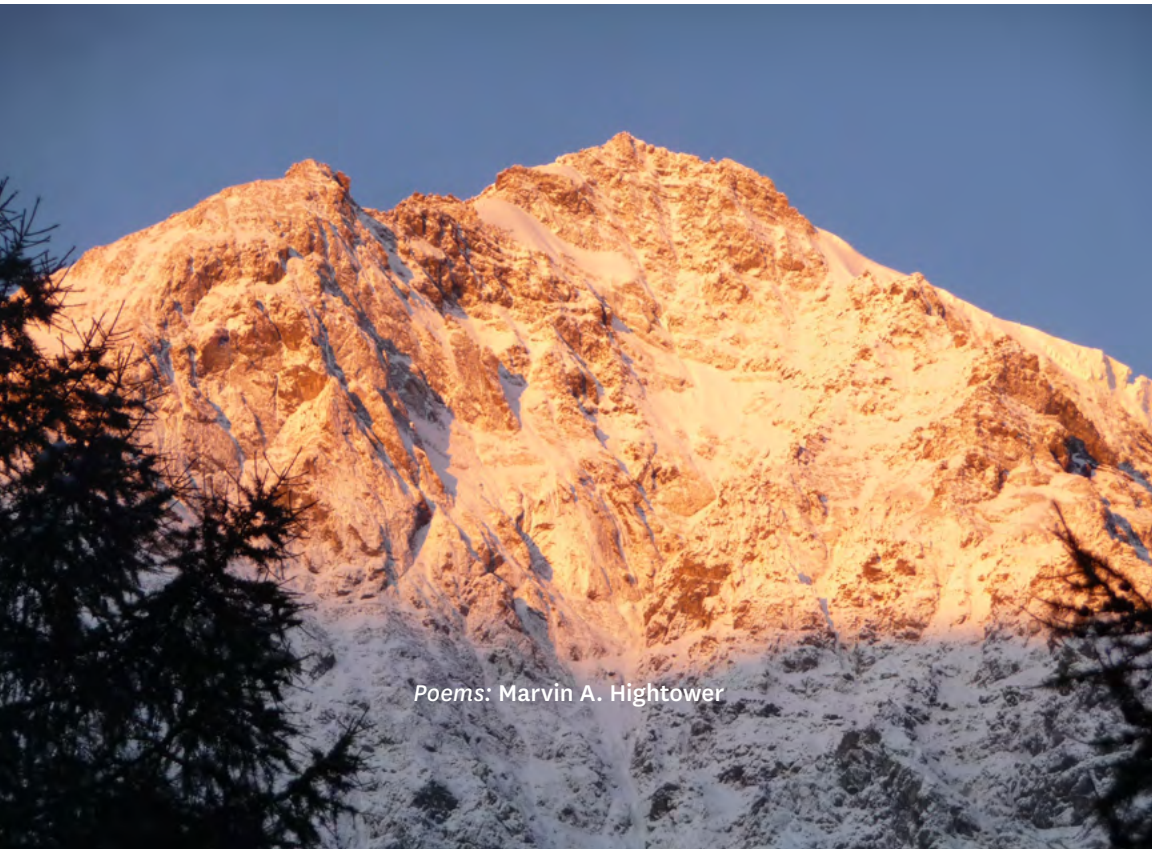
UNTO THE HILLS

A Hiking Life

Peter A. Mark



Poems: Marvin A. Hightower

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Summer 2016 -Winter 2020-2021

«Mes pensées dorment, si je les assis.»
-Michel de Montaigne

Cover drawing
© Jonathan S. Bragdon
Les Dents du Midi

ISBN: 979-8-218-00830-7

For

Jamie Buswell

1946-2021

Incomparable friend.

Magnificent musician.

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Preface

Hiking is easy: you just put one foot in front of the other. Writing is easy: you just put one word after the other. Hiking faces forward, while a written description of that hike looks back. To climb a mountain is less easy. You need to be in good physical condition (or young). Once the latter is no longer an option, it takes time and effort to achieve the former. And patience to climb. In the words of my Alpine guide, Gerd Schönthaler, "If you want to get to the summit quickly, you must go slowly."

To write well is to climb a mountain. To capture the atmosphere, to convey both the effort and the pleasure of the climb, to express the feeling of being in and belonging to the landscape – these are unending challenges. "*Hoc opus, hic labor est*."

This collection of essays and photographs is the first fruit of my retirement from university teaching. Since my retirement goals were to devote more time both to historical research and to climbing mountains, it seemed better to retire a little earlier, rather than too late.

At first, I wrote about hiking just for myself. It has been my great good fortune, as I enter my eighth decade, to be able to continue my life's passion for hiking and climbing. Time, however, deals with each of us at our own rate. Several dear friends are no longer physically able to enjoy the mountains. The immediate inspiration for collecting these essays, written over several years, is to enable these friends to come along with me.

There are many ways to know a mountain. Jonathan Bragdon, one of Europe's foremost landscape artists, has traveled to Switzerland for years to study les Dents du Midi. His meticulous drawings capture the constantly changing effects of light, cloud and distance on this one Alpine peak. As his cover illustration shows, the infinite lies in the details.

Marvin Hightower has come with me through these writings. The poems that he has written in response to my essays and photographs are testimony that two lifelong friends have made the hikes together, although by such different means. He has generously offered his poetry. What higher compliment to the writer? The poetry is the capstone, the summit of this expedition.

Alpine View with Clouds

I - Prelude

And suddenly we are in the Alps. The train winds beneath the first limestone ramparts, green-bedecked hills studded with white cliffs; the entry into the mountains. As we move up the valley, the peaks grow higher. Far above, the forest gives way to barren rock. The white-washed farmhouses with wooden gables and dark tiled roofs, the forest and occasional streams, all speak of peace. I can feel the relaxation flowing into me from the fields, the woods, and the hills.

I have made the 9-hour trip from Berlin to the Tyrol to climb a peak on the Austrian-Italian border, the Similaun. My first attempt, in 1969, was ended by hurricane force winds. Yet, I have to remember . . . this is all about the journey, not about whether we reach the summit. For 47 years, I have lived without climbing the final 300 meters of the Similaun. It would be nice to get there. But the important thing is to try.

July 21, 2016

Prelude: Similaun 1969/2016

Oetztal Alps, July 1969

Wind lashed my face with fresh snow, whipping my parka and pushing me towards the abyss of the north face. The narrow slope rose so steeply that I could stretch my arms forward and touch the snow. Driving my ice axe up to the hilt into the snow, holding on for dear life, I stopped, now within sight of the summit cross. Through the howling wind came the barely audible voice of Rudl Steinlechner, our guide: "We go down." I turned, gratefully, plunging towards the safety of the lower slopes. The Similaun's 3,606-meter (11,827-foot) summit had escaped our grasp.

Oetztal July 22, 2016

Alone, I struggle through the pelting rain, up the barren rocks of the glacial moraine. The wind grows more intense, driving thickening mist and clouds across the 10,000-foot pass of the Hochlabjoch. Glacial streams, racing with meltwater fed by the rain, have turned milky, rising out of their channels. Through the mist, I can barely see the red paint of the next trail marker. Ahead, the rushing torrent has flooded a makeshift bridge; impossible to cross. The Similaun Hut, where I am to meet Gerd Schönthaler, my guide, is perhaps 30 minutes ahead. But to find a ford I would have to leave the trail. If I should then lose my way or, worse, fall into the river, there would be no one to help. Fighting to remain calm, I speak out loud to impress on myself the importance of this decision: "You have to turn around now. If you go on, you may die."

As I start down, thunder cracks and echoes. . . . "There is nothing you can do three miles from shelter; keep going; stay calm". . . Totally soaked, my feet swishing inside the waterlogged mountain boots, I suddenly come on three hikers advancing up the moraine.
I tell them the bridge is out and suggest they, too, should turn around. They reply: "Allein abzusteigen, ist quatsch. Das Wasser is hochgestiegen und du kommst nicht durch. Du musst mit uns kommen."
"To descend alone is crazy. The water has risen and you won't get through. You must come with us."

Exhausted from the fourteen-kilometer climb and from fighting the wind and cold rain, I am happy to let someone else lead. My entire being is now focused on staying close behind the person in front of me. At the broken bridge we detour. After five separate stream crossings, we can finally rejoin the trail. Now, with four of us, if someone should fall in the water, the others would be there to pull them out and then two people could go on for help. Travelling alone, as I had done, eliminates the margin of error in bad weather.

We finally arrive in sight of the Similaunhütte. The 'normal' time from the Martin Busch Hut is two hours; with the backtracking and the weather, it feels like I have been out for three hours.... I look at my watch. It has been exactly two hours. As we walk in the door, we all embrace. Together, we have survived. After such an experience, we are likely to remain friends...sudden and unexpected and emotionally close friends.

Oetztal July 23, 2016

At the Similaunhütte, after changing into dry clothes, we share a round of schnapps; two hours later Gerd arrives. He has climbed from the Italian side after waiting out the storm in his car. The storm has passed. By evening, we even watch the sunset.

The following morning, we wake at 5…to blue sky. However, it is warm, a bad sign. Under 'normal 'conditions, Similaun is an easy climb, technically without challenge. I have chosen it precisely for this reason; it is my first climb since undergoing surgery in May. The climb up the glacier is enjoyable. But the mountain has changed since 1969. Then, the entire northwest slope of the Similaun was covered with ice and snow, and the north face was an ice wall. Today, the upper shoulder of the mountain protrudes, dark rock above the shrunken glacier, and the north face is totally free of ice. One expects oneself to grow old in half a century, but not the eternal ice of the Alps. Here, the terrible effects of global warming are a shocking presence.

Above the glacier, we arrive at an airy neck of snow, a *Grat*, with exposure on both sides for the final 300 yards. Here is where I turned around when I was 20 years old. This time, I am cherishing each step, not hurrying. At 8:35, we arrive at the summit cross. Already the valley is clouded in; we do not tarry. Down the slope we hurry, and across the glacier that brought our party to safety in 1969. On that early trip, we did not use a rope on the glacier. Even in July, wintry conditions ensured that any crevasses were safely covered by snow bridges.[1] This time, Gerd and I are roped for safety, with me in the lead.

1 The warmer climate melts snow cover, weakens snow bridges, and makes a rope necessary in places where, 50 years ago, one could safely travel unroped.

Suddenly, the snow gives way beneath my feet. I sink down to my thighs, with my feet dangling in air. A crevasse. The heavy rains have weakened a snow bridge. Falling part way into a crevasse is the strangest feeling…as though one were falling through the earth. Gerd braces and holds me. Extending my ice axe and climbing pole onto the lower lip of the crevasse, I roll clear of the empty space, back on top of the earth. My gloves are full of snow, but I am fine.

At 10:15 Gerd and I are enjoying coffee and cake back at the Similaun Hut. Across a dozen climbing vacations, frequently crossing Alpine glaciers, this is the first time I have fallen into a crevasse. I say to Gerd, "This is what I pay you for." Five hours later, I am back in the village of Vent, waiting for the bus and eating the best Apfelstrudel I have ever tasted.

The Similaun is a relatively easy summit, and it is not particularly dangerous. Nevertheless, even an "easy" mountain can deploy heavy artillery; all depends upon weather conditions and snow conditions. One mountain, 47 years, two climbs, and three reminders of mortality.

Similaun summit ridge, July 2016

Climbing the Similaun July 1969;
inset: Similaun 47 years later, photographs Peter Mark

Introduction: A Mountain Life

Hiking and mountain climbing help define who I am. The woods and rock ledges of the Ramapo Hills, where my grandparents lived on a mountainside, form part of my earliest memory. My first climbing trip to the Alps was at age 20; expeditions to the Alps have now bracketed fifty years of my adult life. Mountains, my first and enduring love, embody a sense of freedom. As I have grown older, climbing offers something more precious. Adventure and physical challenge have transformed into the search for a deeper connection to something beyond my personal existence. I find, as have so many others before me, that the mountains serve as a font of spiritual renewal. In the words of Reinhold Stecher, the former Bishop of Innsbruck, "Viele Wege führen zu Gott. Einer geht über die Berge." ("Many roads lead to God. One goes over the mountains.")

In 2018, I retired after 40 years as a professor of History and Art History, 32 of those years at Wesleyan University. It was my intent to devote more time to research and writing about my chosen field, pre-colonial West Africa. Equally important, however, I hoped to spend as much time as possible hiking and climbing while I was still able to do so. I imagined that after these trips to the mountains, I would write a series of short, anecdotal accounts of each small adventure.

The writing would be primarily for my own enjoyment. The act of writing about a hike, of committing memory to words, complements the physical effort. Writing, like the photographic fixer we used, back in the days of darkroom photography, lends permanence to the ephemeral act of climbing. Seeking words to convey the physical effort and emotions I experience, and to try to give voice to the beauty of a delicate flower or an overwhelming vista, becomes an integral part of any hike or summit climb. Perhaps this need to capture the evanescent helps to explain why so many mountaineers have published accounts of their efforts. No other sport has engendered such an extensive and impressive literature.

Climbing, however, is more than a sport. Hiking frees my mind to wander along its own paths. In the mountains, the active life induces and nourishes the contemplative spirit. Hiking, particularly in solitude, leads my mind towards matters philosophical and to reflect on religion and life itself.

Two factors have intervened to transform this writing project. One was inevitable and I might have expected it. As I grow older, the paths I have already hiked become far longer than the paths that remain before me. As hiking becomes more precious, the mountains serve as my venue for reflection. This is the place where I can sometimes reach a deeper level of meditation or experience a moment of spiritual illumination.

And then COVID arrived. Borders closed. France, where I live, has twice been in lockdown. Long-term plans, especially if they include travel, have become irrelevant. Research trips and meetings to exchange ideas with colleagues are now ill-advised or outright impossible. More often than not, archives and libraries are inaccessible. For me, the physicality of the archival document or the book is essential. I have never been an online scholar. I take little pleasure in that mode. But without the research to feed my scholarship, writing history, along with so much else in my life, has paused. Fortunately, the hills have remained accessible. And even when we are in lockdown, to write about the mountains brings them to me.

With the pandemic, suddenly we realize the precarity of our existence. Illness is not abstract. Death, as the ambulance sirens remind us, is not so distant as we had imagined. When you face your own demise, the philosophical and the religious become rather immediate questions. In one respect, the pandemic is similar to climbing a rock face: in the face of existential fear we are reminded that we need to master ourselves, if we

value our existence. COVID did not ignore me; I cannot ignore the pandemic, nor what it has taught me. As the illness wove itself into my life, I shall try to weave it into these essays. Through most of this year of COVID, the mountains, happily, have remained accessible. So, I find myself now in the medieval town of Wissembourg, at the foot of the northern Vosges. Here is my inspiration, and here, quite literally, I can carry on fieldwork.

Above Wissembourg

ANONYMOUS GRANDEUR

Winter parachuted me like a seed
to a birth latitude not high enough
for me to be a tree like one of these
never less than regal shagged in jeweled
snow naked as a white-sand beach and not
minding it or cold or wind or
anything at all just standing sure in
my own uprightness unshaken by the
choices I don't have to make the places
I don't have to go not preoccupied
with pure Being even in each instant
as I should be just being *it inscribing*
my own story in cursive not a soul
can read and I'd be fine with that since I'd
just have to live until I fall from sight
where free of meddling hands I would cede my
space with joy to those so like my younger
self that some will pass long after and in
breathlessness declare here's the one so steeped
in lore unless it's that one over there!

Round Numbers

Before I ever saw a mountain, the Checks were given, on maps.[2] I discovered my parents' atlas when I was seven. For each country, the highest summit was marked. I was fascinated by their altitude. Mount Fuji, I remember, was 12,378 feet high. My father had served in the U.S. Army of Occupation in Tokyo the year before I was born. His photographs of Fuji's snow-covered cone mesmerized me. Sixty years on, to climb Fujiyama is on my bucket list.

"29,002," formerly the listed height of Everest, did not interest me. Too high a number; 8,848 meters is also too high. I do love to read the classic accounts of early Everest expeditions, but I have never had the slightest desire to climb the world's tallest peak. 4,000 meters is challenge enough.

Why should the altitude of a peak matter? The height, in meters or in feet, may appear to be an objective fact. But as every climber learns, degree of difficulty depends as much upon accessibility, geographical location, weather conditions. Not to mention changing climate conditions – as I learned climbing the Similaun.

2 See Emily Dickinson, "I Never Saw a Moor."

Furthermore, there is nothing sacred about particular round numbers.

Change the measuring rod, and the number changes. Feet? The magic numbers include: 4,000 and 14,000. Meters? The magic numbers include 3,000; 4,000; or 8,000. But 8,000 meters equal 26,246 feet. 4,000 meters equal 13,124 feet. 4,000 feet equals 1,219 meters. Same altitude, but not quite so interesting.

My first mountains were the Adirondacks in northern New York State. The magic number there is 4,000 feet. 46 peaks attain that altitude. Or they were thought to, a century ago, following the original geodetic survey. Why, a century later, should anyone care to climb a remote, trail-less and view-less bump, miles from anywhere? Couchsachraga ("Howling Wilderness," its appropriate Algonquin name) is 3,820 feet high, a number no more special than 1,156 (its height in meters). "Couchie" was originally mis-measured. Nevertheless, my brother and I cared enough to spend 14 hours trudging along old logging roads and fighting through the aptly named "cripple bush," or second-growth fir trees, to attain that "summit." Couchie was my 46th peak, in 1968. The return hike was either facilitated or complicated by the champagne we consumed on the summit in celebration. I thereby became the 506th person to climb the 46 peaks. At the time, it seemed an embarrassingly high number. Fifty years and 12,000 climbers later, "Number 506" is so low, it sometimes occasions gasps from fellow hikers. (Or are the gasps because someone my age is still climbing?)

When I moved to Strasbourg, I studied the maps of the Vosges mountains prepared by the Institut de Géographie National (IGN). The IGN has just announced that they will stop printing maps. Let everyone rely on GPS. Not a happy, nor a wise decision. But a sign of the times.

In the Vosges, 36 peaks or ridges reach 4,000 feet (1,219 meters). I decided to form a Vosges 1,219 Club. To date, I am the charter and unique member of this august body. I almost abandoned this venture when I learned that one "summit" has a road across it, while several others have ski lifts, and one has an amusement park with a water slide. But a goal is a goal, be it 1,219 or 4,000. And the IGN's measurements, whether on a map or on GPS, are accurate.

Perhaps I ignore two fundamental questions. When, precisely does a hill become a mountain? The answer is easy: When I go out of my way to climb it.

But even then, Why bother?

I propose several answers:

a. Why not?

b. [with apologies to George Leigh Mallory] Because they are there.

c. Because.

II - COVID

Snow, February 7, 2021

Schneeberg is barely a mountain. An easy one-hour hike, close to my retirement home in Strasbourg, Schneeberg is an attractive goal for a Sunday afternoon in mid- winter.

