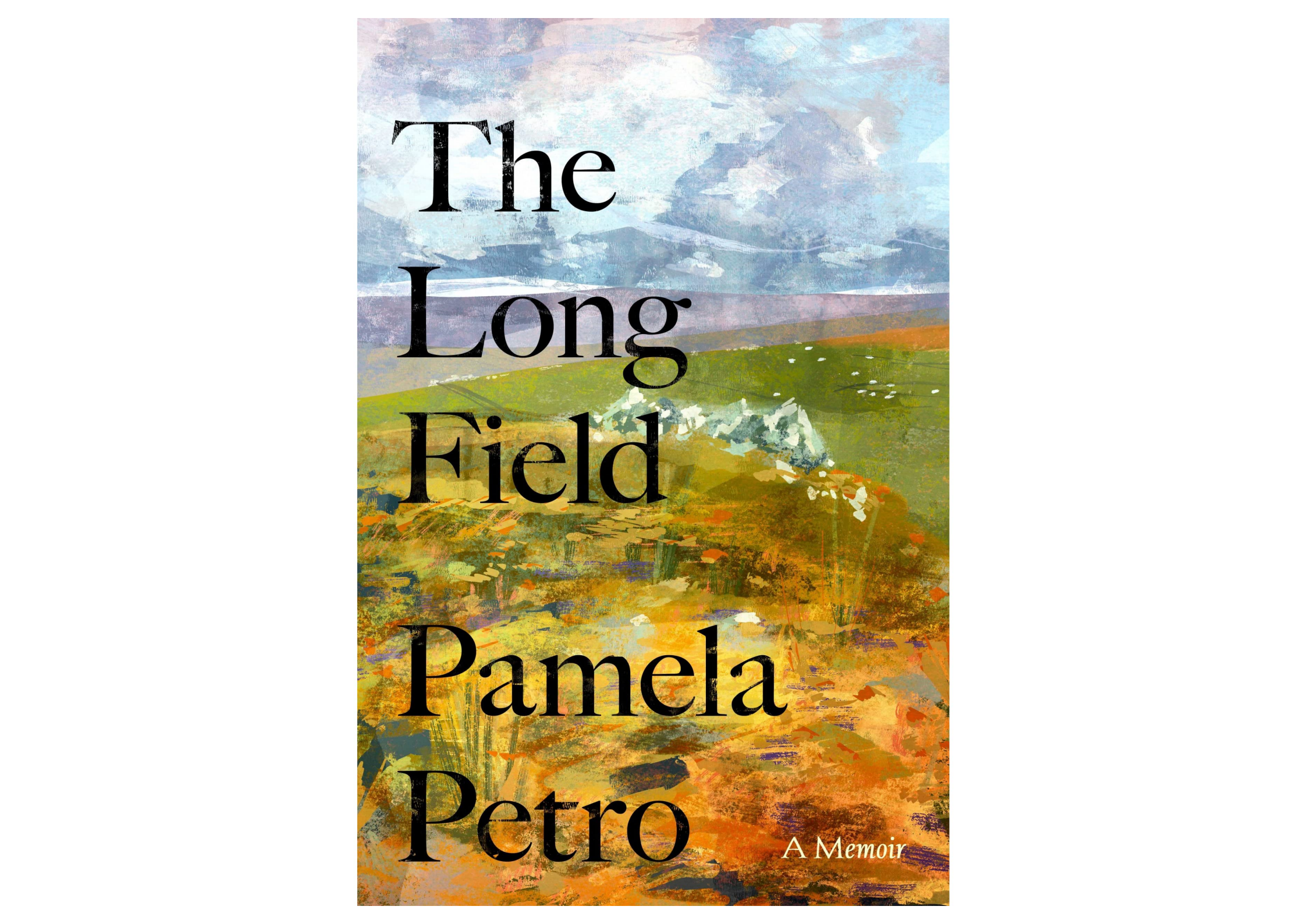


An impressionistic landscape painting featuring a vast, open field with patches of green, yellow, and orange, suggesting autumn or a dry season. In the background, there are rolling hills and a sky filled with soft, textured clouds in shades of blue, white, and purple. The overall style is painterly and atmospheric.

The Long Field Pamela Petro

A Memoir

– here's what Borrow says – "bears marks of blood with which it was sprinkled when the monks were massacred by the heathen Saxons." Promise me you'll beware of heathen Saxons, OK?'

I agree, unaware I would meet Andy later that same week. He came from Hartlepool, on the North Sea. I'm sure he had Viking blood, if not Saxon.

