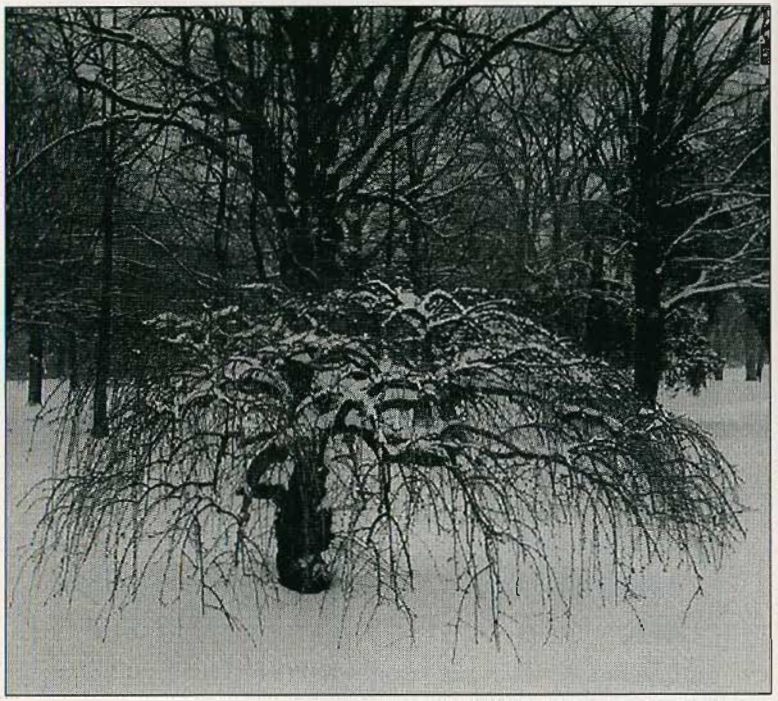


photograph by
Michelle Lasher
Schenectedy, NY

GREAT HASTE, NO BLESSING

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I HATE HEIGHTS, hiking, and Hemingway. Still I went to Kilimanjaro. Was it a midlife crisis that tipped me towards it or just the chance to experience something different with my daughter, brother, and sister-in-law? Would I be part of the one-third who couldn't make it to the peak? I hadn't a clue as I sat in the smoke-filled bar at Johannesburg airport only one week ago.

It was eleven thirty in the morning and they were ordering doubles. There were six of us, the four family and two of Coll's friends. I was the oldest at fifty-two; my daughter, Kate, the youngest, was an adventurous twenty-four. She told us later she thought we were embarking upon a botanical walk. My brother-in-law might have concurred as he was a nature lover and had his bird book handy. Coll had a heart attack exactly four years ago but he was roaring to go. Simon, the serious, was our English general and guide, having climbed Kilimanjaro once before by a different route. He was diligently writing his diary for his daughter while the rest of us drank. Brian had already run the Two Oceans Marathon this year and the Comrades, a fifty-mile race. How would we keep up with him? My Aus-

sie sister-in-arms, Katrina, loves a party. Her conversation would be a welcome distraction from our aches.

Through the blurred air of the airport bar, cell phones whined to the hazy mugs of fellow travelers. Katrina was saying the gate to their house was down; was their daughter inside? More buttons pushed and someone was on their way to fix it. Let's have another drink. A rush of panic and excitement swished under the closing door. Trapped and down the trap, I swallowed my cuba libre. I wrapped my uncle's scarf carelessly around my neck and waited. Like uncle's Mexican homeland, Africa stretches you across space, indifferent to the vertical tug of time. As the Swahili saying goes, great haste has no blessing.

We flew north, dozing with the turbulence and booze. We landed at Dar es Salaam to buy our entry visas and the necessary stamp in our passports. Brian, the Goatman, forgot to check if his passport had been stamped. It wasn't and the same Tanzanian who took his visa money when he entered the country insisted he pay again upon leaving. But that was later. Flying from Dar to Kilimanjaro in the African night, we saw a half-moon rising and an occasional flare below, light or fire.