On this February day, low clouds mask the surrounding fir-clad hills, rain and wet snow blow across the wind-carved summit rocks of red sandstone; water drips from the moss-covered, gnarled beech trees.

We are three, standing atop this 3000-foot high hill in the northern Vosges. For me, it is a commemoration; a year ago I stood here, on what could have been my last hike.

Schneeberg, Friday, March 13, 2020

Schneeberg is an easy climb for this early spring day. Under broken clouds, I start slowly, still fighting the remnants of yesterday's hang-over. The headache and aching muscles serve me right, after watching Champion's League soccer in a bar for two hours. Mountain air and the brisk breeze should be the ideal remedy, also for an incipient sore throat. On the trail, I meet one couple. Like me, retirees. On a workday, who else? We exchange pleasantries and tease each other: "You aren't wearing a mask."

It is too cold to eat at the summit rocks; I head down. An hour later, back in the valley, all three hotels in Wangenbourg are closed for the season. Here, as in too many other Alsatian villages, all the shops have closed. Even the bakery is shuttered: "à Vendre." I sit in the park, looking out across the valley towards the perfectly formed, rounded profile of Schneeberg, shoulders curving upward to a green-clad peak, a perfectly formed, small-scale old mountain.

On the drive home to Strasbourg, I stop in the small city of Wasselone. Every pharmacy in the town is out of hand sanitizer; nor are there any masks. There is not a mask to be had in Alsace. Even my doctor is 'en rupture de stock.'

100 kilometers to the south, Mulhouse is infested with COVID. The city has more infections than any place else in France. Some cases are reported now in Strasbourg. Perhaps it is time I stopped watching sporting events in crowded bars.

About that bar and my hang-over, I have an unsettling thought. During that two-hour soccer match, I ordered only soft drinks. The headache was not a hang-over.

...in the time of COVID

March 2020

Max von Sydow died today. The defining role of his career was as the Knight, playing chess against Death in Ingmar Bergman's masterpiece, "The Seventh Seal." He played on behalf of humanity, though the result was preordained. In 1348, half of the population of Siena and Florence – perhaps half the population of Europe -- died of the Black Death. Six centuries later, when Bergman produced his work of art, that fourteenth-century scenario was unimaginable. Today, we know; it can happen here. It can happen to us. A century after the flu pandemic of 1918, Coronavirus stalks the world. Italy is paralyzed by the epidemic. We are not so invulnerable as we had imagined.

In Strasbourg, rain has darkened our skies for ten days. Sunday, the clouds lighten. We decide to hike in the Black Forest. On the way to the hills, we stop at the pilgrimage church in Lautenbach. "Maria Kronung" has stood, nearly unchanged, since 1486. How many epidemics of Plague have killed how many parishoners? That was long ago. But today, there is a sign on the church door: "To stop the spread of the virus, the holy water has been drained; there will be no Communion." Even the Church must bend to this epidemic. In the fifteenth century, pilgrims stopped in Lautenbach on their way to the Premonstratensian monastery at Allerheiligen. The Canons Regular have been gone from the monastery for more than two centuries. Only tourists come there, but

there are no tourists today.

The fear of plague is in the valley. We drive to the end of the road and begin to climb. Below, spring has come early. Above the farms, in the forest, the breeze is fresh and the air is clear. Higher on the mountain, the snow lies white and pure, crunching cleanly under our boots. We walk here without fear. At the summit tower, we stop to picnic; the benches are covered with four inches of new snow, so we stand in the sunshine, enjoying lunch. On the horizon, we can almost see the Alps. The pandemic is a distant movie.

Lockdown, March 17th 2020

At precisely noon, the bells of St. Maurice, the closest church to our apartment, begin to toll. Not a dirge; not the celebratory bells of Easter; just a long chiming. Calling the citizens of Strasbourg home. Now, our confinement begins.

Spring has come early. The air is soft and warm, but the sunshine retains its winter clarity. In the older parks of the German quarter (1870-1918), the magnolias are in bloom; so are the cherry trees that surround the children's playground in front of St. Maurice. The blossoms are white and pure against the pale blue sky. But the children have gone home. The sounds of the city slowly cease. There is only the silent breeze. The city, it seems, holds its breath.

An hour before noon, Odile and I went out for a final walk before the confinement. The Cathedral square was nearly empty of people. In the shopping streets, two supermarkets were open. Lines formed, each person standing two meters from their neighbors. Along the cobbled streets, there were couples and single women returning from the market, and fathers bicycling with small children in bicycle seats.

The government has deployed 100,000 police across France to enforce the curfew. We may leave our home only for necessary food purchases, or to visit the doctor or the pharmacy, and you have to have with you an official 'attestation.' The form is available on line and you sign it, on your honor, giving the purpose for your sortie. Fines begin today at 38 Euros but will rise to 135 Euros. Still, here in France there is a humane quality, to official pronouncements. This is not the first form I have been called on to sign "On my honor." An hour into the curfew, on the radio (three public channels are sharing the same public interest programming), a police spokesperson speaks of a first stage: "to accompany and to encourage responsibility." If you do not have a printer, a signed, handwritten copy of the official form will be accepted. After all, the form has only been available online since this morning.

It is consolation to know we will be allowed to go out for exercise. We live next to the University park and the Botanical Garden. They are closed, but if we walk or run around the perimeter, the distance is well over a

mile. I hope to find out exactly how long it takes to run the circuit slowly.

Time stretches out, time to appreciate smaller things: the kiss of the breeze on my cheek; the changing light on the red tiles of the surrounding apartments. And we are fortunate. There is a small garden in front of our house. In these warm early spring days, we can eat lunch on our balcony. Or watch the sunset over the city, over a glass of wine.

In Paris, many people are confined to tiny apartments. We have 100 square meters and thousands of books. The wine bars are closed, but we have a decent wine cellar. The spring concerts are cancelled, but we have "France Musique" on the radio and our CD collection to listen to. The museums are closed, but we have our own art on the walls. Perhaps I will rotate the prints; change one work each day.

I have always dreaded the idea of being locked up or confined. This frightens me. Walking, running, biking are the pillars of my emotional stability. But, at least we can go out to "faire de l'exercise physique uniquement à titre individuel." Bless the French government!

Memento Mori – Fear

In Pisa's Campo Santo, a mid-fourteenth century fresco depicts "The Triumph of Death."[3] A group of horseback riders, well-dressed men and women, suddenly comes upon three open caskets. Overcome by the sight and the smell, even their horses shy, as the riders pull back. In the open caskets lie a religious figure, a nobleman, and a decomposed corpse. Painted at about the time of the Black Death, this fresco reminds us that Death is everywhere; it shows no regard for wealth or social status.

3 This painting was formerly attributed to Francesco Traini and it was dated after the Black Death of 1348; see Millard Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death: The arts, religion, and society in the mid-fourteenth Century* (Princeton University Press, 1951; rpt: 1978). The fresco has now been reattributed and dated to before the Plague. See, *inter alia,* Norman Land, "Vasari's Buffalmacco and the Transubstantiation of Paint," *Renaissance Quarterly,* 58 (2005): 881-895.

Covid-19, too, is totally egalitarian. The virus shows no deference for money; it does not care about language, or the color of your skin. It is invisible, but its impact is everywhere. The hospitals are full; the suffering is omnipresent in the newspapers and on the television screen. In Strasbourg, an ambulance, siren blaring, speeds by along the empty Avenue de la Forêt Noire. A friend calls from Nice; she has just recovered from the virus. We cannot ignore the illness.

Walking through the deserted streets at 7 o'clock on another perfectly beautiful spring morning, my fear takes the form of another person, walking towards me. To him, I am the same fear. We move far apart as we pass on the sidewalk. The supermarket is open. A hand-scrawled sign instructs us: Only ONE person at a time is allowed into the supermarket. Where does social distancing blend into irrational fear? Outside, three people wait in front of me, each with an empty shopping cart. My shopping can wait. At the bakery and the newsstand, I am the only customer. The newspapers and email give some feeling of contact with the outside world.

I breathe the fresh air, enjoying the smell of flowers. I stand before white canopies of cherry blossoms. "Loveliest of trees, the cherry now/ is hung with bloom along the bough." "Of my threescore years and ten, twenty will not come again." I am one spring past Housman's threescore and ten. Will this, I wonder, be my last? Hausman made it to his 78th spring. I take hope.

Since serving on a Search and Rescue team at Ground Zero in 2001, I have been subject to post-nasal drip.[4] When it tickles my throat, I cough a little and ignore it. But not now. Outside, walking or running, no problem. But as soon as I come inside and sit at my desk, it tickles my throat. I suppress a cough. Am I coughing more than yesterday? How many days since I watched that soccer match in a crowded bar? What is the incubation period for Covid-19? Oh, God I hope this isn't the start of the Big One. How long does the virus last? Maybe I am one of the fortunate people who only get a little cough!

Keep your mind occupied. Get back to your reading. Or finish pruning the rose bushes. Make a cup of coffee. Or write . . . so long as I don't write about my fear.

4 Virtually all of the 11,000 rescuers and construction workers from Ground Zero show this symptom. We are the lucky ones. Many who had longer exposure there, suffer from much worse.

A Mild Case

April 5, 2020

Hundreds of thousands have fallen ill, and many thousands have died. I dare not complain about the relatively minor consequences of my own bout with COVID. After all, apparently, I now have at least some immunity to this terrible disease. But I need to accept the consequences.

I fell ill on Thursday, March 12. Two weeks later I was symptom-free, although it was another week before I regained the energy to be able to run again, for even 20 minutes.

On Friday March 20, I lost my sense of smell. Suddenly and entirely. I called my nephew, a doctor in Seattle who has been on the front lines battling this virus. He assured me that I did not have COVID. But two days later, the first medical reports were published, identifying anosmia (loss of sense of smell) as a characteristic symptom of COVID. Yesterday, Madeleine (my daughter), reminded

me that she and I also spoke that evening. “You had a bad cough.” I had blocked out the memory. That was clearly the critical moment, when my illness was at its most severe.

A week after my symptoms went away, I contacted my doctor for the first time about the anosmia. He wrote back immediately, to confirm -- he had no doubt --that I had had a mild case of COVID. Antibody tests were not yet available in France, so the diagnosis had to rely on assessment of the symptoms. But I knew, my body knows, that we had the virus.

I have not regained my sense of smell. Given what might have been, this is a relatively minor loss. There are, however, moments when it feels that something has been amputated. I have just spent an hour and half dressing, basteing, and roasting a chicken for our Sunday dinner. It has come out a lovely golden brown. I can only imagine how wonderful it smells.

At night, the burnt odor that, for a split second, sometimes replaces my sense of smell, is almost like the smell of death. I hope this odor, real or imagined, goes away and that I regain some sense of smell. But if I don’t, I am happy. And fortunate. I am alive and I am well. I can run and I can look forward to climbing mountains. Countless others are less fortunate.

Ten days later, my infection was confirmed by the newly developed antibody test.

Getting There

Kort Burnham was the only person I ever met who had known Theodore Roosevelt. Burnham was an old man when my son Chris and I interviewed him about his own father. John Bird Burnham (1869-1939) took part in the Klondike Gold Rush, worked with Roosevelt, and helped to draft the Migratory Birds Act (1918). At the beginning of the 20th century, John Bird Burnham regularly traveled by train from his work in New York City to his home near Lake Champlain. On my first trip to the mountains, I travelled the same route from New York City, 250 miles to Willsboro station in the Adirondacks. Today, few people take the train.

For the climber, "Getting there," when one lives in New York or Boston, implies driving. My first long-distance drives were to the Adirondacks and the Catskills. My only cross-country drives have been to the Rocky Mountains in Colorado, Wyoming, and New Mexico. If the Catskills have largely replaced the more challenging Adirondacks as my preferred hiking destination in the Northeast, that is because family members have

migrated there, but the shorter drive is also an attraction: 300 km.(186 miles) vs 500 km (310 miles).

Living in Strasbourg, one has many ways to get to the mountains. You can bicycle to the closest peaks of the Vosges. Climbing on the road bike is a sport in itself. A *col* is, to a cyclist, as a summit is to a climber. In the Vosges and especially in the Black Forest, public transportation provides ready access to most hiking destinations. The German train network was developed in the nineteenth century in conjunction with the growth of middleclass, outdoor tourism. Today, trains connect to bus lines; along the entire length of the Westweg, the hiking trail that runs the length of the Black Forest, all but two segments of the trail are serviced by train or by bus.

On our annual trip to the Alps in Italy's South Tirol, we drive. Trains take much longer. Our car gives greater mobility once we arrive and, to get to our preferred inn at Rojen, you either drive or you hike up from Reschen in the valley. Our route takes us across much of Switzerland as well as the Austrian Arlberg and Tirol. The distance from Strasbourg is precisely 500 km., the same as the distance from my Connecticut home to the Adirondacks. The Alps are certainly worth this drive.

III - France

The Massif Central: Besse

The medieval town of Besse-en-Chandesse is silent and deserted at seven in the morning. In the central square, a fountain provides the only sound. The facades of medieval and Renaissance dwellings are constructed of the local black volcanic stone, giving the town a severe, almost dour aspect. Only the bakeries and one café have opened. At the bus stop, the driver has arrived early; he converses with the only other passenger, an elderly woman. Ten minutes later, we arrive at Super-Besse; this is the "anti-Besse"-- all modern hotels and sports stores and, incongruously, a 20-story apartment tower. Ski lifts scar the mountainside, but they are silent, too, early on a cool and cloudy summer day. As in Besse, the bakery and a café are open. I purchase a croissant and bread for breakfast, and I stop in the café for my morning caffeine.

Rushing to cross the ski area – all grass and gravel and bare earth – I climb into the forest. Hiking through ski areas is esthetically unpleasant. There is, however, one advantage: the ski trails are steep and relatively straight, so that one quickly leaves the devastation behind. In 40 minutes, I am above treeline and approaching the ridge. For the next hour I wind my way up a combination of narrow hiking paths and wide ski runs that are cut into the thin soil of the upper mountain. At the top station of the téléférique there are signs: "Puy de Perdrix 0.3 km."(The way is practically paved and the final hillside is set with wooden steps.); and "No dogs beyond 300 meters." "No VTT"- mountain bikes are a hazard for hikers; here, at least, there are separate trails for the bikers and the hikers.

Beyond Puy de Perdrix, the route becomes a wide hiking trail. These peaks are the remnants of a much higher volcano. Their cataclysmic origin explains the cliffs that line the eastern slope –the ancient caldera. The narrow ridge with its sequence of basalt outcroppings is what remains from the rim of the volcano. By 10 o'clock I am standing on the highest of these points, the Puy de Sancy (1,885 meters; 6,182 feet), culminating summit of the Massif Central. Thickening clouds hide the more distant peaks; the sun has disappeared. Clouds rise from the valley and scud across the ridgeline, like surf breaking on a rocky shore. Already wisps of cloud cover my trail; it is time to start down.

Puy de Sancy

France: The Vosges

Along the softly rolling summits of the Vosges, sunlight, tinged blue and yellow, bathes the pastures. From the rocky balcony of Rothenbachkopf (1,316 meters; 4,316 feet) I look steeply down into folds of dark green forest. Far below lies the village of Mittlach. The valley, twisting between somber fingers of forest, merges in the haze-shrouded distance with the broad plain of the Rhine. I am sharing the summit perch with five excited nine-year olds and several adults. The children cavort loudly, while the parents warn them back from the precipice. Perhaps this is their introduction to the mountains; in 50 years one of them may make this same climb in search of solitude. Today, there is neither silence nor solitude. I move on.

My favorite climb includes the three summits of Rainkopf, Batteriekopf, and Rothenbachkopf. All are slightly more than 4,000 feet in elevation; the precipitous eastern slopes contrast with the rounded western flank. On my first visit, climbing the sub-alpine trail along the crest, I was startled to come face-to-face with a grazing cow. For

two decades, this hike has been an annual late spring pilgrimage. In May and June, snow still sits in the shaded declivities of the east face. Occasionally, one encounters mountain goats.

I have come by train from Strasbourg. From Colmar, a local line runs into the mountains, ending at the village of Metzeral. From here, the Rainkopf ridge is too distant, but at 1 a.m. the thought came to bring my bike on the train and ride the five km. to Mittlach. Arriving in Mittlach, I am saddened to see that the small hotel, 'Valneige' – the only remaining business in this community – has closed. My anticipated cup of espresso becomes a small victim of the larger business failure. Rather than leave my bike in the village center, I cycle up the narrow country road another four km. to the trailhead. Locking my bike by the giant "Sapin du Kolben," a 150-year old fir tree, I start up the familiar trail to my three Vosges summits.

Through forests of Douglas fir, planted shortly after Alsace was annexed to Germany in 1871, the trail diagonals across a scree slope, then up to the dam and lake of Altenweier. This was constructed by German engineers, as part of a massive hydroelectric project. Now a favorite spot for trout fisherman, the lake provides a marvelous open vista to the encircling mountain ridge. Above Altenweier, the trail switchbacks up the steep slope, winding around and then above moss-covered cliffs. Suddenly, the forest opens; we are at the *col*, at 1,219 meters, or 4,000 feet.

Below the ridge, along the gentle western slope, runs the "route des Crêtes". On weekends and in the summer months, this paved road brings hordes of visitors, attracted by the *fermes auberges*, restaurant-farms that serve their own products. A typical Sunday meal, the 'menu marcaire,' might consist of soup, paté en croute, followed by choucroute or other hearty meats, and blueberry tart, accompanied by liberal libations of Alsatian wine. After such a repast, I would be unable to hike down the mountain, let alone up. My summit meal consists of cheese, baguette, olives and carrots, and some chocolate. But first, there is the final push.

The ridge trail passes through a forest of dwarf beech trees, growing here at their altitude limit. Every 100 meters or so, rectangular granite blocks mark the former border. The western side is incised with an 'F', but the eastern face bears a blank depression where the 'D' was chiseled away after 1918 (or was it 1945?). In years of hiking along this former international border, I have found two or three stellae that still bear the 'D' for "Deutschland." The trail runs parallel to a ditch; beech trees grow from the compacted, mounded earth. These were French trenches during the First World War. From the summit, one can see the entire defensive fortifications. Twenty years ago, pieces of shrapnel and casing from rifle bullets still protruded from bare spots in the trail. This most beautiful mountain landscape was a place of death and suffering.

A century later, across the same ridgetop, the lambent sunlight yellows the summit meadow. A soft breeze

ripples the grass and caresses my face and arms. The late summer air is clear and fresh and cool. From Rothenbachkopf the panorama encompasses twenty-eight 4000-foot summits. Now, from the rounded top of Batteriekopf, I look down on lakes and ridges, toward distant fields of grazing cows. To the south, beyond the peak of the Grand Ballon, a fleet of low cotton clouds hides the Alps. On a clear autumn day one can see the peaks of the Bernese Oberland – Eiger, Mönch and Jungfrau. Today, there is only the haze of a lovely soft summer afternoon.

