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# Known and Strange Things

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Essays

# Far Away from Here

ONLY A FEW slender strings were attached: two public readings and a commitment to spend the majority of the six months in the country. Beyond that, I would be left to my own devices. An apartment would be provided, and a stipend. I didn't think about it for very long. I wrote back: yes.

The invitation had come from the Literaturhaus in Zürich, one of those wonderful arts institutions of which Europe seems to have so many. Every six months they selected one writer, from anywhere in the world, to stay in the apartment they ran with a foundation. When I received the invitation, I felt as though I'd won a raffle I didn't even know I had a ticket for.

Switzerland: the place comes with an easy set of mental associations. But I suspected there was more to it than its reputation for calendar-pretty landscapes, secretive bankers, and regular trains, and here was a chance to see for myself. Besides, I had a manuscript to work on, a nonfictional narrative of Lagos, Nigeria, the city in which I grew up. Where better to write about chaotic, relentless, overpopulated Lagos than in modest, quietly industrious Zürich? There would be so little else to do in Switzerland anyway (according to my less-than-enthusiastic friends) that I would be mainly absorbed in writing during my time there. Perhaps I might even continue my photographic ex-

ploration of landscape and memory, a project that comprised images from many countries I had visited over the past few years.

I arrived in June. The apartment was in a peaceful neighborhood of the compact and elegant city. The writing desk faced a row of windows, and there were mountains in the distance. I grew up mountainless, close to the lagoon and the sea, in a city where the only heights were high-rises. I was familiar with the extremes of city life: the crowds, the traffic, the energy, the crime. But nature's extremes, of violent weather or vertiginous terrain, were unknown to me. Those mountains, visible from my desk, were faint and blue in the distance, not particularly imposing. But already they beckoned.

I had taken a good camera to Zürich with me, a professional-grade Canon. There was a subtle problem with it that I often encounter in digital cameras: they are fine for bright landscapes, but they tend to struggle with highlights and the resulting images sometimes have a plastic sheen. The Canon had served me well on a recent trip to Palestine, but it wasn't working in Switzerland. I had also brought along a film camera, a beautiful Contax G2 range finder. But that wasn't working either: it didn't give me the focusing control I wanted, and I missed the momentary darkening of the visual field when I pressed the shutter, which is something you get with the flipped mirror of an SLR but not in a range finder. The iPhone 5 camera, meanwhile, which I don't rule out as a tool, wasn't going to give me the detail I needed for the prints I had in mind.

What I wanted was an SLR film camera. Sure, there was the cluttered cabinet in my New York City apartment with its eight cameras and their various lenses and filters: the Hasselblad, the Nikon, the Leica, a couple of other Canons, some cameras I



hadn't touched in years. Each sat there, the physical evidence of some previous fervor. Nevertheless, the heart wants what it wants, and, about a week after arriving in Zürich, I bought an old Yashica and two lenses from a dealer near the Hauptbahnhof, for the very low and un-Swiss price of twenty-five Swiss francs, just a little over twenty-five dollars.

I loved that Yashica. During my six months in Zürich, I wrote a bit about Lagos and did a bit of other writing. But I stumbled into a surprise: the majority of my time went into traveling around Switzerland taking photographs, in all weather and at all elevations, thinking with my eyes about the country around me. The drama in these landscapes was real, and seemed almost to demand a response from the viewer.

August 2014. I'm on the Gemmipass, 2,770 meters above sea level and 670 meters above the town of Leukerbad. James Baldwin wintered in Leukerbad in the 1950s. Later he would write, "From all available evidence no black man had ever set foot in this tiny Swiss village before I came." The Gemmipass is a high mountain pass that connects mountains in the canton of Valais with those in the canton of Bern. I'm hunched over the tripod, pressing the shutter every few seconds. The weather has suddenly turned. Is this rain? Fog? I wipe the lens clean. Not only am I the only black man on the pass just now, I am the only human being of any kind. It's just me and the lake, the surrounding mountains, the rocks nearby, and some signs on the hiking trail. I have the wrong shoes on, and my jacket is not waterproof. I clamber over some hillocks so that I see the reverse of a yellow trail sign, the side on which there's no writing. The rocks on the mountain face are a beautiful scatter. The mist goes as it came, without warning. I put another roll of film in the Yashica and keep shooting.

