# TAKE WHAT YOU CAN CARRY

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*Under the pavement, pavement. Hoaxes, failures, porches, archaeological strata spread out on a continuous thin plane; softness and speed, echoes, spores, tropes, fonts, not identity but incident and the accumulation of air miles; unmarked solitude absorbing time, bloating to become an environment, indexical euphorias, the unraveling of laughter; a brief history of escalators; memory manifest, brindled, loosening; the crumpling of automotive glass; the pornographic, the wrapped; Helvetica's black dust: All doctrine is foreign to us.*

(Lisa Robertson, *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture*)

During my senior year of high school, I got a part time job at a backpacking store on Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley. A couple of afternoons a week after school and on Saturdays I worked the cash register and answered customer questions about gear as best I could. I learned about outdoor equipment mostly from enthusiastic research in books, propped up by grandiose fantasies of mountaineering adventures. I was also recently transplanted from northern New Mexico and I parlayed that fact into some semblance of credibility. I learned more on the job, reading catalogs about gear and my sales techniques were based on excitement about the wilderness as much as any real knowledge about the objects for sale.

The clientele were mostly university students and people living in tents and makeshift shelters in nearby

People's Park. Shoes and backpacks were the big sellers. I don't remember exactly how I got the job, but I do recall that my motivation for working there was in large part the employee discount. Towards the end of that year on the job, I bought a large, green, internal frame backpack. It was at the time, quite a sizable purchase and it felt like treasure to me. It was fancy. *Top of the line*. I had read somewhere that backpack straps often didn't fare well in airline and bus latches and so I bought an enormous duffel back along with it and figured together this would be all the luggage I would ever need for *any* journey, anywhere.

A year later, after my first year of college, I followed the advice of friend and packed everything I could fit into that pack with plans to head for Alaska and the promise of well-paid work. Based on a few casual conversations, with a bus ticket to Bellingham, WA and very little cash, I set out on what I imagined to be a great adventure. When I arrived at the bus depot in Bellingham, I shouldered my pack and walked the distance to the ferry building where I bought a one-way ticket to a small island in southeast Alaska called Petersburg. I remember arriving on Petersburg and hoisting the pack onto my back and walking a few miles to a tent city on the outskirts of town, where seasonal workers could pitch a tent on wooden platforms for a few dollars a month. I tried to find a job on a boat but instead spent most of that summer dressed in a yel-

low slicker and rain boots, cleaning guts out of salmon in a noisy factory. I used to lay down after 16-hour workdays, with my pack stashed in the vestibule of my narrow tent, close my eyes and see floating fish parts drifting around in the ambient light behind my eyelids. There were the northern lights and a fleeting encounter with a grizzly bear but mostly the long workdays and not enough sleep stitched together into a hazy blob of time. I decided to hitchhike back to California, and eventually threw out most of the clothes I took along that summer because the smell of fish still lingered after many washings. But the pack smelled ok again after repeated hand washing in the bathtub.

I lived out of that backpack again during my third year of college, on a study abroad program in Nepal. It carried everything, all of my belongings for the year, but also served as a sort of companion. It was a line to my previous life back home. The strange thing about living out of a backpack is that for long stretches of time, it's not called upon to perform the task that it was designed to do. It might act like a storage compartment or masquerade as a makeshift cabinet but most days in Nepal it sat off in the corner, as a lump. It was an object of curiosity for my host family in Kathmandu, who didn't understand why I needed such a large pack for my travels. During the second half of that year, I lived in a small Gurung village that was a full day's walk from the town of Pokhara. The walk

took me an extra day the first time that I made it, as I had stuffed my pack so full of things I thought I would need for a few months, including the books and school supplies I would need to teach in the primary school in the village. It was a grueling hike, across rough jungle peaks and through terraced valleys, up and down stone stairways built into the steep mountainsides. When I finally arrived in the village, a group of kids surrounded me. I pulled off my heavy pack and set it on a low stone wall nearby. It was dusk and starting to get cold. I was completely exhausted and a bit lightheaded from the final climb to the village. I remember turning to look at the setting sun and in the vanishing light I could see steam rising from my body. I looked over at my pack and it too was steaming.