We landed. Outside the air felt good, sultry—Africa. We were met by the Keyes Hotel representative who hoisted our duffel bags to the roof of our bus, all tied together front-heavy. It was just a short bumpy ride now to Moshi, a small town near the base of Kilimanjaro. The Keyes Hotel beckoned, its open door framed by straggling plants, drooping leaves of strelitzias, birds of paradise. A slow ceiling fan circled our reception as we passed our

passport numbers over glassed postcards of Kilimanjaro. Again an echo of a Mexican night but this fan was not groaning to be heard above the twang of mariachis. Unhurried, quiet and impenetrable new faces stood their ground, not without a smile of welcome. We acknowledged and followed up the stairs.

This was no seaside paradise. There was a business about this and after our eleven p.m. dinner, we were instructed for the morrow: leave all valuables in the Keyes Hotel safe; what to take in our daypack—raingear, water, room for a packed lunch; wear shorts.

Tomorrow was the rainforest. Thomas was our guide.

We slept fitfully under our mosquito nets with the help of South African wine. Breakfasting at seven as instructed, a full English one I might add, with fried sausage, fried tomato, fried eggs, fried bacon and fried bread, we only left the hotel by twelve. Great haste has no blessing. We sat around that Sunday morning, fiddling with our cameras and clothes, impatient to begin our adventure, up and down like the black and white boubou hopping in the garden.

The morning clouds parted and the new yet ancient face of the highest freestanding mountain in the world appeared. With great excitement we deserted the back veranda of the hotel for the road, which promised a better view. There it was: the brilliant whiteness of Kili's snow sparkled over its rivulets of black volcanic ash, like an old white head wrinkled down with experience. Our face-to-face meeting was yet to come.

We shot some photos, excited by this glimpse of what lay ahead. Everyone seemed to be heading the way of the

mountain, nuns in white, the young in uniform, porters with bags ahead, no one in a hurry. At last, we also took to the road, past green tobacco fields and crumbling pink houses, scavenging dogs sniffing the air below fly-ridden meat hanging in glassless windows. Smiling children lined the road along with people begging for money everywhere.

There are several gates to Kili. Ours was Machame. It was bustling with hawkers showing their wares—gaiters, jackets, scarves, mixed remains from previous hikes. All climbers must be registered and so we waited and watched the curiosity of fellow climbers—a range of nationalities, relations evident: a mother and son, a pair of Scottish lovers, others just friends; a German party, fit and eager in short shorts; Americans, smart with their new camelback packs; South Africans, cool in their K-way gear. We looked to the mountain regularly, blowing smoke or laughter until our guide, Thomas, appeared ready. He carried an umbrella like a walking stick. We stood at attention with our climbing poles, testing the earth like skiers. When Thomas beckoned, we followed soberly, "polé, polé*," he repeated. We forced ourselves to tread slowly.

As we walked behind Thomas and his umbrella up the rainforest, I remembered my first visit to Africa. While driving from the Drakensburg Mountains, a single black man walked down the road lined with yellow and white cosmos. He carried a briefcase and an umbrella. I wondered where he could be going with a black briefcase and

*Swahili: slowly, slowly

black umbrella under that open African sun with no town in sight. His effects, it was explained to me, were tokens of status, relics of the Empire. I wanted to ask Thomas about this but thought it might be impolite. Already the altitude was pressing us into the rising path, thinning conversation.

In my training I had idled many of the hours memorizing parts of poems. These began to filter through my mind as I tried to take in the magnitude around me. Yeats, Dante, Stevens stuttered through the giant forest stretching either side. "And sun and rain a plural like two lovers that walk away as one in the greenest body." The call of the hornbill stilled them. Shades of impatiens, blues and reds, lifted lazily toward light through screens of giant ferns. Monkeys twittered as our poles found rhythm. The botanical beauties, although bigger than life, lulled our still confident yet studied stride. Kilimanjaro was within our reach.

