

End of Season

So strange, the beautiful,
quiet land—

with so many empty chairs.

Stone Mountains

If one carries the mountain in one's heart, to
pick up the stone is to pick up the mountain,
the world.

But for us, a stone is just a stone and nothing
more, just so much dead weight,
like a pack which grows heavier
with each passing step.

Half way up, half broken, turning back . . .
and the sound of stone mountains
just *is*—in the wind.

The Slip

Coming down
a steep icy path,

a slip instantly corrected,
forgotten, moving on.

Why can't I live like that?

One Morning

One morning, the mountain farmer goes out
to milk his goats and never comes back;

A quiet stream leaps from the edge of a high
granite cliff and disappears into the late
summer air;

Sitting in an alpine meadow, more flowers
than grass, the sound of delicate bells
rings out,

 wave after wave,

from the metal which sleeps in rocks.

The Professor

Red socks tucked into
impeccable gray-green
knickers,

relaxed, confident,
with the refined fingers
of a concert pianist,

tapping with his cane,
he gives just the right
emphasis to his last remark:

*“Beautiful mountains, these . . .
But, too many rocks!”*

The Other Way Around

Walking down with his lambs,
about twenty of them, all male,
still covered with the crusty manure
of the winter barn,

round as a bear, dressed from
head to toe in 2nd-hand army
wool that he wears like fur,

standing in the middle of the
cold, fast-flowing stream,
big-bearded smile, he kicks
the lambs across, one by one,
puffing on his pipe all the while.

He tells me:

*“My wife used to come here
with the goats as a child.”*

*“Once, they brought up
a priest from the village below
to bless this spring.”*

*“She’s always said, it’s the other way
around—it’s the spring that blesses us.”*

The Botanical Gardens

(1)

How nice: *There's Gentian!*
And Anenome. Old friends—

on paid vacation.

(2)

After a while, I've noticed
that I tend to read the signs first.

Pilgrims

Not
yet
far
from
home

the
full
bus

drives
straight
across

the spring
with healing waters

without
a
name.

The Spring

The cowherd pointed
on the map and said,

*“If you can find it,
you must visit this spring.
The water there is very mysterious.”*

*“Years ago, they wanted to sell it,
but it burst the bottles—
every time.”*

The Well

At the village center
a woman fetches water
from a well.

She tells me,

*“All my life
the flow of this water
has never changed.*

*“It was constant during the war
and when my sons did not return,
and it was constant during the time
they built the road and then the dam.*

*“Even during the Winter of ‘51
it did not freeze.*

*“But last Spring,
for the first time in my life,
it was silent of seven days
and then ran muddy for
weeks after that.*

*“This well
never did that
before.”*

Every Valley Remembers

Two neighbors working,
tapping out the blade,

the complementary rhythms of
2s and 3s.

Distance and a summer breeze
do strange things to sound,

the sharp tang of heavy hammer
on anvil planted on heavy rock,

the delicate edge moves slowly
round the tapping of the blade,
a new moon moving from East
to West.

Higher up the mountain, silver
consonants ricochet off nameless
steep granite walls . . .

Wide awake, noon rest finished,
these sounds—were not made today.

Here

On the way,
many beautiful camps
offer themselves for the night.

But to know,
when to keep walking and
when to stay,

and, after stopping,
to know without a doubt
that this place, where one stands,

here

I am at home.

More Than Three

for Carlo

My three loves—

Music, Poetry,
Philosophy—

lie nested together, side by side,
like the three nuts in the chestnut's
prickly husk.

Together as one they are more than three.

Better, not to give this one a name.

A Village Café

Sitting at a table
sharing stories in a
small café,

round ripples of laughter
resonate in the wine . . .

four glasses,
one movement.

The Toad

A little toad,
not more than
half a thumb big,
goes . .

hop-hop, hop-hop . .

Our ways cross—
same path.

Walking the World: *Look at the Mountain!*

Having physically touched and lifted countless rocks, my eyes sense effortlessly the mountain's rough, cold texture, its immensity, its great weight.

But this image, while certainly as real as it is beautiful, is still just an image, strangely ungrounded, distant. Looking through my glass, I notice how the sight of two climbers slowly crossing a steep snowfield instantly provides not only proportion, but also a feeling for absolute size—a kind of kindred presence, bringing that which is far away closer to home.

And yet, to actually cross the snowfield *oneself*—step by step, breath by breath—is in some profound sense truly to make the mountain your own. And that's the wonder of walking: it threads the world and oneself together into one, inseparable weave. I say the world is not just seen, but *made*—with the soles of my feet.

On Paths: Part II

Without a map—
it's hard to know

when you are not where
you thought you were.

The Passageway

Have you ever noticed how the shape
of the Earth always seems to be asking
us questions?

Sometimes she's just teasing us; others,
asking the most serious questions of all.

The way a trail folds into the gentle turn
of a hill, half a mile from a lonely shack,
each morning asking,

"Is someone coming? Is someone coming?"

Or a long day's journey over endless spring
snow and rugged scree, an unexpected
green meadow, small pond,
quiet stream,

a soft-spoken query, hesitant, like a
shy young man asking,

"Aren't you going to spend the night?"

And further to the East, irresistible, pulling
one towards it like the edge of an airy cliff,

a huge V-like opening cut straight through
the high walls of a granite ridge,

“A way through to the other side?”

.....Perhaps.

The possibility of a passageway.

It's there. Ever-present. Massive.
Written in the rocks.

An Old Hunter

Three of us resting on a sunny slope,
a carpet of prickly juniper,
the shiny leaves and red berries
of kinnikinnik.

He was coming down, alone,
holding a tied bundle of wild
wormwood.

All silver-gray, so pungent,
tiny yellow flowers that seem
almost afraid to open...

*"I just watch now.
It is better that way."*

"Stay here all Winter."

He points and says,

*"Look! Chamois,
15 females, 8 or so young;
they're all heading over
that ridge."*

*"No, no.
No black bear here.
Too many guns, too*

much granite."