A photo essay on London must have the Houses of Parliament or, at least, a red phone box, and one on Paris must include the Eiffel Tower. Rio de Janeiro is the statue of Cristo Redentor. Entire countries are reduced to their metonyms. Kenya is a safari, Norway is fjords. And Switzerland is mountains. This is an exaggeration, but the truth in it is worth thinking about: it is a country built largely in the lee of the Alps, the towns and cities formed from old human migrations that came to rest in valleys, on lakeshores, and, sometimes, in higher regions. I had a notion: if I could understand the mountains, I could understand the country.

The Alps, Europe's arching spine, have often been the obstacle to cross between one part of the continent and another. Hannibal's charge in 218 B.C. from Spain to Italy was celebrated even in antiquity and would later serve as a point of comparison for Charlemagne and Napoléon. During the Renaissance and Baroque periods, many Northern European artists went to Venice and Rome, via arduous Alpine crossings, returning home changed by the art they had seen. Dürer was obsessed by the canon of human proportions, Frans Floris took on a Michelangelesque vigor, Rubens imitated Titian, and, in the seventeenth century, the Dutch Caravaggisti plunged their styles into deep shadow and dramatic light.

But for Pieter Bruegel the Elder, who traveled to Italy in the 1550s, the major change in his art—which was unclassical before his trip to Rome and which remained unclassical after—was due to the Alps. He became a virtuoso of vertical landscapes, which were utterly alien to his native Brabant. His biographer, Karel van Mander, wrote, in 1604: "When Bruegel was in the Alps, he swallowed all the mountains and rocks and spat them out again, after his return, onto his canvases and panels." Bruegel's work was important for the development of independent landscapes: landscapes that did not need the pretext of a mythological or biblical event.



A few centuries later, the limitations of the daguerreotype meant that cityscapes and landscapes were among the earliest photographic subjects. In 1849 the great art critic and social reformer John Ruskin made what are believed to be the first photographs of the Alps. This was the age of firsts: the first photograph containing a human being, the first photographic self-portrait, the first aerial photograph, the first news photo (it showed a man being arrested). You couldn't have your photograph taken in 1825, but by 1845 there were thousands of photos, of people, things, and places. Light from the world could be fixed on a surface: it was possible to take the shadow away from the body and show it elsewhere.

There had been a powerful tradition of Alpine painting, connected both to the Romantic tradition and to scientific study. But photography made the Alps newly portable. For Ruskin, they were such a staggering geological fact that he visited Switzerland repeatedly, describing what he saw with intense drawings, photographs, and words: "There is indeed an appearance of action and united movement in these crested masses, nearly resembling that of sea waves; . . . they seem not to be heaped up, but to leap or toss themselves up; and in doing so, to wreathe and twist their summits into the most fantastic, yet harmonious, curves, governed by some grand under-sweep like that of a tide running through the whole body of the mountain chain."

Others took their enthusiasm for the Alps in a more athletic direction. Some well-known mountains had already been climbed, but from the nineteenth century onward, at a greater

rate than ever, the first ascents of dozens of major peaks were recorded. The first ascent of the Dufourspitze was in 1855, the Eiger's in 1858, the Matterhorn's in 1865. The ascent of the Dom, on September 11, 1858, is typical in its details: the climber was the Reverend John Llewelyn-Davies, a Cambridge-educated classicist and prominent vicar, with the help of three Swiss guides. These were difficult undertakings, and the risk involved was sufficient, in the words of one commentator, to "lend climbing the dignity of danger."

Between 1863 and 1868, a photographer named William England produced a series of views of Switzerland and Savoy, showing lakes, roads, valleys, and mountains, work he carried out under the auspices of the Alpine Club of London. And the Italian photographer and mountaineer Vittorio Sella produced, in the 1880s and '90s, some of the most beautiful photographs ever made of the Alps, photos that later inspired in Ansel Adams "a definitely religious awe." Working near the end of the nineteenth century, with a heavy glass-plate camera, Sella captured the cold and awesome power of the Alps with an accuracy and descriptive sensitivity that has hardly been improved on.

All the while, leisure travel itself was changing. The publishing house established by Karl Baedeker in Germany issued *The Rhine,* one of its first travel books, in 1861. Not long after that came *Switzerland*. Informed about the best rails and trails, the most reliable hotels, and advice on local customs, an intrepid traveler could experience foreign lands without an entourage or local contacts. The Baedeker guides are tart and direct. Swiss hotels are praised: "Switzerland may be said to have a specialty for hotels; few better are to be met with in any part of the world." Swiss wine is condemned: "Wine is generally a source of much vexation. The ordinary table wines are often so bad



that refuge has to be taken in those of a more expensive class, which is indeed the very aim and object of the landlord." But throughout Baedeker's *Switzerland,* over the hundreds of pages, what impresses is the attention to detail, the almost microscopic precision with which each itinerary, town, museum, mountain range, and hike is described.