August 2016/January 2021

Petit Ballon

The pale blue bowl of sky shimmers under a hot sun. Mid-morning at nearly 3,000 feet on the slopes of the Petit Ballon; in the heat, only silence. No wind : ". . . nor breath nor motion. As silent as a painted ship upon a painted ocean." From the natural balcony of the steep hillside, above an open pasture, one looks across a broad valley to the crested pale-green waves of mountains : Hohneck, Kastelberg, and then old friends, the rock-crenellated ridge of Rainkopf-Batteriekopf. Haze-paled greens of distant forest, trees tinted with yellow matching the late summer golden brown of the 'chaumes,' or bare summits. The sun dries my shirt, soaked, just moments ago, with sweat. I shall continue climbing without the shirt, into the relentless glare.

I have come by train, back to the Valley of Munster, to escape the torrid and diesel-fouled air of Strasbourg and the five construction sites that surround our apartment and that pour forth noise and fumes.

View of Rothenbachkopf

From Batteriekopf, looking west

Up in the mountains, where I am going, it is still hot; but at least one can breathe. A favorite ferme-auberge (Christlesgut) offers refreshment and shade. I enjoy a second breakfast of café au lait and fresh bread. Now on to the Petit Ballon.

From one ferme-auberge to another (Rothenbrunnen) after three hours of hiking in bright sun. A faint breeze ripples along the ridgetop. But an ill-advised off-trail detour so that I may climb to another summit takes me through dense secondary growth of juniper. The thick bushes are as impenetrable as Adirondack "cripple-bush,"and just as uncomfortable. Poor judgment, as there is also a trail between the two summits. On top, I stand on a flat stone, strip and spend ten minutes picking sharp juniper needles out of my socks, my boots, and the pockets of my hiking shorts. Now, drinking a liter of water in the cool restaurant, I watch puffy white clouds floating by; the day is half over. Soon I will start down to meet the evening local train from Metzeral. By then, perhaps, the worst of the heat will have passed from the city.

Five p.m. at Christlesgut, enjoying a beer and coffee on the terrace. Buddhist prayer flags float above us; conversation with the proprietor – she has traveled to Nepal. One of the men who work the farm is from Nepal. Christlesgut sells wool sweaters from Nepal to raise funds for a school in this man's home village. On the shaded terrace, we talk about the world, and

we agree that we are fortunate to live in such a place as this. As the sun moves behind a cloud, the ridge of Hohneck-Batteriekopf turns blue-purple in the shade, promising a cooler evening, at least up here. For me, it is time to head down.

August 26, 2016

The Petit Ballon with Rothenbrunnen ferme auberge

Autumn in the Central Vosges

A night of rain has given way to crisp blue skies with scudding grey-white clouds. As we drive into the Vosges, climbing the steep switchbacks to the pass (Col de Pandours at 662 meters (2,171 feet), the forest palette comes awake with colors of a European autumn. Early October; already, the rich green of the fir trees is framed by yellow flashes of aspen and red-brown of beech. Autumn colors are more subdued here than in New England. There is a quiet beauty worthy of an older, more staid part of the world. Three days ago, I was in Lisbon. There, it was 93 degrees. In the hills of eastern France, the dew-fresh early morning air registers 11 degrees centigrade, 52 degrees Fahrenheit.

From the parking area, we oblique across a steep hillside, climbing through a forest of centenarian fir and beech. The forest is owned by the local commune and the woodsmen have been at work. Their selective harvesting provides a significant portion of the commune's annual income. We climb over the fallen trunks of immense beech trees, while beechnuts and early-fallen golden leaves carpet the soft earth. At the first *col*, a small grass terrace tops a sandstone cliff so precisely vertical, it appears to have been fashioned by ancient architects. Only by the First Architect.

The Vosges have been inhabited for millennia, since long before the arrival of Roman soldiers. Merchants

drove their carts across these passes when Strasbourg was a Roman outpost (Argentoratum). Today we follow more recent paths. One route is neatly paved with giant cobblestones, probably laid down in the late nineteenth century, when Alsace was part of Germany (1871-1919). Our path leads us along the crest of a ridge, to a rocky promontory reached by steps cut into the living sandstone. On the summit (Urstein 3,100') stands a pedestal topped by an old orientation map. The map is long gone; the forest has grown up, completely obliterating any view.

From Urstein, we join the GR 5. The letters indicate this trail is a "Grande Randonnée," one of a series of long-distance hiking paths that traverse France. We pass through open forest; there are views to the surrounding green- and yellow-clad ridges and down to the valley of the Bruche River. We pass hunters' blinds, used for culling the overpopulation of wild boar. The first hunters entered this valley 10,000 years ago, at the end of the last ice age. From a hillside cave at the mouth of the valley of the Bruche, they ambushed migrating prey, presumably much larger than the animals hunted by their descendants who use shotguns.

Two hours into our hike, we come to a paved road that descends the western slope into Lorraine. We turn east. The forest grows denser as we climb the long slope to a summit called Grossman (1,010 meters or 3,300 feet), the most remote and least frequented of the northern Vosges peaks. No trail leads directly

to this, my favorite hidden mountain. We leave the hiking path and climb through wet undergrowth, along the crest of the gently rising ridge. 200-year-old carved stones mark the boundary of Alsace and Lorraine. 70 years ago, this area was considerably more remote than it is today. During World War II, when Alsace was annexed by the Third Reich, local woodsmen risked their lives to guide refugees, young Frenchmen escaping conscription and Jews fleeing Nazi Germany, across the mountains. These *passeurs* used their intimate knowledge of the Vosges to traverse the mountains in the dead of night. Because of its remoteness, Grossman was a favored point for crossing the massif.

Grossman has no precise summit; the ridge is crowned by a rocky promontory, deeply eroded to form channels and passageways, and overgrown with ancient, moss-bedecked fir trees. These rock formations are shaded even in early afternoon. We picnic in one of the overgrown clearings that hint at an earlier time, when the ridge must have been pasture. The morning dew still soaks the ground and rises as mist in the sun. Through the mist appear the ghostlike forms of rocks and fir trees. One half-expects to see elves moving silently through this faerie-like setting. I sense the presence of the *passeurs*, leading their clients at night, through this magical space and on to safety.

Another Way to be in the Mountains

On the high plateau at the headwaters of the Bruche river, the village of Saales perches on the border between the Departments of Bas-Rhin and Haut-Rhin. The hills at the western edge of Saales mark another border, between Alsace and the Department of the Vosges. From 1871 to 1919 and from 1940 to 1944, this was also the border between France and Germany. On a mid-June evening, the cool air is bracing as I look out across the fields of wild grasses, cut by narrow winding roads. Long low ridges turn blue in the distance; pine forests rise to the nearby hills. Soft gray light under broken clouds marks the end of 16 hours of sunlight, as we approach the solstice. Walking in the early evening, I feel so close to my earliest childhood summers at my grandparents' house on a wooded and rocky hillside in the Ramapo hills. "Rockledge" is the only house I have lived in that had a name. Lake Sapphire, 60 years ago, the time feels so near I could reach out and touch it.

June 17, 2020

Today would have been my parents' 75th wedding anniversary.

A mild case of COVID has brought me presumed immunity. After my recovery, I tried to volunteer my services any place where I might be useful. My proposed blood donation (for the antibodies) was refused – "too old." The same offer, repeated to the International Red Cross, was ignored. Local clinics in Strasbourg found no use for me, even as a messenger or a secretary. But the newspaper warned that a manpower shortage threatened local agriculture. I wrote to Jean Vogel, former Mayor of Saales, agronomist, and a friend. He did respond. And now, I find myself helping a crew to hang an acre of netting above Jean's berry orchard, to protect the blueberries and blackberries from birds.

Blueberry bushes are planted in rows that run across the hillside, forming several rectangles, each 150-200 yards long by 75 yards wide. Around the perimeter stand 8' poles capped with plastic 'hats,' and set five meters apart. These perimeter poles define the rows of slightly shorter stakes that cross the berry patches at 10-meter intervals.

The bird nets, of green nylon, are woven with two-inch openings. Our work consists of anchoring the netting over the tops of each interior line of stakes. We advance 'en echalon' with both arms upraised to gently guide the netting and then to tighten it, using plastic clips. My shirt buttons keep getting caught in the netting. I feared I might end the day hanging from the netting, like one

of Andrea del Castagno's fifteenth-century paintings of Florentine criminals hung in cages, the 'Impiccati.'

Twelve of us work steadily from 8:30 until after 11, when we take a break for a beer – or a drink of fizzy water mixed with blueberry syrup from last summer's crop. The spirit of comradeship is strong. Jean Vogel's friend Claude, former Assistant Mayor, rock-hewn tanned face, progressive politics, was a laborer in a local business. Here, status does not come from a university degree.

We return to work, followed by a welcome lunch break. At 3 o'clock Jean, his two teenage sons and I begin a final 1 ½-hours, tightening the netting. Again, we march in line, arms upraised to pull at the billowing green waves of nylon, which we then anchor with the plastic clips. By late afternoon, I am tired and frustrated by my inability to master the art of clipping two nylon holes together, all the while looking directly up at the sky. I leave most of this final task to the taller boys. At 18, already with years of netting experience, they are just coming into the confidence of their nearly adult strength. I, learning this new task fifty years on, can only wistfully wonder at the endurance that once was mine.

All day, lifting an acre of netting. Communal work and physical labor; the pleasure of a shared effort and the satisfaction of a hard day's work well-done. This recalls the year I lived in the Casamance region of Senegal (1975). I helped to construct the roof for my friend Cheikh Abba Badji's new house, working together with all the men

of the community. The following summer, recovering from tropical maladies in Norway, I spent a vacation high in the Jotunheimen mountains, sawing wood and cutting trees, then carrying and piling the birch logs. Each of these days brought the satisfaction of hard physical labor, and of sharing a common effort and belonging to a group. Shared work projects are another way, along with mountain climbing and hiking, to become more fully a part of the surrounding landscape.

June 18th

Heavy rain all day. Rarely have I experienced so much precipitation, lasting from sunrise to sundown. Jean Vogel tells me 33 mm of water have fallen – 1 1/3 inches. At 1:30, after reading and writing for four hours, I decide to hike to the ridge above town. There, Jean led a successful campaign to construct the windmills that, today, are the source of Saale's electrical power. Wearing all my raingear, out for only 2 ½ hours, I return soaked. The equipment is drying by the space heater, while I take a long, hot shower.

The next morning, the sun awakens me at 5:30. I step outside beneath a blue sky. The woods will still be wet and I have a blister from the wet socks yesterday. This trip has been conducive to physical effort, but not to hiking.

In the evening, Clotilde, my landlady invites me and

Georges, the village priest, to a copious dinner. Georges is from Cameroun. By coincidence, Jean Vogel lived for several years in Cameroun. This corner of the world has become cosmopolitan. Georges, an intellectual in the best Jesuit tradition, studies medieval philosophy at the University in Strasbourg: Averroes, Maimonides and Thomas Aquinas. Without Averroes, medieval Europe would not have had access to Aristotle. Without Thomas Aquinas, there might be no Positivist tradition and, ultimately, no Heidegger. I read some of Thomas Aquinas during freshman year of college; perhaps, were I to read him again, I might understand something.

The Northern Vosges

Col du Pigeonnier/Col de Scherhol

Wissembourg is a walled medieval town in the shadow of the northern Vosges. The forested hills here mark the border between the northeastern corner of France and Germany. They have been the border since 1945. Before that, the hills wandered (like the frisky sheep in one of the Psalms), back and forth between the two countries. Louis XIV secured the region for France; after 1870 it became German. In 1919 France regained Alsace. In 1940 Hitler annexed all of Alsace and, finally, in 1945 the region was returned to France. Wissembourg was founded by monks during the seventh century C.E. The tower of the Abbey Church was built in 1075. Several houses within the well-preserved city walls date to the 1200s, as does the nave of the Church, monumental yet of jewel-like beauty.

I have rented an apartment in a sprawling house constructed in 1598. My apartment (modernized since)

opens onto an interior courtyard, decorated with farm implements that must have come from the attic or the cellar. When I visited, the landlord showed me his private entryway with a spiral stairway, missing its bottom step thanks to a cannon ball from the Franco-Prussian War. The half-timbered façade has a sandstone entry arch; my living room contains a carved stone pillar and capital, also of local sandstone, presumably also from 1598. To be here even for a short time, you feel part of a 500-year chain; I imagine that to own the house, even for decades, one would still feel transient.

Our soggy early winter weather returned yesterday. The forecast calls for several more days of rain, leading me to amend my hiking plans. The GR-5 is one of numerous hiking trails that cross France from east to west, or north to south. GR-5 crosses Wissembourg. For the first five miles beyond the town, the trail is never far from a road. On a stormy December day, hiking alone, I feel safer to stay near a road. I won't be hiking fast; the constant rains have transformed most trails into mud. And local mud has a lot of clay in it...which is why the region has long been renowned for its pottery. In winter, even for a day hike, I carry the same large pack that I use for multi-day summer hiking trips. The pack is heavy with extra wool clothing, an extra down parka, extra food, and raingear. No summit on the agenda today. I am heading for a 'col' or a pass: Col du Pigeonnier (pigeon-raiser's col). A slow, steady 3 ½ hour round trip.

The rain has begun, so I am wearing rain pants as well as a Goretex jacket, wool mittens, wool cap, and mountain

boots. Half an hour along the paved bike path, then up into the woods: First sign: *1'05" to the col*. The marked times are probably set by turtles; so this should be a short climb. 10 minutes later: *Col 1'10";* 15 minutes after that: *Col du Pigeonnier 1 hour.* Next junction: Col de Scherhol marked, but no pigeons. I take out the map (fortunately the rain has stopped). My goal is 20 minutes beyond Scherhol. At the junction, a dirt road leads to the col (10 minutes), while a trail leads there in 20 minutes, but over a "summit." I choose the latter.

At the top is a simple stone refuge, constructed by the Club Vosgien. This hiking club was founded during the nineteenth century, while Alsace was German. In fact, the modern sport of mountain hiking has its roots in Germany. Both the Vosges and the Black Forest, with their dense networks of trails, figure among the birthplaces of the sport.

At the summit cabin there is a view through the trees toward pine-covered ridges, beneath lowering dark clouds and swirling, rising mist. Rising mist, as I have learned in the Alps, usually means that the rain is ending. In addition, the air is calm. I'll take photos, but first comes a picnic in the warming hut. Lunch consists of a fresh baguette and exotically spiced tuna fish, "flavor of the Garrigues.' I have no idea what that means. Outside again, with the camera, I see that those lowering clouds and those rising mists have met in the middle. White-out. And it's raining again. So much for my weather forecasting skills. And now, the wind. Time to head down.

Ten minutes later I arrive at the Col du Pigeonnier (and another warming hut). It is now raining heavily; happily, I have complete raingear. I stop at the shelter and wait. And wait. The rain turns into huge snowflakes. And then back to rain. After half an hour it starts to let up; I am off, on a shorter variant of GR 5. Actually, GR 5-3 (variant 3). Or more specifically, GR 532. There must be hundreds of these variants of the "Grandes Randonnées." I am following the road, which is reassuring. A site marked only as *redoute*, or is that *re-doubt*?, turns out to be a *castrum* of circular earthen walls, perhaps 20 feet tall. Which war does it date to? Further down, the forest opens out and I can see across the plain of Alsace. The sky is streaked by a long thin black cloud. I've never seen anything like it. It certainly doesn't look pretty. Clearly, this was the source of the wind and the snow. And then I recall: winter storm Bella is moving across France today. Later, on the evening news, I learn that Alsace is the one Department that was barely touched. Central France is under snow...a lot of it. Well, that may keep people from going out and celebrating New Year's. Which would be a very good thing for public health in the face of the continuing pandemic.

In the woods just above Wissembourg, I come on another, much smaller earthwork. This one has a marker. It was part of Louis XIV's frontier line, built in 1708. We are within walking distance of a more famous – and less effective -- defensive work, the Maginot Line. I'll save that for a drier day.

Wissembourg

To live in Wissembourg, as I have this mid-winter, is to go about one's daily activities bathed in a rich but understated historical heritage. The venerable buildings date to the fifteenth and sixteenth century, and a few to the thirteenth century. They, along with the city wall (before 1179 CE), and the Abbey church, begun in 1075, create a sense of urban settledness. Wissembourg was recognized as a town by the Emperor Friedrich Barbarossa 850 years ago. By then the settlement, centered around a Benedictine monastery, was already 500 years old.

In Alsace, only Strasbourg Cathedral is larger than the Abbey Church of Peter and Paul. The church tower and a small separate chapel, dark and heavily vaulted, are all that remain of the original eleventh-century structure. The church itself offers a museum-like sampling of Alsatian religious art, beginning with a late Romanesque rose window in the north wing of the transept. The nave and most of the transept are thirteenth-century, mature Gothic in style. The choir is embellished with glorious stained glass windows (1262-1293), while

the south transept contains extensive fourteenth-century frescos, including a Passion cycle. A Flamboyant Gothic chapel houses an extraordinarily life-like fifteenth-century image of the dead Christ; finally, the westernmost pillar of the nave supports an elegant, late thirteenth-century statue of Madonna and Child. The artistic riches may seem like a museum, but this is very much a place of worship. The spiritual component of the paintings, the sculpture, and the architecture is palpable, reminding me that these masterpieces were all created to guide and to embody a religious sentiment. In this space, one understands that the aesthetic is at the service of the spiritual.

Geographical location determined the existence of this small urban center. For more than a millenium, the southern exposure, on the western edge of the Rhine floodplain, has made the local hillsides ideal for growing wine. The Rhine provided a transportation highway south to Strasbourg. Wissembourg was long protected from attack both by the meandering course of the Lauter River, and by geological ramparts, the northeastern extremity of the Vosges mountains. This protection was necessary, although all too frequently not sufficient. Wissembourg is situated on the border between the Palatinate (the Holy Roman Empire) to the northeast and, to the south, Alsace. In 1342 the town joined the 'Decapole,' an Alsatian league of ten walled cities. But the era of military conflict had only begun.

The surrounding hills and forest are criss-crossed with scars from centuries of military campaigns. Guttenberg

castle, perched atop a 1500-foot rock peak, part of a domain originally belonging to Pepin II, fell victim to the Peasants' Revolt in 1525. A century and a half later, when the French extended their conquests across the Rhine, Louis XIV constructed a line of frontier fortifications above the western edge of Wissembourg. An earthen fort, built during the War of Spanish Succession (1705), is a prominent feature along the hiking trail GR 532. Since that time, the ridgeline that defines Wissembourg's northern skyline has marked the border between France and the German principality of Baden (now Baden-Würtemberg), as well as the adjacent principality of the Palatinate. Successive border stones, often planted right next to each other, date respectively, to the 18th century and to 1826. After that date, things get complicated.

