

Tony Frey

A Mountain Tour

*I simply could not fathom
how the mountain got here.
It was as if it had to be
raised up against its will
just to give shoulder to
the ark.¹*

Andrej Bitow

When we were woken by Z, who with reddened eyes had been trying to keep himself awake reading the paper and doing crossword puzzles in the yellow glow of the bulb mounted behind wire mesh there on the wall above the table, trying to stay alert, ready in a split second to yank the phone from the cradle lest it wake the others sleeping on the bunks behind him in the dark, drymouth and eyes as red as his, deep in the mountain, 200 meters from the entrance, three-thirty in the morning. – *A second pair of black knitted socks²* in the shoes, – coffee, – and then the rations and a little hoard of bread – and tea and a second hip flask with Lacrima Christi, dark Vesuvian wine from the Cantina – and then the gear – all into the back of the Jeep – a lonely little convoy passing along the wide stilted curves of the new road below Lucendro – treads sucking up water and chips of stone – a rustling and a crackling – every pillar in the dripping gallery like a drumbeat, the jeep vibrating over the rough concrete, the sound echoing around inside as the light vehicle slips and slides suspensionless down into the village, empty at this time and slowly dying anyway, the overgrown foundations of shanty homes and construction shacks, the old redlight district long gone cold.

And so over the bridge and along the river into the side valley, wrapped tight in a hooded overcoat against the chill morning draft – holding on with clammy fingers to whatever you can, the steam of the motor, the unmistakable smell of metal and the weatherproof stamoid of the ragtop – the first little hamlet, a narrow main street, scarred walls with cracked edges, chipped paint and glass shards on pedestal lips, – in a niche in the wall of a house a Mother of God in painted plaster, Madonna del Sasso? St. Mary of the Snow? – plastic flowers in a tin can with rusting seams, – in an open window a young woman dressed in black sorting the mail in front of a case with a few sparse shelves.

What pleasure she got from those walks over the country roads, when she was alone, lost in the rhythm of her footsteps, at one with her surroundings, with the air and the light, with the gentle sounds all around her, with the vistas far and high, ... with the clouds in the sky above the peaks and the view of the dark still mountain.³

Huts now, above and a bit to the left – built on a dam made of deposits brought down through the steeply stepped ravine by the river, now just a brook barely able to moisten the black-, orange- and green-stained wall, fenced with wire, half covered with fast growing trees the height of a man.

At Tre Croce, – was it lightning or an avalanche? Here you leave the valley floor, long winding turns and tight curves, the small car has to back up twice, endless furrows across the road formed by two pieces of wood fixed with bands of iron, – the



AL1983.111

1 Andrej Bitow, Armenische Lektionen, Suhrkamp.

2 Albert Venzens, Gebirg, Schwabe 1999.

3 Albert Venzens, Gebirg, Schwabe 1999.

tiny ridges wrench the steering wheel back and forth so that the shoulder of the man sitting next to the toothpick chewing driver is thrown against the rollbar and the helmets rattle like mannequins, no one says a word – *as if we were nobodies*⁴, up to the Strada Alta and then straight along it with hardly a rise until the high alpine meadow which seems abandoned, a mark on the wall shows how high the snow was, splashes of green in the tiny pools left by hundreds of hoofs, large-leaved weeds on the pigpens, charred campfire sites on the other side of the road, the scorched trunk of a larch.

There is a red dot on the map for each one.

At the end of the meadow the path immediately begins to rise and the slope obscures the view as the trees fall away behind, steps and tiny trails in the sward, granular red-brown sediment which moves anew each time the water flows, the trail is moist and the washed stones slip under shoes, no one around, cows on the side of Piz Sella like toys, – tiny decorations, – the first winding steps in this landscape, jumping over little hollows eaten out of the earth, boggy bits in the flat depressions where leafy herbs cushion the sound of footsteps, tiny crouching forests of Alpine roses and the season's last blueberries.

The valley widens, a path leads over the water but only one pylon of the bridge remains. Balancing on the water's edge with the flagpole.

Half way up, the walls of derelict huts, shrubbery and stunted pinewood everywhere clawing their way across fallen debris from the roof, – tea from the thermos, – move on, – hiking boots come down hard on the steps beaten into the snowfield that flows out like a giant bowl from beneath the SAC hut. Then a fork, followed by a long but gently rising stretch of short grass and flowers – flannel leaf at the foot of a scree field, then the beginning of the short ascent to the pass 2,438 meters up which despite the red-and-white markings is not easy to find, you can forget about walking upright, its all fours here though they've attached a piece of rope for safety's sake.

The slope descends, the north side of the Pizo looks ready to burst when the snow melts, you imagine the pieces sliding down to fill the bowl below and the alp slowly shrinking, and then as you sit there in the windy stillness the sun rises high enough and the trickling really begins, blocks and slabs loosen themselves from the overhanging crags, slide down the scree and mud until they come to rest in a pile of rocky ruins, sorted by size or weight. Smaller stones tumble after, bouncing over each other in little bunnyhops until they find themselves wedged in somewhere among the larger ones.

I take off my backpack and the unexpected lightness makes me float for a moment.

Then I set up the red flag, try to make radio contact, one of them doesn't answer. – I look for a place to sit where I can see over all the paths.

