Honorable Bandit

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Why I Walk

Adnomination

It is a fact that not once in all my life have I gone out for a walk. I have been taken out for walks; but that is another matter. Even while I trotted prattling by my nurse’s side I regretted the good old days when I had, and wasn’t, a perambulator.

Max Beerbohm, “Going Out for a Walk”

I’m better at packing for a trip, now. Any trip, not just the foot trips. If it doesn’t fit in the overhead luggage, it’s not going. Every time I’ve checked a bag, something got broken: CD jewel cases, toothbrush handles, a souvenir trilobite fossil. Nothing important, agreed, but once, when unpacking after Mexico City, I pulled out a small showy bottle of good tequila and didn’t at first notice that it
had broken, and then I noted that it was as if some small animal had taken a small bite out of a bottom corner of the glass, and the agave had soaked into my clothes, so that they smelled of sour yogurt and sweat. After a beach trip to the island of Vieques, I saved a spiral seashell, but when unwrapping it, a hermit crab, shriveled into a tiny fist, slid from its pearly chamber onto the floor. I had to jump back, the body had the shock gag heft of a rubber chicken, a whoopee cushion Bronx-cheered out flat, harmless now, the damage done. I was scared, but it was killed. Better leave things where they are, take nothing there, and bring nothing here. Avoid souvenirs, keep a light knapsack, or plan to carry sorrow.

At the beginning of long trails, I have found many things ditched in the ditch. I have walked along the trail, and they’d be there, a museum exhibition. There have been shirts and extra shoes and pages ripped from guidebooks—after you’ve walked through a map, it’s no longer worth its weight. My favorite item: a copy of *The Portable Dante*, not portable enough. There was a most beautiful new leather jacket left on a grassy knoll, curled like a sleeping animal, delicious as an advertisement for a nougat candy bar split open to show its sheen and luxury. Nobody picked it up, as far as I know, not anybody walking on the same trail, anyway. The gîtes and hostels and refugios, even in the most remote alpen reaches, have impossibly huge, almost mythic libraries of abandoned books in many languages, a library of Babel.

People will make me wonder at the burdens they’ll carry for pleasure. The extreme sports boys have invented superflyweight tent steaks as light as a Coke can. Nylon rope, vacuum-packed freeze-dried noodles. All this, in order to make room for a six pack of beer, an elaborate camera, hackey-sack beanbags. They always lecture me when I come in, about how my pack is too heavy and not the right name brand. But when I have pulled out a good bottle of red wine, one properly stoppered and not with a wad of
paper nor sold at extortionate prices, the sort you’ll get from the gardien at the refuge, I have thought—who will help me eat the cake, asked the little red hen.

After one or two days of walking, a walker knows pain. Pain consumes you, not just physically but mentally (you can’t hear a pretty song or enjoy a beautiful view) and emotionally, and even the imagination is consumed; you start to believe that your bones will shatter, your flesh turn to jelly; you cannot avoid it. It becomes a kind of focus, an asceticism, if you want to be vain about it. No wonder religious types see it as a test of faith, a punishment even.

Sometimes the meaning of something changes when you just shift the position, or disposition, of the roots, the context, a little bit. Among words, this is called “adnomination,” a kind of wordplay in which the root meaning or phonetic value of the words are similar or alike, but that actual meaning between the two is germane. The only dictionary where I can even find the term listed begins by telling me that the word is obsolete. We get our puns elsewhere these days. But I’m thrilled at the small difference between two words, for the meaning of “restive” is quite different from the meaning of “rested,” especially if you are a walker with a pack.

I descend from long-drawn tailings of lumpenpeasants, German, Irish, Polish, Hauserbroad. I was built for work, like a mule, though I hunch over a desk most days. So, when I put on the burden of a backpack, it shouldn’t surprise me that I stand up straight, my posture improves. In the Corsican mountains, I have the high peaks as role models, and I try to match them with my own stature. Even the villages on this island are exemplary to a walker—the stone houses
stand up tall, seven stories high and carrying their own burden. They swagger while they conserve, these citadels, these defenses like Corte and Calvi. In the bars, I see Corsicans sit bolt upright on their stools, and I am sure they are ready for any attack.