Baedeker was already able to state, in that early guide to Switzerland, that places like the Rigi, the Brünig, and the Scheideck were on "beaten tracks." By the 1880s Switzerland was estimated to be receiving a million visitors a year. Travelers tend to go where other travelers have gone, and perhaps this is part of the reason travel photography remains in thrall to the typical. When you do visit Zürich or Cape Town or Bangkok, they are very much alike: the amusement parks have striking similarities, the cafés all play the same Brazilian music, the malls are interchangeable, kids on the school buses resemble one another, and the interiors of middle-class homes conform to the same parameters.

This doesn't mean the world is uninteresting. It only means that the world is more uniform than most photo essays acknowledge, and that a lot of travel photography relies on an easy essentialism. I like Italo Calvino's idea of "continuous cities," as described in the novel *Invisible Cities.* He suggests that there is actually just one big, continuous city that does not begin or end: "Only the name of the airport changes." What is then interesting is to find, in that continuity, the less obvious differences of texture: the signs, the markings, the assemblages, the things hiding in plain sight in each cityscape or landscape. This is what outstanding photographers are able to do, and it is the target the rest of us chase.

The question I confronted in Switzerland is similar to that

confronted by any camera-toting visitor in a great landscape: Can my photograph convey an experience that others have already captured so well? The answer is almost always no, but you try anyway. I might feel myself to be a singular traveler, but I am in fact part of a great endless horde. In the 1870s, Mark Twain was already complaining: "Now everybody goes everywhere; and Switzerland, and many other regions which were unvisited and unknown remotenesses a hundred years ago, are in our days a buzzing hive of restless strangers."

I went up many mountains in Switzerland, often jettisoning the dignity of danger for the luxury of cable cars, and took many pictures of slopes and summits. I suppose I knew, even then, that those photos would not necessarily play a central role in my project. I considered them, instead, small installments on a debt to beauty, a relief from having to be original. But beyond the mountains (this became gradually clear) lay smaller quarry: ordinary land, cityscapes, interiors. Having opened myself to the sublime experience of the Alps, it was to these I turned as I got deeper into my project. The Alps were the door, but what lay beyond, or below?

Switzerland isn't a huge country. It is about a third the size of Alabama. I traveled all over it, and I did not tire of it, was not bored even for a moment. I went to the Bernese Oberland and Interlaken, to Graubünden in the east, to Valais in the south, to Ticino in the southeast, to Geneva, Neuchâtel, Basel, Bern, Vals. I took trains, trams, funiculars, ferries, cable cars, buses. I walked and hiked, the camera always around my neck, the tripod on my shoulder. I went to crowded places and bare ones, to nightclubs and graveyards. The country is sane, clean, expensive, and saturated with a straightforward, unironic, and inexhaustible beauty. A couple of months into the residency, I was in a mesmerized state.



Lake Zürich, bigger than expected and as clean and graceful as the city whose name it shares, is described by Baedeker as follows: "Its scenery, though with slight pretensions to grandeur, is scarcely equaled in beauty by any other lake." But I found Lake Zürich's equal at Lake Brienz, which in summer is a turquoise color of hypnotic clarity and is ringed by steep green cliffs, which, in winter, threaten the small villages along the shore with avalanches. In fact, the problem I encountered was that each lake in Switzerland was the most beautiful, if it happened to be the one you were on.

Lake Geneva feels fully enfolded into civilization and has the air of the grand hotels from the 1950s. Lake Neuchâtel is compact, with fine vineyards nearby that make you think of France. Lake Lugano is warm and joyful, a page taken from the Mediterranean, and it slyly extends into Italy. Lake St. Moritz, Lake Silvaplana, and Lake Sils are pure and clear, the elongated splatter of the three of them visible from the mountains of the Upper Engadine as clearly as on a map. Lake Lucerne—the Vierwaldstättersee, the Four Forested-Cantons Lake—is the most mysterious of them all, a fjordlike lake, full of fog and silhouettes, inlets and outcroppings, and an extremely complicated coastline that spreads, as the name says, across four cantons. In the mountains and towns around all these lakes, days pass by like the hours of a dream. Travel, mountains, and photography lock together in dream logic.