He hands us a few of the bitter leaves
to taste,

"A r - t e - m i - s i - a"

I say to him. He says,

"Yes, yes! Artemisia, I see. I see."

In the South, the herb of the hunter's
goddess. He smiles and writes it
with his left hand in the air.

*"It's possible! The great brown bear,
many years from now. Yes, yes, it's
possible."*

He puts his felt cap back on and quickly looks
with his glass up the north side of the steep slope.

*"Yes, yes. In this valley, with new moon in
Winter, you can almost hear Orion breathing
at night... ...the great one, it's possible,
it's possible."*

First Fire

Burning candle, match lit, a solitary flame
passed on to a handful of dry pine.

Is there really this or that fire?
Or is there just f i r e?
a source ever-present.

Smell of smoke, pinched eyes, ears cracked
open as the primal flame bursts into awareness.

Deep within, the body moves to the music
sung to the sun-god
brought down
to earth.

Only Here

Thick mist, moving
from stone to stone.

Two days ago, I
walked off my last map.

Crossing dirty firn snow,
the rocks on the way down
said,

*“How can you be lost
if you don’t know where
you are?”*

Still further down,
the trees said,

*“Stay here. There’s good
water over there.”*

Being lost—
everywhere, the
best way to make

new friends.

Love Letter

I wrote on the outside,

*“Have seen many Vanessas, all
above treeline, all heading South.”*

*“One wonders, from Dutch burning nettle
to the sweet heel of the Italian boot, how
do they find their way?”*

Coffee finished, the
waitress smiles as I
place the sugar packet
with its colorful butterfly
into the gray envelope,

and seal it carefully—
with a kiss..

Border Crossing

Not a word penetrated
the thick glass boundary.

Changing money,
all I had to do
was—

show the bills.

New Clothes

All these bright colored clothes!
The noise of city streets shouting,

“Here I am! Get out of the way!”

How much more beautiful to disappear
into the rich hues of an October day,

simple garments, subtle weaves,
threads the color of solitude.

Night Fire

Why do the best things seem
to come unasked for,
of themselves...?

the shade of a juniper,
the shared smile
on a city street,

or these windless nights,
smoke rising, straight
and true,

two sitting together, watching
coals, now suddenly—

stars.

Night Flight

Suddenly, a distant roar
fills the steeply
walled valley.

A sound cascading,
wrapping round itself,
moving in all directions at once.

Barely visible on the eastern horizon,
a softly glowing blue-green body
with one intense flashing red eye,

zooms in on a straight-line path,
utterly confident of its purpose,
its destination.

Wind-sound pushing us right down
to the ground, thunder then dissipating,
its head of whirling energy
flattens out into the silence
of the spinning red light.

Already returning, three uniformed
men swiftly carry the young mother
and her little child away, while
the creature—

m o t i o n l e s s,

roars itself into high energy, leaps
from its rock, and,
without a trace of hesitation,
gives itself back

to the night.

Burial Place

*“Erect no monument. Let but the rose
flower each year on his behalf.”*

Rainer Maria Rilke

SONNETS TO ORPHEUS V [FIRST PART]

Turning back

Inside of me,
a hammer taps
a little bell, and reveals
a minute, invisible crack,
inside of me;

Inside of me, these strange epitaphs
that do not rest in peace,
that do not ring out fully
into the mountain silence;

A place where no one
dares venture, but
that everyone knows exists,
and cannot forget.

Even the crows do not stop here,
and the trees enter Winter without bud.
But the sound of just one of those poems....

.....a rainbow that could span galaxies.

(Raron, Switzerland)

Mountain Flax

On the wall,
to the side of the tracks,
unwanted,
the grating noise of
unnatural form and color.
the artifacts of
digitized day-glo eyes,
full of computer scans
and CD-voodoo.

Why does this mechanical
movement of imitation always
make its way over the great
water, from West to East,
from America to Europe?

Is it because this is the way
the Earth itself moves...?

To the side of the tracks,

a magnificent *Linaria alpina*,
setting root in greasy gravel,

orange/purple pioneer of new-found land,
the humble mountain flax,
at home in the deep cold and
loose granite of glacier moraines.

Just passing through...?

The train backs out with a sudden jolt—

Why do they always have
to spray the weeds...?

*(Zürich, Central Station,
Switzerland)*

Graffiti

On the wall—

no more space

The Knife

The tool needed to fix
the knife was on the knife.

A Hut

Side by side
a granite boulder,
a hut with a stone roof—

I noticed the boulder first.

Difference

In the mountains, a bit
of flatland is precious;

In the lowlands, just a little
hill offers relief.

Difference:—How it's loved
everywhere.

The Scythe

Must awareness always be so slow
in coming?

I've learned to sense each rock,
each change in the lay of the land
before I cut—

But my scythe!

So hopelessly full of gouges and cracks,
its tip—no longer whole.

Barn Work

*A farmer's life is measured
by the pitchforks full,
of hay, of manure,
of the mountain
of work
which is each day
left undone.*

(1)

Working in the barn all day,
moving manure from here
to there.

Evening, and the low door opens
all by itself. Walking out the door,
I bump my head against the stars.

(2)

Life inside the stomach of a cow!

Low ceiling, pigshit smells,
moving manure from here to
there.

Late summer hay is mid-winter joy.

The goat's eyes are filled with delicate
bells pouring over into the sweetness
of milk. A last drop and the bucket is full,
the gentle waves of a warm evening wind.

(3)

The gift of labor.

Working together on a neighbor's
farm, moving manure from here
to there.

An old wheelbarrow,
the wooden handle's worn thin
as a bone—on one side only—the
right side.

They say his older brother
died young.

A Daisy of Dry Meadows

for Max

We count the rays, knowing
that the metamorphosis
of plants is also our own,

clear centers which turn
around the great play
of loss and rebirth.