A couple of years later, after I had saved enough money by deferring student loan payments and long hours building furniture and commercial interiors for retail stores, I stuffed the backpack again and followed a girlfriend to Argentina. For months, it sat empty in the apartment in Buenos Aires, where I taught English through freelance agencies and studied Spanish at the university. Then I packed again and headed south, hauling myself and whatever fit into that reliable pack into Patagonia, spending days hiking through Torres Del Paine national park and crossed into Chile, taking buses and ferries across the long distances between destinations we had picked out on the map. I remem-

ber camping in the national park on the Island of Chiloe, only accessible by ferry at the time. When my girlfriend took a bus back to Buenos Aires from Santiago, I continued north to the Atacama Desert and into Peru. I hiked the Inca Trail with three travelers I met on a train and on our last morning together we woke up before dawn so that we could arrive at Machu Piccu at sunrise, before the busloads of tourists showed up. I remember stashing my pack behind some rocks on a hill high above the ruins so I could roam Machu Piccu without its weight.

I was half-remembering all of this amidst the sweeping views and dense stands of fir and pine trees as I walked up a trail in the southern Sierra Nevada recently, across steep switchbacks and through meadows and boulder fields along the Pine Creek Trail. I was imagining my old green backpack as a leaky container for all of these memories, called up by a combination of pandemic time and my first real outing in months. Events flashed by in a series of atmospheric associations, as pictures and unspoken language, fractured and cinematic, made vivid by the overwhelming glare and the long shadows of mountain light.

A few years ago, my older brother Michael, who lives in Petaluma, suggested we climb all of the 14,000-foot peaks in California. It sounded absurd and overly ambitious. I agreed immediately. He's an avid moun-

taineer. I'm really not. But when I'm out in the mountains with my brother I'm somewhat more capable than usual, almost competent. On this trip, the goal was to climb Middle Palisade, one of the easier peaks on our list of fourteeners that doesn't include much technical climbing.

Initially, we debated whether or not to go on the trip at all. Was it too risky? Should we be traveling during a pandemic, especially into the backcountry? If one of us somehow was injured, wouldn't we be taking desperately needed emergency and healthcare resources away from those struggling with COVID-19? Aside from short walks and essential errands around Los Angeles, I hadn't been anywhere in months. Going into the mountains seemed like a relatively safe thing to do in the midst of a pandemic but also possibly reckless. Finally, with lingering doubts still in place, I left Los Angeles before dawn and drove north through the sprawl of Santa Clarita and past the gridded streets of Palmdale and Lancaster. I stopped for gas in Mojave, where a long strip of motels and gas stations mark an abrupt transition to the wide open spaces of desert. Finally, I was speeding across the expansive spaces of creosote bushes and Joshua trees before the Eastern Sierra suddenly jut out of the landscape with so much presence and drama.

The first hour of backpacking is always both a physical and psychic adjustment. Moments of ner-

vousness and excitement combine with finding the right tension on backpack straps and shoelace tightness. My mind is often restless, ticking off checklists in my head: Did I remember my headlamp? Should I have brought the other water bottle? Maybe I have too much food. Why is something digging into the lower left side of my back? My pack feels heavy. Too heavy.

I was thinking so much about backpacks that morning because the one I was carrying was brand new. I'd pulled the old green backpack off of a shelf in the garage a few days earlier and pushed my arms through the stiff straps, remembering that I'd promised myself I'd never carry the thing again. The padding was all but disintegrated. It looked limp and sad; all color completely faded. Was it really worth spending the money on another backpack for something I use a few days every couple of years? I needed fuel for my stove and some provisions anyway, so I ventured out. Masked up and trying to get out of the store as quickly as possible, I felt like buying camping supplies was a rehearsal for the end times. I somewhat impulsively bought a new pack from a confident salesperson in a tartan skirt with an enormous red beard. Back on the trail, I was getting used to the pack. It felt better than the old one. A lot better, though still too heavy. It occurred to me that the old backpack sitting in my garage in L.A. was something I had carried around for 30 years.