But ambition always comes to darken your serenity. Technically proficient mountain pictures were good, but I also had to develop my own voice. In photography, as in writing, there's no

shortcut to finding that voice. I could not decide ahead of time that I would take only ugly pictures or only beautiful ones, or that everything would be in focus or blurred, or that I would use only color or only black and white. I had been thinking about landscape, I had been exploring color film for a few years, I was drawn to abstraction, and a certain gentle surrealism to be found in the attitude of objects. But there then followed a situational focus, a sensitivity to what the environment gave me.

Out of this focus, many pictures emerged, most of which didn't quite work. But I also started to intuit my ley lines. As I shot more and more, I saw that I was drawn to signs, to mirrors in the landscapes (in Switzerland, there are rectangular mirrors at many street crossings, which frame the landscape behind you above the one you are facing), to maps and globes, to mountains as well as to pictures of the mountains on billboards and posters. I noticed—proof perhaps that we cannot help thinking of mountains photographically, the way we cannot help thinking of explosions cinematically—that some of my photographs of mountains looked like photographs of photographs of mountains. I was drawn to this shimmering partition between things and the images of things.

I became less interested in populating my images and more interested in traces of the human without human presence. I used deep shadows less frequently than I had in the past. I pretty much ceased nocturnal shooting. As the sequence began to take shape, I got a better sense of what belonged and what didn't. I was studying photographs constantly, but I also immersed myself in the rhythms of certain painters and collagists: Chardin, Matisse, Rauschenberg, Mehretu, Mutu. I let go of some "good" photos, the way you strike out pretty sentences from a draft,



and I learned how a number of tightly argued photos should be followed by one or two that are simpler and more ventilated. Authorship, after all, is not only what is created but also what is selected.

Along the way, I felt the constant company of doubt: my lack of talent, my impostor's syndrome, my fear of boring others. Every once in a great while, there was finally a superb picture, but when I looked at it the following week, I would see that it actually wasn't very good: too obvious, too derivative. Three thousand photographs and three thousand doubts.

November 2014. Past the town of Paradiso, I come to Lugano proper and walk along the waterfront for a while. Then I see the cultural center, an angular building with a green wing cantilevered off a pair of red-brick walls. Behind are the windows of an off-white neoclassical building. In the middle distance is some construction material. On the lawn in the foreground are a bronze horse, a red bench, and a bush with orange flowers. Certain photographs contain notes that are unexpected but, brought together, poignant. I sense the tension created by the disparate elements of the scene before me. Fitting these unfamiliar notes into a single frame creates a strange new chord. But what does it mean? What it looks like is what it means.

The German word for homesickness is "heimweh." Legend has it that Swiss mercenaries from the fifteenth century onward, dispersed throughout Europe to fight foreign wars, were hardy soldiers susceptible to few weaknesses. But they missed home with a deranging intensity, longing for the high elevation of their cantons, their clear lakes, their protective peaks. This feeling they called, in their Swiss German, heimweh. The intense psychosomatic disorder was first treated in 1688 by a

physician in Switzerland, Johannes Hofer, who also gave it the Greek name "nostalgia." It entered the English language in the late eighteenth century as "homesickness."

Heimweh, having been absorbed into standard German, acquired an antonym, fernweh. Fernweh is a longing to be away from home, a desire to be in faraway places. Fernweh is similar to wanderlust but, like heimweh, has a sickish, melancholy tinge. Wanderlust is rooted in the German Romantic tradition and is strongly tied to walking out in nature. Think of Caspar David Friedrich's paintings of a lone hiker in spectacular landscapes, communing with the overwhelming greatness and intricacy of nature. Fernweh is a bit more imprecise. One simply wishes to be far away. Fernweh: the syllables sigh.

"Think of the long trip home. / Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?" I've always loved Elizabeth Bishop's poem "Questions of Travel." With plain description, she presents the traveler's predicament. The poem continues: "What childishness is it that while there's a breath of life / in our bodies, we are determined to rush / to see the sun the other way around?"

I recognize myself in the childish rush that Bishop describes. It is connected to a willingness to reconsider what counts as home. The term "at home" describes both a location and a state of being. You can stay at home or feel at home, and often those two notions coincide. But what about when they don't?

I never felt Swiss. I never felt like moving to Switzerland. The appeal was all in the awayness of it, the estrangement that one could count on. And that's just the thing with fernweh: the cure and the disease are one and the same. Fernweh is the silver lining of melancholia around the cloud of happiness about being far from home. I wasn't homesick for Switzerland; I was homesick for the feeling of being far away that Switzerland elicited in me. While I was there, I didn't follow Swiss politics closely. I read some history but not a whole lot. My German remained poor, as did my French. My Italian was worse than poor, and I was not tempted to learn Romansch, Switzerland's fourth official language. Had I got into any trouble with the law, I wouldn't have known what to do. I was most at home in Switzerland precisely because I wasn't. It made me happy because it couldn't.



