

"Only a fool or a saint or a media correspondent travels in a foreign land on the brink of war not his own. I am no reporter, and certainly no saint."

*Border Lands* recounts the story of a journey which became several: a visit to a distant friend, an obeisance to the dead, a chant for the living, a trek through the Valley of Death, a communing with the Alps, and ultimately a return home. Throughout the author finds himself chafing against the verges of what he knows and does not know about himself and his surroundings, as well as the Other who is always present, if not always seen.

Jim Kacian is the owner of Red Moon Press, a co-founder of the World Haiku Association, and a former editor of *Frogpond*. This is his twelfth book.

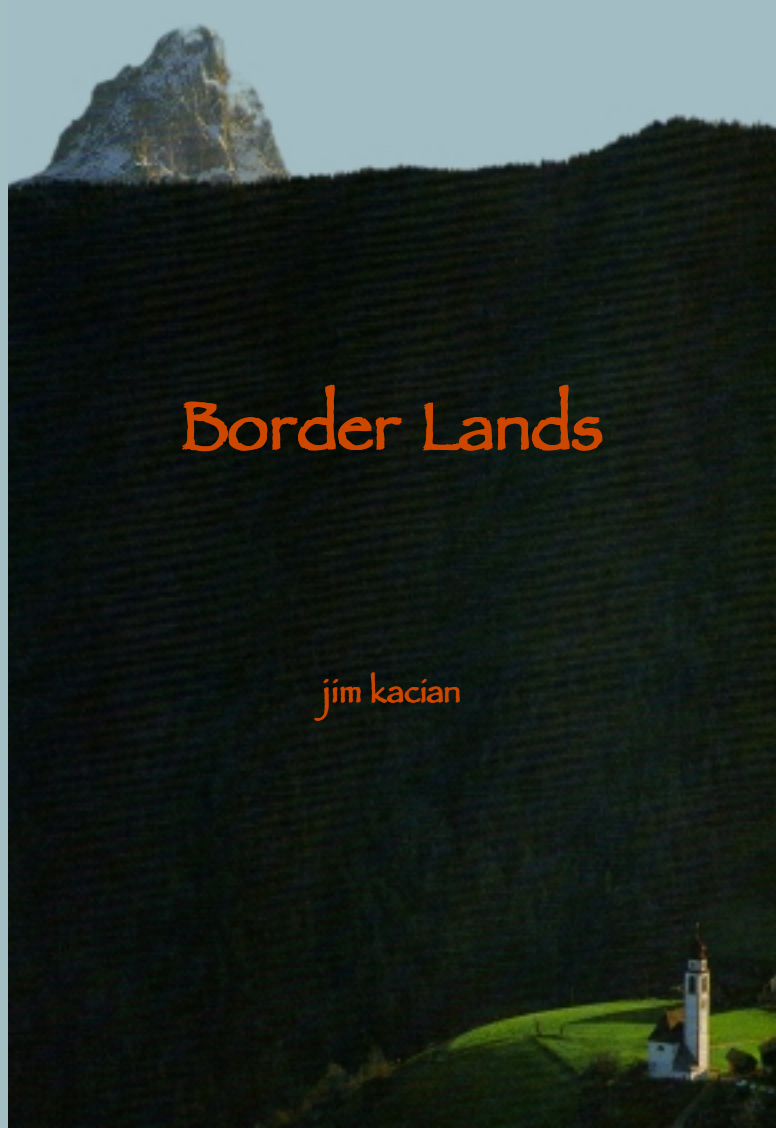
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# Border Lands

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*Border Lands*

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FOREWORD

Once in a great while we are fortunate enough to witness something of great significance outside our usual ken. The rest of life is preparation for such moments. The question is not whether or not we will be able to cross the line once we have come to it, but what we will be when the time has come, and if we are able, to cross back.

## DEDICATION

To Z. for the going.

To V. for the coming back.

# Border Lands

travels in the old country

## GOING BACK

Only a fool or a saint or a media correspondent travels in a foreign land on the brink of war not his own. I am no reporter, and certainly no saint. But there are things which at times we must honor, beyond consideration of risk, or else we accede to a diminution of our lives and are the less for it. No man is an island, the poet Donne tells us, but full heed of the dangers of this world might make us feel as though we were.

Z.'s father has died, and his people are gathering to enact the rituals. I have been asked to bear witness, a great honor for a non-believer, an outsider, a Westerner, an American.

It is easy to say yes at the moment, but as time draws near I find myself growing apprehensive.

a moment of doubt . . .  
the dark flecks  
in my eyes

V. has the good sense to remind me that it is only one's self that is seen in the mirror, and I am able to master myself, to climb aboard the 747 to cross half the globe in the name of brotherhood and solidarity and respect. Perhaps because it is not simple or easy it is worth the more, but whatever the risk, I am going back.

planning the trip —  
the gentle rolling  
of my tongue

old map  
the whole country  
one color

fingernails  
bitten to the quick —  
sliver of moon

flying overseas  
wings quiver to the unseen  
densities of air

## INTO THE LAND

In the morning Z. meets me at the airport. His face is bruised, one eye blacked, and an arm and leg scraped raw. I fear the worst, but he laughs and tells me, "No, I fell playing basketball."