German machine gun nest above Wissembourg

In 1870, the first battle of the Franco-Prussian War was fought at Geisberg, within sight of Wissembourg. The ensuing overwhelming Prussian victory led, a year later, to the annexation of Alsace by the newly formed German state. After World War I, with the return of Alsace to France, the border once again was established in the hills above Wissembourg. But in 1940, Alsace was annexed into the Third Reich. Then, in 1945, the retreating 'Wehrmacht' constructed a defensive stronghold along the crest of the same ridge. Wandering off trail along these forested summit ridges, one comes upon earthen fortifications and machine gun nests, now overgrown by beech trees. It is difficult to realize that young men of my father's generation – the few survivors are now in their 90s – fought and bled in the snow and the cold, where I so happily traipse across the winter landscape.

BATTLING FOR THE HIGH GROUND

—And the trees fought too, though no one asked.
Humans commandeer instead, to build
and burn and bash their way to satisfy
some pressing need, as with this nest (unfit
for any bird of prey) that bears its weight,
unrotted, keeping its appointed post
now standing like a cenotaph not far
from roots on which the living timber stood.

Is it a blessing that the trees prefer
to tell no tales, and salve old wounds with bark?
Else, might the weather swirl in endless storm?
And could we bear that sift of sooty snow,
etching screams from age to age that chill
the soul? How forests brood on woes beyond
our fitful days! Are they too merciful,
at least for now, to tell us every evil
we have done? It's our perverse revenge
to cut them down, before they change their mind.

To Know a Mountain Trail

This week I have hiked out of Wissembourg into the forest of the northern Vosges/southern Rhineland-Palatinate. Three times I have climbed to the nearest ridgetop, appropriately named "Wegscheid" ("Path Intersection" or "Crossroads"). The path from Wissembourg to Wegscheid is perfectly laid-out at a gentle gradient. It slabs upward through second-growth pine, above a miniature green valley. Nearing the ridgeline, it passes through dense growth of beech, the fallen brown leaves cushioning every step. At Wegscheid, the intersecting trails are shaded by mature Douglas fir and there is always a chill in the air. A dank cabin may offer welcome shade in July, but not in January. Standing outside at a picnic bench, I quickly eat slices of baguette and tuna in virgin olive oil; I try to ignore the orange peels and used tea bags left behind by previous visitors. How can people leave their trash in this cathedral?

From Wegscheid the forest rolls north along higher ridges; the path beckons me as it climbs towards a near but unknown horizon. The *Wegweiser* (trail sign) announces: "Ruine Guttenberg, 2.0 km." The days are short, but the time is still early. I believe I can get right down to the end of the trail and be back in time for tea.

Brown leaves cushion the path; gray beech and majestic columns of fir rise above the steeply canted mountainside. Running along the crest, I glimpse, to the west, the billowing green swells of a higher ridge, crested with snow. Ahead, suddenly looms a jagged broken incisor: the ruined tower of Schloss Guttenberg. The castle was 350 years old when it was destroyed – in the Peasant's War of 1525. The final stretch of trail heads skyward, alpine steep. I strain against the slope. At the summit, sandstone cliffs rise 50 feet; the precipice is turned by snow-bordered stairs. From the top, mercifully surrounded by a railing, one can see Strasbourg cathedral, 50 miles to the south. To the east, Karlsruhe. To the north, marching waves of snow-covered ridges.

I cannot imagine the labor, the organization needed to bring the stones for this tower, and for the structure that has since disappeared, up from the valley – or was there a nearby quarry? The vestiges have lasted nearly a millenium. What, if anything, of our labors will last half that long?

In nearly two and a half hours on the trail, I have met three hikers. Plus two trail runners, gray- bearded elders,

looking like misplaced Old Testament Prophets. Five hours round trip, hiking alone in January, is close to my safe limit. I would gladly be alone. But there is another path to this ruin. Guttenberg is two miles, or less, from that trailhead. Groups of hikers congregate on the summit. The edge of my known hiking world is the center of their map. I turn and head back to Wegscheid.

Ruins of Guttenberg Castle (Schloss Guttenberg)

To know a mountain trail, it is not enough to climb it; you also have to hike down that path. Climbing, I see only my feet and the trail immediately ahead. During a climb, I occasionally stop where the trees thin out, to look at the vista. My sense of the geography is composed of snapshots. Descending, you look outward; the view encompasses distance and space. There is a synoptic sense of the geography.

Climbing this trail, my favorite section is where you can look down to a patch of green: a delightful narrow valley. Above the head of this valley, the brown hillside rises steeply to meet the trail, which then turns at a right angle and ascends above a second miniature green valley. . . . Or so I thought. Descending, I realize that the trail turns, not 90, but 180 degrees. We descend above one side of the valley; we turn; we then descend above the other side of the same valley.

As on today's hike, my perspective determines what I see, what I know. Is this place near, or is it far? Is it central or is it peripheral? Do I visit early, or late? Is this the same place? Have I been here before? On the journey out, we don't always know where we are going; coming home, sometimes clearly, we see where we have been.

January 2, 2021

On the trail to Wegscheid

Trail above Wissembourg

A MOUNTAIN MARRIAGE

Through woods arrayed in white I gladly go
to meet the bride I've missed since last it snowed.
She loves me true but will not long abide
the lightest stamp I leave with sunlit stride:
our vows last only while the snow is new,
when I come first of all to break it through.
And for a blessèd spell the woods are mine.
But how I long for snow to come next time.

Wissembourg Morning

In the half-light of an early January morning, the center of Wissembourg is awake and animated. Under white holiday lights and a slowly breaking gray dawn, children laugh as they walk, run, or ride scooters on their way to school. No school buses here. Soft light from the food shops and bakeries glows on the façades of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century buildings. Profiled the length of the main streets, the cantilevered, half-timbered upper stories bulge with wood-framed bay windows. Along my quiet rue de la Laine, white stucco walls glisten wetly, broken by the Mondrian criss-cross of dark oak beams. The wealthiest Renaissance owners adorned their entryways with red sandstone portals, carved in labyrinthine patterns. Columns stand, with pedestal and capital animated by rectangles and floral designs. One of these columns graces my living room. I stop, between these two sentences, to reach out and touch the stone.

Wissembourg: Abbey Church of St. Pierre et Paul (13th century)

Bad Bergzabern

Midwinter weather has given way to sudden early spring. The temperature has climbed from -12 degrees C (10 degrees F), to 16 degrees (62 degrees F). As the days grow longer, I decide to hike further afield. An early morning bus brings me from Wissembourg to Bad Bergzabern, 20 km into Germany. From there a trail runs 17 km over the hills and back to France. Two complicating factors: Will I be allowed into Germany, which has closed some borders to slow the spread of new variants of the Covid virus? No border control; no problem crossing the frontier. But there is another matter: the sole bookstore in Wissembourg only sells trail maps for France, while across the border, only foodstores and pharmacies are open. I cannot obtain a hiking map. Since I do not, by choice, use GPS, I will have to hike by dead reckoning.

This should be possible. The forest and hills run north and south. They lie directly west of the vineyards that overlook the string of villages running from the border north to Bad Bergzabern. The sun is shining; I have only to orient west until I hit the network of hiking trails,

and then to head more or less south, towards the sun. Cloud cover will be minimal until the evening, so my solar compass should be available. [As it proves to be.]

Bad Bergzabern is the terminus for the bus. The town turns out to be full of stunning examples of the local Renaissance style of architecture. The city *Schloss*, constructed immediately following the Peasants' Revolt of 1525, doubled as a fortress. The walls are two and a half meters thick. The classical elegance of the façade belies the hidden military function. And the 16th century residence of high public officials, now the 'Gasthaus zum Engel,' can only be described as Palatinate proto-Baroque. The façade is encrusted with carved pink sandstone, a profusion of geometric curves and spirals. The start of my hike is delayed for a delicious hour, an introduction to a corner of the Renaissance I knew nothing about.

“Zum Engel”

Bad Bergzabern, Schloss

Bad Bergzabern to Wissembourg

Above the old city, Bad Bergzabern transforms into a thermal spa. The Wilhelminian buildings have long lost their splendor, replaced by thriving medical establishments. Or at least they were thriving until Covid closed down the economy. At the top of a rise, across the "Kurpark" or gardens, a sign lists a dozen hiking destinations, accompanied by a confusing array of arrows, several of which seem to point directly up the adjacent cliff face. I follow the arrow indicating "Guttenberg 8 km." These are the ruins that mark my furthest foray north from Wissembourg.

I cross vineyards where farmers are busy fertilizing and pruning, and I continue west towards the forest, up slopes lined with ranks of gnarled old vines. A flash of white up on the ridgeline indicates the hilltop Stäffelsbergturm, the tower that marks the horizon on my hikes above Wissembourg. I leave the vineyard road in favor of a wide forest track, then head due west on a

succession of smaller trails. At the crest is, as I hoped, a wide path. But my dead reckoning has not brought me to the tower.

A horseback rider arrives up the slope; "How far is the white tower?" She points north: "800 meters." With hours yet to hike south, I decide to forego the tower. But after a kilometer, the trail I choose turns – north -- as it descends into the valley. I decide to continue for 15 minutes. Just as I am about to turn back, I spot a valley trail, heading between south [good for me] and east [back to the highway; not so good]. After following the valley for a kilometer, I can see, above me, a road climbing the slope of the next hillside. Now I understand the challenge.

While I try to head south, all of the valleys are oriented east-west. This means either to climb and descend all afternoon, or to find a ridgetop that eventually connects to the north-south spine of these hills. I continue up the road. I have been hiking 75 minutes when I come to a trail sign: "Guttenberg ruins, 5.5 km." Clearly, I have not followed the direct path. There, on the adjacent ridge that I have just descended, the white tower stands, as if it were mocking me.

The road makes for fast walking. At a small parking area, a man stands beside his camping car, reading a map. I ask if I might have a look. He kindly shows me the route to Guttenberg…two miles up this road to the end. There I will find trail signs. In half an hour I reach those signs.

From here, all trails lead to Guttenberg. Except one. Up the ridge to the north, perhaps a twenty-minute walk, gleams…the white tower. That ridge trail I did not follow, leads directly from the tower. My decision not to walk the 800 meters suggested by the rider, effectively added an hour to my day. But I have seen more countryside. Without a map.

The next two kilometers to the parking lot (named "*Drei Eichen*") follow the Westwall, Hitler's inner defensive line. Here, for three days during March 1945, American infantry faced a well-entrenched, but poorly armed and undermanned line of underage youths and wounded soldiers forced to leave their hospital beds in Bad Bergzabern to stop the Allied advance. 10 Americans died in the fighting, as did 54 Germans. This was the last strong defensive fortification to slow the American march across a soon-to-be defeated Germany.

From "*Drei Eichen*" a forester's road leads south. Quickly, I arrive at Guttenberg castle. In the three days since my last visit, all of the snow has disappeared; today, the landscape feels tame. Still, it is a pleasure to hike, virtually alone, along the ridge to Wegscheid. Then directly down along the French-German border to familiar vineyards and home.

Why No GPS?

Some years ago, I lived in Berlin. My favorite local newspaper, *Der Tagesspiegel* introduced a lovely series about rural bicycle routes one could access from the S-Bahn. I decided to use the map and accompanying description to follow the first, a 66 kilometer-long ride. But *Tagesspiegel* offered something new: a smartphone app to show you exactly where you are for all 66 km. Of course, it didn't really show where you were geographically. It showed your "location" in the form of a red dot superimposed on a blue stripe (itself the representation of the trail). And the colored dot marked your place on the "trail." I could have moved my body through 66 km of real space, all the while orienting myself exclusively by watching a screen with a red dot on it. That is fine for airline pilots flying in the dark. It is not so fine for bicycle riders. Or for hikers.

To orient by map and compass, you have to focus your attention not on a small screen, but on the topography. To experience your body moving through space is a first step towards feeling at one with the surroundings. To orient without a map, as at the start of my hike from Bad Bergzabern, one is constantly calculating and recalculating time (as an indicator of distance), altitude, direction. You have to be totally engaged with your surroundings.

I choose to be in the mountains as a way to get away from the grid, both the urban grid and the electronic grid. During my final years at Wesleyan, I taught a course entitled “The mountains and art history.” The first semester, I asked my students whether they had ever navigated by map and compass. The answer? Not one of them had! I did not get to ask my next question: "How many of you have ever climbed a trail-less mountain using only map and compass?" Which implies the third question: "Have you ever been lost in the wilderness?" I can answer to the first two questions: "Many times" and, to the third: "More than once." But I always got myself out, without an app.

Coda: Small Mountains

Back in Strasbourg after spending half of the winter in Wissembourg, I feel I have been stripped of part of my existence. I miss the aura of the medieval town with its rich patina of age, the Abbey church and the half-timbered houses half a millenium old. Yet, Strasbourg too has medieval churches, half-timbered houses, and a magnificent cathedral. I adore Strasbourg. If I want to change language, I can walk or bicycle into Germany. We have the same weather – frigid last week, spring-warm this week -- and even the same bread in the *boulangeries*. What is it that is lacking? The size of the city and the traffic, here in Strasbourg, produce a constant level of sound and energy that I shall have to adjust to. But there is something more important. What I miss, above all, is the proximity of the hills. In Wissembourg, they rise at the end of the street, close enough that I can count each tree. As I have come to know each trail, and many unmarked paths, these hills and ridges and deep-cut valleys have become friends. The hills, whether I go to them or not, are a benevolent and an uplifting presence. That presence lifts my mood and calms me.

The northern Vosges, or *Wasgau*, as they are called across the border in Rhineland-Palatinate, are little more than

forested hills. They are so accessible that, hiking through the woods, one senses an intimacy that you do not find in the Alps. And when, from a viewpoint half-obscured by trees, you have a glimpse of endless lines of rolling ridges, like breakers on the sea, these small mountains have their own majesty.

February 24, 2021

The Lauter: River Walk [5]

5 The name of the mill on this stream is, literally, the Walk.

IV – Mittelgebirge: Germany and Beyond

Mountains have played an inspirational role in German culture, for writers from Heinrich Heine through Thomas Mann; for composers including Richard Strauss, Bruckner, and Mahler; for painters from Lucas Cranach to Caspar David Friedrich to Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. The sport of mountain walking thrives in German-speaking lands. The Alps, however, except for their northern extremity, are not in Germany. The higher summits lie within Austria, Switzerland, and adjacent parts of Italy and France. German mountains are lower. The Bavarian Forest along the Czech border and, in the west, the Black Forest both reach close to 1,500 meters (4,920 feet); the mountains of the Harz, of Thuringia, of the Taunus, are closer to 3,000 feet. Not surprisingly, there is a German word for these ranges. What in English one might term "low mountain ranges," or "high hills" are "Mittelgebirge."

Five years working at German universities (in Frankfurt, Berlin, and Halle) and my present home in Strasbourg, near the Black Forest, have brought familiarity with many of these "Mittelgebirge." In this section of essays, I extend the term to include the peaks of the Styrian Alps in eastern Austria. The highest ridges there, approaching 2,400 meters (7,870 feet), remind me of the White Mountains in New Hampshire.

Styria; view from Wildstein

Schwarzwald

COVID December in the Black Forest

In this COVID December, the pandemic constricts and transforms our lives. Strasbourg calls itself "Capitale de Noël." The Place de la Cathédrale and the main city square host a Christmas Market, lines of wooden sheds, offering holiday handicrafts or *Glühwein* to hordes of holiday shoppers. This year, however, there is no Christmas market. Restaurants and cafés are closed. After a month, the stores are open again – those businesses that have survived. The city has installed the usual seasonal illuminations. But the lights only provide a ghostly backdrop for the half-empty shopping streets. In 2018 a terrorist shooting and in 2019 almost constant rain diminished the Christmas atmosphere. In 2020 there is no festive atmosphere. Our independent bookstore, "Quai des Brumes" is open again. They appear to have weathered the lockdown by setting up an online ordering system. Delivery takes far longer than with Amazon, but the clientele are devoted. I do not mind waiting a month for my order. I always read several books at a time

and now, with two lockdowns, I have read more than at any time since college days.

Our second confinement arrived together with winter darkness. The cherry blossoms and long hours of sunlight that helped us through the first close-down are gone. Gone, too, are holiday travel plans. All of France has been limited, first to an hour of daily exercise within a kilometer of home -- a restriction we ignored -- and now to three hours of exercise within 12 miles of home. Alsatian residents, however, are allowed to spend 24 hours in Germany. The border is two miles from our apartment. Once we are across the Rhine, no questions are asked. The Black Forest beckons. The closest hiking trails are 17 miles from Strasbourg.

My salvation comes from the hills. In two weeks, I have spent five days hiking in the Black Forest. Each hike is different – the weather, the topography, the level of physical demand -- yet every visit to the winter woods leaves me relaxed and centered. The effort, the solitude envelop me. I am immersed in the eternal cycles of the mountains and the forest, cycles of growth, death, regeneration...My place here is infinitesimal, yet eternal.

x x x

Thursday morning in Strasbourg, in the half-light of gray clouds and fog. Escape: a thirty-mile drive into the sinuous, steep-sided valley of Mittel Schwarzwald.

Snow-painted furrowed fields rise above Bad Griesbach at the head of the valley and the end of the railroad line. I park at the station. It is 29 degrees. I am wearing layered clothing: longjohns of Merina wool, polypro shirt, light pile jacket, down vest, wind shell, gloves, wool hat, gaiters. Emergency down jacket in the pack. My transition hike, from autumn into winter conditions. The air is still; the trail climbs steeply above the village church, the slope unbroken for the first one and a half miles. I quickly remove the windbreaker.

As I climb, the snow cover deepens. Tramping through even two inches slows my pace and turns an easy summer climb into a workout. Even though I am climbing strongly today, it takes nearly an hour to reach the Renchtalhütte, in the woods above the highest farms. Renchtalhütte is a refashioned eighteenth-century farmhouse, built of massive wooden beams, hand-hewn. The pine planked floor is pockmarked from generations of hobnailed boots. This "faux rustique" restaurant belongs to an immense luxury hotel complex, visible across the valley – visible from virtually every place on the surrounding ridges. The monstrous hotel stands vacant for the second time this year. The restaurant is also empty and locked up tight. On our first visit here, at New Year's ten years ago, the house cat watched us eat as he crouched along the attic beams.

Up the wooden stairs is a small, informal museum of antique skis. There, I found a pair of blue wooden skis

with cable bindings, emblazoned: "1956 Cortina Winter Games." The same as my first pair of skis: Christmas 1959. My grandparents lived on a mountainside in the Ramapo Hills of the Hudson Valley. I taught myself to ski that winter, herringboning up their hillside and sliding down, up and down, all day long. For 60 years now, I have been skiing. Every winter, the first time out, the smell of spruce needles and the bite of the cold transport me back. I am 12 years old again.