What does it mean, that I am at my best when I am loaded down, respond so quickly to the labor? Despite the softness of my hands, my body sends many signals: it was meant for work. I never get sick on these walks, although I shiver in cold mountain clouds and fry under too much sun. After a few days, the bones in my feet begin to spread, to give me a wider base. I shed pounds, lose that grief, too. After walking a few weeks in central France, I was embarrassed when my shorts fell around my ankles.

Adnomination seems some version, within one’s own language, of “false friends,” faux amis, words that share the same cognate between two languages that are quite different, in fact. “Demand” in English, “demander,” in French: To require of another, to ask of another. “Exit,” in English, “exito,” in Spanish: a place of departure, a place of success. Petra tells me that when she goes to London, she laughs at the Gift Shops. “Gift” is the German word for poison or venom. With shorts around my ankles, with no water in my bottle, with no bed to call my own, do I stand before God with humility, or humiliation?

Grief has weight. After a terrible breakup, I frequented a deserted Chinese restaurant that did most of its business in carry-out. It was me alone in a room full of nostril-red paint and outdated paneling, the good-luck cat, his paw up as if to say, “Right on!” watching me order plateful after plateful of chow mein, especially the hot and spicy “Emperor’s Special,” and all that ingested starch was sorrow made manifest. I had to walk it off.
The appetite comes—or goes. Once my plump aunt’s husband died, she began to lose weight. But it was more than that, as if the body wanted to disappear itself. Her doctor called it “the dwindlies.” Get fat! Don’t die!

When my partner Jeff died, he was not much more than a pile of twigs. He could not make his way upstairs to the bedroom, so we had set up a hospital bed downstairs, very close to the bathroom. On more than one occasion, he had gotten up to go to the bathroom, and he’d run out of energy on the way back, so in the morning I would find him asleep on the couch or in an easy chair; I’d have to get him up or carry him back to the bed. The day he died, I didn’t notice at first, because he seemed to have run out of energy again and simply slumped under the cuckoo clock. I had been awakened that morning by an early phone call. “I’ll have to call you back,” I said to a friend who didn’t realize the time difference, “I have to put Jeff back in bed.” I went over and found him cold. There were, above him, the two lead pine-cone-shaped weights that pulled the gears ever downward, drawing the time through the gears and up to the hands of the clock face. The pine cone rested on his bony shoulder. He had stopped the mechanism of the machine with his body, and I knew exactly what time he had died: 5:12 a.m. He lay pressed down by the clock’s weights like that curled up leather jacket at the side of the trail.

It’s only precious word play, on another level. Take the “I” out of lover, and it’s over. Petra asks me, “Have you ever noticed how ‘fashion’ and ‘fascism’ sound nearly the same?” I am not sure whether it is better to be an “invalid,” or to be “invalidated.” Did the bandits d’honneur that hid for so long in the maquis “give themselves up” or simply “give up”? 
When I took the long walking journey through France and Spain to the pilgrim shrine of Santiago de Compostela, I carried in my back-pack a stone from home. I picked up the pebble from my mother’s garden. “What are you doing in there?” she asked as I poked around. I’m sure she thought I might stomp on a tomato. I explained that I would carry a rock from home and when I got to a place about three-quarters of the way to the pilgrim site, there was a great iron cross, the cruz de ferro, and at the foot of the cross, pilgrims over the millennia had tossed their stones. The stone is meant to represent the burden of sin, and after the purification of pilgrimage, one is allowed to shed that weight. My mother picked up a stone. “Take one for me.”

Whenever I walked, my mother took care of Grace, my dog. My mother was less strict about feeding my dog, so she’d have to go on a diet whenever I returned. I once made the mistake of reading a book about dogs, what they think and feel. It’s all guesswork, but the guess is that dogs are pretty much easygoing. The only thing they hate is being left alone. I didn’t want to know this.

The Corsican bandit d’honneur is notorious to some, but enjoys notoriety among his own. Some say he gets by in the maquis with a good knowledge of craft. Others think him merely crafty. The Maquisards, those workers for the resistance against the Axis nations of World War II were revolutionary to those who longed for a free France, revolting to the Nazis. As I trudge through the maquis myself, I think it is good to be outside, but would rather not be looked at as an outsider.