I remembered that James Salter, who was fond of Switzerland and its hotels, went to interview Vladimir Nabokov in 1975. Nabokov had by then been living for many years at the Montreux Palace Hotel, on the shore of Lake Geneva. I cherish both of these writers. One thing they have in common is a mastery in describing light in particular and optical phenomena in general; another is their inclination to evoke in-between states: drowsing, dreams, epiphanies, hallucinations. Both qualities, I think now, must be connected in some way with their appreciation of the in-betweenness of Switzerland. They loved this landlocked country of valleys and slopes, with its proliferation of odd hotels, its biggest languages shared with bigger neighbors, its neutral and independent international politics, its utopian but insular domestic politics, its extraordinary architects, its love of luxury and careful finishing. Switzerland is in-between but not average, a periphery in a central location, in this world but not of it.

"Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?" But to have merely thought of here would not have revealed its subtle peculiarities, the peculiarities that are not written in guidebooks. Only direct observation can reveal those. The way streetlights and traffic signs vary, the most common fonts, the

slight variations in building codes, the fleeting culture of ads (different in each place, even when the company is a multinational), the noticeable shift in the range of hues that people wear in a given city, the visual melody of infrastructure as it interacts with terrain.

November 2014. The balletic glide of trams up and down Bahnhofstrasse, which connects the central train station with Paradeplatz, the elegant center of the Swiss banking industry. What terrible things are the bankers up to today? Don't ask, and no one will tell. At street level on Paradeplatz are fashion boutiques, luxury-watch dealers, and famous chocolatiers. I disembark from a tram. There is construction on a shop front. There is a man on a ladder and another holding it steady at the base. I'm taking pictures but I know I'm getting nothing. Then I turn around: the tram, the cutout ads for pralines and truffles along its top, and behind them, the rows of windows set into the pale-colored stone of what is probably a bank's building. Why do I like this picture? In part because of what it means, the way it compresses into one image three Swiss clichés: a bank, chocolates, and an efficient tram. But also because of how it looks: like a language that I simply don't know yet, a new cuneiform of the street.

By the time I leave at the end of November, I have shot and developed more than eighty rolls of film. Back in New York, I examine what I have: almost enough for a book, but not quite. I begin to plan a trip back to Switzerland: I want to revisit Basel and Zürich. And how can I leave out St. Moritz or Sils Maria? I long for these places as though I were a doppelgänger of those long-ago mercenaries. Just a few more days, a few hundred more photographs, and out of the whole pile of thousands, I'll be able to select the eighty that will go in my book. Fernweh: a sickness, a longing to swallow up the Alps or to be swallowed by them.



July 2015. Late afternoon. A hotel room in Zürich. I've been out shooting all day and have made no good pictures. I remove my lens cap. I'm shooting with a Canon Elan 7 now, a lovely lightweight film SLR from around 2000. I pivot the camera on its tripod. Covering the front of the freestanding wardrobe in the room is a picture of a ship on a lake, beyond which are mountains. You could wake up suddenly at night in this room and, seeing that lake dimly lit by a streetlight, imagine yourself afloat: the slightly vertiginous thrill of being nobody, poised in perfect balance with the satisfaction of having, for that moment, a room of your own.

I face the wardrobe. I open the windows behind me and increase the camera's exposure setting slightly. A black lamp, gray striped wallpaper, the wardrobe, a foldable luggage rack, black light switches, a brazen handle on a black door. Arrayed like that, they look like an illustration in a child's encyclopedia. This is a door. This is a ship. This is a lake. This is a mountain. This is a room to which you long to be away, a room redolent of fernweh. This is a man in a room, crouched behind the camera, readying his shot, far away from home, not completely happy, but happier perhaps than he would be elsewhere.

# Home Strange Home

In November 1975, when I was five months old, my mother took me home from America to Nigeria. My father completed his MBA and joined us a few months later. Growing up in Lagos, I began to invent memories of my place of birth, the small college town of Kalamazoo, Michigan. There was evidence in the form of photographs from those first months, and I had my American passport (pine green in color), a squeaky rubber puppy I'd played with in the cradle, and stories from my parents. I convinced myself that I could remember our one-bedroom apartment, on Howard Street. I even had a memory of the room at Borgess Hospital: it was just after five in the afternoon, and some Nigerian friends of my parents were there. I was born by cesarean section. The nurse pronounced me a "gorgeous Borgess baby."