The air is chilly. I stop briefly then move on, the final mile and a half to the 3000-foot summit and the Maisacher Turm, the newest tower in this, the youngest National Park in Germany. The trail is actually a forest road: no need for the map and compass that I carry in my pack along with a first-aid kit and the down parka. I detour on top, crossing the nearly flat summit ridge to the unmarked (but readily accessible by hunters' track) highpoint. Here, the snow is deep enough to ski. Suddenly, the clouds give way; the sun shines with mid-winter brightness on the fresh snow. I arrive at the tower and surrounding picnic tables There is a road only a mile away across the summit ridge. But the road has been washed out by a landslide. Spreading my wind shell as insulation on the snow-covered bench, I revel in the solitude of a late lunch . . . and the warm sun.

The air is still. Under a pure blue sky, I am alone amid the crystalline sharpness of the fir trees, the clarity of mid-winter light, and the soft warmth of the sun. To the southeast, the ridge line seems close enough to touch. But to the west, the Rhine Valley is covered by a sea of fog. Here, I belong.

December daylight is brief and hiking in the snow is slow, even in perfect conditions on an easy forest path. I head down. At the far end of the ridge is another small summit. Though it is just a five-minute walk, I have never been there. Today, the sheer joy of hiking through the snow draws me on. And then quickly down to Renchtalhütte. There, I briefly walk along the paved road. The mail delivery man drives by. We wave at each other. A steep trail leads down through the woods and past the first farms. I arrive back at the car, comfortably before dusk, envigorated and relaxed.

Black Forest Blind Dog

Descending from a mid-winter Black Forest hike in our 'new normal' 60-degree winter weather, I round a curve in the broad, oak-lined woodland path. A young woman is approaching, surrounded by three dogs of undefined breed. German dogs are well-heeled and two of hers are leashed. The third is turning in close circles in the middle of the path. She calls to me: "Don't walk straight at him." Not the usual "Don't worry, he won't bite." Giving him a wide berth, I move to the mud and brown leaves at the side of the path. The dog continues to rotate and I notice that his eyes are cloudy. "Your dog is blind?" "Yes." "But he walks the trails without a lease?" "He was born blind; he navigates in the world by smell and feel." The dog is also affectionate. We stand talking, while I rub the dog.

While we speak, the woman's glasses fall to the ground. "It's ok. One of the 'arms' is broken." She tries to fix it; I offer some tape from my first-aid kit. "It's ok. I live right around the hill there." The only problem, we agree, is that it can be difficult to find one's glasses when one is

not wearing them. It can also be hard to find them – my situation -- when you forget that they are on top of your head.

Our conversation, and my meeting with this extraordinary dog, are timely. I had just visited the ophthalmologist for a case of conjunctivitis, complicated by incipient cataracts. Medication: two antibiotics and steroids. The medicine leaves me temporarily unable to read. There is another problem. One medicine is a cream that I am to place carefully under the lower eyelid. But I can't apply the cream while wearing my glasses. And without the glasses, I can't see to apply it. Last night I ended up with cream all over my glasses. Tried to clean them, but with (some) of the cream in my eyes, I couldn't see. This morning, I couldn't find my glasses. When I finally did, they were covered with cream.

Hiking the Westweg - I

June 29, 2020

One of my goals in retirement has been to hike the length of the Westweg, a hiking trail that runs along the crest of the Black Forest between Pforzheim and Basel. The Westweg, 280 km long, generally takes 12 hiking days. My aim is to hike it over an extended period, in small segments. This first venture will be a trying-out – of equipment, of what to bring and what not to forget next time, and above all of my physical readiness. I'm totally flexible, so this first trip could be two or three or possibly four segments. Rather than start at either end, I will begin with a particularly attractive portion of the trail, readily accessible by train from Strasbourg. I have reserved two nights at mountain hotels.

June 30, 2020

My first day of hiking, a relatively easy 20 kilometers. On the early morning train to Forbach; nervous stomach; have I packed too much? Will I be able to climb all day with a heavier pack than I have carried for perhaps 30

years? Still, it only weighs 22 pounds. Sweating on the steep opening climb, searching for a rhythm, one breath per three or four steps. Up into the forest of dark fir trees, across the iridescent green moss of the forest floor. Past heavy construction machinery at a dam-site, then climbing into the quiet zone of the first Karsee (a glacial lake, formed beneath the headwall of the retreating glacier, 10,000 years ago; those glaciers are not likely to return any time soon). Topping the Badener Höhe, the first 1000-meter (3,280-foot) peak, in fresh mountain air. Here, the Westweg follows a broad forest road, surfaced in packed dirt and crushed stone, easy hiking with vistas of gently rising green ridges stretching eastward. Then the short climb up Hochkopf, at 1,040 meters a lovely and quiet meditative spot, actually a large open glade. These clearings were man-made during the middle ages to create grazing lands; in dialect they are called 'Grinde.' A place for reflection or silent prayer, to commune with nature. The late afternoon sun shines from an azure sky, cooled by a breeze.

The hike: yellow flowers by the roadside; blueberries and wild strawberries in the open areas; purple flowers and white swamp grass. My silk rainbow scarf protecting my throat from the soft summit wind.

Wildsee

July 1, 2020

Looking back on today's challenge, to hike 30 kilometers over two mountains with a full pack. – Leaving the small inn, "Hochkopf Stub," precisely at 8 a.m. after a good night's sleep, but then a terrifying symptom of throat pain that destroyed my breakfast. Perhaps the incident will pass, like the thunderstorm that has suddenly broken over the village of Kniebis. But the sore throat that accompanied a mild case of Covid in March

has not departed. I called Odile on the cell phone, and she has scheduled me for an 'echography' next week.

The early morning climb up to Hornisgrinde, tallest peak in the northern Black Forest, becomes a climbing prayer of thanks for so many years of health and of climbing. At the broad, open summit, in the cold wind of this first July morning in the year of Covid, the hike also becomes a prayer of promise: to return to Hornisgrinde when this medical issue is resolved. A prayer and a promise, to return here.

Down the south slope to another Karsee...the Mummelsee, now a dreadful tourist trap, with its ghastly tourist hotel and 'real wood-fired' bread oven, belching smoke like the mouth of Hades. I am literally smoked out of the chapel that stands next to the bread shop. After an hour's trudge up forest roads, I arrive at an airy crest above the third glacial tarn, the Wildsee [**photo**], and the lookout point, with its monument to Julius Euting. Euting was a co-founder of the Schwarzwald hiking club and an expert in Middle Eastern languages. The chief librarian for the University of Strasbourg, he had the good sense to die in 1913, just before the world he loved fell apart. Below this ridge lies the small ski center of Ruhestein.

The *Ruhe*, or calm, is destroyed by construction noise. But this is for a worthy project, a new visitors' center for the Black Forest National Park. My lunch is a huge bowl of soup, washed down by alcohol-free beer. I am halfway to my goal, the village of Kniebis. But the sun

is hot as I climb the ridge to Schliffkopf (1,055 meters ; 3,460 feet). No shade, so I keep on, across open fields and along baking-hot forest roads. Finally, at the edge of the forest, I arrive at Zuflucht, a small, half-abandoned ski area with an umbrella-shaded beer terrace – another alcohol-free beer and, this time, a slice of unsweetened strawberry cake. Energy and respite from the heat. Rucksack on again, I head back into the mid-afternoon heat. Happily, the last five kilometers are through a dense forest, and broken clouds offer blessed relief. At 5:15, I arrive at my goal, the Kniebishöhe Hotel. I stayed here years ago; the new owners have significantly upgraded the place. Later, when I tell them they have certainly added a star, they act hurt: "only One star?"

I begin to develop a post-hike routine: first, unpack; then a long, hot shower; then to care for my poor blistered feet. Finally, I head out to the hotel garden with its rose-bowered gazebo, umbrella-shaded sofas, and a small pool with a fountain. The music of falling water provides a Zen-like background to my poolside meditating. In the evening light and the soft breeze, I have found what I have come for. The garden merges with the deep green of the surrounding forest; the cool light welcomes and embraces me like a Black Forest fairy tale. I would walk 50 kilometers for this.

Coda: Hiking up Hornisgrinde, I revel in my strength, but I focus on the knowledge of how precarious good health is, at age 70 in the age of Covid. A chasm separates

those who are gravely ill from those of us who still have our health. Who has the sensitivity to reach across this divide? I think of theologians who view Christian sacrifice as more than an ideal; it is a model for the fulfillment of one's humanity. A select few actually live that suffering, taking on to themselves an immense pain from others. Ultimately to cross the divide that separates the suffering – or the Being – of another human from oneself, is a means to transcendence. Here, my model for one who lives their faith is Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

July 3, 2020

A Portuguese dedication, often presented as a toast, says "To those who are present and to those who are absent." Even on a solo hike, I am seldom alone. For four days, my physical companions have been seven through-hikers, three couples and a single woman, all aiming to complete the 280 kilometers to Basel. For the time we are together, leap-frogging past one another, or stopping together for a rest, we are friends. Heike goes alone. Marion and Armin are accompanied by Henrietta, their compliant and quiet dog. Today, we meet at the final rest stop, a tiny forest house, barely two rooms,

overlooking a rock crest. The elderly gentleman who lives here brews a pot of coffee for us. I sit and write. Three men are rebuilding the stone structure. One of them sits with me for coffee; the usual first question: "Where are you from?"... we begin to talk politics. He, like so many Germans I encounter in the mountains, is even more vehemently anti-Trump than I am. I am amazed by his detailed knowledge of America's social problems, beginning with the absence of universal health care. How many Americans know anything about German – or European – politics? He asks, "How old are you"? He smiles at my answer: "Got you by six years." The trick, we agree, is to keep moving and keep busy. Refreshed, I head back to the trail.

I also hike with those who are no longer physically among us. Yesterday's storm has passed through. The early morning forest smells fresh from the rain. When I was a small child, my grandparents lived in a stone house that was built into the bedrock of a wooded mountainside. My grandmother, Anne Kessler, introduced me to the woods. From her, I received the gift of the forest. Anne was with me this morning.

Some moments, I am accompanied by my younger self. A soft breeze from the south transports me to the forest above Pontresina in the Engadine; it is July 1969. I have just spent two weeks climbing on the snow and ice of the Austrian Tyrol and am about to leave the Alps to study fourteenth- and fifteenth-century painting in Rome, Assisi, Siena and Florence and then Venice. In the Swiss Alps, suspended between my two loves, climbing and

art history, I do not know that this tenuous balance between the two halves of my life will not last. In the autumn, back at university, I will fall into a months-long depression, unable to study. An enduring balance will emerge slowly, across my career in African history and art history. But the epiphany comes 40 years later, when my partner, Odile and I discover the Südtirol. Italian and German; good food and efficient organization. Potatoes and pasta in the same meal! Marvelous hiking and a cornucopia of frescoed medieval churches. To construct a balanced life takes longer than hiking the Westweg. The Westweg leads me to the past and, through each moment, to the future. The trip was to last three days, a trial run. I have hiked for four days and wish I could stay on.

Hiking the Westweg - II

Lookout above Hausach

July 13, 2020

Hausach to Wilhelmshöhe is reputed to be the most strenuous stage of the Westweg. 21.5 kilometers long with 1200 vertical meters (4,000') of climbing. I found it to be not so difficult, aside from two moments of dehydration, easily solved by ...drinking water. From now on, I will keep a small bottle in my hand as I hike. A cool breeze much of the way: the long opening climb, pleasurable with its graded switchbacks. I lost the well-marked Westweg one time when, gazing into the sun, I read the lozenge trail marker at a junction to be yellow, when it was the usual red. Had I not made this mistake I would not have run into two other hikers, Andrea and Carmen, young women with packs as large as mine and climbing nearly as fast. At Karlstein (971 meters; 3,184 feet)) they did not stop for the view, so we separated... perhaps until the inn. The inn at Wilhelmshöhe is a slight disappointment. I have a pleasant but small single, facing the road. Outside the hotel, there is a restaurant terrace full of noisy young children; perhaps the next generation of hikers. I had, naively, expected a bit of a wilderness experience. Vacation season has begun and hikers are no longer alone. However, in the forest, close to where Odile and I hiked on Sunday, a heavily armed fugitive is reported to be hiding from the police. Far enough away that he isn't about to show up here, but this may keep some vacationers out of the woods until he is captured.

I arrived before 4 pm, having left the train station in Hausach shortly after 8:30. At 5 pm, a lovely breeze ruffles the dark green fir trees; above, drift white-gray early

evening clouds. Suddenly tired, I could fall asleep here over my alcohol-free beer at my outdoor table. I see no other hikers. Have the two women arrived? I miss the group I started with last time. They must all have completed the Westweg by now.

Across the road from my window, a boardwalk leads into the woods. At 1,000 meters altitude, the poorly drained plateau creates mountain swamps, poor in nutrients. I head off, along the boardwalk and then away from the trail. The trees are widely spaced, with boulders randomly distributed as if some long-ago Polyphemus with a scatter-arm had gone mad. At my feet, the forest floor is deeply carpeted in moss, dry after a spring of drought. As soft as a feather bed. I lie on my back, gazing up through a circular opening, outlined in green by the fir trees. Across a far blue disk of sky, wisps of cloud drift. Are the clouds looking down at me, or am I looking down on them? As though they and I were at opposite ends of a long, brightly illuminated well.

22 kilometers, thanks to the "yellow" trail marker. Less than 6 and a half hours on the move. This is what being in shape feels like. What a gift to be able to do this!

7:30 p.m.: Dinner in the wood-paneled dining room, the walls covered with kitsch. Mobiles of red plastic hearts, garlands of fake ivy. And photographs – portraits of ancestors, most likely. Above my table, a weirdly crouching, crucified Christ stares down. Beneath the fake ivy flies a stucco angel. At least there are no stuffed

animal heads, pride of some long-dead hunter.

Outside, the softening evening light slants across the green forest, tinging the tree trunks in white gold.

Rural German cooking is strange. Schwarzwald cooking is even stranger. Chopped filet (*Geschneltztes*) of turkey (*Trauthahn*), drenched in melted cheese! Serves me right; I ordered it. It was that or the omnipresent *Maultaschen*. (pasta wrapped around spinach, sliced into white and green spirals). Backpack up the mountain for 6 ½ hours, and you can eat even this!

The wine is better (Pinot Noir; here called Spätburgunder). Ten o'clock; day is over.

July 14, 2020

Cool breeze, green fields flecked with lacy white flowers, dark fir-clad hills rising in waves (this is, after all, the Black Forest). White cirrus against a pale blue evening sky. The kiss of a soft breeze. I am drinking water on the terrace of the hotel "Zum Kreuz." Arrived at 5:15 after 30 kilometers that began in the morning coolness at 8:30. Fast and easy! Not too hot. The trick is to rehydrate constantly and take regular snacks.

The first ten kilometers were exceptionally varied. First came a highland moor and lake, the Blindsee. Here, too,

one walks along an elevated corduroy trail. Outside two hotel-sized Black Forest farmhouses stand Longinus Crucifixes, featuring the Roman soldier who took pity on the suffering Christ and put him out of his misery. This Roman soldier sports a mustache, like a Hussar.

A few kilometers further on, stands the Martinuskapelle. The chapel is on the site of the spring which is considered to be the source of the Danube. If you stand precisely on the divide, one foot is in the drainage basin of the Atlantic and the other is in the drainage of the Black Sea. Like standing on the Continental Divide.

The Westweg follows foresters' roads along the crest of the Divide. I am on a paved road leading, after a slight rise, to the open "summit" of Brent, at 1,150 meters (3,800 feet) the highpoint for today. There is a restaurant and a viewing tower, both closed. I hurry on. In a clearing, where the Westweg leaves the paved road, two elderly women sit in the sun outside an old inn. Time has passed them by. I order a bowl of soup and a half liter of 'Apfelschorle' (apple juice and fizzy water). My sweaty socks lie in the sun on a rock outside. When I am hydrated and the socks are dry, it is time to move on. Today, the final 9 kilometers will not be fun: they run along the highway. I top a hill outside the town of Furtwangen. Below, in the valley, construction cranes stab the sky; the highway stretches before me. A wide culvert leads the Westweg under the highway. I try to focus on my feet and to look only at the path. This will be the one truly unpleasant part of the trail. Most hikers end this stage at an inn that bears the uninviting name of Kalte Herberge. But

my aim is to get past the section along the highway. I have reserved a double room at a Michelin-rated hotel/ restaurant, “Zum Kreuz.”

For this final push, even the forest is hot. I accelerate. Neither map nor guidebook offers a clear indication of the distance to the inn. The hotel told me seven kilometers; the trail sign indicates it is further. I estimate my speed at four km/hour. At 5 pm, I must have 2.4 km. to go. I stop for water and trail rations, then back on the trail. 12 minutes later, I arrive at “Zum Kreuz.” A pleasant surprise; I have covered 30 kilometers today, the final seven at a speed of five km/hour.

Causeway at Wilhelmshöhe

A Longinus Crucifix

The soft air and the stillness (except for traffic on the Schwarzwald Hochstrasse, barely 50 meters from the terrace) relax me. My room is, happily, in the rear. Oh my gosh, the waitress is wearing a low-cut dirndl; this is distracting. At my age? Well, inside every 70-year-old there is a 30-year-old wondering what happened. What has happened is that I am now invisible to young women. A bottle of beer and the dirndl, and nine kilometers of hiking along a highway. Definitely not a wilderness experience.

A long-distance hike is like a vision quest. The rhythm of your feet; the solitude; one begins to meditate. But meditation and inspiration come when they please. Seek as I will the calmness that follows the beat of my hiking boots on the forest path, inspiration has to find me. After yesterday's 22 km. and with 25 km. 'in my legs' already today, suddenly there arrived a quietly centered moment.

Here and now, I am doing what I love. It is almost miraculous that I can still do it. Perhaps I should be doing less research and writing of African history. I push to finish one historical essay and then rush to the next one. But my time grows short. The many friends who are ill remind me of this. I have just recovered from a potentially life-threatening disease, part of a pandemic that still hangs over us all. Now one hears that acquired immunity, while likely, is not something to bet one's life on. Later in the evening, another friend calls. He teaches in the U.S. but he is heading home to Italy, where the medical system is more reliable. He is on medical leave, to treat his newly-diagnosed cancer.

My time, too, is short. It is time to look to deeper concerns. To the mountains. And to reading: Bonhoeffer, Thomas Aquinas. Don't worry about maintaining a 'professional reputation.' Don't worry about yourself. Read Bonhoeffer.