Two bicyclists, a man and a young woman in matching tight cycle suits, having ascended the greener and gentler side of the Pizo, now zigzag their way down, sliding, gliding and swaying to and fro. They remove their helmets, the woman unbinds her hair.

For a moment the three of us stand on the pass, catching our breath.

*Throats are set free in the mountains! It's a miracle we don't sing.*⁵

4 Franz Kafka, *Die Erzählungen. Und andere ausgewählte Prosa*, Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer 1996.

5 Franz Kafka, *Die Erzählungen. Und andere ausgewählte Prosa*, Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer 1996.



AL2005.016

They have nothing with them except some water and their fanny packs. They want to go to the hut and only later in the evening down into the valley. Heaving their bikes on their shoulders they spring down the scree field bounding from boulder to boulder, yet somehow frail and vulnerable. Soon you can only see the tops of their suits like quivering colored specks in the glistening white of the melting snow field along whose edge the path winds up.

Chunks of stone lie randomly scattered over the gently sloping plain, following some unknown current, black holes, improbable, lonely islands which rise and then sink again as their warmth melts the snow.

A glance through the binoculars reveals nothing moving, – the wind carries the murmur of water, fog from the reservoir rises up through the gaps and tentatively fingers the slope, above it all a faultless soft blue – the ethereal blue of my screen, – and wisps of jet stream flying off to the south.

The higher you climb, the more you can see of this unique constellation, and down the other side, the Pizo is hardly 150 meters above the pass, you can see, lying on the edge of a nameless lake: glacier food, flat granite slabs of a uniform drizzly grey whose shadowy crevices house yellow-green lichen, slabs warmed by the sun, on which you can sit and hang your feet in the water. If you go down on your knee, – *flectamus genua*⁶, – to scoop up some water you suddenly see your face mirrored on the edge.

Thousands of stocked young fish school through the ice clear water, their numbers jealously checked every day by the lake warden.

The lake is small, if anything falls in back by the glacier its echo rolls across the surface like a wave.

Almost unnoticed by hurried hikers, leaning on the side of the Madone just after the crossing to the north, there is a long hut with a cement foundation and tin roof. A refuge for border guards, hunters and mineralists? The entrance to a mine? An edifice whose purpose has long been forgotten. It is divided into several rooms, some closed up, some open to all. Every once in a while a door is broken and they send someone round to fix it and fit it with a new lock. On the frieze of one such at a height making it almost impossible to look in someone had cut out an oblong rectangle with round edges. Someone else seeing this form drew it over the other doors. Except for the signature: J.K. the new door remains untouched, living wood, breathing skin, pleasant to the touch. – The room in the back is dark and empty, on a board a candle and a figure perhaps the Madonna of the Pass or the Holy Barbara ...

There are benches and a table in the open room. On the wall a poster of protected plants. All sorts of stuff has been left behind: walking sticks and flowers, jackets, hats and sunglasses. Colored stones, little crystals collected by children who in the end did not take them home. Names are scribbled and engraved everywhere, dates and drawings, pinned-up notes.

It is impossible to see the mountains except at a distance. If you stand in front of them you only see the rising or perhaps even overhanging slope or a boulder field. If you stand on the summit or on a ridge, having rewarded yourself for your courage with a little nip, all you can see are the depths below you and the other mountains.⁷



AL1992.031

⁶ Andrea Köhler, NZZ 11.09.07.

⁷ Anonymous (note pinned to the wall in an alpine hut).

Transcribing step-by-step, word-by-word sitting at the table, dazzled, blinded by the midday sun, empty of all thoughts, of all will, *a tranquil desire*⁸, full, – but someone is climbing down the edge of the snowfield, – only someone who knows the area well can move like that, – down by the fork he doesn't turn into the scree but seems to make via the flowery meadow directly for the hut, only now do I see the small winding path leading away from here which someone had beaten out in order to avoid the perilous bits. Buon di! he says without stopping, and also that one must take advantage of the weather and there is still quite some snow on San Giacomo and then he is gone, hand on his cap, a wordless farewell, enough said. Noli me tangerere!

*The mountains are way too loud in the summer.*⁹

Through the gaps he winds his way down towards the nameless lake and the road farther to the south which will take him to Lago Nero.

The locals are always a mystery to us, what we see but do not understand seems to be a part of them, – they think with their bones, – it's not just the dialect that keeps you from asking where they come from, where they are going, what they are carrying on their backs or even how they survive here, we see only stones and water, they however are gatherers and hunters and setters of traps.

There is a constancy of stone, – of clouds, – infinite repetition of the same theme – the indifferent trickle of time, the infinitely indifferent rustling...

*That's why there can be no other end than the total exhaustion of the wanderer, who explores this inexhaustible landscape.*¹⁰

8 J.-J. Rousseau, *Emile. Oder über die Erziehung*, erstmals 1762, München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag 1971.

9 AI, in conversation in his studio.

10 Claude Simon, *Landschaft mit blindem Orion*, NZZ 11.10.03.



A91-01Ber
Alois Lichtsteiner,
"Wald, Abgrund, Stall, östlicher Raum",
(Hess Collection, Bern),
Ausstellung Kunsthalle Bern, 1991