Honorable Bandit

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Why I Walk

Imagining the Maquis

"Useless to ask a wandering man
Advice on the construction of a house.
The work will never come to completion."

After reading this text, from the Chinese Book of Odes, I realised the absurdity of trying to write a book on Nomads.

Bruce Chatwin, The Songlines

All of my travels end up “mid-epic” in scale. I go away for a long time. Home gathers dust. Seasons change. Milk spoils in the fridge. Friends move away. Careers launch and fail. Like the eponymous Swimmer of Cheever’s story, the world shifts radically. Is it possible to miss away the way people miss home? Wanderlust, I guess it’s called. Walking long distances has given me a better sense of distances,
stretched some out into realistic ideas and made shorter distances seem smaller. I start to torture friends when I come back home by suggesting we walk to the movie theater. “Come on, parking is terrible over there and it’s only three miles.” There is a sigh that can only be the sound of being uninvited. And yet the task of rounding up sponsors for the March of Dimes Walk-a-Thon, the fee I must pay to join the gym—I can’t bear it.

I have long given up the pilgrim’s need for a site, a tabernacle on which to offer my suffering feet (and by tabernacle, I also mean the March of Dimes or a fit gym-built body). This is desire without an object; call it longing. I need to be outdoors and indoors. Yes, there may be fleas, and sometimes I have to eat tripe, and is there no bathroom in this gîte? “I have never heard of a bathroom in a gîte” (and by “never heard of it,” I mean, if found, “you’ll never forget it.”). Or this is what I’d like to believe. But what I wish for is coherent story, for an object of my desire, for meaning or metaphor. A trek with danger and pain, a passage that makes the body and heart sore, such a thing should be a metaphor for something, or it is nothing. And that’s why I begin to weep on the plane: there are dozens of anecdotes, dozens of objects of desire, and yet the trip across Corsica, beginning and ending so abruptly, crumbles into fragments; the only thing that feels whole here is the sense that the entire trip was nothing but a digression.

For me, crying always comes as a surprise. Weeping comes to me, who willed a shutoff of the waterworks long ago, only when I am off my guard, overtired, under the influence of bad movies and jet lag. Otherwise, crying, or the impulse to cry, swoops down like the lammergeier and strikes a little terror. It’s a cleansing experience, though, an unselﬁng; I feel satisﬁed as fully used, bleached bones afterward. I want to pick apart the mess that leads to the weep, the initial anger and frustration, say, at not understanding a command in a foreign language, at getting deep-fried lamb intestine instead of a
salad when ordering off the menu, at the way little old ladies will barge in front of me when I am stepping onto a train. Usually, I suppose, the emotion I would express would be mere anger if I were at home, but when I am away, some strangeness rolls it over, this decayed log, and suddenly I can see all the beetles and worms crawling underneath. Weeping is this kind of disturbance.

If there is such a thing as reverse jet lag—the dread anticipatory worry of departure—it is a site of some weeping. The child has had fun at summer camp, and he does not want to go back to school.

My shoulders were sore the day Petra drove me to the airport from the previous day’s long snorkeling excursion in the Gulf of Santa Manza. After the snorkeling, I slept in a bad position. I was scheming rather than dreaming: how was I going to get all of the loot home? Besides my own souvenirs, Petra had given me one of her two high-tech walking sticks and, wrapped around it, a roll of Mentos with the flavor of pink grapefruit, a flavor not available in my best-of-all-possible-worlds country. Our tryst was ending for another time. But we were already making plans: Zanzibar! Crete! Tallinn!

And then I was alone at the gate, for I had commanded that Petra leave me. I wouldn’t want her to see me weep. Besides, she has to drive the Clio all the way up to Bastia and fly back to Vienna very early the next day. Our goodbyes have always been perfunctory, a kiss or two, but mostly because this is ongoing, breaks between being mostly together. What makes a gay man wish to be straight? A friendship as easy and enthusiastic as the one I have with Petra.

Before I knew it, I was leaning out my window, meditating on the throbbing, undulating barcode of skidmarks on the small airport landing strip.

Or perhaps I weep because I read in the final Corsican newspaper I’ll get during this trip that the little dead British boy is—they’ve finally
discovered—really dead. My heart is a cactus, and I weep for that, too.

Driving to the Figari airport, we were slowed by cows, the first time cows ever threatened to make me late for a flight. Earlier, when I planned this trip, I had the choice of taking a ferry or one of those rinky-dink flying operations (in this case Air Littoral), the sort in which the plane is borrowed from another country (in this case Spain) and everybody claps when the plain lands—from relief, maybe? Or maybe it’s like a small town putting on a big musical production of *Oklahoma!*, and everybody knows personally the big stars that play Curly and Judd and the captain and your stewardess. And you collect the air sickness bag for your friend who collects air sickness bags, because this is one he can’t possibly have, but statistically, the air sickness bags of this kind of plane are used 1000 percent more often, making them an even more rare collector’s item.