Grace once got sick from eating while I was on one of my long journeys. “Garbage gut,” they call it. She had to have surgery to remove
the blockage of too much food. She was okay for a few years, then the scar tissue around the surgery built up, and became a mass that couldn’t be removed. When I returned from Corsica, Grace got sick again. At the vet’s, there are four private rooms, each equipped with an examining table. The table is also a scale, so when you put your dog or cat or parakeet on the table, a little readout at the end tells you how much the dog weighs. I put Grace on the table: twenty-three pounds. When I take her leash off, the light-emitting diodes adjusted: twenty-two pounds. The doctor, who had known Grace for years, only talked to her now. “What you got there?” he asked her as he poked around her little paunch. He took her in to be x-rayed. When he returned to the examining room, he left Grace behind for a little hydration, and we put the x-rays into a light board above the weighing table. He leaned forward to show me the spooky shadow of blockage and tumor. The weight from his leaning body was registered on the readout: twelve pounds. “See this mass here?” he asked. I leaned forward to look with him, and pressed my fingertips on the table. Twenty-one pounds. A little more leaning for him: twenty-three pounds. “There’s really nothing we can do about it.” I stood straight, as if I’d just put on a very heavy backpack. He stood straight, too, looked down at the table as if he might make the weight change with his mind, but it still said: zero pounds. “So when you say there’s nothing we can do, then that means there’s nothing I can do,” I said. I placed the flat of my hands on the table. Seven pounds. He did too—he must have noticed this business himself. It must happen all the time, the pressure on the table. A Persian cat: twelve pounds. A black Labrador: fifty-six pounds. My torso, my head, my arms, as they hung over, realizing I had to make the decision about how much longer Grace will live: about the same as a black Lab, I suppose: fifty-six pounds, then, breathing in, fifty-four, then fifty-six again, fifty-four, fifty-seven, fifty-five, fifty-six, fifty-four, fifty-six.
I know what you’re thinking: Just what is adnomination’s relationship to antanaclasis? I’ve anticipated that question, for antanaclasis is the repetition of a word whose meaning changes in the second instance. “If you aren’t fired with enthusiasm,” Vince Lombardi once said, “you’ll be fired with enthusiasm.” After a day of walking, I am enervated. After a night of sleeping, I am energized, or should be, if I had real coffee instead of little packets of coffee goo to suck on. With real coffee, I am content. Without it, I am contentious.

Deep in the heart of Corsica’s “Cirque de la Solitude,” we used chains and ropes to scale up and down sheer cliff faces. I felt ridiculous, sure to fall. With a backpack pulling you down, it’s as if gravity itself wants you dead. But loose stone is even more treacherous. The word scree, is it, perhaps, adnomination with the word scream? Somewhere among the gila monster–backed peaks of the Bavella group, above us, three birds soared nearly at eye level over the canyon below. I watched them swoop down to the bottom and come back up with sticks in their claws. “They must be making their nests,” I told Petra. “But it’s autumn,” she said. “Birds don’t feather their nests in autumn.” Then what were they doing with the sticks?

They were dropping them. Apparently, the sticks were too heavy to carry for long. I saw them break on some rock ledges just below me. The bird went down to retrieve it again. But wait: the bird poked its beak into the broken stick, and ate. That’s when I realized that the bird was a buzzard, and the sticks were bleached bones. Later, I’d read about this bird: a lammergeier, a lamb vulture, known for its ability to get the last tender morsel out of the inside of an old bone, hollowing it out, the last dwindlie of the dwindlies.
Seeing the lammergeier in action and not knowing the nature of its actions—it’s like eating the last ramekin of caramel custard in the fridge and discovering that it’s gravy. That sort of horror.

I held Grace’s head while the vet put the needle into her paw and put her to sleep. It’s so fast, that business, that you can’t trust it. On the examining table scale, it still read: twenty-one pounds. Her eyes still open, her body still warm. A week later, I got her back, dust in a box. I put the box on a kitchen scale and it said: three pounds two ounces, but I couldn’t trust that: my doctor is always weighing me in my boots, so I can never trust these measures, they are never accurate.

Grief is so strong at times, one tends to forget one’s self—all of the mind is deeply engaged with the one who is no longer there. After a while, when the searching around proves fruitless, one needs to find a reason for the loss, blame, and so grievance is born. Such an ugly child.