Wild Wales will never be returned to Vi – not my real aunt, but a close family friend. It will sit on my parents' bedroom bookshelf until I clean out their house in 2013, a year after my father dies. I will not touch it, not once, in the intervening three decades.

Relentless curtains of rain, falling since breakfast, have risen now, revealing a stupendously sunny morning. Every blade of grass, every sheep, every quartz-flecked rock gleams as if scrubbed by hand. The blues of distance pulse with ultramarine light and cloud shadows appear sharp enough to cut you. I profess happiness to Annie and Caroline – 'Now the weather won't keep us off the mountain!' I say brightly – but secretly I'm disappointed. Now I have to do this thing.

My heart lifts when we find that the Pen y Pass car park near Llanberis is full. It sinks when we discover spaces in the Nant Peris lot down the road. A shuttle runs between them. We squeeze aboard next to a standard poodle. Are all these people, I wonder, really going up the mountain today? Is the poodle going too?

'We're going to have an *adventure!*' exclaims Annie, well known for outbursts of boundless enthusiasm. I wince a little.

Annie and Caroline have been a couple for 30 years, just as long as Marguerite and me, but I've known Annie even longer. We met in Lampeter when she moved into the room next to mine in the rugby dorm, after one of the lads left. While I liked the rugby team, female solidarity was a relief.

Like me, Annie was dating men back then; unlike me, she had teased her bright blond hair into standing up straight and was partial to glittering, Egyptian-style make-up.

Just before the train wreck I'd sent her a letter – hand-written and posted in those days – to tell her I was gay. I hadn't heard back, and assumed she no longer wanted to be friends. It turns out that Annie had lost a friend for that very same reason, a roommate who'd asked her to move out of their shared flat. On moving day she'd made it halfway down the block when she realised she'd left something behind, and returned to get it. While she was there, the postman arrived with my letter.

'*ME TOO!!*' she wrote back with characteristic enthusiasm, just as soon as she'd settled into her new place in London. I'd read her letter in my hospital bed and had laughed aloud. I remember that it hurt to laugh.

Annie and I and our partners have been close friends ever since. There's just one big difference between us: Annie and Caroline are ferociously fit. Their FitBits record over 10,000 steps *before breakfast*, as they repeatedly mount and descend the towering hill above their smallholding, feeding their sheep, donkeys, and llamas in the upper fields. Even their gear puts me in my place. They have high tech hiking sticks and rain jackets *for their backpacks*; their Ordnance Survey maps reside in a battered, clear plastic holder that Caroline wears around her neck. They are serious hikers.

I've been training and I'm not in bad shape, but I'm no hiker. I merely go on occasional hikes. Like Iain Sinclair, who admits in *The Black Apples of Gower* to 'failing to identify Iron Age forts' – he can't tell them apart from big chunks of scree any more than I can – I'm not accustomed to the starker terrains of Wales.

'Landscape is a harsh interrogation of trespassers,' Sinclair reminds us both, and I am a trespasser here. Jim Perrin knows these hills in all seasons, in daylight or darkness; he is

intimate with their moods, their relationship to the horizon, the quality of footfall on one mountain versus another. I'm far more accustomed to Jim Perrin's least favourite hills, the rounded, oblique planes of the Brecon Beacons. This mountain has as much right to deny me entry as the immigration agent at Heathrow Terminal Three.

'To the Welsh, besides being the hill of the Awen or Muse, [Snowdon] has always been the hill of hills, the loftiest of all mountains, the one whose snow is the coldest, to climb to whose peak is the most difficult of all feats, and the one whose fall will be the most astounding catastrophe of the last day.'

Borrow *had* to climb Snowdon. It was just as Welsh as the language – it might as well have been another Welsh dialect for him to master. It was an essential way of knowing Wales. Not just of saying, 'I've been here', like you do when you build a small cairn of stones, but 'I belong here'.

He sets out in high spirits, singing in Welsh 'at the stretch of his voice', arm in arm with Henrietta, his stepdaughter. His wife stays behind at the inn. Probably at her insistence, Borrow hires a local guide to lead them up the mountain.

'Brace up your nerves and sinews for the attempt,' he thunders to Henrietta. And they climb.

They are not alone. As they ascend above Llanberis Pass, a steady chain of climbers switchbacks far above and below them. The path is good and sure underfoot. They keep climbing until they reach a knoll above a lake, secreted 'dark and deep' below. Borrow is out of breath and they stop to rest. The temperature begins to drop.