Pray for just 10 more days of Summer.
Hay cut, carefully dried, put up
in the winter barn.

Work finished, the farmer
knows what the philosopher
only longs for:—

No stone, but a song
which snaps shut resolutely,
without a thought,

leaving plenitudes of questioning
silence between so many
unnamed stars and the
snows which are sure to fall.

Winter Paths

More than three feet of snow
has healed the deeply scared
landscape.

Even the houses seem more
at peace with the Earth.

But those winter paths . . .

winding, sensuous,
unhurried rhythms,

a drifting of the
timeless music of
long, cold—

white nights.

Processional

*(After six months
of walking on snow
one grows tired of it,
and wishes naturally
to give thanks to somewhere
that the Winter is again almost over,
and that no houses or barns,
or friends or family, have
been lost . . .)*

Not yet light, walking up an asphalt
road, lost, looking for a trailhead.

The man, whose face I could not quite see,
speaking in an ancient dialect I knew
might soon disappear, said,

“We lost my father that winter. Everything.

“The snow swept down on all sides.

*“It took down a house that had stood
there for more than 300 years.*

*“Very peculiar, this. Don’t you think?
Very peculiar.”*

...Mark the day of the Patron Saint
of a safe Winter's passage...

The village people, young and old, walk
lethargically through the misty morning snow,
singing hymns, the words of which no
one can quite seem to remember,
yet thankful somehow, and,
for the mean time, free of fear
about what the next, now very distant,
Winter might bring.

The Revolving Door

A man and a woman meet, the
edge of two worlds, the north and south
faces of a revolving door.

The transparency of the glass
makes it clear to them both the need
for complementary intentions,

the necessity of moving
together:—his *in* is her *out*,
as the dance completes itself, of

itself, and the revolving door,
now empty, swings round its middle,
as faces turn and eyes meet, once more.

Mountain, Chapel, Cemetery and Tree

A snow-covered mountain, a
chapel made of stones;
a cemetery which holds
the light and the darkness
that entwines them both.

A shadow falls from a Linden tree,
its crest now broken after so many years.

Planted with such care, two seedlings grow
and will take its place.

As two young men walk swiftly past,
the mountain's face begins to glow...

Will their roots reach deep water?
Will they, too, embrace the light?

The Bell

The point at the center of a cross,
where wet and cold meets warm and dry,
and flowing waters and cultures divide.

North side and South side—
how could I ever choose? Swaying
back and forth, I am the bell
that rings out on all sides.

Walking the World: *On Water in flowing Movement*

Rushing energy fills the air! Being careful not to get wet, boots step from stone to stone like a child just learning to play the piano, trying hard to hit the right notes in a sea of possible errors. The joy of a world of self-made bridges, used then forgotten, leaving no trace. On the other side, water bottle filled, I move on up a steep slope.

From above, the whole of the stream seems so utterly constant, a silver thread shimmering, weaving, feeling its way down the mountain.

It is this movement which gives shape to the form, and it is the structure of the bed of the stream, cut deep into the granite rock, which gives order to the movement. A necessary unity, it seems.

The water in my pack which quenches my thirst is not the stream. I can take the water with me but I can't get hold of the movement. There is something beautiful in that. At best, I can try to point at it, but the pointing itself is not the movement which is the stream, although I admit that I frequently confuse the two. And it is this movement which one leaves behind as oneself, too, moves on.

Walking the World: *The Devil Stands on the other Side*

*Intellect builds good roads,
but only intelligence
knows when not
to build them.*

I can already hear the intense, steady roar of the stream, swollen with all the rain of the past three days.

For hours now, I've been climbing up through dense spruce forest. The trail is faint and little used, and there's a lot of windthrow about. It's remarkable how these difficulties transform the story-like movements of a well-made path into something more like an abstruse argument, full of many hard to follow twists and turns.

As the rain begins to mix with mist and wet snow, I make a short descent to a large, open meadow which must have been cleared generations ago for pasture. Towards the back, with its rear wall built against a sheer granite rockface, there's an abandoned shepherd's hut. Made of stone, facing South, the hut's surrounded on either side by groves of larch trees. The delicate yellow of their needles reminds me that the nights will be getting colder now. And that it won't be long before I can expect heavy snow above timberline.

To me, places like this, especially when I've been out

walking for weeks on end and I'm alone, seem filled with an almost surreal resonance of the past. It's as if all that once happened here continues invisibly to echo like sounds lost in space, and to reach out in a subtle way to touch and shape the present moment.

Why is there no one here? Not that long ago, they probably would have used the hut for five or six weeks during the summer months. They would have made cheese and kept perhaps about twenty or thirty milk cows. One can almost hear the voices of children playing, of the men rounding up the animals, see and smell the smoke of alder rising up out of the chimney.

I lean up against one of the old larches and walk my backpack slowly down to where I can ease it off and onto the ground. "*That's better*", I say out loud to myself. Just to be free of all that weight for a moment! I take out a pocket knife I've had for years and go straight for some bread and cheese I have stashed in the top of my pack. Even though I can't see much past the crowns of the trees, the weather doesn't feel like it's going to get worse. Not much wind, and the barometer's slowly rising.

The meadow is here and there overgrown with weeds. There are patches of spiniest thistle, with its tough central stalk standing a good head or two above all the other plants, and leaves so well-equipped with thorns and sharp edges that even the hungriest of goats would not touch it. A sad form of natural selection, this. Much

like how only the most corrupt of men is left standing tall in the fiercely competitive battlefields of politics fired not by ideas, but by money. To the side of the hut, there's an area about the size of two or three small suburban backyards that's grown into an entire sea of coarse alpine rhubarb, always a sure sign of overgrazing. And of too much manure concentrated in too small a space. Maybe that's why they left.

The hut is clearly marked on the map. "*Not much of a place to spend the night,*" I think to myself. There's also a bridge indicated about hundred and fifty meters southwest of here. That's the water I could hear before I came down to the meadow. I still have three or four hours before I need to set up a camp, but even so it doesn't look like I'll make it over the pass I had hoped for today.