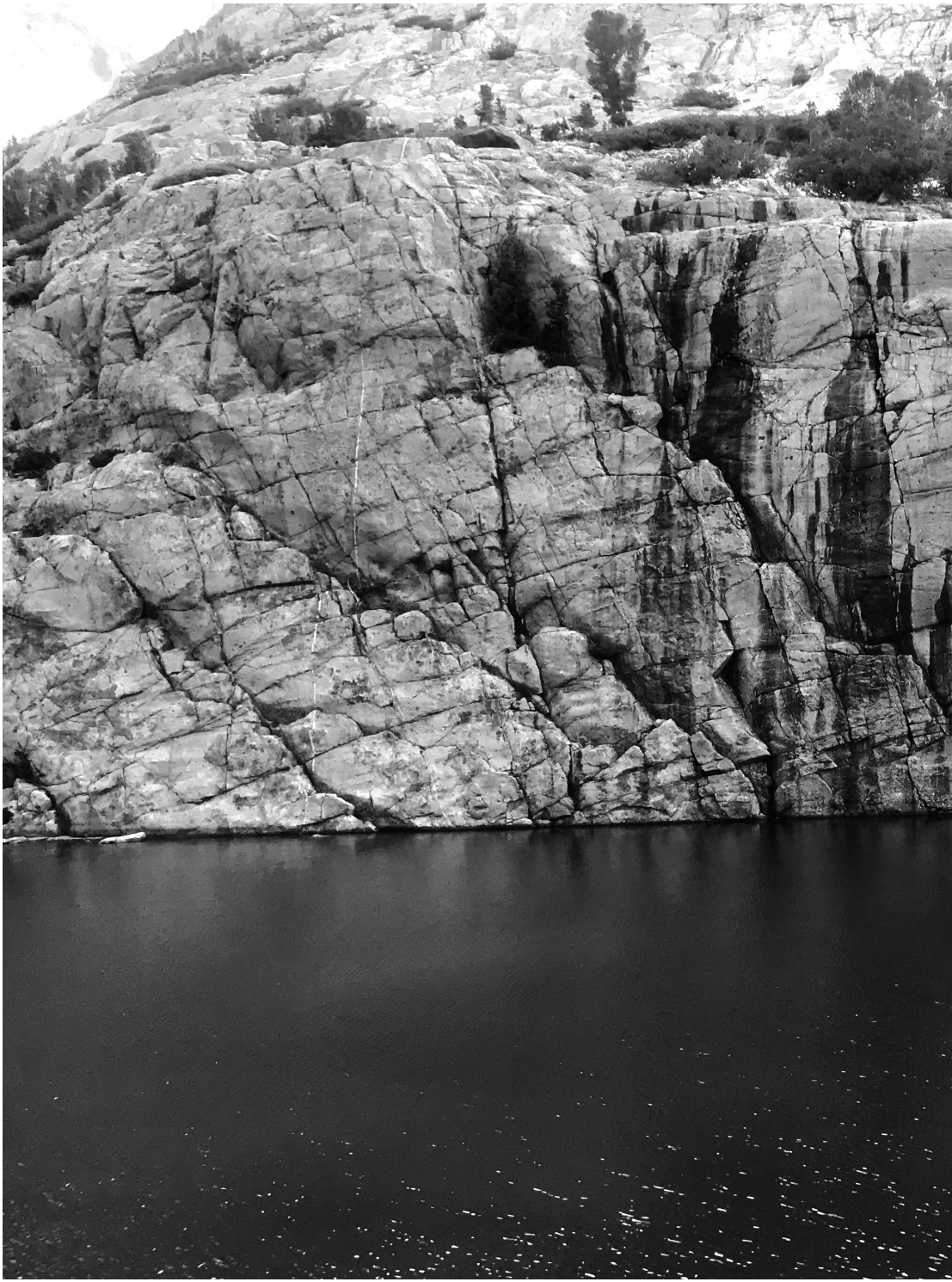
*Private life is dialectically a real lived time + a fictitious spectacular time + a fictitious spectacular space + a real lived space.*
(Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*)