In Lagos, I was a regular middle-class Nigerian kid. My first language was Yoruba, and I had Nigerian citizenship from birth. Yet I was also an American, the only one in the family—a fact and a privilege that my parents often alluded to. I didn't dwell on it. I tried to wear it as easily as I could, like someone who is third in line to the throne: aware of extravagant possibilities but not counting on any particular outcome. From the age of ten or eleven, when political arguments with other boys at school be-



came a part of life, I took the side of America. When classmates insisted that the Russians had a superior nuclear arsenal, I pitied them their nonsense. During the Olympics, I rooted for the USA, Nigeria being unlikely to win anything anyway. And at home my father spoke of NASA and Silicon Valley as though they were natural future steps in my progress.

In the 1980s, Nigeria went from being the hope of Africa to being a poor and perpetually tense place. Inflation dragged most Nigerians into poverty. In 1990, in Liberia, the dictator Samuel Doe was tortured and killed, and a horrifying civil war began in that country. Who was to say that Nigeria wouldn't go the way of its West African neighbor? "If that happens," my parents said, almost in unison, "we'll just drop you off at the American Embassy. You will be airlifted from there. Americans never abandon their own."

My parents meant this seriously. I loved their insouciance about it, and rehearsed the scenario in my mind: Nigeria in flames, my parents handing me over through the embassy gates, me in a helicopter rising over Lagos. Later, I would find a way to return and save my trapped family. The American passport (renewed, and by this time a dark blue) was the ultimate get-out-of-jail card.

War never came. We faced a slower disaster: a corrupt ruling class, crumbling institutions, armed robberies, bad universities, despair. When I graduated from high school, my parents gathered up their savings and decided to send me to college in the United States. We considered various places, but I was destined to end up in the one town they knew and trusted: Kalamazoo. I arrived in the fall of 1992, and for the first two weeks I couldn't understand the language, which seemed to be an accelerated version of English, with bizarrely flattened vowels.

"Mop" was pronounced "map"; "map" was "mep." It was equally difficult to make myself understood. I did know about *The Cosby Show*, MTV, and baggy pants. I had anticipated something of the liberty and recklessness epitomized by sixteen-year-olds who drove their own cars (and I was soon to exercise my own liberty by choosing to be an art historian instead of an astronaut). But I was astonished by the Phil Donahue show, by how little sense of shame people seemed to have; and I was more than astonished by the black-white divide.

The journey to Kalamazoo seemed like a journey of return, the opposite of exile. A direct flight from Lagos to JFK, followed by a daylong train journey across the Midwest, had brought me to the town where my parents were married, the town where I was born and baptized. I had no anxiety about legal documents. Picking up my Social Security card was an afternoon's errand. I got a job at McDonald's, and banks gladly loaned me money for college. But, my first evening on campus, as I wandered around in what seemed like intolerable cold, it suddenly struck me that everyone I loved on this earth was almost six thousand miles away. I was flooded with panic, like a young boy in a helicopter being pulled away from all he'd ever known. Seventeen years of invented memories abandoned me. A sob ascended my spinal cord.

That evening, I began to invent new memories for myself. These new memories were all about the home I had left to come back home: what I had liked about that other life, and what part of it I was happy to be rid of.

# The Reprint

IT WAS A small village in southern Germany. It was a summer's day. From an old turreted tower, on the green hill that was separated from the village by a sluggish river, the sound of bells negotiated the afternoon. I was drowsy in that carillon sound, looking out a window that framed the hill, and it seemed as though the sound came from all the green hill and not just its tower. Then the window suddenly shuttered, and I woke up in a darkened room in Brooklyn. The bells continued a few seconds more, until I reached across to the dresser and silenced them. The clock said 5:00. I had gone to bed with my mind on James Baldwin: somewhere, he tells the story of traveling into a small Swiss village that had never seen a black man. In the strange logic of dreams, Switzerland had become Germany, and Germany had dissolved into Brooklyn on the morning of November 4.

I padded around the house so as not to rouse my wife. I made the last of the coffee her uncle, a kindhearted Jesuit in Pune, had sent us, and prepared the things I was taking to the polling place with me: ID card, camera, voter registration. I returned to the bedroom and asked my wife for whom I should vote. Flipping her pillow round to its cooler side, more or less still asleep, she said I should return home immediately should