

New Nonfiction from Laura Hope-Gil: “The Train”



We were staying in the youth hostel in Zermatt at the base of the Matterhorn and on a day trip to see the castle in St. Nicklaus. I was twelve and my sister fourteen. My period started the night before while we played foosball in the hostel's arcade. Starting your period at the base of the Matterhorn summons amazement, but my mom, surrounded by our backpacks she had emptied to do a laundry, handed me an inch-thick sanitary napkin with the simple instruction, "The tape goes on the panties." My father was in the room, standing between the bunk beds. He was stressed out. Mom was stressed out. They had a disagreement before on the hike to Pontrecina.

We each wore a distinct-color K-Way windbreaker. My father was

red, my mother yellow, my sister green, and I was powder blue, always in the back. I had small legs. We walked with what felt like a mile between us, wending our way between unbelievably tall pines and all the silence in Switzerland. My sister said it is because Dad wanted another baby and Mom did not. What a day to start your period. It was the end of my autonomy. Things were tense in St. Nicklaus. My usual efforts to get everybody laughing failed. The family had entire moods, and this was a dark one. My sister's hypoglycemia was at least yet in check, but I knew eventually she would eat a Toblerone, then, a couple of hours later, lose her mind. Now that we were in the region that appears on the Toblerone triangular box, things felt shaky.

Castles, for my sister and me, were a reason for travel. Yes, there were art galleries and Eiffel Towers and windmills, but we loved castles, especially the one in Montreux with its crypt and torture chamber and a hole from the gallows down to the rocks and waves of Lake Geneva. A terrible way to die and darkly intriguing. Just a meter or so away: the pillar to which Lord Byron was chained or about which he wrote the poem *The Prisoner of Chillon*. I didn't have the whole story yet. I won't say I didn't understand anything. I understood enough. In third grade I had found a brick in the basement of our Toronto home, and with a crayon I had written three words: *Daddy is dumb*. I'd tossed the brick back into the pile of bricks. One day soon after, my father found it and brought it upstairs.

"Did you write this?" he asked me.

"No," I said.

I had just earned my "writing license" at school, an actual document that meant I could write in cursive on my assignments. I took it to mean something more. We writers are supposed to downplay what we know and how we live, like it is some sad accident, like we do not know exactly what we are

here to do. I knew exactly what I was here to do: to listen, to watch, to write about it. There was nothing else to do. The writing license did not come with a list of ethics or guidance on what we should or should not write. This was something we figured out on our own. I had written on the brick in reaction to something my father had said or done. I had externalized my pain. This was a learning moment: you can write anything you want on bricks with a crayon, but you shouldn't throw the brick back with the other bricks.

Thinking every castle must be as cool as Chillon, my sister and I wanted to see the castle at St. Nicklaus. We did other things that my father wanted to do, and my mother towed along in constant damage-control mode, forever appeasing him and ensuring that my sister and I were not entirely in danger. There were precedents of danger. In British Columbia he had insisted we take this long hike through Burgess Pass, where an avalanche had recently torn apart a valley. With instructions not to talk, we walked for two hours amid upended whole trees on a sea of shards of Rocky Mountain. We made it to our destination and back before midnight, but when you are in the Canadian wilderness, where bears happily steal honey from backpacks not strung up in trees, anything after sunset is late. He seemed happiest when he was risking our lives in some situation he created. All of this was his lifelong reflex to being a child in a Japanese prison camp in China. We failed him repeatedly. Nothing we did could reach that high of an infancy in barbed wire, bayonet, liberation by atom bombs. In St. Nicklaus, Switzerland, he decided he did not want to see Waldegg Castle. He wanted to go back to Zermatt and watch the Mistral windsurfers on the lake. He was thinking of trying it. Windsurfing.

My sister had not yet eaten a Toblerone so was complacent. I was less so. I really wanted to see the castle. I was a castle junkie. I wanted secret tunnels between chapels and courtyards. I wanted crypts, ossuaries, and carpets hung on

walls. I did not know that Waldegg Castle was not a medieval castle but a baroque one, and that it was not in St. Nicklaus but a little way out. So I fought for it like it was Chillon and just around a corner. My father did not let me argue. A Great Wall had grown out of that one brick. There was no returning it to the earth. No getting over it, such a small thing, so few words, eternal damnation. Standing in the street of this small town in the shadow of the Matterhorn, my father grabbed my mother's arm and led her away. We followed because we were children. He led us to the train station. I could not stand the idea of missing a castle. The train to Zermatt was on Gleis 1. We were right there beside it. The door opened. My father, holding my mother's arm and pulling her, got on the train.

"Get on the train," he said.

"No," I said.

"Get on the goddamned train." My mother pleaded with us with her eyes. My father glared at her for doing so.

The thing people who have not seen it do not know is that the Matterhorn is not a mountain like the other mountains around it. When we first arrived in Zermatt and disembarked from the train, my father had told us to look at it. The Matterhorn. I looked and saw a row of mountains with some clouds over them. I wondered what the big deal was and felt this massive wave of betrayal by the world that told me this was a spectacular mountain. I pretended to see it just so we could get to the hostel and rest.

"Look up," my father said.

"I'm looking," I said.

"Look up more," my sister said and placed her hand on my chin and tilted my head up. And I saw it, above the clouds, the wall of its north face, the sheerness and height I had seen on

the Toblerone boxes my sister devoured and transformed afterward. It was everything a mountain on a chocolate bar shaped like it should be, a sight that makes you glad you can see, to behold it, to recognize it as something you have always known. It has been sold to you and you to it. Even when you are taller, it will be forever taller, more vast, more imposing, and out of proportion than anything else ever could be. With my chin lifted, now forgetting I was tired, I was metabolizing wonder, awe, and, in a little way, terror because when we look at mountains, we are always both where we stand and at the top of them looking down at ourselves through its eyes, and we feel we could easily disappear with all the other small things in the world. When I was only three, the family had camped at Interlaken, and for days helicopters floated over us in search of a Japanese climbing team who had all perished on the Eiger's north face. The north face of everything was terrifying to me. It was what you got lifted off of after it killed you.

The train doors began to close, and our father did not step off with our mother. The door closed. The train left. We stood there in St. Nicklaus, wanting to see a castle but not realizing that our desires could so easily cause our abandonment. Not that we thought we could win, but we did think that he could concede. It was just a day in Switzerland. A holiday. It was a castle, something the children wanted to do. But that was incorrect. When he wanted to deny us something, he could. Control was altitude. He could come crashing down on us; we should have remembered.

Neither of us had any money, just our Eurail passes in little pockets around our necks with string. We learned that the castle is a walk from Solothurn, where we were not. It was afternoon. Our parents had left us in a town, although it had been noticeably clear to both of us that our mom thought Dad was bluffing since this was not normal parenting behavior. We would only catch on to how enthralled we had all been decades

later when the entire world quieted down when he died. Yes, there were still wars and still starvation and every violation of human right imaginable, but they were not in our respective houses. That is a critical difference in how we perceive the world. My sister and I walked around St. Nicklaus in search of some other castle. It did not make us friends. We had truly little connection. But on that day we had something. We were the daughters of something that could leave us if we said no to it. We understood that now. Standing in quite possibly the safest place in the entire world, on cobblestone, between white stucco buildings with high-pitched roofs and geraniums in the stained-dark window boxes, with tickets in our neck-safes to anywhere on the continent, alone, we understood.