July 15, 2020

Rain. Stayed in bed until 7:15. This is luxury. Hotel "Zum Kreuz" is pleasant, with a decent restaurant. Late start in a drizzle that keeps turning to rain. I stop to put on raingear, and here come Anna and Horst Romerburg, through-hikers from Wilhelmshöhe. At breakfast in Wilhelmshöhe yesterday, there were six people, all doing the Westweg. Andrea and Carmen were at the next table. Anna and Horst and I decide to continue on together.

We compare our modified wilderness experience on the trail. There are plenty of cows and goats, but we have not seen any wildlife larger than a squirrel. Suddenly, 40 meters ahead, standing in the middle of the trail, is a gray fox! The highlight of this short morning. Then comes an early lunch break, as much to get out of the now steady rain, as for the food. An easy choice. Besides, it is the only restaurant along today's portion of trail. In the afternoon, it grows suddenly cold. Horst and Anna are slow on the descent. I run ahead to the tourist village of Titisee. We agree to meet "at the first café." In a tourist town, there is always a café, and here it is, right along the street that the Westweg follows into town.

Sitting in the warm café, drinking a cappuccino, I cannot see; my glasses fog from the sudden temperature change. As my vision clears, I look across the room. There sit Andrea and Carmen. They are both architects from Darmstadt. Horst and Anna arrive, then decide to do some sight-seeing on their first visit to Titisee. The architects and I hike on together up one more hill and then down to Hinterzarten, another tourist town, but smaller and oriented towards hikers. Friendships form easily when you are hiking together. All four of my new friends are staying at the same Bed-and-Breakfast. When I ask their landlady for a room (the house, like the town, is half-empty) she replies "93 €." This is significantly more than I paid for last night's three-star hotel. I decide to stay in a B-and-B two houses away. The price there is 25 €, including breakfast. This is truly a bed in a private home. Frau Kleis' small children sleep upstairs, while I am given a bedroom on the lower floor. Almost like being a family member.

The rain seems to have ended, and the eternal hiking question occurs: Do I climb tomorrow? The local mountain is Feldberg, Germany's highest peak outside of the Alps, at 1,495 meters (4,904 feet). There will be time to decide tomorrow. Meanwhile, the five of us join up for supper. The Hotel Schwarzwaldhof is a classic Neo-Gothic fantasy. Turrets and wooden shingles outside; dark wood paneling in the interior. Constructed in 1883, it is a monument to Schwarzwald-Wilhelminian Gothic. All that wood replaces the customary red brick.

We order drinks. Carmen turns to me: "It is so wonderful that you are still doing this. And you climb so fast." I am flattered. But then I wonder, "Dass Du es noch machst." Does she mean, "after recovering from Covid?" Then it hits me: She means "At your age." What was that I was thinking, last night? "Inside every 70-year old, there is a 30-year old, wondering what happened."

July 16, 2020

'Wegweiser' near 'Zum Kreuz'

The rain has returned. In the gray light the low-lying clouds screen the mountains. Breakfast improves my mood: good coffee, fresh bread and local butter. I am the only guest. Frau Kleis, energetic and happy to talk, informs me that economically, things are a bit dicey in town, especially for people who have invested heavily in their bed-and-breakfast or hotel. Between the virus and the weather, not many people are here in mid-July. Anticipating a stay in a fancy tourist hotel, I had packed a swimsuit. It is 54 degrees; no swimming today. On Feldberg, it is 48 degrees. I have climbed it before and have no desire to try it today.

I step outside into a misty rain. In the nearby city of Freiburg, half an hour by train, the Augustinian Museum of medieval and Renaissance painting and sculpture has reopened after long remodelling. Today is an ideal opportunity to look at paintings by my favorite local 16th-century artist, Hans Baldung Grien. (He was from Strasbourg.) I am off to the station for a city day.

View towards Feldberg

Northern Germany

The Brocken

The Brocken, in the Harz Mountains, is the highest point in north Germany. Brocken is renowned in literature, thanks to Goethe. The mountain plays a role in *Faust* and in Goethe's account of the winter ascent he made in 1777. Heinrich Heine devoted a long essay to his own travels in the Harz.[6] In 1824, he climbed the Brocken, a worthy interruption to his law studies. And then there is Mussorgsky's "Night on Bald Mountain."

From the town of Wernigerode, one enters the Harz, now a national park, by narrow-gauge mountain railway. The line was an engineering *tour de force* when it was constructed in 1898. The best way, however, to continue to the summit of Brocken is not by steam train, but on foot, following in Heine and Goethe's footsteps.

6 "Harzreise" was first published in 1826 as Part I of Heine's *Reise-bilder*. See, *inter alia*, Heinrich Heine, *Die Harzreise* (Anaconda/Penguin Random House, München, 2021).

In winter, the first train leaves Wernigerode at 9:40. From Halle, where I am a visiting scholar at the Max-Planck-Institut, the earliest Sunday morning train connects to the 9:40. While the Halle train is fast and smooth, it offers nothing to match the romance of the historic train with its steam engine – a *Dampflok*. Belching clouds of steam like a shiny black dragon, rattling comfortably at its old man's pace above precipices, its interior finished with polished wooden window frames, the steam train is the ideal way to arrive in the Harz.

Riding a slow train, one experiences the forest almost as one does hiking. But with no need to watch your feet to avoid stumbling over roots and rocks, you have more sense of the unfolding panorama. November hillsides pass by with their armies of dark green fir trees, suddenly interrupted by slashes of yellow and orange beech and birch in late autumn flame. Beyond rise cold, gray barren summits. The forest, growing over the site of millennial mines of copper and silver, itself forms a mountainside of copper and gold.

I disembark at Schierke, a vacation village 2000 feet up in the massif, to begin the climb. I should take my time, to enjoy each meter climbed and each new vista. But there are no views; the fog that blankets Brocken 310 days a year has closed in. The guidebook figures five hours for the hike, but the trailhead is 30 minutes from the station. I arrive at the trail after 11:30. The last *Dampflok* leaves at 5:30. Adding a half hour for refreshment at the summit and 20 minutes to hike back to the station, I had better hike fast.

But I am not alone. After passing 32 other hikers and 4 dogs, I stop counting. The trail is not entirely without challenge. The massif is composed of granite boulders. Had there been no fog, I still would have been looking at my feet – and the rocks – most of the way. The final mile, however, is on a paved road. This is fortunate, since the fog has become too thick to see more than 50 meters ahead. Even more ghostly than the forms of other hikers, is the whistle of the steam train as it passes unseen, 50 meters away.

The summit is a broad wind-swept expanse. The trees grow gnarled and stunted. One can see why this spot appealed to Romantic poets. In the tall grass are traces of snow. The summit buildings are dour relics of the German Democratic Republic, when this was a border listening post. I look at my watch. Instead of the predicted 2'30" I have been underway for only 1'08". No wonder I am covered with sweat despite the wind and the 45- degree temperature. After a bowl of soup and a change of shirts, I head back to Schierke, by a different route. There is almost nobody on this trail. I arrive at the station in plenty of time ... for the 3:22 train. I have hiked 16 kilometers in three hours.

We wait while the engine takes on water ... and blows off clouds of steam; very impressive. At the first stop, 12 minutes down the mountain, we change trains. There are three announcements. The first is clear: "Passengers for Wernigerode should disembark on the right side, where the next train will be waiting on track 3." The

second is less clear: "All passengers should disembark on the left side." The third, in local dialect, was more or less incomprehensible. It seemed to say: "Please stay on the train so that we do not have a delay when the train continues [in a different direction.]"

Everyone heading to Wernigerode follows the first announcement. And each of us, as we climb aboard the train on track 3, asks the other passengers: "Is this the train to Wernigerode?" It is. We reach that station just in time for the train to Halle, and a fast, relaxing, tired ride. I occupy myself by drafting this essay; we arrive home by 6:10.

In the Halle Hauptbahnhof, there is a 24-hour café. It happens to be a literary café. Halle is a university town. A small city, formerly part of the GDR, Halle is rather despised by inhabitants of Berlin and Leipzig. But I cannot imagine any American city with an all-night literary café in the train station. This is one more thing I love about Germany. While waiting for an early morning train – or any time – the traveler can relax with coffee and a book. I sat here early this morning, reading about travel in the Harz, from a collection of essays by Goethe and Heinrich Heine.

Austria: The Styrian Alps

A Strange Day

Summer vacation 2020 : For two days we have driven east through a ninety-degree heatwave, across southern Germany and into Austria. We stop in several villages to stretch our legs and drink iced expresso. Each town square contains a Greek or Turkish restaurant, an Italian ice café, and a German restaurant. We also find Indian and Soul Food restaurants. Immigration has made German cuisine more international. As night falls we arrive, exhausted, in a village on the Deutsche Alpenstrasse (German Alpine Road). The last available hotel room, a suite, comes with a double balcony and a kitchen. A full moon rises over the dark forms of the surrounding hills. Evening on the balcony is the high-point of our day.

The next morning, we drive along the Alpenstrasse, past the tourist center of Riet-am- Winkel, on the border with the Tirol. Crossing the Austrian border, we come to the university town of Rottenmann. Here is a sense of economic decline; no semblance of a university but a magnificent late-fifteenth century Hallenkirche, St. Martin's. Four central pillars, almost like a refectory; an altar painting, a sixteenth-century copy of a "Madonna and Child" by Lucas Cranach.

Late in the afternoon we arrive at our destination, a mountain cabin above the village of Reichenfels, in the Styrian Alps. At 1,100 meters (3,600 feet) elevation, the air is fresh after a thunderstorm.

The next morning, I am on the terrace before 7, reading Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Already, the sun is uncomfortably hot. Birgit, our friend and hostess, proposes that we hike up the Wildstein, one of the magnificent bald peaks on the ridge across the valley. But first, she has business to attend to by phone; we make a late start. Not good in hot weather. Too much sun and, in the afternoon, the danger of electrical storms.

Wildstein is truly a strange hike. The summit is at 2,187 meters. We drive to the Wildsteinhütte at 1,700 meters, 400 meters higher than I have yet climbed this summer. This might be a straight-forward hike, were it not for the rusty barbed wire we must cross through or under. Birgit is an exceptionally strong hiker. But she has been fielding telephone calls all morning and, once underway,

the calls continue. She falls far behind us. At the col, Odile decides to wait for her. She tells me to go on to the summit with Lily, Birgit's friendly and energetic Border Collie. There, I am to wait for them. Fifteen minutes later, Lily and I are at the summit cross. At 7,173 feet, the air is cooled by a breeze. Almost immediately, I need to put on my jacket. Half an hour goes by with no sign of Odile or Birgit. I return to the col.

Now I, not Lily, am in the doghouse. "Why did you not come straight back?" I try to explain: "You told me to wait at the summit." But they chose not to go on to the summit. Curious. For the rest of the hike along the ridge, then back down to the Wildsteinhütte, I walk alone. At the refuge, I take off my beloved 10-year old hiking boots. The sole of one shoe falls off in my hands.

Wildstein summit ridge

Blue Light

The evening light is an extraordinary blue. Pale blue of the sky and dark blue of the mountainside frame the gray-white clouds, softly tinging them. Snow, as Monet understood, is not white; in his scenes of Vetheuil in winter, he painted the snow with blue pigment. Our evening clouds tonight are similarly hued.

The soft light, the softer breeze, the cool air on an evening in early August, frame our day of hiking. This day and this moment bring perfect relaxation.

Morning clouds threatened another day of rain; our initial goal, my namesake mountain, Peterer's Riegel, was socked in. To climb above treeline seemed a less than brilliant choice. We chose to drive up the next valley, Sommerau, then to hike 3 or 4 hours up to a refuge called Fenerhütte and back. The hike took 5 hours; every minute of it was a pleasure. The entire route lay along an unpaved forest road. Bordered by girolle mushrooms, blueberries, and wild strawberries, our way led

through forests of fir trees and larch, and up to the open land above treeline. From a small Gothic chapel at 1,300 meters, we hiked gradually to 1,650 meters and then gently upwards along the blueberry-carpeted mountain bald, to the refuge. We ordered drinks on the terrace. Odile and Birgit then found a spot for a picnic, while I climbed, in soft sunlight, across blueberry and gorse thickets, to the 1,860 meter (6,100 foot) summit. The wind was blowing, the cloud-studded sky ever-changing, the sun bright after a threatening start to the day. Of our three climbing days, this was the least challenging, despite being the longest. But it was also the most relaxing. Pure enjoyment.

And in the evening, the blue mountains and the blue clouds.

Blue light

Zirbitzkogel: The Climb Down

The weather has changed. From the wide living room window of our vacation cabin, silhouettes of fir trees pierce the evening whiteout. This morning, as the clouds gathered, I drove to 5,000 feet to climb Zirbitzkogel, at 2,396 meters (7,859 feet), the tallest local peak. I raced against the weather, also against the effects of the antibiotic I am taking to clear an infection, and against the deterioration of my hiking boot. My beloved old boots, resoled four times, are disintegrating. I glued the sole back on yesterday. Today's hike was six hours long. My toe held up until I returned; the rain waited until I was nearly down; but the boot began to de-laminate almost immediately.

Mistaking my starting point, I find myself on the same trail I climbed two years ago. Half an hour in, I catch my boot in a cow grate, and the sole begins to separate. I hope to get up and down the summit cone before having

to switch to the running shoes I am carrying – extra weight but, after a week backpacking the Westweg, no daypack is too heavy.

Put your head down, concentrate on each step, find and maintain your rhythm: one breath every three steps. My speed is now a function only of the incline of the trail. The trail sign announces: 2 ½ hours. Higher on the mountain, my head down, I mistake a trail junction for a shortcut. Shortcuts cause erosion; keep to the more gradual route. That adds 10 minutes to the climb. Stop for chocolate and to put on a windbreaker. Then up the final pitch. At the summit, clouds capping nearby peaks, glance at my watch: surprise; it is 9:50 a.m. The climb has taken 1 hour and 45 minutes.

`At the summit is my least favorite monument: "To our fallen heroes from two world wars, and to all Alpine Club members who were victims of… *the mountains*." And what of all the Jewish members, expelled from the Austrian Alpine Club in the early 1920s, before they became victims of National Socialism? It is high time for a new monument. At the summit house, nobody wears a mask; no social distancing. I order coffee and talk with an Austrian who has hiked up from my intended starting point. He is in great shape; I'd judge almost my age. Pleasant, but today I need to climb alone, so I wait for him to start down. 20 minutes later, he passes me going back *up* the trail: "Forgot my jacket." As I thought: must be about my age.

The steel-gray overcast and wisps of cloud covering the neighboring summits warn of rain; a good day to avoid the adjacent knife-edge ridge. I decide to take a little-used side trail that cuts down steeply to a small See or glacial tarn. Over a rise, down the steep headwall, the lake is a green jewel. Still water is broken by ripples: fish, at 7,000 feet? In the water, a sudden flash; a fish breaks the surface, the first time I have ever seen a leaping trout.

The steep hillside below the tarn is a profusion of Alpine flowers. I recognize only the marsh marigolds. There are colors (purple) in shades I have never seen before. The colors are a science fiction fantasy. I am a child discovering his first rock garden; there is no one else on this side of the mountain.

Suddenly the trail dives over a second headwall. This must have been a sizable glacier 10,000 years ago. I wind down between cliffs, carefully. The trail and the rocks are rugged and steep. I check my boot; the sole is still attached. Not a good place to balance on one leg! Below me spreads a classic glacial valley, u-shaped, the outlet stream running through the middle; and along the far edge, green-clad, an unmistakable lateral moraine. A pristine valley. I feel as the first human visitor to this green paradise. Across the valley floor, three specks are in motion: deer. At the bottom of the headwall, I am much closer to the animals; they are mountain goats. I am an interloper in paradise.

At the lower end of the valley stands another monument: the *Turkenkreuz*. In 1480, as an invading Ottoman army approached, pillaging and burning, villagers fled to this high, remote valley. After the invaders moved on without discovering their hiding place, they constructed a cross in thanksgiving. Five centuries ago, they owed their lives to this valley. They, too, found spiritual grace; I hope they, too, found beauty here.

View of Zirbitzkogel

August mountain landscape near Reichenfels, Austria

DE RERUM NATURA* *II*: *REFLECTIONS AT REICHENFELS*

Thrice-braced in slender barbs, the fenceposts march
in single file across the mountain back—
a stranded line defending fictive lines
no sentinel can grasp. The mountain does
not mind, for wire runs home to iron, posts
repost as carbon, and the creature that
imagined it had something here at stake
quite soon enough the winds will blow away,
just like the fluff that masks the Sun for now.
How gen'rous Nature seems, here in best
array? She's but a gift horse tricked out in
caparison where Earthly time and treasure
know their place. The lavishness is all
for show: largesse is just a passing lark.

**On the Nature of Things* (Lucretius). For the first *De rerum natura*, see https://shrtm.nu/QjLZ.

Portugal

Autumn 2016

Serra da Sintra

My faculty apartment at the University of Lisbon, where I am a visiting scholar, lies directly under the flight path of planes on final approach to the airport. After working on my first lecture until 2 am, I am awakened this Sunday morning at 6:30 by an arriving Airbus. Feeling surprisingly chipper, I decide to take an early train to Sintra for a hike. The Serra de Sintra, a forested ridge crowned with giant boulders, extends 12 kilometers, descending to the coast at Cabo de Roca, Europe's westernmost extremity (now that Britain has exited Europe). I hike here on each visit to Lisbon. But in 14 years I have never walked the length of this miniature mountain range, which tops out at 565 meters (1,853 feet) altitude. With

the early start and the pleasantly cool late September weather, I hope to do so today.

I arrive by train to find the city park closed. The park is the surest way to avoid the weekend crowds in Sintra. Early in the morning, the main road is already congested and polluted. I change plans on the fly. By hiking up a path -- hidden between two stone walls on the upper slopes of the town – that I usually descend, I can by-pass the tourists flocking to the hilltop Pena Palace, a 19th century Romantic royal residence. The change of route also enables me to avoid the line to purchase tickets at the main Park entrance, although it shortens my projected end-to-end ridge walk to 11 kilometers.

The excised portion is lovely, and includes a rocky promontory, Cruz Alta, that is the highpoint of the ridge. There is also a botanist's paradise, the Lagos, a string of man-made lakes (actually ponds) planted with ferns, redwoods, and sub-tropical flowers by a 19th-century German-born royal consort (Ferdinand de Saxe-Coburg / Fernando II). Over the fourteen years I have hiked here, dirt paths and crumbling remnants of old carriageways have been replaced by neat, cobble-stone pathways; overgrown gardens have been replanted and manicured; and the crumbling perimeter wall has been rebuilt. Parque Pena is worth the entrance fee. But not the waiting time. And I have hiked every square meter of trail in this segment. I am anxious to move on.