Now the path ahead – or rather above, high above their heads – is winding and steep. Borrow frets about Henrietta, offers her a hand, but the 'gallant girl', as he calls her, can do it on her own. She perseveres and so does he, and the next thing you know – at least in print – they've done it. They're

atop Snowdon, skirts and scarves whipping in a fearful wind. Borrow is elated, spirits higher than Snowdon's 3,560 feet.

'Below on all sides are frightful precipices except on the side of the west. Towards the east it looks perpendicularly into the dyffrin or vale, nearly a mile below, from which to the gazer it is at all times an object of admiration, of wonder, and almost of fear.' Below them lie lakes 'like sheets of ice or polished silver.' Shading away from the sublime, they discover a refreshment stand on the summit.

The heroic scenery begs a gesture, and despite the crowds – or maybe because of them – Borrow begins reciting praise poems in Welsh in a booming voice. Three or four Englishmen look on with 'grinning scorn,' but a Welsh gentleman strides forward to shake his hand.

'Are you Breton?' he asks in Welsh.

Borrow was forever being taken as a southerner in North Wales, a Breton, or a northerner in South Wales, doubtless due to his curious accent – a product of learning from the dictionary.

No, says Borrow, sadly. 'I wish I was, or anything but what I am, one of a nation amongst whom any knowledge save what relates to money-making and over-reaching is looked upon as a disgrace. I am ashamed to say that I am an Englishman.'

In the introduction to *Wild Wales*, Theodore Watts-Dunton virtually shouts about Borrow's self-proclaimed *Englishness* – his insistence on his English identity. Yet here is the same man, wind-battered and passionate on top of Snowdon, proclaiming its magnificence in Welsh and shunning the materialism of mid-century England. In the book he makes the mountain home to Arthur and, wrongly but nobly, to the medieval Welsh hero Owain Glyndŵr, who led an independence revolt against the English in the early fifteenth century. He even insists (wrong again) that it was

on Snowdon that Llywelyn ap Gruffydd 'made his last stand for Cambrian independence.'

In Borrow's time it was the intellectual fashion to equate the mountains of North Wales, especially Snowdon, with 'freedom fighters' like Arthur, Llywelyn, and Glyndŵr. The men who battled the English juggernaut. The mountains became a symbol of self-determination. By hiking into the view and publicly reciting in Welsh, I believe Borrow was very clearly choosing Wales as his inspirational and moral home in Britain. It may have been more comfortable to live in England, but Borrow – the lifelong sympathiser with people of the margins, who I can well imagine would have supported the miners during their Great Strike – planted the flag of heart and conscience on Snowdon. Like young parents choosing to live in Aberfan, like Dylan Thomas returning from England, he chose Wales. That's where the best of him flourished best.

'Wait!' I shout.

Caroline and Annie are far ahead. I've stopped to scrawl into my notebook: 'Wondrous and monstrous!' About to plod on, I add – writing more gives me a longer break – 'Beyond human realm, up with the birds. No eagles – *Eryri* (Snowdonia) means Place of Eagles – seagulls here instead. Should be funny but can't laugh. The sheer inhospitableness! Jagged outcrops jut like made-up mountains in medieval paintings. Unfathomable depths. Rock, rock everywhere, dark and frightening.

Look up – bright sky replaced by nighttime scree of Snowdon's flanks.

Turn head – heart-filling view, an endless echoing of hills to the horizon. No place for people.'

I don't belong up here. I've been through this place often in the car, but I've never been *in* it. Climbing Snowdon has all the surreality of climbing into a painting. I'm *in* the

scenery, and it's as disorienting as if I'd shed a dimension. In West Wales – the environs around Lampeter – the hills aren't 'scenery'. People, sheep, houses, pubs, roads – the 'scape' of familiarity – occupy them thoroughly. Hiking there – or what my Welsh friends would invariably call 'walking,' as there's a US/UK difference of opinion on what constitutes a hike – is an extension of everyday life. But today we're pushing into the view, stepping over some metaphorical ha-ha and penetrating that place in the distance that until now has always been beyond the rim of the next hill. Or above the lowest cloud.

Is it satisfying? Not yet.

Right now it's terrifying.

Clouds are no longer a blueprint hillscape in the sky. They're our cohorts, our co-conspirators. I feel as if we've transgressed, as if I should've asked permission. I begin to understand the origins of animism.

