

## Life Is Like a Mountain Railway

Heaving backpacks on the luggage rack,  
I plopped into the empty seat behind  
the gurgling baby, whose coos would change to  
screams  
when the locomotive revved its electric motor  
and lurched our railway carriage up the Alp.  
But, half dead from ten miles of mountain hiking,  
and headachy from trying to translate foreign  
headlines,  
waving from the hands of French and Germans,  
announcing the Russian coup and death of hope  
for liberal reform in Eastern Europe,  
I'd hear just the whining dynamo  
until the rumbling wheels rocked me unconscious  
and I dreamed again of the flat Midwestern home  
I'd flown across the Atlantic to escape,  
which haunted my sleep like a persistent ghost.  
The same delay between my mind and body,  
months after I got discharged from the army,  
made me return to barracks in my dreams,  
where I was issued orders to Vietnam.  
I pulled guard duty every night and woke  
in a sweating panic with my fingers cramped  
around the butt of the M-16 I'd cradled  
against my aching shoulder in the dark,  
until I took to staying up chain-smoking  
with all night talk-show radio till dawn.

Now, I propped my head against the window  
and dropped my eyes from Mont Blanc's glaciated  
peak.

The conductor signaled as a couple dashed  
 across the platform and hopped the moving steps.  
 Brushing past my knee out in the aisle,  
 they fell into the backwards-facing seat  
 behind me for privacy, I guessed — to make out,  
 as honeymooning Europeans do,  
 between unsatiating feats of sex.  
 But, as I closed my eyes, instead of murmurs,  
 hard edged phrases issued from their lips.  
 She asked for money. He claimed she'd spent too  
 much.

She suggested they split up. He hissed  
 something lost inside the whistle's screech  
 as we plunged into a tunnel. Not sleepy now,  
 I pricked my ears like a soldier on night watch,  
 straining to filter out Italian babble  
 and baby howls from deadly hushed exchanges:  
 "I'll need at least five hundred pounds next week."  
 "I can't spare that much." Half overhearing,  
 half creating their whispered conversation,  
 I eavesdropped on their dialogue until  
 the train lurched to a stop and they got off.  
 I twisted my neck to take in her smooth beauty,  
 his middle aged lined face so like my own  
 that when he whispered something that made her grin  
 and take his arm and kiss him lightly on the cheek  
 as they mounted the village street, I knew how much  
 he'd offered to keep her for another week.  
 And then some noisy Americans got on,  
 with COUP DEFEATED waving from their *Tribunes*,  
 and we resumed our progress up the mountain  
 with lovers reconciled and the world safe  
 enough for me to doze off to my nightmares.