The open flap of our pup tents was a welcome sight that first night. I never would have dreamed that a yellow bit of framed canvas could be so alluring. Between that and the hard earth I took counsel. How was I going to relieve myself with no forest for hiding? The need watered down any delicacy. It was the favor of a small bush that time, the beginning of less and less cover. Food, water purification and next-day clothing preparation took up the last of the sun. We gobbled up bread, rice, and potatoes greedily, not to mention the local peanut butter and massive mugs of hot chocolate. The aches and excitements of each of us finished off our evening. We had made it through the rain forest without our gaiters, mudless, a lucky break. The cold ground softened with sleep.

A speechless sun woke us. We could glimpse between its clouds the great mountain far before us. To my surprise, Thomas appeared with a stethoscope, checking our lungs and then pulse. He kept a record. My lungs were gurgling. The somber look on his face as he consulted another nearly sent me fainting: the beginnings of pulmonary edema, altitude sickness? I couldn't go down after only one day. I was instructed to drink more water as I walked and watched for clouds in my wee. I wasn't confused, was I? Mental clarity was never my forté but I knew my lines. It would be okay. I drank three liters of water in the first few hours like they were my last draught. I kept the poetry to myself.

The landscape opened up to us, dots of senecios and giant lobelia whose spikes shot up flowerless. The early spring warmed the workings of their future blue flowers. Higher and closer the great silvery senecio rosettes, big as tabletops, open-armed to the sun and mist before closing each night to that deflowering frost. The beguiling face of Kilimanjaro appeared and disappeared throughout the day, beckoning. Our climb this day was a long one up to Shira plateau, twelve thousand, six-hundred feet, where we would camp for two nights and acclimatize. We had made it above the clouds. Off in the distance was Mount Meru, opposite its greater mountain cousin, but not connected.

Shira Camp was a bustling way station, a crossing point for several of the different routes up Kilimanjaro. It reminded me of people on a pilgrimage stopping at an inn on their journey. We spotted our yellow tents as we descended to the plateau. They looked like golden ladybugs with wings folded, composed and ready to fly. With

tent-flaps closed, they faced the cliff edge, in formation, as if awaiting flight orders. Arriving, we got in and gave them body, then emerged for the sunset. Behind us was antlike activity—porters heaving, cooks slopping, guides sniffing the air and following the clouds, cell phones pulling people to the edges for reception—last messages, none for us.

The next day was acclimatization, a fair walk and a rest. We ascended slowly through the valley with little vegetation left—tiny clumps of some rock flowers peeking out from the occasional stone. The landscape was exhilarating in its barrenness. It felt the perfect fit to my aging, dusty body. There was no shadow under its gray rocks. A ragged stretch of peaks reminiscent of the Drakensburg in Natal rose to our left as we were drawn by the force of Kilimanjaro to our right. We walked and our lungs grew. Returning to camp, we arrived just in time to shelter in our casques from a sudden hailstorm. That night icicles, a foot long and wide, formed in the creases of our golden helmets.

We hadn't known then the predicament of a fellow soldier, pilgrim, as we huddled in our casques against the pounding hail. A French doctor was improvising an oxygen tent for one who had stayed at Shira while his group acclimatized. Too late—drowned in his own fluid, sent down for a casket under darkness. No stars to guide, only thick clouds muffling the dead thud of that descent. The next night another death in the night, a woman confused, stepped off the cliff. Out to relieve herself?

Pre-summit day, we set out for Lava Tower and Arrow Glacier Camp. It was a long, slow march with the sun

smelting the lava rocks red. Hours later we stopped for a well-deserved break at Lava Tower, a pike of black rock sticking up out of loose scree. We saw vultures circling and the odd little mouse scampering under rocks. Ravens with white throats were our last companions. At the base of Lava Tower, the two mothers, Katrina and I rested while the rest climbed for a lark. Thomas made us shade with his umbrella. Only the beating wings of an eagle broke our siesta. We watched it alight on a familiar ledge of the huge lava rock, most probably its home. Shouts from above announced the identity of those dark specks against the sky: Goatman, Simon the Donkey, Coll the Lion-hearted and Kate the Cat who always walks by herself. And then they were back and we strained on for Arrow Glacier Camp, our last post.