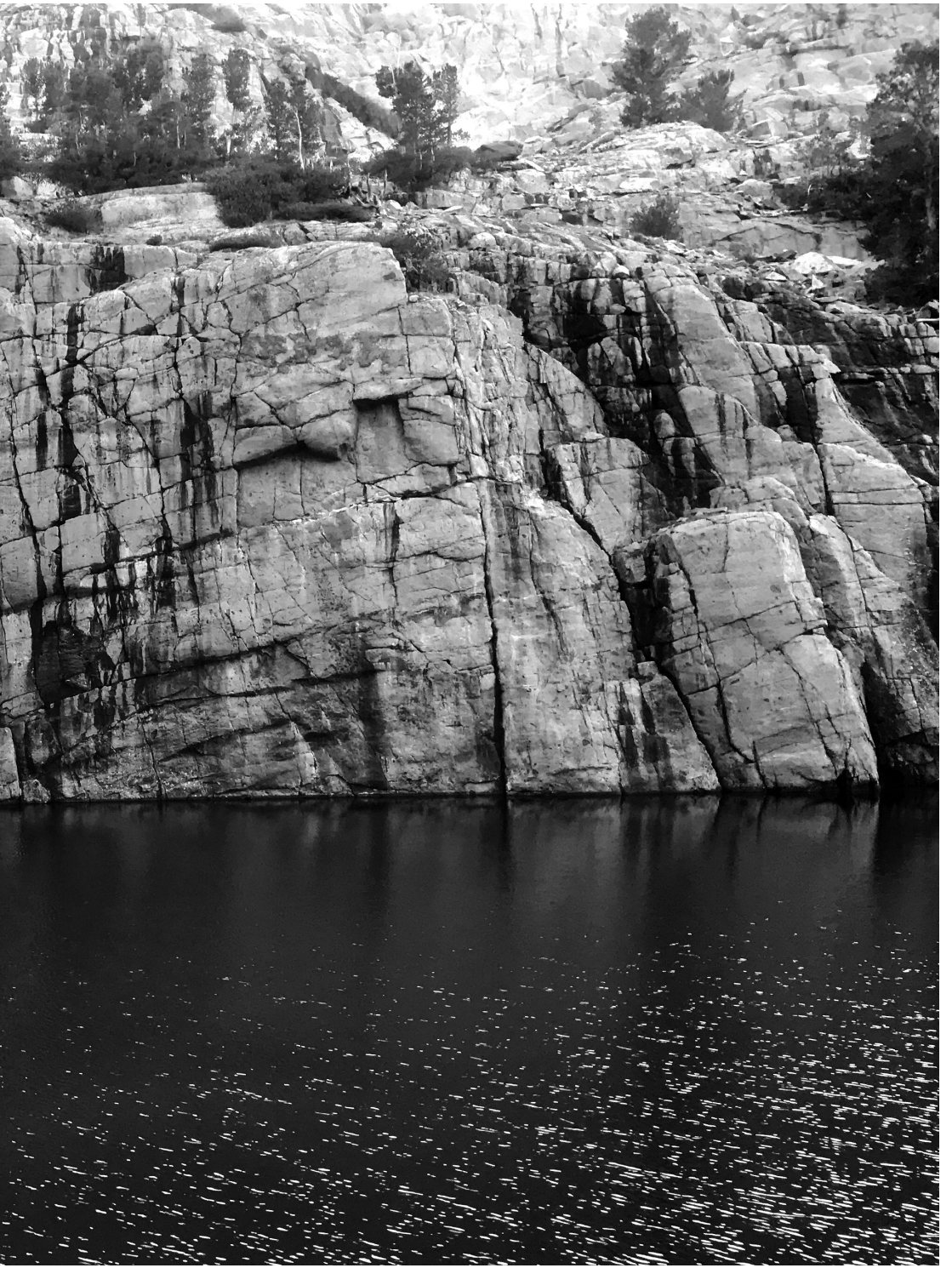
Backpacking is a unique form of walking. First, because of the weight one carries but also because of the length of time spent walking. It's a day long walk for a few or even many days in a row. And even for those who walk daily, it presents a very different temporality of movement. It's the kind of walking that allows for long meandering conversations and also long stretches of walking together with others in silence. It provokes that associative thinking that hovers across registers of language and memory. The slow and purposeful movement produces alternate rhythms. The rhythm of my footsteps mixes with the songs of my youth that suddenly appear in my ear and linger, on repeat. Conversations across time re-appear. Distance hovers. The Sierra mountains have an uneasy, reciprocal relationship with all sorts of surrounding places, real and imagined. The distance between the Sierras and Los Angeles is suddenly far and close all at once. In one moment, I'm walking in the present, another distracted by the past, but also imagining some unlikely future. The physical endurance involved in this sort of walking evokes specific memories and produces a kaleidoscopic series of impressions. Walking

is about getting from here to there but also inevitably about everything else that gets in the way.