Along the ridge beyond the park walls, there are no tourist busloads, only small groups of mountain bikers, runners and a few hikers. We all follow the road that runs along the crest. (This is hardly "forever wild" country.) A profusion of bike trails leads through dense stands of newly-planted eucalyptus. Just as I begin to doubt my choice of path, I run into four German hikers. We stop for a conversation ... they are retired and live in Sintra. They guide me back to my route.

My first goal is an abandoned monastery. The buildings, perched on a granite promontory that anchors the western end of the ridge, overlook the Atlantic coastline. At the summit, a rippling sea breeze forces me to eat my lunch in the refuge of a stone wall, part of the ancient, abandoned summit chapel. Here, the pine and eucalyptus forest ends abruptly. The trail, which I start down in the company of an Australian couple, cuts across heather and open slopes. The view of the coast reaches from Cabo de Roca to the Tagus River, and from the mist-shrouded Atlantic to the outskirts of Lisbon.

The path reenters the woods and divides several times. The trail is not always marked and eventually, I lose my way. Retracing my steps, I am still unsure of my way. With the morning route change, I did not have the chance to pick up a hiking map. Again, I encounter a group of older hikers. Which language to use, German or my limited Portuguese? No, they are Americans and they show me the way. We are a polyglot crew: Australians, Germans, Portuguese, American ex-pats, all hiking on this first autumn weekend of the year.

The trail quickly intersects the coastal road and turns south toward the town of Cascais. The hike, which I had projected for 5 or 6 hours, has taken barely four hours. In minutes I come to a bus stop and shelter, but with no posted schedule. Does bus #403 run on Sunday? In 2 minutes, my answer arrives, #403. I climb aboard and head back to Sintra.

The afternoon tourist crowd has grown even more dense. Sintra is mired in gridlock – drivers standing beside their cars, the ignition off, nothing moving except pedestrians. The train back to Lisbon, however, is unaffected by gridlock. Despite missing my stop because I am writing this entry on the return trip, I am back in my flightpath apartment by 5 p.m.

Despair and Motivation

November 13, 2016

Sunday morning on the train from Lisbon to Sintra, sunshine and azure sky . . .

After the calamitous presidential election, I have been reading the last essays of João Lobo Antunes, on pain and illness and the final dissolution of the self. Also Paul Krugman on post-election despair and on facing years in the wilderness. The question imposes itself: how ought I to spend the final chapter of my life?

Should I devote my days to working against this growing American hatred and exclusionism? Should I take a final stand on the barricades? Metaphorically, of course. Does anyone actively choose such a fate, aside from Walt Disney's version of David Crockett? Do I choose instead to "cultivate my garden," to complete my long-prepared transition to settling in Europe, to devote my time to writing, hiking, and climbing mountains?

. . . On the summit of Cruz Alta, the highest point in the Serra de Sintra overlooking Lisbon, the Tagus River and the Atlantic coast. Bright warm sun, a sea breeze – in New York this would pass for a perfect Indian Summer day. Mid-November in Portugal.

White clouds scud above me, the bay sparkles silver and, beyond, the dark blue ocean is shadowed in late morning haze. I sit alone on a lichen-patched granite boulder, watching the silent boats, motionless on the silver-plated bay.

As a college student, disaffected by the Vietnam War, I tried to cut my emotional connection to American society. My anti-war involvement skirted the limits of legality and twice landed me in court. Thirty years later, the same spirit of activism drew me to Ground Zero on a search and rescue team. This mission briefly reconciled me to an almost patriotic view of the U.S. Now, however, I feel as alienated as I ever was under Nixon's criminal war machine.

Past the 60s[7], a more contemplative role feels comfortable. The Jola people of Senegal, who taught me so much during the year I lived among them, would consider me now to be an elder (Íŋjé anifañ.) If I have learned anything of humanist values, it is time to pass on that knowledge. A younger generation continues the struggle for dignity and human rights.

7 The 1960s and my own 60s.

Teaching and writing are my response to the spreading darkness. Classes take me out of myself, into a place beyond despondency, where time ceases to be and where I share myself with others. Yesterday, I met with my five University of Lisbon graduate students at the Museu de Arte Antíga. Although it was a Saturday, they all attended and stayed for four hours. Sitting at lunch in the museum garden overlooking the River, I realized that Tiago, Marcello and Luciana are from Brazil. Brazil, with its recent history of dictatorship, has fallen back into a period of reactionary government. These three post-doctoral students are all educators. State funding for education in Brazil has just been cut for the next twenty years. They are despondent. Perhaps some small part of what I teach may help them to survive as academics and to combat the darkness that extends also to their country.

In the end, there is writing, that small, brief print we leave behind in the sands of time. To read and to write is to think. Let us hope that future generations– if any survive the ecological catastrophe that will be our legacy – may know that some of us, living on the verge of darkness, have kept alive a small flame of thinking and of humanist learning.

V- The Alps

Back to the Tirol

Ortler sunrise

St. Nikolaus in Rojen

The hamlet of Rojen sits in a high mountain valley above the Reschen Pass, the border between Italy and Austria. At precisely 2,000 meters (6,560 feet) elevation, Rojen is the highest village in Italy's Südtirol. Seven centuries ago Rojen was inhabited by sheep farmers; it was then a dependency of the Bishopric of Chur. Today, seven immense dwellings – each combining farmhouse and cattle barn – cluster on the steep hillside. The farm buildings dwarf the Chapel of St. Nicholas. To the west, the valley broadens into pasture. A dirt road, log-cabin barns strung along either side, winds through green fields. Beyond, steep slopes climb to a line of 9,000-foot summits.

For millennia, the Reschen Pass served as a conduit for people, goods, and cultural influence between Italy and the German-speaking north. The cities of Merano and Bolzano were only a few hours by horse or cattle cart to the south. Until 1919, these valleys belonged to Austria-Hungary. North Italian and south German culture and language have long intermixed here. Nowhere is this 'métissage' more clearly visible than in the early 15th century frescoes that transform the Chapel of St. Nicholas into a jewel box of color. Built in the late thirteenth or fourteenth century, the Chapel is an aesthetic treasure.

Rojen, Chapel of St. Nicholas

On the whitewashed south wall of the nave, one small fresco has survived centuries of rude winters and chapel repairs. The image of a female saint is painted in the linear style of fifteenth-century south German/Austrian Gothic art. Is that a comet depicted at the upper right edge of the painting? Halley's Comet appeared in 1456. I believe this is a depiction of what was then interpreted as a portentous heavenly sign. This interpretation would suggest that the image was painted shortly after mid-century.

In the tiny vaulted choir, a magnificent Passion cycle, along with depictions of the Evangelists and the lives of Saints George and Nicholas, transforms the space into a flowering profusion of color. The magnificent late fifteenth-century frescos were subsequently covered over with whitewash and were only rediscovered at the end of the nineteenth century. To come upon this respondent work in a rustic settlement high in an Alpine valley, is truly astounding. The crowning glory, despite its fragmentary condition, is a depiction of "The Adoration of the Magi." The volumetric, simplified forms of the three Kings are stylistically northern Italian, related to fresco paintings in Merano and Bolzano. The Chapel of St. Nicholas reminds us that the Alps, far from being a cultural barrier, served to funnel artistic forms and styles in both directions, between northern and southern Europe. The chapel attests to the success of this merger.

Nave, south wall. Fresco possibly depicting a comet, upper right

Choir frescos, St. Nicholas of Rojen

STANDING GROUND

Does fresco fade in such a frosty clime,
as Winter's fingers grate the particles
of plaster into snow too fine for eye
to see and nose to sneeze on? Did perhaps
unholy water laced with lime leave just
a hint of veil to mark a time when these
proud figures fell afoul of plainer fashion,
puzzling how their bluest blues broke through
the vault to kiss the sky? Or do the walls
seem faded now for want of fervency
in those who come here still to pray but with
less-pressing need than doubting Thomases
skimming palms on walls yet cool and damp,
and too incredible to trust to sight?
Or is it just the frozen light of this
one day that grants no right to sense how much
the space beguiles without the passport of
true pilgrimage? I ask, assured of no
thing but a mystery. For from the modest
eaves a welcome wafted on the breeze:

"Come, Pilgrim! Rest the while. Drain this dram
of time's delusive joy! For I am less
yet more than I may seem. Beyond the trails
you farthest trekked in dream have I endured,
waiting centuries for Time to draw
you nigh, to shower gifts amid the grass
that trembles to recall the snow that none
will brave but those who dwell with me upon
these heights. But my, how poor a host am I!
You've come at last! All welcome to these walls,
that you may put them to some noble use.
Veni, veni, Creator Spiritus!"*

*Latin (9th-century chant): "Come, Creator Spirit!"
Gustav Mahler doubled the verb to open his Eighth Symphony.

The Adoration of the Magi

Rojen: Haus Bergkristall

We have come to Rojen for six summers. On the first visits to Gasthaus Bergkristall, the proprietor and host was Hans Maag, a bearded bear of a man, sage and bartender to the small community. Four years ago, Hans suffered a fatal coronary. His absence is palpable. Now, his nephew Christian serves as host – before and after he works a full day on his dairy farm. Hans' sister runs the kitchen. Together they welcome the guests who return year after year, like extended family. Warmth radiates from the dining room with its plain wooden furniture and the well-stocked bar over which Hans reigned. The food is simple, yet perfectly seasoned, a mélange of rustic Austrian mountain fare and flavored Italian sauces. Bergkristall offers the best breakfasts I have ever enjoyed. From the farms of Rojen come eggs, tart yoghurt, cheese, butter and milk; the table overflows with home-made jams and fresh bread . . . and excellent morning coffee. I never eat butter – except here. Rojen is a cultural mixing pot between southern and northern Europe. This includes local culinary culture. At night,

pasta and polenta and rice from Lombardy alternate with potatoes; meat comes from local farms; the wine is a rich and full-bodied Lagrein, also from Südtirol. When one has spent the day hiking, the generous servings are just fine; the conviviality is even finer.

Culinary mixing pot: pasta and potatoes

Half-birthday Blues

Today is my half-birthday. Since turning fifty, I offer thanks, on my first summit of each year, to be able to hike and climb. To do what I love is a gift. A year will come – too soon, whenever it arrives – when I can no longer climb mountains.

Evening light climbs the snow-dappled slopes of eight peaks above the green valley of Rojen. I have climbed most of them. This trip I will not add a new summit; I cannot climb. A recurring toe infection hobbles me, despite multiple courses of antibiotics. The year I have dreaded is now.

After 500 kilometers driving, through the hottest June day ever recorded in Europe, we have arrived back in Rojen, above the worst of the heat. But we, collectively, are the cause of this heat.

Shadows swallow the valley. Above, remnant snow fields turn golden in the dying light of this last evening in June. Cumulus builds spun-sugar fortresses against the blue sky, harbinger of a change in the weather, promising a pause in the blistering heat.

June 30, 2019

A peak above the Rojen Valley, South Tyrol

ROJEN AT EVENTIDE

Sometimes grandeur looms so large—expands
us so from inside out—we long to grasp
what is not scaled to human form, hoping
it might fit the ambit of our arms.
We want to be—not see—the beauty ranged
before us. How we yearn to nestle in
this other crux of knowing, figured boldly
forth in such opaque obstruction to
the outer eye as frees the inner eye
to see through rock, perchance to be it. And as
we open arms to clasp the dream, some trite
distraction like a fly will break the spell.
And suddenly we stand alone, bereft,
at once too near the mark and yet too far.

Three Guides and the Ropemate from Hell

Rudl Steinlechner was the first Austrian to receive the annual medal , the Targa d'Argento, of the Italian Alpine Club. This was in 1987. Twenty years before, Rudl taught me to climb on snow and ice. I knew him as a relatively young man. Half a century ago, during our two-week tour of the Ötztal Alps, Rudl described climbing together with his friend Hermann Buhl, the greatest Austrian climber of the post-war generation. Buhl developed his legendary endurance through training climbs of 5,000 vertical meters in a day. In 1969, Steinlechner gave me an ice axe made of steel with an oak handle. Imagine hefting that weight to cut steps, in the days before the invention of front-point crampons! The axe hung from the wall of my office at Wesleyan University among African masks and shields. It means more to me today than those masks.

Across two generations, I have been privileged to climb with several highly respected guides. In 2005, I climbed the Gross Venediger (an easy summit of 3,666 meters, or 12,024 feet) with Herbert Rainer, who was also a Himalayan guide. The long absences and the risk involved did not, however, go unnoticed. As his mother observed one day, "Can you imagine doing this, with three small children at home!" Herbert's wife, who stayed in Austria with their family, was herself a magnificent climber. She served as a second guide on one of our climbs. I prided myself, at that time, in my climbing speed. From 2001 to 2011, she was the only person – other than her husband – with whom I could not keep up in the mountains. Inevitably, as Herbert's own star rose, he was less and less often available to local clients. Too often, when he was free during the summer months, either the weather did not cooperate or I was injured. I regretted losing the professional connection with Herbert.

I met Gerd Schönthaler as I met Herbert, by joining a group tour led by a local climbing school. Young guides begin by working for these organizations, often taking neophytes up relatively easy summits. Gradually, they develop their own clientele. On my first ascent with Gerd there was only one other client, a strange, middle-aged man from Dresden. Within 30 minutes of our meeting each other, he was telling a Hitler joke. The very concept of a "Hitler joke" is, of course, an obscene oxymoron. This man then regaled us with descriptions of his own athletic feats. To save weight, he had brought no water with him, and he made fun of my heavy daypack. When we reached the glacier, he had no idea how to use crampons. He was literally unable to walk without tripping himself. It seemed we would have to turn back.

It was a beautiful day. I was about to un-rope to continue the climb solo. But Gerd brought us by an alternate route to the summit. There, this man begged me for some of my water. On the way down the rock face, Gerd and I belayed him on a short rope, like a sack of potatoes. At the bottom of the rock wall, he literally collapsed. I had never seen someone collapse on a climb. He staggered into the refuge, bought himself liters of water and soup, which he declined to share. When we reached the top of the chairlift down to the valley, he disappeared. Gerd and I feared he had passed out in some dark corner. Finally, the chairlift attendant called to us; the man had taken a ride down without telling either of us.

The nameless gentleman was an insufferable climbing partner. But Gerd and I have this guy partly to thank for our friendship. The experience brought us together. It also made me appear to be a more accomplished climber than I actually am. Ten years later, we still joke about the ropemate from hell.

The Casati Hut is Falling Apart

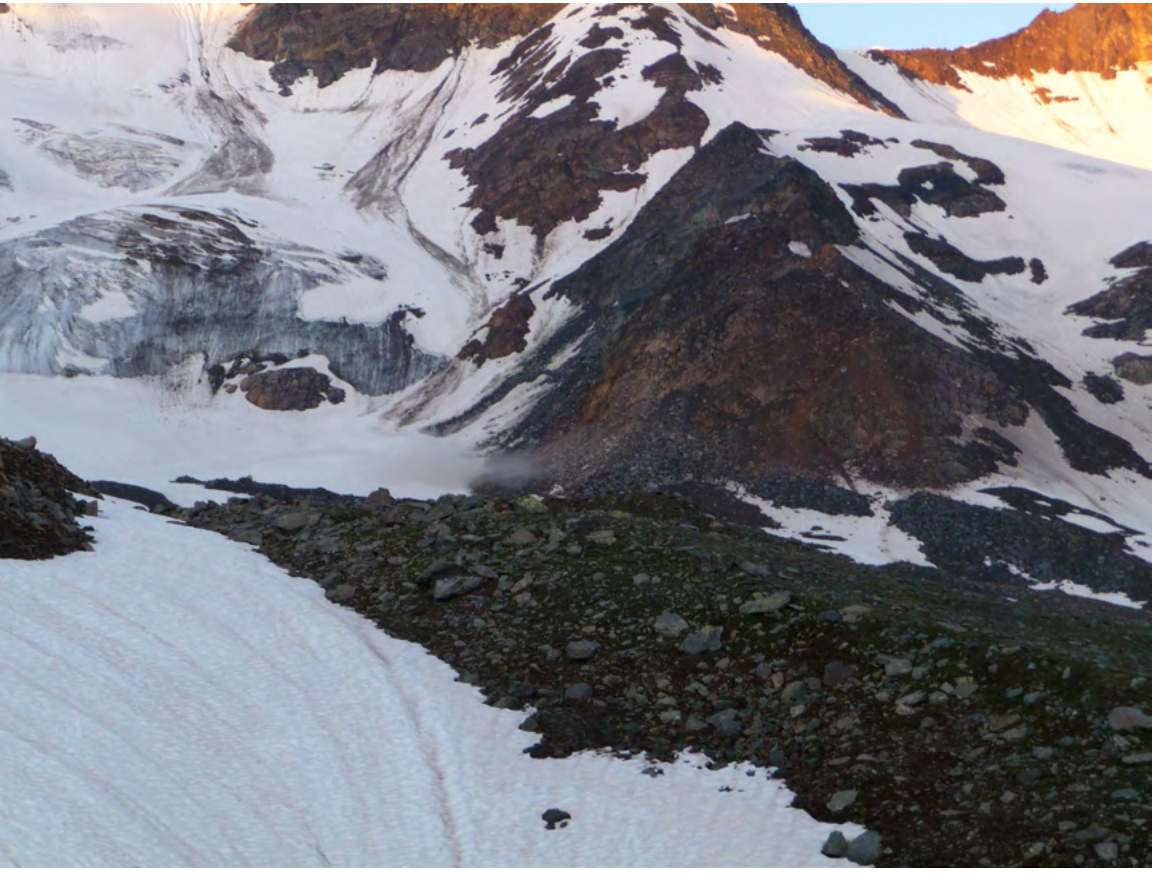
The Refugio Casati – a climbers' hotel surrounded by glacier and constructed at nearly 3,350 meters; or 11,000 feet in the Italian Südtirol – is built upon permafrost. With climate change, the permafrost is melting. The building has cracked like an egg. The mountains, too, are falling apart. Rising temperatures melt the glaciers that once covered their flanks, exposing bedrock. Last week's record heatwave has melted the ice that cements the brittle rock walls. The rock itself has only recently been exposed, due to the shrinking glaciers.

Gerd and I begin our two-day climbing trip at 5 a.m. Despite my lingering foot infection, I will give it a try. As we start up the moraine, a roaring crash reverberates across the valley. An immense rock avalanche sends clouds of powdered rock across the glacier. A generation ago, the glaciers were white in summer. Now, the ice is streaked with brown slashes from rockslides. Gerd says

quietly, "The mountains are moving." The eternal ice is melting.

When I first climbed in the Tirol in 1969, July was still winter. Even on the warmest days, the glacier's surface refroze at night. Rockfall occurred only in the afternoon, after the sun had melted the cementing ice. Today's avalanche on the Königspitze occurred before sunrise. Even at night, the ice is melting.