Arriving at the stream, I suddenly realize why the trail has fallen into disfavor. The bridge is washed out. Not during the storm of the past few days, but probably a couple of years ago. Raging full and wild, the stream is now a torrent. I ponder the situation for a while, filled with the intense, almost oppressive sound of the rushing water. It's funny. If one's alone, it sometimes takes quite a bit longer for a fairly obvious situation to sink in. I decide reluctantly that, with my heavy pack, it would be too risky to attempt a crossing, so there's nothing left to do but to turn around and go back the way I came.

Walking down, a bit wet and weary, it occurs to me how we have come to take our ease of movement so for grant-

ed. Like most people, I grew up in a world where roads and bridges were already largely in place and as much a part of the landscape as streams, fields and forests. If this is all one has experienced, it can be extremely difficult to go back in time to get a sense of the land *as it once was*, and, in many cases, *how it might naturally wish to become again*. In this sense, perhaps one could say that this original wildness of a place—even that of a thin strip of weeds alongside of a busy highway—never really goes away. And perhaps more than anything else, it's the movement of walking itself which brings us back into resonance with it. As we walk, we can't help but become more and more sensitive to the profusion of disharmonious structures which have over the years been built upon the land.

This includes, of course, roads themselves. From the walker's point of view, *every road has two sides*; it makes it easier to get to places, which, because of the road itself and what it brings, are frequently less and less worth going to.

On a long trek like this, through spectacularly rugged mountains like the Alps, easily gaining or losing 1500 meters of altitude in a single day, crossing over ridges, passes and complex glacier fields, I have much occasion to meditate upon this theme of wildness. This is because I still need to drop down into villages, traffic and the noisy chaos of tourist towns every three or four days for provisions. I don't mind though. I find the rhythmic

back and forth, with the extreme, razorsharp contrasts of Nature and Culture, both exciting and enlightening.

How different things must have been in the not-that-distant past. In the European Alps, which before they were developed in many ways must have resembled the Northern Cascades of the Pacific Northwest, there were places where the Earth would have said *resoundingly no*, where a road or track would have naturally been brought to a halt by some insurmountable difficulty: a wall of solid granite which could not be by-passed, or a gorge too wide to bridge. One can imagine that some cultures would have perhaps been at peace with such natural limitations, but with this great outward bound movement which is so characteristic of Western culture, with its emphasis on mechanical measure and technology, thought projected the possibility of boring a tunnel straight through the mountain, or bridging the gap. And generally, as soon as the means became available, this is precisely what was done, regardless of long-term consequences or possible negative side-effects.

As I come back down to the bottom of the narrow valley where I camped the night before, the path leads out onto a concrete dam and across to the other side and another trail. This time with a bridge, I hope. The glacier run-off backed up in the small reservoir has that characteristically eerie, opaque, milky green color. This is but a small, secondary or tertiary dam. The water here is tapped off and led directly through the mountain on to a much larger dam via tunnels more than two and half meters high.

What strikes me most about a dam like this, one of the many I've seen on this and other trips, is the utter lack of restraint which it represents. The dam is evidently built simply because *it can* be built. One need look no further than the dry riverbed opposite the dam to see for oneself the remarkably callous and destructive character of this metaphysics of no limits.

Remarkably, this problem of natural limits is not as recent as we might think. There's an ancient myth which is common both to the German and Italian-speaking areas of these mountains which tells of a possible passageway across a steep and treacherous gorge. One must remember that this was long ago when the lives of the people of mountain cultures were intimately intertwined with the movements of Nature generally, and that they were still very much in awe, not only of the Earth's beauty and abundance, but also of its at times utterly indifferent fierceness. With this in mind, here's how I've heard the story told:

Now, just at the point where a road would reach more friendly terrain and make for easy commerce between up- and lowland villages, there is a fearsome chasm. Here, the river roars so wildly that it dampens the sun with a thick cloud of icy mist on even the brightest of days. And here, one day at the beginning of Spring, the Devil appears. He offers to help the villagers build a bridge to the other side. But there is one condition which must be met. The first soul to cross the bridge must be his. The bridge is built and the villagers try to trick the devil by driving a she-goat across first. But the Devil will not be so easily fooled. He insists that the contract be met in full...

At the same time, it must be said that *there is* something truly marvelous about the knowledge, the technical ability and, I suppose, the audacity and determination, which enable a large-scale bridge or dam to be built. But may the gods save us from the culture that has this capability, but without any sense of *right measure* or *real necessity*. And, more especially, without any love of Earth in its heart. For surely, change always has a potential devil waiting for us on the other side. Seeing this is seeing the fact that, no less important than the power of the intellect which builds the bridge or the dam, is the clarity of intelligence which sees that it would be wrong or inappropriate to do so.

* * *

These are the thoughts which cross my mind as, high and dry and full of gratitude for those who built this simple bridge of but a single log, I pause and look down at the rushing water below me. *This sound*—somehow it enfolds a secret. Moving from the beginnings of time from high peak to distant sea, it is the sound which brings the cycle round.

On Paths: Part III

When worried about the finish
before getting started,

I know I'm
on the wrong
path.

Of Cars and Boots

My friends who own cars
tell me they can be in the high
country in but half a day.

No car, just a pack and a pair
of old boots, but I say *I stay*—
in the mountains.

Pay Day

He handed me twelve 100 frank notes
for a Summer's work.

I must confess, the only two things
I know about the ways of money,
are whether I have it or not.
I thought, well, what
am I going to do?

Then I thought, with
a pound of blueberries,
gathered and sold,
I can get more than that
much buckwheat. A
pretty good deal. That's a fact.

Then I had second thoughts.
Half a Summer's work for
a pair of boots?—

Well, maybe it's worth it.
With new soles here and there,
I can get 2 or 3 thousand miles
out of them. Not a bad deal!