This kind of movement-body-memory-thinking is not unique to backpacking but it is heightened by the conditions, and in this case, especially the spectacular landscape of the Eastern Sierra and my state of mind, caught between a city in modified quarantine lockdown and the rushing quiet of the wilderness. In her book on the various sounds and noise around the airport in Los Angeles, Marina Peterson quotes the Polish psychologist Joseph Segal: "The imagination is neither a 'seeing' of a mental picture with the so-called 'minds-eye' nor a conceptual thinking, but rather a kind of action, and above all, a bodily action" such that "imaginative space is essentially kinesthetic just as perceptual space is."

Putting one foot in front of the other, I started thinking about a class on walking I taught at CalArts several years ago. I liked the idea of taking walks with students and I wanted to dive into the literature and art of walking. Between the time I proposed the class and the first day it met, Trayvon Martin would be murdered while walking home, changing the frame of what it meant to stroll through suburban neighborhoods with a group of art students. We read a lot about walking alone and in collectives. We considered marches and protest walks, literary wanderings, fundraisers and religious pilgrimages. We took different





kinds of walks together - some with a strict set of protocols, others more rambling and loose. We walked and talked. We looked at the photographs of Richard Long and talked about the relationship between a walk and documentation of a walk. We re-created dada and surrealist walks and did writing exercises. The classroom became a place of practice. We discussed Baudelaire, the flaneur and Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project, itself a kind of literary analog of a meander. We contemplated artists who walk as part of their practice including Vito Acconci, Francis Alÿs, Hamish Fulton, Simon Forti, Tehching Hsieh, Janet Cardiff, Kianga Ford, Christina Kubisch, Helen Mirra, and Stanley Brouwn. It was clear to everyone in class that walking was deeply connected to art making. A student wondered aloud whether a walk itself could be understood as an art piece. Should it be framed as such? Should we understand it in relation to performance and conceptual art?

In *Pilgrimage to the Wedge* (1987), Kim Abeles walked from her studio in downtown Los Angeles to the San Gabriel mountains. On unusually clear days, the mountains were occasionally visible from her studio window. She wanted to make a photograph of a clear view of the mountains and so after making hundreds of photographs of the mountain obscured by smog, one day set out without a map or a plan, making her way towards

the mountain and ignoring the logic of urban and suburban planning. She wondered how close to the mountain she would need to be to get a clear photograph of it. She crossed fields and climbed over walls, was chased by stray dogs and yelled at by strangers. It was poetic activity, and it took her all the way to the base of the mountain. The work crystallizes many of the questions which haunts the relationship between walking and art practice: the dynamic tension between individual activity and collective experience, the importance of 'place' within cultural production, particularly in terms of day-to-day experience, and creative practice as something that has an inevitable but uneasy relationship to commodity exchange — how could this be turned into an object? How could it be seen? Abeles' work, it seemed to me, was political in all sorts of ways.

In my thinking about walking and art, Guy Debord's notion of psychogeography always hovers in the background, sometimes closer to the foreground. Like so many others who grew up in the 70's and 80's, I was first politicized through music and I probably first encountered a reference to the Situationists as a teenager reading Greil Marcus' writing about popular music. A narrative took shape in my young mind that followed a bumpy, non-linear path between British punk in dialogue with Caribbean music, strains of the American pop songs on the radio and my growing sense of frustration with the way school – and

most everything else – seemed to be organized. It must have been about the same time I bought the green backpack that I learned about the Situationists. Psychogeography became a way to think about how different people move through place in time.

