

THE DEEPEST NORTH

1. Of the Northern Peoples

Gold teeth rock-logical in his mouth, his face
a wall of crumpled paper smoothed out into smiles.
He stops chuckling, stares at me,
his eyes animal, courageous in their simple darkness,
and I am an horizon.

Of a people used to staring out into the white, into blindness,
he could be a prehistoric explorer hurtling on a sled,
skidding, bouncing across the blue ice floe,
his breath a frosty pennant, his laugh wild as Creation.

Fleeting he's Hone, a roshi, a connoisseur of raw flesh, wind.
Then he's Yamamba, the Mountain Crone, my dying self
wordlessly screaming:

2. On Asahi-dake

The rock is large enough to block the wind if I crouch down
like a primitive man inventing shelter. I do.

And from here on Asahi-dake my view is of the distant mountain range
and a nearby gravel slope where, with streaming smoke,
the Earth is pouring into the grey sky and howling endlessly
jet-engine harsh through the holes of its volcanic vents, its exhausts.

Whole industrial cities could be buried here under the rubble
right up to the tips of their smokestacks.

*Why do mountains always miniaturise the human,
reduce us to an imagining?*

I wait there until the mist descends,
then wander the stony paths until I am lost in the whiteness.

3. Encountering a Bear

Facing the Sea of Okhotsk, to my right the mouth of the invisible Iwaobetsu River,
to my left the stretch of beach, not grey in this autumn twilight, dim,
another density of dark, though not the solid black of the volcanic cliffs.

Dull waves forming and re-forming the intermittent shore —

Words, phonemes, breaking down, sizzling.

Behind, high up on the cliff road, amber stars flashing: road-safety beacons.

Then on the beach some distance off, a large rock becomes two rocks,
single, then twinned, to and fro, flickering in my vision, larger, approaching.

There's not a sound, only the impossibly black form nearing me fast as a bear.

There's no sound, nor do I know I'm running, flying over the lumpy sand,
the stones, the thick grass ...

I am horned, a stag fleeing, prey-mute.

(from John Mateer — *The Ancient Capital of Images*, p 58)