That will get me far enough
from this place. And walking
is for free. Now—that's a fact.

Fire Starter

When short of kindling,
I must confess, the first thing to go
is the literary journals;

Then the guide books, and
only very reluctantly the dictionary
and then the maps.

But my notebook? Well, if it must,
that too. But blank pages first,
or those scribbled with numbers and poems?
Now, it's getting cold, I'm alone,
and I'm of two minds. Think of that.

Night Watch

Flash goes the lightning.

In the tent, the air is calm
and the candle's flame is motionless.

Flash goes the lightning.

Outside the tent, the terrifying
sound of huge boulders swept away
by a river rising fast.

Flash goes the lightning.

In the tent, the air is calm
and the candle's flame is motionless.

Cafés

(1)

Opening the door of the café, I see
that it is empty.

Walking into the room, the wooden
floor creaks like frozen snow under
mountain moonlight.

The windows are closed.
In a corner is perched a stuffed
golden eagle, wings spread
out the length of a man, with a lamb
clutched in its talons. Both claws
and beak painted a yellow
brighter than life.

I ring a bell at a table, which
is promptly answered by sounds
coming from a speaker on a wall
opposite the lamb and the eagle.

The music piped in is stranger
than life, electric instruments,
electric recording, electric speaker...

A shaft of sunlight peaks through
a window, hitting first the table,

then a hand-carved cross of stone pine
just behind me, above my head.

Still, there's no one in the room.
Time enough to ponder the things
we put up on walls . . .

(2)

When one returns to a café,
even after many years, one
tends to sit at the same table.

Who says repetition
is such a bad thing?

(3)

The waitress looks at the stranger,
seeing his pack, wishing
she could walk off with him.

The man looks at the waitress
and sees suddenly in himself
a more responsible side—
a master of small talk,
of mixed salads, of a
home where the door's left
open even when it rains.

Applause

(1)

Skiing down a steep,
icy, dangerous slope,

the camera zooms in
for a close-up:

Where does the theater end,
and the real performance begin?

(2)

There were no witnesses.
Even the crows cried, "*Bravo!*"

(3)

The conductor finished
before the piece was over,

as the orchestra crashed
into the last bars.

The audience stood to their
feet, clapping. In the square arena,
names in gilt on a background
of sky blue.

Evidently, this has
happened before.

(4)

When worried about the finish
before getting started,

I know I'm
on the wrong
path.

Hut Caretaker

for Paul

People come and go,
come and go.
So he knows enough
of city life to write a book
about it:.

*“You can only know the land
you can walk in a single day.”*

He hadn't said it. Or
even read it.

He *knew* it,
Yes. He *knew* it—all the same.

Flash of Insight

Believe it or not, there was a book
on the summit. Believe it or not.

One must see these things for oneself:
a metal box bolted to solid granite.

The book was old, but
untouched by wind or weather.

I thought to myself, if there
were a God, angry or not,
and who shot fierce barbs of lightning,
that wooden cross over there and then

this book—

would be first to go.

Digger of Potatoes

Upon having reached a broad plateau
still a good mile above the valley floor . . .

There are people here! And
a road! Small houses!
And look there, fields!

After weeks of cold, snow,
and steep rocky faces, paradise
is not easily passed by.

The three of them were bent
under heavy brown sacks of
potatoes.

The oldest man pointed up
towards where I had come from,
and asked, "*A journey?*"

I nodded, and said I had heard
that the women in a village near by
still made fine linen by hand.

The youngest, thick black braided
hair, smiled. Signs
that give a man hope.

Second Thoughts

Some climbs are harder
than others.

A mile and a half higher,
and still I'm not above treeline.

Not a single stream in sight.
What to do with the water
in my pack? Wash or eat?

Exhausted, I put down my bag
on chestnut pincushions I hadn't seen,
eating dry buckwheat with salt
out of a bag.

Night comes with dreams of fields
of new potatoes. Ah good sweet earth...

*"Would you like some more
fresh butter?"*

The things we pass by on the way.

Flatland

*"It's a long road
that never turns"*

These lowland roads!

Threads of stories stretched out straight
through page after page of curveless plot.

The future lies all there before me,
so the question of what next fades
into a horizon forever retreating,
my journey now a matter of perseverance.

Do these endless skies somewhere meet the asphalt
artifacts of this simple geometry?

Does one ever really arrive in flatland?

But I still don't know—
shall I take my place with the
chorus of roadside weeds,

or count my steps,
watch my breath,
and lean forward into the wind?

Palimpsest

When writing new
compositions, one
upon the other,

one prays that
they might with time
get better.

Can

On the glacier, frozen
in solid ice, a freshly painted
can, red with white letters.

I took a swipe at it with the adze
of my ice axe, then, with some
satisfaction, walked on . . .

Strange, this ugly, heavy metal
cut into a symphony of
pure acoustic strings.

Too Close for Comfort

for Ferruccio

He looked me straight in the eye
and said,

*“You can stay here. Eat
something, have some wine.”*

When dogs see a stranger and
don't bark, you know there's
a man of some dignity about.

He had the whole valley to himself.

*“The bread's old. Brought it
up here three days ago.”*

Eating too much, he made a fire,
smoke finding its way out of the
stone roof.

*“You know, there's a war going
on not far from here. If you walked the other way,
you could be there in one and a half months time.”*

The dogs, big eyed and quiet, listened
to him talk.

He hit the coals of the fire and threw
another handful of pasta in the soup.

Without him saying a thing, the dogs
got up and walked out the door of the hut.
They were making room for me to stay the night.

Sometimes, something as simple as a roof
of stone can be a blessing. I fell asleep
to the sound of the valley closing
in with clouds and misty rain.

Before first light, I woke and
saw him pouring hot coffee into
two cups.

*“You know, you better go
now. The snow will be soft
before you’re down .”*

By a small pile of rocks on the trail,
he let out a shrill whistle and the dogs
charged up a steep slope of avalanche alder,

chasing after something,
I could not see.