The sheer effort of the climb adds to this substantial sense of difference, of having transcended ordinary place and, consequently, ordinary perception. A prevailing strangeness clings to the edges of my senses. Something extra-sensory, maybe. In *The Living Mountain* Nan Shepherd experiences Scotland's Cairngorms as 'this naked, this elemental savagery, this infinitesimal cross-section of ... energies that have been at work for aeons in the universe [that] exhilarates rather than destroys.'

I'm still scared I'll die here, but I feel Shepherd's energy and am scared as well of a quiet, answering thrill in my gut.

I don't know how long we've been climbing – an hour and a half, maybe? Everyone including the standard poodle passed me as we set out on the Pyg Track up the mountain. The route was Caroline's suggestion. She shunned the easiest trail and thought this one would be the most 'stimulating'. (I've since seen the Pyg Track described as 'the most rugged and challenging of the six paths up Snowdon.') Caroline

likes a challenge but is careful and eminently level-headed, so I agreed. Several years ago, when we lost our way hiking a wooded trail on the Gaspé Peninsula in Quebec – ‘we’ being Caroline, Annie, Marguerite and I – our turncoat dog Tenby instinctively abandoned Marguerite and me and clung to Caroline’s side. I figure if an animal can sense her expertise under duress, I can trust her to guide me up Snowdon.

My thighs and calves read each step hacked into the bedrock as two stair risers. Initially, when I could still glimpse the roofs of structures near the Pen y Pass car park, my legs were heavy with weariness, but the feeling has passed. Now I concentrate on the pounding of my heart. The path is so steep I can see the bottoms of Annie’s hiking boots – and because they did wait, she’s only two paces ahead of me now. The day is surprisingly warm, and we peel off layers down to our t-shirts.

We rest where Borrow rested. Today the lake burns a vivid blue flame. From here on, the bedrock steps alternate with loose scree. You have to be careful of upthrusts of vertical rock along the path. I look away for maybe three seconds and the next thing I know my boot is caught between two of them in a V-shaped vice and I’m falling. I instinctively throw my weight leeward, and my backpack tows me toward the mountain. My knee lands first, a direct hit on another of the sword-like outcrops of metamorphic stone.

One, two, three, four quick breaths. I’m stunned, then I take stock: I’m on all fours and shaking, but I’m alright. I free my foot with difficulty and then allow myself to look the other way. A twenty or thirty foot drop to a ledge of sharp rocks like broken eye teeth. Beyond that, land vanishes.

We carry on. The sharp pain in my knee focuses my mind and calms me. I stop thinking so much about my thundering heart.

Higher and higher and rock crowds in even more. Outcrops, boulders, inquisitive crags, and everywhere, the scree. The

earth’s bones on view. As the mountain’s faces narrow to the vanishing point of its summit, still over half an hour away, the sense of ‘scenery’ returns as great vistas rush to the horizon on all sides and the sky and its gifts of distance are revealed.

It occurs to me, quite suddenly, that this hike has always been more about the sky than the mountain – about entering the great cloudscape that first welcomed me to Wales. Here, near the top of this alien place that terrifies me, virtually *in* the sky, I experience a welcome shock of familiarity. Crowds of clouds I’ve admired and peered up at, clouds that have blued afternoons with shadow, have piled atop one another in topographic glee, have fought and bruised each other, defined meanings of white and grey, have been my emblems of belonging for 30 years: they’re right here beside me. A jolt of unexpected cynefin races down my spine, and in sharp, fast breaths I marvel.

The crest is close now, outlined in tiny crenellations that appear to be fellow hikers – ‘trip-trap trailing termites / carrying their backpacks,’ as poet Mike Jenkins calls us in his poem, ‘Yr Wyddfa Speaks Out!’ Like Borrow, we haven’t climbed alone. I’ve rarely seen so many people in one place in Wales outside a rugby match. There are serious hikers and families with kids strapped to pink, Hello Kitty backpacks; there are lots of dogs (we meet the poodle again when her people stop for lunch). When I look back I can see the trail winding away below, the thinnest of coiled chains, on which tiny dotted figures appear like Bosch’s toiling damned, or maybe Tolkein’s orcs enslaved in the mines of Mordor.

And now the clouds’ embrace. Near Snowdon’s summit a milky blue dusk erases all the world but for a short pool of visibility around us, and a ghostland of suggestion just past. Beyond that the planet is merely a myth, or a wondertale. Unlike Manawydan and his friends in *The Mabinogion*, we’ve climbed inside the misted spell.

It's a cold place to be. The temperature plummets and an icy wind kicks up; we struggle back into our outer layers. At the summit, where you'd expect to find God, we instead discover a tumult of people waiting to take selfies atop a thin and precarious ridge. Nearby, a train-depot-cum-restaurant and souvenir shop is as jam-packed as a highway rest area on a holiday weekend.