The plane took off. It’s amazing to be able to see the shape of the island from the air, a big Michelin map. It’s like knowing all the vocabulary, all the declensions, all the conjugations, at last, of a language you’ve been struggling to learn—and then it’s time to go.

The highways and paved roads of the world were once walking trails that kept getting used, known conduits, the devil we all knew. Before that, they were the paths of our domesticated animals, trying to get to food they were willing to stoop for. Before that, their trails were paths of animals not yet domesticated, as yet unstooping, or maybe untameable. Before that, they were arroyos, dried river beds, or the drag marks where natural gravity pulled at matter until it reached its final resting place, inescapable. If it is not all of these things you see in the way between here and there, then we probably blasted it out of rock, or did something equally violent or unnatural to make it exist. In which case, we travelers not only destroy what we seek but destroy the way to the sought thing, too.
I think I saw, as the plane shot out for a minute in the wrong direction and turned around on a steep banking curve, Elba, the place of Napoleon’s exile. Not the wrong direction, no: every direction may be exile.

When I came back from Corsica, my bags were full of everything I speak against in my travelogue: a museum of ceramics, liquors, meats, books, and cuttings from the maquis. Travelers destroy what they seek, or at the very least, make a museum of it. I am not hateful toward museums, but I tend to attend the ones in my home town more often than those in the places where I travel. They seem something like ossuaries, a record of something that was there rather than something that is—the half-rabbit, half-rat skeleton, a living stretch of the maquis now dried out and tied up in string, sachet. One of the things I did buy was a collection of essential oils from a little homeopathic shop in Porto Vecchio, reported to be the four main ingredients in the makeup of the maquis. Myrtle, of course, and rosemary, and some mix of several savory herbs.

And still the mind lags behind the body. The mail is still stopped for a few days after I arrive, and I’m too busy resuming the duties of work to call all the people I know to tell them I’m back. Until I do, they consider me still gone. I’m a ghost, have slipped over the lip of the world and disappeared the way a teabag tag will slip when you pour the water into the pot too quickly—and that is a thing cave-men never knew.

Even I consider me gone. I look at my town the way a tourist does, noticing for the first time things that have been there from the first: incredible! My entire neighborhood seems to be made of brick. All these girls know how to apply foundation to their face by the time they are twelve. Gingerbread gets more “cakey” when it is kept
in Tupperware. These observations, like the suggestion that we all walk to the movies, challenge my friendships. The Bouldrey we sent to Corsica is not the Bouldrey they have returned to us.

My mind is not with my body but is still back in a village in Corsica. In Sartene, I recall now, a boy hanging out the little veranda over the street with his excited, wound-up dog. What were they waiting for? That is when I sometimes wish I had a video camera, even though the tourists who carry them are international embarrassments. In the museums and cathedrals, I’ll watch some dope pan over silver crucifixes, or the history of how the aperitif “Cap Corse” is made (it’s made with chestnuts, of course, and quinine, antimalarial and intoxicating), and no doubt that video will never be watched. So too, do they pan over crappy souvenirs, badly lit minor paintings, the wide expanse of the sea and beach. Never over the little boy and his dog, the towering Laricio pines swaying precariously in a wind, an old woman in black peering out her door—yes, I was the one who had them start the vendetta, and watch out, or I’ll set one up for you!

I’m being judgmental. I think of the packets of my father’s hopeless family vacation photos, of bland open landscapes. They were beautiful places; I was there and I agree, breathtaking to see, but inert, shrunken, even boring in a picture. Buried deep in this inability to see or apprehend or frame beautiful things and places is the longing for it. We did see it, it was apprehended, but how can I show it to somebody else? How do I convince anybody that the aiguilles of Bavella are something brought to earth from another planet and set out there in the Mediterranean? In the phrase “as is,” that almost assonantal, glottal-stopping term, it is suggested that there is something wrong with the thing it describes; our task is to find the damage in the thing.

And perhaps I’m asking the wrong questions. Is it natural for every person to wish to apprehend beautiful things, interpreted or
isolated or not? I walk with my dog every evening and will now and then witness hallucinatory full moons or the visitation of a barn owl on a low branch, but she doesn’t see it. For my dog, beauty is elsewhere. In the smell of vomit, perhaps. And soon, she will be gone.

I watched that little boy on the veranda in Sartene from the camouflaged safety of a café table, watched until the bread delivery man drove up, at which moment the boy lowered his cumbersome action figure on a string down, down, down, until it clobbered the baker, who was not amused, and beat on the door and insisted in Corsican Italian, I suppose, to be let in so that he could exact his revenge.