The President

He walked right up
to me and said,

“I’m the president of this valley!”

waving his arms out into the air.

Men who meet outside like to
get straight to the heart of the matter.

There were jeeps around, and
a gun next to the door.

*“Have some wine. That’s
my son with a friend. He’s
a lawyer. They’re coming down.
Too much snow.”*

Carrying their guns low like
hunters who know they’re not
going to shoot anything anymore,
we met half way. Happy to use
their tracks, they wished me well,
knowing that at a certain point
I’d be on my own.

While I hoped the snow would be less
deep on the other side of the pass,

the sound of the man's voice stayed
with me a long time.

He said he had learned his English
as a prisoner of the Japanese
in the South Pacific.

In the mountains, what we do
in town does not leave much of a trace,
even on the smooth surface of—

new snow.

Walking the World: *Backpack Pilgrim*

The journey of the pilgrim is essentially one of taking away, or dropping, what is unnecessary, each step becoming simpler and lighter than the one which preceded it.

Today will be a day of descent.

Heading South into the Italian-speaking part of the European Alps, for four days now I've been winding my way through a labyrinthian landscape of small, uninhabited alpine valleys. But now, I've reached a major divide—the point where two vast watersheds meet and diverge, one flowing Northwest, the other Southeast.

Out of this natural articulation of the land into parts, different cultures and languages have emerged and flowered. But here, unlike the busy bordercrossings used by trucks and cars, there are no signs to mark the spot or men in uniforms asking for passports. There's just a clan of alpine jackdaws, all shiny black, riding the late morning thermals in ever-higher spirals, at home on either side of the divide. One bird breaks away from the others, folds its wings and dives headlong into the distance as its body gracefully modulates into something like the small black dot which ends a phrase.

One must prepare inwardly for these high alpine crossings. It is not just the uncomfortable feeling of passing through the strangely alien zone of the northside of a mountain, with its deep shadows and permanent cold. Nor is it just the powerful sense of the world contracting around you as the rock walls of a narrow col close in, giving back the metallic sound of your crampons biting into the icy firm snow of early Fall. As the pass grows steeper and the zig-zag of ascent tightens into a line of single steps, one above the other, I always feel the need to compose myself before the final moment of crossing the divide to the other side.

Every crossing is always the first, this great wave space which suddenly rushes in. To gaze out upon the entire breadth and width of a wild valley one has never seen before, taking it in, as it were, in a single breath, and to know that this is where one is headed, full of all the exciting prospect of the new and unknown, is truly something magnificent.

* * *

It's too windy and cold up here to linger long, so I scramble carefully, one step at a time, about three or four hundred meters down a boulder field. Looking ahead, I can already see terrain that is less steep, and a small, green, inviting spot near a stream where I can sit, have something to drink and rest a while. The granite rocks are all about the size of small cars, balanced precariously, one on top of the other. I can't help think-

ing that, in the Spring, this would be one long smooth *glissando* or glide down the mountain over hard-packed snow. But now, with Fall, the intense sunlight of the southern exposure has long ago melted all the winter snow. So different—the smooth, continuous rhythm of my ascent over northside ice, and now the irregular, rough jerks and leaps of the more cheerful southside.

The nearest village is still almost two vertical kilometers below, but I can already hear the traffic of a major North / South connecting highway. The sound rises on the same gentle updrafts which carry the jackdaws still circling above.

* * *

Like so many other areas of contemporary life, mountaineering has unfortunately fragmented into just so many specialties with a characteristic emphasis on outward measure: ever higher, faster or more difficult. What used to be called “*the freedom of the hills*” is now frequently traded in for a list of personal achievements, attached to one’s name like medals on a chest. And, now that most peaks have already been named and climbed, the search for something new and spectacular has taken on the air of the ridiculous, being determined mostly by the clock—“*climbed in half the normal time!*” Ironically, the clock—that prototypical artifact of city life—was the very thing one wanted to get away from by going to the mountains in the first place.

I must confess that I prefer the more open country of mountaineering as pilgrimage, climbing peaks perhaps when the views are good, but just as contented with a pass. This is pilgrimage not just in the sense of journeying to especially beautiful or powerful sites, but more as a movement. one which, much like poetry itself, essentially takes away, dropping freely what is wasteful or unnecessary.

The cars and trucks of the road below move in a very different direction. The roar of a diesel grinding its way up the sharp curves and steep grades of a mountain pass...

...If greed has a sound, then this is it.

* * *

The bells of a small flock of sheep wake me from my nap. I need to get going. I still have to go down, get food, gas for the cooker and climb up the other side of this valley and find a new camp before dark.

After a good bit of cross-country rambling, I pick up the faint trace of an old goatherd's trail. It passes a cluster of stone huts, the roofs having collapsed many years ago. Evidently, the stronger vertical order of the walls only very slowly gives itself back to the random shuffle of a natural pile. Further down, gradually leaving the low juniper, cranberries and kinnikinnik of the alpine tundra, I come into the larger, more erect trees of the continuous

forest. Here, the trail becomes an ancient ox-cart path, the work of many generations. Each stone is layed like a well-chosen word in a carefully constructed phrase, and *worn* well, like a phrase worth repeating.

It's so remarkable, this difference between the view within the car, and the view of the highway from the vantage point of the forest clearing where I now stand. Clearly, the automobile is not simply a neutral mode of transportation; it is something more like a way of being, a kind of *metaphysics on wheels*. To step into the car and close the door is to turn the key which activates an entire self-worldview. Comfortably seated, a gentle breeze coming in from the half-opened window, the speakers in the back playing one's favorite music at just the right volume, enough of the motor's purr filters through to let one know that this is all real and not a mere projection on a screen. The foot on the pedal, the hands on the wheel: it's hard to think of another context which gives us such a strong sense of power and control.