Debord theorized the *dérive*, or drift, as an urban walk for an indeterminate length of time that should be, ideally, undertaken in groups. The emphasis on ambiance and chance, respectively, allows for an understanding of urban space that exceeds the logic of urban planning. Psychogeographic maps can help undo expected pathways through a city: "One measures the distances that actually separate two regions of a city, distances that may have little relation with the physical distance between them." One of the peculiar dynamics attending the entrance of psychogeography into the discourse of art is that Debord's ruthless and unapologetically anti-capitalist critique of urban space is often domesticated in the service of art *as such*. And since psychogeography has to do with more than just the physical geography of the location, the experience of an embodied, collective process-based drift was never simply about producing an *experience*. Debord was increasingly suspicious of the place of culture within late capitalism and was wary of the ways that an activity meant to cut against the grain of capitalist logic might be recuperated and repackaged in consumer-friendly forms.

On the trail, I found myself wondering about our destination and what was happening along the way. Why was I parsing Debord's idea of the *spectacle* while struggling along the trail in the Sierras? Were we actually going to make it to the top of Middle Palisade? Or was the point of setting an ambitious goal simply to get us out into the wilderness and enjoy whatever progress we made along the way? Was this all some sort of metaphor? As my knees began to ache and my head pounded with the elevation gain, I began to bargain with myself: A snack at the next rest. More water soon. My thinking grew muddy. For stretches of the hike, I wanted nothing more than to not be walking with a pack on my back. Breath. Landscape. Breath. "And to think, some people do this for fun," my brother and I say over and over.

From an early age, I had an ambivalent and skeptical relationship to being Jewish. Growing up in Taos and Santa Fe, where the Jewish community is tiny, I didn't "feel" particularly Jewish. It was through learning family stories that I began to understand how this identity has shaped my life: My grandfather bribed guards at the Czech border as the Nazis rolled toward Prague and escaped to China. My father was born in Shanghai and his father only revealed his Jewish identity to my father when he was in his 30's. The trauma of those early years, his mother's mental illness – which must

also have had something to do with the war years – and this late realization of his own identity are things that fundamentally structured my father's life and in turn have had an enormous impact on me. Many of my mother's extended family were killed in the holocaust. This troubled forgetting and remembering across generations sometimes feels like it's lodged in objects: A photograph, a teapot, a backpack.

When my brother decided he wanted to go to Hebrew school my mom was surprised. She wasn't observant, but she enrolled both of us in Hebrew school because my brother requested it. As a single mom raising two boys, she probably also thought it might help my brother and me feel a sense of community. My closest friends at the time were in Hebrew school and we had fun with it. I remember being kicked out of class for being obnoxious more often than not. But when it came time to decide whether I wanted a Bar Mitzvah, I knew that I wanted to do it. It somehow felt important. The ritual seemed appealing to me, I think. It was both a struggle and a deeply affirming experience. Relatives came from the east coast, all of my friends watched me read from the Torah and the Rabbi made a bunch of bad jokes and awkward comments. We had a party at our house afterwards and a Klezmer band from Albuquerque rocked our living room floor in a way I had never felt it move before. And then, that Monday morning

when I went out to the car to go to school, written into the dust on the window of my mother's car, were the words: *Fucking Jew*.

My first impulse was to wipe away the words, which I easily did with my sleeve. Only later did I talk to my mom about it, and she went around to the neighbors to talk to them. I've thought a lot about that experience over the years and the sense of shame I felt in being marked in this way. I always think back on my impulse to quickly wipe it away, as though my sleeve might erase the meaning those marks carried. Charlottesville, "Unite the Right", chants of "Jews will not replace us", the massacre at Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburg — they'd all brought this moment back.

I was thinking about all of this in fits and flashes as we climbed up the steep ascent to Brainerd lake. The impossibly blue water of the lake appeared like an illusion. We picked our way through the thicket along the edge looking for a campsite. They were all occupied, so we decided to continue on to Finger Lake. I remembered a conversation with my mom when we decided that an intense sense of longing and an inclination to wander were both my personal and cultural inheritance. A family of wanderers... Somehow this struck us both as very funny. There are all sorts of strategies for addressing the trauma that cuts across generations. Humor is one such strategy. Walking away is another.