All the things I brought back—the brocciu and the lonzu and the bundled sprigs of maquis herbs, even the intangibles, the things taken that don’t destroy what travelers seek, the journal with all the records of the events, the photos—they are some crystallized, postcard-perfected version of the place, that granite stone along the road without the spray-painted admonishment, “Francesi Fora!” I remember how, while listening to the polyphonie in Corte, some tourists were so moved by the music that they pulled out their cameras to snap a picture of, what?—the sound? Beauty seems only to be mediated through the eye. What will they think when they get the pictures developed back home? What were they trying to capture? Movement, sound, an emotional arc—everything but what is there, frozen, lifeless in the photo. And soon, they’ll even forget that music.

That doesn’t mean I don’t do the same sort of thing. What I miss the most, or remember best, is the smell of a place—Galicia smells like sour milk, wet hay, cow dooky. The Perigord is a great smell of pine and rotting grapes. Andalucia is a spilled Jerez and unfiltered black tobacco cigarettes. Les Landes: railroad ties rotting back into earth. Every once in a while, a wind will tease me with that red-pepper-and-cooking-octopus smell, and I am back in Galicia. But I have a box full of mementos of travel—bits of broken tile, sea glass, shells, seed pods from some impossible plant. When we finally got
together again, the scentmeister Michael and I mixed up a handful of the various essences I’ve brought back in order to re-create the maquis. Michael has brought out the little swizzle stick paddles again and a box of ziplock bags. I told him I saw Corsican households with ziplock bags filled with water in order to scare away flies by showing themselves as a distorted, inflated imaged in reflection.

“That’s just weird,” he said, and I realize he’s right even as I tell him about this superstition. But the remaking of the maquis isn’t weird to Michael. This, he can understand, or begin to imagine. I can bring that home from my travels, and my friends can get a hint of an explanation.

I get my hint by mixing up various portions of the essential oils—two parts rosemary, one part myrtle, three parts citronella in one bag, then three parts rosemary, two of myrtle, a little thyme, and a dash of balsam and bergamot. By the time we are finished, there are more than a dozen baggies sealed with their attending scent stick, and it is baggie number eleven that seems the closest to what I remember as the maquis. Michael mixes a tall flask with the same measurements, and uses his label maker to tag it: “Maquis No. 11.” Later, he makes candles from it for me, and an oil to burn in a censer.

Even so, this is an idealized version of the maquis, the home edition, a Hollywood version. What we lack here is the “uninventable detail”: the malodorous alder, or that certain version of thyme that grew out of rocks and smelled like sheep piss. There is no essential oil in the shops for “dust” or “forest fire” or “goats” or “trekker sweat.” Still, it does something I don’t anticipate: it brings the outdoors indoors, a little of the wild, strange place into my overly familiar living room. It is a little foreign to me. And that is when I start to notice old things in a fresh way. And that is when I confirm that my home has to be just a little bit unhomey, even uncomfortable, in order for me to feel comfortable in it.
The outdoors, I realize the morning after my return, has been taken indoors once again. I think this as I pour milk on my cereal and the flat flakes make the milk skiff off and land in spatters on the counter. For if I were outdoors, I’d be throwing flat stones across Lac Nino, and this wouldn’t be a mess I will have to clean up.

Days later, even weeks after a walk, I still dream nightly about walking, knowing well that there never will be real meaning in it, that walking is as senseless as violence. And as any perpetrator or recipient of violence knows, it will happen again.

In the city, I can close my window and the world is so quiet—no lovemaking Germans in the next tent, no peeg running through the bivouac. Just the sound of my own pulse when I rest my head against my pillow, the sound of some soft, fibrous cotton rubbed against the hard fact of teeth and bone and my tympanum, rush, rush, rush. I fall asleep to the beat, and I dream of walking to far-off places and it’s always pretty and it’s always good to walk. I dream a visionary dream one night of a big backpack with long tassels hanging from all its pockets and corners that rotated in space like a backpack satellite. I wake in the morning and begin to pace. Where is my stick? Where is my pack?

The secret thing about travel is that time (namely, the future) is what one travels in just as much as space, and so travelers destroy time with the same intent as the other thing they seek. What keeps me going on into the future, I wonder, if I’m always gobbling it, consuming it, destroying it? A promise, perhaps, made to someone else, or a self from long ago, or one of the future, or God. God may exist to make me be true to all those promises, like the man who built Holyrood in Edinburgh.

I light a candle, scented with Maquis No. 11. In its perfection, it is imperfect. I think of how the travel agencies talk us into
wanting a perfect romantic getaway that’s picture-postcard perfect, but it’s when something mars the journey, that’s when it becomes memorable—then we’ve really done the thing.

This is the phrase: “cherishing something and putting it in lavender.” That I like. The maquis will do that to me. For me. For you, I only have my nostalgia to offer, and this book. This book is not for me, after all, but everybody else.