From within the car, all is order and harmony. But this, of course, is an illusion, one which is evidently extremely difficult to break. Seen from the wider context of the car-plus-environment, the car is unequivocally a disorderly, destructive instrument. This is not just because of the toxic gases suffocating the spruce trees of the forest through which I now pass. It's also because *cars have driven us* into a state of isolation and indifference which at once destroys both the land and, in a far more subtle way, the sensitivity necessary to see the destruction.

Tragically, as every environmentalist knows, as long as we remain within the highly artificial world of cars and car culture, everything will appear perfectly okay. *“Hey! What’s the problem? Get out of the way!”*

* * *

Crossing a foot bridge over the road, I look down on the steady flow of trucks, motorcycles, campers and cars. This is a flow which has tremendous mechanical power behind it. Listening to the noise it generates gives one a sense of how difficult it will be to change. But there is also the ever-present possibility *of simply stopping*, getting out of the car and venturing up to higher ground. To pause is evidently momentarily to dissipate the energy that is caught in the loop which sustains the illusion. In the gap, there is the potential of new awareness, a new understanding, a new beginning. Perhaps I’ll return to the car, perhaps I won’t. But, as the jackdaws have always known, from the land far above the road, the views are always superb.

On Paths: Part IV

Perhaps poems are simply paths
we make in walking, sometimes,
even when headed the wrong way;

These things—gifts, one picks
up and passes on,
along the way.

A New Friend

for Paolo

Before I could remember
how to say I was walking,
he leapt out of his car, speaking
perfect English, throwing
my pack in his trunk.

*“You can stay with me.
But you’ll need a car, some
money and a date, perhaps.”*

How could I refuse?
The idea that I must walk
the whole way
went up in a puff of smoke
on the sound of tires
quite used to losing their grip
three or more curves down the road.

A Poor Man's Vacation

The bench had been freshly
painted a bright red, made all
the brighter by the surrounding
light greens of forest Spring.

A man, grizzly, unkempt,
with few clothes, (How could he
make it through the mountain night?)
but with a certain refinement
in his gestures, belongings
pouring out of his bag onto the path.

He had his beans cooking
in the can leaning against a stone
at some well-studied, precise angle,
with, underneath, the smallest larch
twig fire I've ever seen.

*"I used to be a chemikus. Abito
now in Pari. Ik ga nach Roma.
Capici?"*

He spoke a confusion of different
tongues, but I guessed he might be
Dutch. He said his name was Hans.
Holding up a brand new white and
orange bag of polenta, he said with
no uncertain pride,

“I koop this for 75 cent.”

I couldn't argue with him. Those
just new to an area have an eye
for bargains the locals easily pass by.

Shelter

In the all big cities of the world,
when old men end up
sleeping under bridges,

in their dreams, they go
back in time to the knowledge,

that in the mountains,
the best caves are found
under the biggest boulders;

the bigger they are, and the higher
the cliffs are from which they have fallen,
the more sure a man can be,

that they will not give way under
the relentless pressure of even
the most unexpected of
stormy nights.

On the Necessity of Poetry

(1)

Walking from spring
to spring,

one tires quickly of all
the intellectual bushbeating,

telling me I'm
not thirsty
when I'm
thirsty.

(2)

Let's be simple:
A house without a hearth
is a home without a center.

After somebody lets the fire
go out, they always like to tell
you it wasn't important.

(3)

Have you ever noticed that
bird calls are often answered
by silences of equal duration?

Who is to say which one—
the sound or the silence—
is more important.

(4)

We are born naked; we make
love naked; and we die
naked;

Though not strictly necessary,
doing poetry naked seems to work
just fine, too.

(5)

Once the commons
are fenced in and sold,

on the very same ground
we'll argue incessantly about—

the necessity of poetry.

Lamb of the Lord

All energy is directed
down to a single point
as with but one blow
he hammers the bullet
into the kidgoat's skull.
Just as deftly, he slits its
throat, draining the blood.

Still warm, what was once
all muscle and resistance
lays limp in the straw, while
a sibling is tied with a short
snatch of rope and wrenched
up to the scale in one smooth
motion.

More than 12 kilos means
certain death.

He carries the two carcasses
by the hind legs, one in each
hand, working hard to keep
their dangling heads with
stubby little devil's horns
out of the freshly fallen
snow, making his way from
barn to his basement where
he'll dress the meat.

Three of the village children
peak out from the side of the barn,
their blushed cherub faces watching
the scene as if from a slightly distant,
more subtle realm of being.
A lean black dog growls and snaps,
cutting frenzied figure 8's in the snow
around the farmer's slow, methodical.
all-business-like trek back to the house.

Meanwhile, in a distant city, a dinner
party is about to begin. It is spring,
Everyone is dressed in their Sunday best.
“*How tender,*” they say. At that same moment,
the farmer and his family say grace
and cross themselves.

From a window looking in: Inside,
almost timeless, happy, faces look
down into their steaming bowls
of fresh stomach stew. Outside,
in the mountain darkness, snow
falls without a whisper of wind,
flake by flake erasing all the travail
of the day's passage.

Truly, if there were indeed angels,
how they would endlessly love to
discuss the mysterious ways
our world of earthlings is threaded
together anew, each time
a life is taken, each time it snows,
each time—
we break bread.

The Dance of Chance

A toss
of the dice...

The machine has no problem with
randomness,
abstracting order from chaos,
whole songs computed at will. But
the beauty of the Butterfly's wings?
Just blind permutations, the in-
determinate
survival, selection, of small

dotted poems

in a
sequenced array, or
the sure sign

of the
open road, the future's pathless

land

unprecedented
possibilities

a l l ?

Tramontane

Bits of
labor, left

behind, tasks now foreign to straight
speaking tongues.

Closed doors reluctantly open
as that which is unfamiliar
is brought
into the outside within....

The necessary work
of inessential people, guests

held

hostage,
a ransom
s e l f - paid, the

outlandish
price of membership to these strange

worlds

of
aliens

a l l.