I find to my surprise that I don't really mind the crowds. I'd rather have had an audience of three with God, or the god of the mountain, but at least all of these people have gotten off their bums and climbed. It's a rare chance to feel good about the species, as I do when I see people at the beach for no other reason than to commune with the ocean. The instinct to connect is still there.

My knee explodes with pain on the way down. We take the Llanberis Path – a much slower gradient – to avoid scrambling along the same trail we came up. Even so, the descent seems steep to me and slippery after a thin rain sets in. At the bottom, Annie takes pity and calls a cab to bring us back to our car.

That evening, as we're downing the champagne we'd wisely reserved at breakfast, my swollen knee iced and elevated on a chair – it will be bruised for over two months – I get an email message from an English friend.

'You've climbed Snowdon!' she writes. 'This must mean you're well and truly Welsh now.'

Am I truly Welsh now? Ho, ho, I doubt it! Do I want to be Welsh? *No, I don't think so.*

Do I want to know this place so well that the clouds embracing Snowdon feel like family? *Yes I do.* I want to do everything I can to know Wales as well as I can, and if that means climbing a bloody enormous mountain – the mountain that anchors the Welsh imagination, which Jan Morris calls, 'Wales in excelsis, Cymru-issimo, where the

meaning, passion and loyalty of the nation is concentrated' – then bring on the mountain. I want to continue to flourish here. But I want two definitions of home. Number One: 'the place where one lives permanently,' and Number Four: 'the place where something flourishes.' *And I don't want those places to be the same.*

Saudade, hiraeth's linguistic sister, has been dubbed by the scholar Emily Apter as, a 'philosophy of transfinity.' (Pronounce 'saudade' as Marguerite would, with a Brazilian accent, lilting up at the end: 'sow-DAHD-gee'.) What this means is that it describes a condition of separation. The space between life and death. The relinquishment of metaphysical security. An emptying out of the present. The space between a poem and its translation into another language (I added that one). And, especially, a 'preparation for transportation to an unknown elsewhere.'

That unknown elsewhere is the space in-between the two definitions of home. It's the long field. The uncomfortable place where absence stokes the creative imagination; the place where hope is born. *And that's where I belong.*

I grew up in a very, very short field. I had love and every middle-class comfort and opportunity. My parents' families maintained a scattering of Old World traditions – German for my mom (my grandfather played the zither), Hungarian for my dad (my grandmother made potato glushkas with melted, browned butter). But both had embraced Americanhood to the point that I didn't grow up with mythic homelands over the rim of distant, Atlantic waves, urging me to imagine an unknown elsewhere.

I may have yearned to uncover remnants of the Lenape Tribe, but like my ancestors' Old World homes, so few clues remained from their time that I couldn't establish an imaginative toe-hold in their world. And even though I was sure I'd been born in the wrong place, I was too young to

do anything about it. My world was seamless and intact. I was restless with *fernweh*, but I had to wait until I was old enough to crack it open on the hard edge of travel to begin to imagine. I'd learned to daydream by then, but I didn't long for my created worlds, I simply entertained myself with them. I had to invent the state of being in between – that gnawing awareness of an absent presence – to experience the freedom and thrust of absence, its thrilling creative challenge, and I did that by falling in love with someplace else. Someplace far away.

What strikes me as remarkable is that I created for myself the long field in which Marguerite found herself from birth. She has always navigated the wilderness between Brazil and the United States, never feeling quite at home in either home. As a child living in Brazil, she spoke native Portuguese with her friends, but always shouldered a nagging awareness of being different, reinforced by speaking English with her dad.

When her family moved back to Virginia – she'd lived full-time in Brazil from the age of two to fifteen – her typical teenage resentment at being forced away from friends was ramped up by the sudden foreignness of a language she thought she knew. Teenage high school English was somehow different from the English that felt comfortable in her mouth. All the slang, the culturally weighted expressions unknown to her that she had to learn. It was a hard time.

Today, despite having long ago embraced the hyphen in her cultural identity, I think Marguerite would say she still feels at a disadvantage in both countries. The States is now home for her, the familiar, comfortable place, yet when she's fuzzy on historical details, for instance – Watergate, say, or the last years of the Vietnam War – she'll invoke Brazil.

'Missed it,' she says, shrugging. 'I was in Brazil.'

And as the place she visits once a year, for two weeks at best, Brazil presents a constant learning curve for her. She