July 4, 2019



Rockfall (on rock shoulder); newly exposed moraine

Turning Back

On the second day of our climbing trip, the temperature has dropped overnight. The glacier surface has refrozen. We will not be trudging through knee-deep snow, as we did yesterday. Our boots have dried in the Pizzini Hut, at 2,700 meters (8,856 feet). In the brisk predawn air, my head begins to clear, despite an almost sleepless night. As Gerd and I climb, the gentle snowfield gives way to steepening ice slope; we stop to put on crampons. The ten steel points, biting into the frozen surface, enable us to walk, insect-like, across even the steep upper portion of the glacier.

Across the valley, the graceful Punta San Matteo glows in the sunrise. As we climb, bearing the weight of our packs, the cool shadows make the slope comfortable despite the effort. Our goal is a *grat*, a narrow neck of ice and snow connecting the snow dome of Monte Pasquale to the massif of Monte Cevedale. We plan to climb Pasquale, then retrace our steps and climb the shoulder of the higher peak. From there, 2½ hours hiking across the

glacier should take us back to our starting point, above the village of Sulden.

The wind is strongest in the col. The view is always sudden, and what it reveals is often unexpected. After two hours of effort, the headache that prevented sleep has returned. And from the col, in place of the expected snow slope, the way to Monte Pasquale is guarded by stretches of broken stone blocks and by a cliff overlooking a precipitous ice slope. My head throbs; my legs feel like rubber. To rock climb, you need to find your center of balance. Arms and legs extend from that point: "Climb from a ball." Today, I have no sense of equilibrium. We have to cross the rock band. Ultimately, we will climb back across it, then over Cevedale and finally the long hot trek down the glacier. I decide to climb Pasquale without my pack, which we secure against the wind, by tying it to a stone block. But even without this load, I feel wobbly. I don't trust my balance today, especially wearing crampons on the rock.

"Gerd, ich kann es heute nicht." ("I cannot make it today.")

"That's o.k. The important thing is to be safe at the end of the day."

At this moment, like two opposing waves crossing each other, my intense feeling of relief intersects a sense of utter failure. I know my body. I am proud of what it can do. And today that body has let me down. Or have I, by

Sunrise, Punta San Matteo (3,678 meters)

pushing too hard before fully recovering from a serious infection, let my body down? The antibiotics that are making me well are also sapping my strength.

A terrifying thought intrudes: despite a lifetime of working out, of running, cycling, and cross-country skiing, I am growing older. Maybe next year will not be any better. Maybe the birthday that Gerd and I have joked about, when I "graduate" to easier mountains -- perhaps that birthday has already passed.

July 5, 2019

September Christmas (2020)

Thursday evening: Standing on the porch of our rented apartment in Sulden. In the darkness, the sound of the cascading river and the rain; below, the lights of the town; a chill in the air offering a foretaste of winter.

Relaxing after a strenuous morning and early afternoon climb with Gerd. The Ferner Wand, 2,882 meters (9,453 feet), is a rock scramble with a few stretches of *via ferrata* (steel bolts and chain, attached to the cliff). Cloud and fog, slippery wet rock; dry on the descent but the expected rain began as we arrived back at the car after the six-hour trek.

After ten years climbing with Gerd, I have almost total faith in the security he provides. We planned to climb Tuckettspitz, a much higher and glaciated peak. But, for the second year running, fog and the increased danger posed by unseen crevasses forced a change in plans. I don't mind; to climb anything is uplifting.

Last year's aborted climb, when Gerd was totally non-judgmental of my inability to continue, showed me that the value of our annual tour lies as much in the friendship as in the actual climb. Today, we carried on a long theological-philosophical talk. He was raised Catholic, I as a non-practicing Jew, but we both find closeness to the All-Mighty in the mountains.

Ferner Wand is shorter than our original goal. We were back in Sulden before 3 p.m. I invited Gerd to visit the Messner Mountain Museum, to view the paintings and watercolors of E.T. Compton. Compton (1849-1921) was an Englishman who lived his adult life in Austria, perhaps the only top-notch landscape painter who was also an accomplished climber. He portrayed the mountains not only from below, but from the summit. When we came to Compton's painting of Monte Rosa, it was Gerd's turn to identify the specific location on the massif, and to describe the climb. Today was his first visit to this art museum. I have given him something valuable, as he has given me so much over our years climbing together.

After three days of hiking and climbing, I need a day off and am not upset if tomorrow brings rain and maybe snow. Saturday, hopefully, we can hike again.

Impressions of the day: The veiled sun shining dimly through the mist; a herd of chamois running up the ridge; crystals of hematite in the rocks at the summit; the view towards a semi-circle of higher, snow- and glacier-clad peaks. Late season cranberries; a lone Gentian; moss campion, pink flowers blossoming at 2,400 meters.

SNOW

An early winter snowstorm on the third day of autumn. Our pleasant apartment is located a mile beyond, and well above the center of Sulden. We look across and down on fields of white. The day was filled with reading and emails and a walk downtown to shop, then back along trails through the woods. Late in the afternoon I set off again, with camera, up a longer trail.

Sulden is a center for mountain tourism, but not this autumn. Only two hotels and restaurants remain open during what is usually the busy shoulder season. Two grocery stores are open from 8 a.m. to noon. The local economy is clearly depressed. The reason is, of course, the pandemic.

One restaurant is listed in the Michelin guide. This morning we stopped in for a warming cup of coffee, before the rain turned to snow. The chef, a handsome man of about 50 with a close-cut gray mustache, walked in at 11. We greeted each other formally. At 5:30, when I returned after a more strenuous hike into the snowy woods, he and I had a conversation at the bar. We talked of many things: of snow and mountain villages, and life in "paradise." He said that even if you live here, it is still paradise. And then he said, seeing me drinking a glass of decent local wine: "I have something for you to try." Pouring more than a taste into another glass: "1997; Antinori riserva Chianti classico." This was to

chianti as a Michelangelo is to those saccharine pictures of children with big eyes.

The rich, earthy bouquet of a mature wine; to smell it is like breathing ecstasy.

Snow in a mountain village is magical. A voice says: stay here, above the troubled world, like Hans Castorp in Davos. Davos, however, is where we will not go on our drive home; the Flüela Pass is blocked by snow. Snow slows us and simplifies our life. Outside our window, the silence of a perfect postcard.

September 26, 2020

Snow Above Sulden

The Collector

Flakes are free as air.
Earth's greedy, grabbing all the
flecks of sky herself.

Fifteenth-Century Church, Sulden

Towards the summit, Ferner Wand, 2,882 meters

September Winter

September

Snow on the rails. Snow
On the pales. Old Man Winter's
Done gone and made bail.

Seebodenspitz: The Edge of the Map

In six summer visits to Rojen, I have climbed all of the immediately accessible peaks. They are varied and beautiful, but it is time to try something new. I decide on the longer hike to Seebodenspitz, a 2,859 meter (9,377 foot) rocky peak that lies at the edge of my hiking map.

I start up the valley shortly after 9 in bright sunshine. For half an hour I walk along a winding dirt road, between the river and hay fields; the farmers are bringing their hay in to store in the log cabin barns that line the road. A few of these barns have small additions that provide a kitchen and sleeping room. One of those would be perfect as a writing studio! The first trail sign says: "Seebodenspitz 3 hours."

Beyond the road, another sign points straight uphill. There is, however, no clear path; every 40 meters, a prominent rock is painted in red and white stripes,

marking the "trail." The challenge is to find the next painted stone. And then the one after that. I tell myself: "This is an adventure; if you lose the trail signs, just turn around." I also take compass bearings, just in case ... even though the route is almost due southeast, directly towards the morning sun. If clouds should come in, that form of dead reckoning won't work.

Very few hikers must come this way, as the trail is almost non-existent. After 45 minutes, it is reassuring to come upon a simple stone hut, an emergency shelter. If one were caught in a late-year snowstorm (June) or an early season snowstorm (August), this hut could be a life-saver. Beyond the next rise, I glimpse the summit ridge and its distant cross. The remnants of this winter's unusually heavy snows glisten in the sun. I cross streams fed by snowmelt, followed by increasingly steep and rocky ridges. The cross seems no closer.

Gradually, I approach the dark, looming form of the massive rock ridge that guards the summit. The slope grows steeper, my progress slows. My watch seems almost to have stopped. I take care to remember the compass bearing and to note the two places where the "trail" turns abruptly. I add a piece of shining quartz to one cairn. Miss this turn on the way down and you end up in the wrong valley...or atop an impassable cliff.

Finally, I am climbing what the Germans poetically call the *Gipfelbau*, the fortress-like pile of rocks that guards the final approach. In this forlorn, imposing setting,

suddenly there is a profusion of wildflowers: the delicate five-petaled gentian ("blue gentian," a protected Alpine plant, is actually deep violet); and the tiny pink petals of moss campion. I am entering the narthex to an outdoor cathedral. At the summit, amidst the sublime mountain scenery, I seek my sacred spot. On this remote peak, at the edge of my map, maybe I will be alone. Alone on the summit, sometimes, one is made whole, brought together with all of Creation. It is as if I can commune with the Creator.

Through the flowered ante-chamber, to the summit.

Five minutes later, voices. I turn. Two people have arrived, but from where? There must be a trail on the other side of Seebodenspitz. I look down. Spaced along a wide trail are another couple, then three more people, then another four people. Below this unexpected trail, I see it: A road leads to within an hour walk of this summit cross, my own distant goal for two hours. And from the road, a ski lift rises. I stuff my lunch into the backpack and head down the less frequented side of the mountain. Half an hour later, at a grassy promontory, I sit and take out my sandwich. There will be no communing today, no experience of the Sublime. From one side of the map to the other; from the sublime, to the…

July 16, 2018

Eternal Ice: The Dying Glacier

"Das ist das Eis...das nicht weggeht, bis an das Ende der Welt."

"That is the ice...that will not disappear until the end of the world."

Adalbert Stifter, *Bergkristall*, (1845), chapter 9

Piz Sesvenna, Südtirol, Italy

Gerd and I meet on Saturday for our annual climbing trip. This year, we will climb together for two days. At 6:30 a.m. we leave the Sesvennahütte, a simple hotel-restaurant surrounded by rocky summits, an easy two hour hike up a broad green valley above the ski resort of

Schlinig. 6:30 is late by Alpine standards, but the climb to Piz Sesvenna (3,205 meters; 10,512 feet) is relatively short and the weather report is good.

We ascend across boulder-strewn slopes of late-summer alpine flowers, past ponds left by ancient glaciers, then up a steep rocky defile. We arrive at a pass at 2,819 meters. A sudden vista reveals our entire route before us. Beyond the deep valley, a rock wall guards the remnants of the once prodigious glacier that carved this immense trough. Above the cliff the upper Sesvenna glacier rises to a rock-toothed ridge line. A protruding rock wall cuts the ice slope; below, a band of dirt-streaked ice is all that remains of what was, even in 2013 when our map was made, a living river of moving ice. Soon, even that small patch will be gone.

Where one used to climb across glacier, now there are only slopes of scree and broken rock. The disappearance of the lower glacier forces us to descend steeply across massive granite blocks, jumbled upon one another in precarious balance, then steeply up alongside the river that carries snow melt – and, today, ice melt -- down the valley. I love climbing on glaciers, but this is a slow, muddy trudge. The sublime beauty of eternal ice has given way to frozen mud and gravel.

The effects of global warming are apparent throughout the Alps. Everywhere, the glaciers are shrinking. In Austria, where they are closely monitored, all but two of the 98 surviving glaciers are in retreat. But climate change

has its most devastating impact on the smaller glaciers. Last winter, snow came late and there was little of it. June was exceedingly hot. The ice, unprotected by a winter's snow cover, is fully exposed to the killing intensity of high- altitude sunshine.

Above the mud and the cliffs, we reach the intact upper icefield. We stop to put on our crampons and to rope up. Here, as on most glaciers, the slope increases as one climbs. Near the top, we use the front points of our crampons to climb, spiderlike, a wall of crevasse-broken ice. Lower down, walking is easy. But higher, the surface of the ice is soft and pitted and strewn with black, sludge-like deposits. I ask Gerd what this is. I have seen red sand – brought by winter winds from the Sahara[8] – but never this black dreck. Gerd answers, "Pollution." It is the detritus of coal fires from electricity-generating plants in Germany and Poland, carried far in the upper atmosphere and then dropped here. The black dust mixes with melting surface ice to create sludge-like deposits that absorb the sun's energy, further melting the glacier. Like a cancer, the black sludge eats into the living ice. The Sesvenna Glacier is dying.

I first stepped onto glacier ice fifty years ago. When one looks into the sapphire-walled depths of a crevasse, glaciers are both humbling and beautiful. The first crevasse we come to on the upper glacier is, indeed, a jewel box. But the next crevasse is dark; even the depths of the

8 A recent French study (June 2021) of these red glaciers has established that the color is due to microalgae, the appropriately-named *genus Sanguina*. See *Le Monde*, 9 June 2021, p. 24.

Sesvenna glacier are infected with grime. Every glacier is distinctive; with familiarity they become friends. Today, I have met a new friend in the Alps, and this friend is dying.

The Sesvenna Glacier, Südtirol

Transformations

The Schöne Aussicht [Beautiful Vista] climbers' refuge perches on a buttress overlooking the Hochjoch Glacier. A line of summits rises above the bare rock valley that was, until recently, a river of glacial ice. At 2,845 meters, the airy terrace looks out over nine glaciers. They are all receding. The effects of global warming are accentuated in the delicate high mountain environment. At least for now, the past winter's snowfall protects them with a coat of pristine white. I vividly recall my first visit, in 1969, also in July. At 9,300 feet, we had winter weather. My diary records 8 inches of snow the day we climbed the Fineilspitz, across the glacier.

The Schöne Aussicht Refuge has also been transformed. Half a century ago, the predominant smell was a mixture of diesel from the generator and chemical toilets. Today, the enlarged and modernized mountain refuge is more of a hotel. Electricity comes from solar panels, the flush toilets are composted, and there are hot showers, glass-walled, with spectacular views up the glacier valley. In 1969, on a two-week climbing trip through the Austrian Tyrol, I took exactly one shower. On that day we stayed at a hotel

in the valley. In the new Schöne Aussicht, there is even a television. Climbers could have watched France's World Cup victory the day before yesterday.

The dining room walls are lined with aerial photographs that document the shrinking glaciers. The earliest photo is from 1968. Hochjochferner [glacier] was immense. Progressive images show the eternal ice melting. The four glaciers that, today, descend the slopes of the Fineilspitz are still impressive. But there is more polished gray and brown rock than ice.

Evening in an Alpine refuge: hikers and climbers excitedly discuss today's climb or tomorrow's challenge. Outside, gray clouds cast silver light on the slopes. We subside from the day's physical activity, aided by glasses of beer or dark red Lagrein wine. Slowly, the seer, unwelcoming precipices begin to feel familiar, not nearly so imposing or terrifying as when I arrived. Over a glass of wine and the promise of dinner, the Sublime feels nearly civilized.

In the evening light, I step outside. The wind blows wisps of cloud up the rock face of the Fineilspitz, as it did in 1969, just as it surely did 5,200 years ago, when Oetzi, the man in the ice, lay down for the last time on the far slope of this peak. What is a human lifetime, or even the lifetime of a civilisation, to the wind? In this realm of ice and rock, in the face of climate change, the timeless immensity of the *Creator Spiritus* is immanent.

July 17, 2018

Piz Lad

The rock ridge rolls in gray waves that crest and plunge in shattered pillars to the valley floor. The trail arcs gently toward the green slopes below. White clouds shadow peaks and far ridges, while sunlight glints from the blasted rocks that line the summit. In the soft breeze, my son Josh and I watch a falcon hovering above us, above Piz Lad, 2,808 meters (9,210 feet).

Piz Lad is the final summit on the east-west ridge that forms the border between Italy, Switzerland, and Austria. The precipitous eastern slope overlooks the Reschen Pass. Like a watchtower, Piz Lad dominates this strategic conduit between Italy and Austria, a route established long before the Romans constructed the Via Claudia Augusta here, in the first century AD. Viewed from the south, the barren gray-white limestone slopes loom, seemingly too steep for any hiking path.

The mountain is, however, far from inaccessible. The climb from the south is steep, but the footing is secure,

without the dangerous exposure and loose rock that transform other Alpine trails into dangerous slides. No exposure, that is, until the summit ridge. From the peak, some god has taken a giant cleaver and sliced off the northern half of the mountain. The cliff falls 500 meters.

Last year, when I climbed Piz Lad alone, the summit was shrouded in cloud. At the summit cross, I signed the register, ate some chocolate, then quickly retraced my steps down, out of the fog. A year later, Josh and I are hiking in sunshine with high clouds; the route is just as steep, but it is nevertheless a different mountain. After a terrible start, slow with no strength or rhythm to my breathing, I suggested we change our goal to the much easier Aussere Knockenspitz. I am grateful that Josh did not agree. After the two-hour approach hike, we keep a fast, steady pace until close to the top. On climbs such as this, Josh has 'carte blanche' literally to run the final 150 meters. Ah, to be 20 years old!

Just below the summit cross, nearly out of sight from the trail, Josh spots animal horns. Carefully we diagonal across the slope. Two Steinböcke (mountain goats) sit among the rocks, placidly chewing the sparse alpine grass. With their long horns against the ridgeline, the animals look as though they were employed by the local tourist bureau to embellish the already glorious landscape.

Trudging up this final 45-degree slope to the summit, we look up at the foreshortened legs and boots of those who

are ahead of us on the path. There is no race; they simply started before us. At nearly 10,000 feet, our breath is short. Close to the top, so close one might say that we have already arrived, an elderly man sits, his face pale, gasping on a rock. I greet him: "If you stand, you can see the mountain goats." But he does not answer. He rocks back on his heels, then forward, leaning on his walking poles. Then back and forward again. Perhaps he is trying to stand. Fearful of embarrassing him, I say nothing. For the remainder of the hike I regret that I did not help him up.

The old hiker sits there, so close to his goal, unable to rise. He has arrived, as we all must, at the end of his climb. We may pass him now, but that is because he is ahead of us all. Like figures depicting the cycle of life, carved round the rose window of a medieval church, the old man precedes us and we follow.

Near the summit of Piz Lad

Piz Lad, Summit Ridge

Summit ridges: center - Königspitz; right - Ortler

Summit ridge, Piz Lad

PIZ LAD

Each mountain is the
end of the Earth when you stand
there fearing you might
fall faster farther
more furiously than you
ever fell before
becoming part of
everything that wombs you up
in awe so deep how
can you dread that you
might vanish there . . . only to
wake up in Heaven?

FORBIDDING HEIGHTS

Alpine View with Clouds

Peaks
Etch
Th'
Etheric
Realms
Aloft
Looming
Larger
Enigmas
Never
Mastered
Arrogant
Remotest
Karakoram