Arrow Glacier Camp, sixteen thousand feet, was on the final flattish slope before the foreboding vertical cliffs in front of us. We would climb the Western Breach to Uhuru Peak. Looking back and down was spectacular, empowering. A slight trek and the crashed remains of a small plane dug into the snow. A half-turn back and we were dwarfed against that giant wall of snow and ice. With the sunset and the vast night sky, cool and aloof, we were warmed with English breakfast tea. We dined early with the necessary night preparations ahead for our summit. The sky was drunk with stars, but unenticed, we sought our sober tents for a brief sleep before the eleven thirty p.m. waking. We cocooned briefly in our downy layers of summit gear, but the excitement and fear prickled. Could anyone rest under cover of Kilimanjaro's icy brow?

At twelve thirty a.m. we were moving in single file, head torches trying to mimic the starlit dome, white umbrellas in the black snow. We had no idea what this face of Kilimanjaro was like. It felt cold and hard. We walked with little breath, no flat breaks in the final ascent. The moon had not yet arisen, so only the boots of the one in front led us. We plodded on, unaware of the precariousness of our position in that ambiguous black protection of darkness. The adrenalin moved us up. One nightmarish moment in that awful, awesome Western Breach, we had to cross a narrow path, snowed and iced with endless drops on either side. I froze with vertigo. The rest braved it upright. With their encouragement and direction, I crawled. The handle of Thomas' extended umbrella was my goal. That was the beginning of the fear, not courage, that pulled me forward.

In the entire summit climb, only two thoughts broke the utter concentration of my fear. One followed the desperate other when my hand closed on that umbrella handle: the thought that Thomas' umbrella possessed the James Bond gadgets to deliver us, or that Mary Poppins might appear with her magical umbrella to whisk us away. Then Katrina's drinking water froze, and she collapsed. Kate's fingers burned with cold and she froze. They both got up and we all trooped on without science or magic.

We were now rock climbing, ropeless, connected only by the glow from our headlights which danced on the heels of the boots in front of us. A misplaced foot or a loose rock could send you straight down to death. The call went back—loose rock, narrow ledge. The rocks were so upright we had to pull, heft ourselves up and over, breathing

relief only to repeat the same again. A sensation of imminent arrival recurred—that over this rock our headlamp would reveal an open place of light and safety, a spot of everyday life: a floodlit court, stadium, parking lot. It was the promise of "being." It never came. As I took Thomas' offered hand, he too faltered periodically, unsure of the next direction to lead. Yet we stepped on, wandering in that dark rock-bed, somehow upwards—a vertical drag of the body for breath.

I don't remember when light ever came. That silent sun must have made a dumb show of its own rise in the last hour of our breathless crawl to morning. We finally crested the unreachable crater rim. The magnificence of the glacier greeting us, awash in the dawn's pastel light, overwhelmed our petty exhaustion. The glacier's cool elegance shook free the last fetters of fear. It was, we were, frozen glory. No pestering thought of Uhuru still to peak. We were atop the world, sick with cold, sore with emotion. We rested, gloating with a sip of cognac among wind-free lava rocks.

In no time we had to move on to the peak—another half hour of crisscrossing our way up on our now ancient legs and hardly gasps left for oxygen in the thinnest of air. Wrapped so for the below-freezing temperatures, I grew claustrophobic for more air. I collapsed, tearing off neckwraps as if the icy air might give me a needed tracheotomy. Encouraged by the rest, I rejoined the upper thrust, a few steps and then rest, push and stop, more slowly than imaginable. Great haste has no blessing. Unable to even look up, in time: eight twenty-three a.m.—Uhuru, nine-

teen thousand, three-hundred forty feet. High and clueless, what a blessing!

Our descent was a different route, the way we might have gone without the terror. The coming-down was excruciating relief. The euphoria of the peak thinned with our diluting exhaustion. And then it began to snow. We slid down the whitening scree, that volcanic detritus on our jarring knees which could barely hold us upright. Everyone fell but it almost felt good. We were in the right direction.

We stopped for a brief rest. Thomas opened his umbrella to shelter the old lady. He offered a warm drink. I still hate heights, hiking, and Hemingway but I love sitting low, sipping tea under an English umbrella in the African snow. Great haste has no blessing.