I left my large pack in the tent at basecamp as we set out at dawn for the summit. From Finger Lake the trail more or less disappears, and we followed the geography of the landscape, across moraine and large slabs of granite, until we reached the snow and ice of the glacier. I carried a small day pack with crampons, extra layers, water and food, feeling liberated without the extra weight of the backpack. The elevation rises steeply above the lake and once we were climbing above 12,000 feet, breath becomes the priority. The pace slows. The sequence of footsteps and breath fall into line. The ascent was intensely focused. Once we transitioned from walking to climbing, the memories and associations pause. The careful, methodical movement of hand and foot holds take priority.

At the summit of Middle Palisade, tucked out of the wind, is a small metal container that holds a notebook where people sign in and mark their ascents. There are dates and signatures and stories, a strange fractured archive of people climbing the peak. Notes memorialize those who have died, climbers record how many years sober, and doodles and mysterious references abound. It's a public archive, cared for by those who contribute to it. Next to this container, I noticed a small circular plaque installed by the Sierra Club in 1936, a small but stark reminder of settler colonialism and white supremacy. In the summer of 2020, in the aftermath of the murder

of George Floyd, the Sierra Club, like so many institutions, was confronted with its own troubled legacy. One of the oldest organizations devoted to conservation in the U.S., many of its founders are on record expressing profoundly racist beliefs, and the group had deep ties to the eugenics movement in the U.S.. Much of the land the Sierra Club has fought to preserve over the years is also land forcibly stolen from indigenous tribes.

Though the views were partially obscured by the distant smoke of forest fires, from the summit of Middle Palisade I could see for miles in every direction. I looked out east across the Owens Valley, where the Bishop Paiute tribe, descended from Nu-Mu people, have lived for thousands of years. In 1912, after the violent appropriation of the valley by settlers, the US government reserved almost 70,000 acres for the tribes in the area. But in 1932, President Hoover placed the acreage in watershed protection status for the city of Los Angeles, and the following year the city engineered a swap that left the tribe with only 875 acres of land. The distance between the Sierras and Los Angeles is, once again, far and close all at once. It's not only in the imaginative space of hikers' fantasies that the vast mountain views and the grids of urban space intermingle. The wilderness is anything but untroubled by the extractive processes of capital and the state.

*Surveys of routes miss what was: the act itself of passing by. The operation of walking, wandering, or "window shopping," that is the activity of passers-by, is transformed into points that draw a totalizing and reversible line on the map. They allow us to grasp only a relic set in the nowhen of a surface of projection. Itself visible, it has the effect of making invisible the operation that made it possible. These fixations constitute procedures for forgetting. The trace left behind is substituted for the practice. It exhibits the (voracious) property that the geographical system has of being able to transform action into legibility, but in doing so it causes a way of being in the world to be forgotten.*

(Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*)

Descending from a climb is an unraveling, a slow race against the fading afternoon light. The effort of return is less anticipatory, less singular in focus. Fatigue produces a form of meandering but one that seeks the fewest steps. Associations spread out into the farthest reaches of memory, memories that don't even belong to me. We talk to the birds, insects and marmots that make fleeting appearances. I mumble to myself in an unknown language. The stumbling descent from the starkness of granite to the lush moisture of grasses and wildflowers unspools towards one version of rest or another. A brief respite on the way down: My brother describes a crane fail video on YouTube in exacting detail as we soak our feet in ice-cold lake water.

The drive back to Los Angeles is a fit of fidgeting to stay awake, plus singing. It's dark when Mia Doi Todd's tune about her mother and grandmother being ordered out of their Los Angeles home to the internment camp at Manzanaar comes on the radio. "Take What You Can Carry" she sings over and over in her beautiful and haunting voice. I passed the turn-off to Manzanaar Historic site a few hours ago, where more than 120,000 Japanese Americans were held in internment camps during WWll. The ephemeral sounds of the music – a performance of remembering – and the reified monument exist in an uneasy tension. The road between Los Angeles and the Sierra Nevada seems littered with real and imagined objects, saturated with unreliable memories, a landscape of incalculable loss and dispossession. Seemingly absolutely still and yet set in motion by the spectacle of accumulation.

At home, I empty out the new backpack. It's a mutant form, designed with cybernetic precision. It's light and aerodynamic. I turn it over in my hands, it's at once strange and already familiar. In the garage, I set it down on a shelf beside beach chairs and picture books our daughter refuses to throw away. Next to it lurks that other hulking green object, still nearly alive.