Grace is gone now, and I have no companion to join me on my park walks. In the same spring heat I felt the need to step into the tender grass and watch children play on the jungle gyms. I stood by the fence and watched the kids, giddy in the air, coming out of it in swings and on slides, and I laughed, too, in sympathy. Scaling a mountain and sliding down in the scree is just some grownup version of that feel. But as I stood, I watched a mother, then two, take a look at me and hustle quietly to their children’s sides. Weeks before, these same mothers might come up to me and ask me, “Can she pet your dog?” and it would be a way to talk to them. A dog is park carte blanche. Now I am a sketchy single man, a stranger, a danger, with no business in the park.
When you walk among villages in rural Europe, the backpack makes you look funny to dogs. I figured this out years ago when walking out of the city of Pamplona, and two dogs and their masters approached in the park on the outskirts. I reached down to pet one of the dogs, and it went nuts, barking viciously. “It’s okay,” said the lady, accustomed to this moment because pilgrims to Santiago were always leaving the town at around this hour, heading west, and her dog must have barked at a hundred other walkers, “It’s your backpack, it makes you look strange, like a monster to him.” I am a monster.

I do it too, of course. When I walk on a trail and there are cyclists, they come and go so quickly I never get to know them. Other walkers, I see day after day; they are accountable. I watch my possessions around cyclists. They can be thieves. Where do they go?

If I had fastened my superlightweight towel to the refugio’s clothesline, it might have stayed put. But a fast bicyclist stole it when I wasn’t looking. And perhaps then, I would not bear this grievance, this prejudice toward cyclists, in general. My backpack’s buckle breaks, and it will not hold fast. My aunt fasted, and died of the dwindlies.

Sometimes when I walk, I’ll kick a stone. I’ll see how far along the road I can take it. It’s a silly indulgence, an almost childish anthropomorphism, but I’ll talk to the stone: you’re going on a great journey, you’re going to see things none of the stones back home have ever seen. And a half a mile later, I’ll have a feeling of guilt, because I’ve taken the stone away from its home. When I was an actual child, rather than merely childish, I would make sure to kick it all the way back home. When I am walking a long way with no real end in sight,
which is basically the only kind of walking I do any more, I convince myself the stone needs an adventure. Or I’ll simply take the stone back to my own home.

Petra was raised in Germany learning English, so she knows it well, the coin of the business realm. When she was in high school, her first boyfriend was named Matthias just like her husband, a Teutonic probability. The first Matthias was tall and passionate with just the slightest of stutters. He wrote Petra hundreds of love letters, full of promises and declarations and lyrics from American pop music. She kept them in a shoebox, and when I went to visit her in Vienna one Christmas, she pulled them out to show me. Some of them were dozens of pages long. His handwriting was something akin to typesetting. His adoration was far more emotionally charged than any love letter, at least any from a man I’d seen since reading around in the letters of Abelard and Heloise. A perfect balance of the particular and the abstract: “My love for you is like a thousand flames, although our parents might forbid us to light a thousand flames.”

How do I know this, since I don’t know German well? All of his letters were written in English. The profundity of this did not hit me until I thought what it might be like to write love letters to a significant other in a language I might know well—Spanish, or better, Russian. Making love in a foreign language is like providing for yourself a bit of safety glass between you and a violent criminal; you can say anything and be heard through it, but you are secure in its manufactured distance. Like oven mitts, sun block, or irony, writing about frighteningly real emotion in a second language, however fluent one might be in it, can render it a stance, an artifice. Passion is calmed to delight. Romance is a barely tethered beast; one needs a shield. The fire and music, for one who speaks that language first, however, can seer and dazzle. I think of Nabokov’s Humbert Humbert, Conrad’s Marlowe. This, too, is the trick of long-distance walking, to get both the intimacy and the distance. I told Petra that
our walk together across Corsica was like reading a love letter written in a foreign language.

“Those were written twenty years ago,” she said.

Why do we keep these things, the letters, the ashes of your dog, the rings of a dead partner? I am always sacking Europe, but unlike the Goths, I bring back such valueless things—the stone I kicked, the menu from a special meal, postcards I never sent. Broken pieces of tile, the chestnut given to me by a local woman, seed pods. I put them in a box, and after a while, I don’t quite remember where they came from, and why I saved them. They accumulate, they gather weight. Only a couple of things are vivid enough not to be forgotten, only because they are emblems of something painful: a bit of thread I lanced through a blister to help it drain, a bit of bone from the lammergeier’s meal. The fluids in the blister are kept flowing, the lammergeier has flown.