We stop by his apartment to pick up his things. While he's packing I wander around out back in his garden. Woodsmoke drifts in from across the vineyard and I discover I have been here before, in space, of course, but in time as well. The slant of the sun, the waft of the clouds, the uncertainty of the immediate future: all is exactly as it ever has been. This is a place where one might believe in fate.

back in  
the old country  
I am old

Z. comes out to join me, and we sling our packs onto our backs and head for the center of town. It's a short walk, and we have time for a beer and a smoke before we have to leave. The borders are closed, and we would not be permitted to cross them by automobile, so we will go by bus. It will take several days. We gather our things and buy some extra fruit to sustain us as we head out across the littoral into the blackness of the near mountains and beyond, straight into the land.

“All aboard . . .”  
smoke from his mouth  
into his nostrils

stop light . . .  
our driver starts up  
a conversation

into dusk . . .  
guessing the color  
of bats

## MARS

These mountains, stripped of their hardwood forests by Venetian shipbuilders at the behest of merchants more than five centuries ago, are mere karst now, the bones of mountains, yet they appear no less impenetrable. The bus spews out great plumes of diesel exhaust, the driver shifts again and again as we slowly grind up the miles. There are no houses to be seen, no sign that men might survive this terrain and yet, paralleling the road

the steep path —  
a babe on the back  
of her mother

The mountain which takes half a day to ascend requires only a couple hours to carry. Once out on the plain we come upon the cenotaphs of the Bogomils, an ascetic cult from a millennium ago who attempted to reconcile the beliefs of the Manichaeans with those of Christianity. The likenesses on their tombstones are oddly similar to Dadaist art, and so they appear ancient and yet contemporary at the same time.

Darkness is overtaking us. We still have fifty miles to sustain before we stop. The first sickle of the waxing moon is dead ahead, and nearly nestled in its arc, the steady gleam of a planet, red, Mars.



passing cars —  
the moon slips  
along their curves

far from any town —  
a bird I don't know flies  
beyond a crossroad

frosty night —  
the window's half-halo  
where my head was

## TRIBE SOUP

We stop for the night in a very small town near the border. Z. has people here, and we walk a couple minutes to the outskirts of town, asking directions, but when we find the house, it is boarded up and abandoned. The front is only a few miles away and above the crickets we can hear occasional gunfire. Strange lights come and go on the surrounding hills. From an overlook we can see the headlights of jeeps and trucks moving down in the valley below.

passing freight train —  
the rhythm  
of the moon

Many others are walking this road, and we follow them into a large field full of tents and fires and men. I pick out half a dozen dialects even with my untrained ears, and presume there are many more. Z. finds his cousin, who says the houses are too much a target, and that it is safer here in the open country. We are invited to join in the meal. We pick sloes from the nearby blackthorns, and pass around the flask of vitriolic slivovic. I snort at the first swig, and amid the general laughter I am made guest of honor and given the privilege of tasting and approving the tripe soup.

passing the jug  
the warmth  
of many hands

night wind  
one dog starts  
them all

barrel fire —  
shadows of men disappear  
into the woods

sleepless night  
the burble of a jet  
I cannot see

## DRIVEN AWAY

The bus isn't due until midday, so we decide to hike the local mountain. It is perfectly safe, we are told, because near the top is an excavation site declared out of bounds by both sides. I am unconvinced, but willing nonetheless.

It is easy to tell when we are near —

ancient village —  
the sound of hammers  
chipping stone

A long rectangle of earth has been dug out, and men on their hands and knees are sifting through

it. Beyond it the broken remains of walls and houses and roads, the detritus of lives ended long ago. This was a Roman outpost, built to repel the barbarian tribes spreading up from the south two thousand years ago. At the time it would have been considered the very edge of civilization. Not much has changed out here since, except the Romans (and the Vandals and Goths, the Avars, Illyrians, Celts, Anths, Magyars, Shiptars, and later, the Turks and Germans) have long been driven away.

ancient road  
wearing away  
my share

excavation site —  
the holes  
living things leave behind

unplaced stones  
at the foot of a wall —  
the noon-day sun

breaking up  
the ancient wall  
flowering yucca

## TALK OF SNOW

My U. S. passport creates a stir with the customs officials. We are held at the checkpoint for a very long time, and I wonder if it is because of me, but nobody seems perturbed, so perhaps this is the norm. We all stand together in the cold mountain wind, smoking and chatting, using the rest rooms and the modest duty-free shop, which stocks only chocolate and cigarettes. After an hour we are permitted to reboard, and travel the 50 yards to the adjacent border, where the process is repeated. Someone says, in English, we will have snow before we are permitted to leave this place, and it is meant as a joke, but as the sun sinks lower in the sky, I wonder if it might not be true.