Border Crossings

(1)

On neither side of the border
was war, although there had
been in the past.

The man in the uniform wasn't
old enough to remember that; neither
were the dogs.

Only the gun looked
exactly the same.

(2)

With more
than enough money,

borders mean
next to nothing.

(3)

On targets, they draw
a kind of generalized human being;
it could be a man, a woman, or
even a child.

At 300 meters, you see the bullets
flash off granite first; a fraction
later, you hear the shot.

Terrifying, this border crossed, when,
even at close range,
the figures still don't have faces.

(4)

There wasn't war.
The tanks—there were 15
of them—were firing
live shells.

Broad daylight, they
could see the whole
of the arched trajectory,
from first flash to distant
explosion in glacier ice.

400 years ago they thought
a cannon ball followed
a straight line path, flying out
at an angle, then plummeting
directly down to earth.

Nowadays, things are
more precise. The rear
doors of the tanks

opened and some 40 men
jumped out. I had taken
them by surprise.

“Just practice,” the lieutenant
said. He showed me a map
with the way out. I opted for
a safer route—

straight down the mountain.

Waystations [*Urbi et Orbi*]

Empty, there's no one here . . .

Signs of former empire, the simple
stations of a pilgrim's life;

A painting on the back wall
flaking off...

...a powerful robed man
with a staff, child on his
shoulders, crosses the river,
alone...

Images, names, the sounds of immense
bells slowly fading into the distant past...

An iron cross stands guard over
rows of melted candles;

A lock and chain keep the dogs
out at night.

Watching the Fall rain turn to
snow, thinking about the state
of the world.

*(Gran Paradiso, the Alps, at 1300 meters:
a seven week's journey from Rome.)*

The Richest Man in the World

They found him with a dollar bill
clinched between his teeth;

They said, they couldn't get
the gun out of his hands.

Home Grown

Right in the middle
of the path,

a dead sheep, body
burned black, blown up
like an old tire.

Further down the way,
a man, long black hair
down to his shoulders,
lies, mouth open, passed
out on a granite rock, cigarette
burning in his hand, an empty bottle
of whisky on the ground.

I get around him
without waking him up.

They say, in these parts,
good shepherds are
hard to find.

Maybe it's the price of wool . . .

Power of the Word

After a five day wait, I
crossed the pass walking
slowly over narrow frozen
streams of wind-hardened snow.

Hours later, getting dark,
not much flat ground about,
I set camp next to an old
roofless hut with a hand-
written sign nailed to
a stake in the grass:

“Beware of Vipers!”

I knew for a fact that
this wasn't true, yet I
didn't shut an eye all night.
The things we write on signs.

The Way of Paths

On either side of a farmer's fence,
a wooden ladder with three
high rungs;

a path, clearly visible, runs
straight through a field of yellow
mustard, half a man high;

I followed, somewhat re-
luctantly. Later, when I asked
at a café, a local man told me. *"Take
it mate. You've got right of way!"*

Between the Ways

When I play the hunter, I've
sometimes noticed I long for
the more carefree rambling ways
of the gatherer, coming upon
by accident, as it were, a whole
field of ripe berries;

When I play the gatherer, I've
sometimes noticed I tire of
all the boring beating about
the bush and long for the sharp-
pointed confidence of
the hunter who finds and
kills on the spot
exactly what he needs.

Open Road

Hitchhiking. It's late,
raining. Wondering
where to set up camp.

With time, one comes
to realize, despite the constant
flow of bright lights,

that the faster a sound
comes at you, the steeper
it bends. Either way,
in an alternative world,

that could've been either
you—or me—riding the wave
of disappearing red light.

Sometimes . . .

Sometimes, a poem
wanders about the world
in search of its
proper place
and hour;

To learn it by heart is
to walk with it;

To offer it to another is
perhaps to bring it home.

Caretaker

He had stopped to clear
fallen rocks off the path.
It wasn't his job.

Thick mist, he showed
me clearly the route
I wanted to take, pointing
his stick first at this stone
and then that. He tapped
the third stone hard, for
emphasis, and said to stop
there and camp.

No map, yet I knew I
could trust him.
He was clearing rocks
off the path.
It wasn't his job.

Every Valley Has Two Sides

for Konrad

A cluster of stone huts,
huddled together like sheep
in a storm;

Roofs made of the split slabs
of granite rock, some still whole,
some broken, but all speak
of a time when time moved
more slowly,

and walls were built with a care
that carried the snow of two,
three, perhaps five hundred Winters.

One old couple is all that remains,
children grown, married,
gone to town;

Two cows, a calf and three goats
keep all eight alive, and warm
their house on-top-of barn
on-top-of rock.

The town is slowly creeping up
to this place;

A road has been built,
and other huts
bought and restored,

for Summer...

That time of year
when the mountains bloom
with full-breasted goat-girls,
barefoot, flowers in their hair.

The tourists
do not know
the dark side,

when the earth-energy contracts
from the crowns of trees
back down to the roots,

and the sun goes away
for months at a time;

It is this movement,
brought round and ripened
with wet hay, dead calves
and avalanche Springs,

that radiates
from the old man's
bloodshot eyes

as he gives me water
and tells me—

*“I’ll get lost,
on that path.”*

(Coda) The Room of Mind

My conscious mind is but
a small room, full of facts
of different kinds; it has
few windows and is rather
stuffy.

Outside the room is non-
conscious mind; it is vast
and surrounds the smaller room
like a wilderness over which
I have no control, although
I can venture there, which
is refreshing.

I've noticed that walking
gets me out of my own little
room. I've noticed, too, that
it's easy to get stuck inside—
Before I know it, forgetting that poems
are something like paths we make in walking,
I'll mistake the dark little closet
where I've locked up all the unpaid
bills of the past
for the door which leads—

outside.

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Questions and comments for Cliff Crego
may be addressed to crego@picture-poems.com
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