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The Mountains

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The Mountains / Andrew Waterman

I do not talk of daytime, when one can choose;
though whether, already exhausted, to follow what shrugs
beyond the horizon, knowing it always will,
or turn back, either feels like failure,
and the brooks raising noise like something wanting answer.
But it is the nights, when the mountains choose me,
bare, humped, unscalable, that prove possession.
I have seen a face against that backcloth
eyes pouring intensity, the streets between
minutely familiar, mapped with memories
like lilac-scents, some turnings now forbidden,
and houses to be called at or no more
allowed. These things deflected my purpose,
and the air filled with the voices of girls
I had been young with calling in their children;
still hauntingly that clear brow beyond me.
The mountains are my sleep's wild hinterland,
they shift, usurp known territories. Once,
above roofs at the edge of the town a stile,
and path leading up the climbing eye; there were people
ascending, returning; some strayed to rest in the sunlight.
But down in the street they denied the stile,
and the slopes shut off, cloud spilling down ravines.
It was last night I hit the summit.
My glider had found a thermal current, and rising
rode it. . . . After the smash I looked from a ledge
upon greenness strewn with white cottages by their turfstacks
and slate-dark lakes, all intricately rimmed
with yellow strand; far out to sea
stood Rathlin, Aran, the Blaskets; and I held
the whole world's curve, revolved it slowly . . .
Then came down; the man whose slant along
the upper slopes I crossed was real enough,
on Brandon once, he'd leant, told how all weathers
took him high as his sheep, and for no peak's sake.
Whin and heather tore my clothes, I filled
a shoe with peaty water, found the road,
at last crashed bleeding through swing doors. No head
looked up. They said, "There are no mountains."