Immediately upon crossing the border, the bus falls down into a valley undisturbed by the war. The harvest is underway, and the peasants are deepening shadows.

autumn evening —  
the last peal of the bell slips  
into the light fog

The air is milder, and in the drone of travel we forget about the talk of snow.

mandrake roots  
pulled whole from the earth  
last shadows

harvest dusk  
sitting in the wheelbarrow  
with the potatoes

weaving through  
my thread of thought  
this swallow

smoking the hives  
the quiet  
of the torch

## RED CLAY

We have arrived in Z.'s native place. It is now a farming village, a few hundred souls, but once it was a sizeable market town. The church is dedicated to Sveti Sava, patron of travelers and poets. A small waterfall flows down the ancient steps, worn in the center by innumerable feet.

Inside the gold of the vaults has been tarnished by centuries of burnt myrrh, and the figures tiled overhead flicker ghostlike in the candlegloom.

a feeble light  
the slow melting  
of the eucharist

Though he has not lived here since he was a child, Z. is greeted every hundred yards by another old friend, and must recount again where he now lives, and how, and why. I slip away to meander the small streets on my own, to take a local lunch of burak and yoghurt. Most of these people have never traveled beyond the mountain, and they look at me with a frank curiosity, are pleased with my few words and smile at my efforts. By the time I rendezvous with Z. the soles of my boots are freighted thickly with the local red clay.



lighting a votive  
for the living  
with one for the dead

morning rain  
the gray of the churchstone  
the same as the graves

child's burial  
the uneven heights  
of the headstones

river walk  
the slow seep of water  
from the sandbags

## TO ME

The next few days are spent in preparation and observance of the ritual. Z. is gone each day from morning to night. When I see him, he seems to be carrying himself differently. He is gentle with his small nieces and nephews; he is quiet before his old mother and aunts. His talk, given to extremes, is tempered, his drinking is moderated. He is subsuming himself to a larger pattern here, one which has played out in the lives of his ancestors for generations in this same place.

I watch from the café in the piazza whose owners have adopted me. Each morning they provide me with the same breakfast, every noon the same

lunch, and otherwise leave me on my own, to write, or roam, or muse. I am trying not to be in the way, and at the same time to be available. I am perfectly useless. The bus comes every midday, and every midday I think about V.

departing bus —  
a child I don't know  
waves to me

rubbish pile  
a butterfly rises up  
on the smoke

cemetery visit  
the sharp edges  
of the newer names

mild afternoon  
a woman licks the blood  
from her son's finger

back alley  
a stray dog won't come  
in English

## AND SALT

Each night another conclave, full of storytelling, invocation, eating and drinking. I begin to follow the patterns of the stories, not by the words, which I don't understand, but by the rhythm, by the music, by the tenor of the voice. It is some kind of blessing not to know the language.

ritual meal —  
holding the candledrip back  
in the flame

Bread and wine are left behind each meal, and salt. What is both basic and luxurious, necessary and desirable.

The women serve the men. The men honor the women. It is an old way, though perhaps not the oldest. When all the food has been eaten, all the stories told, bread and wine are left behind. And salt.

local vintage  
the easy flow  
of tongues

bread soaks up  
the last of the soup —  
farewell meal

reminiscing  
a young girl looks out  
from the old face

morning after  
a red ring at the height  
of left wine

## TO THE WEST

And then it is done.

Once forty such days of food and drink and tales were taken, but no longer. Even so, these several days have melded into a single continuum, and I cannot say if it is the day of the sun or the day of the moon.

The season has advanced without our taking notice. The clouds are thinner, greyer, and more out of the north. Nomads have come down from the surrounding hills with their flocks, and something of their restlessness has caught us up, and the birds and beasts as well.

claiming  
the whole night  
wolf's bay

We wake to a bright but cold sun, and begin gathering together our things. It is the day of Mars, and we are heading back to the west.

after blackbirds  
one or two fallen leaves  
lift off

a low pass  
the whirr of the wings  
of geese

after the wake  
a shawl on the chair  
unknits itself

## COMING ON

But not straight home. Before we left we had agreed to meet J. on the way back to hike in the Alps. We take a northbound bus and arrive at dusk at the base camp where J. and his dog are waiting for us with provisions. A night's sleep in the cold mountain air prepares us for the brisk climb of the morning.

By midday we gain a ridge which overlooks the river valley below. It looks sleepy and peaceful, but J. says this ridge was the site of some of the bloodiest fighting in the last great war. It changed hands dozens of times, usually in hand-to-hand combat, and usually only for a day or two.

returning  
to the mountain pass  
glacier

We are grateful to move off the ridge and out of the cold wind. The sun is warm through the thin air, but already slanted, and by the time we reach shelter at the base of the peak night is coming on.



old border —  
at the checkpoint  
we stop

packing the tent —  
leaving behind  
the one flat spot

bright moon —  
smoke from our campfire  
moves across it

## THE WAY BACK HOME

Up early for a try for the top. How light we feel without the packs. I recall a rodomontade by Jack Kerouac "... in that flash I realized *it's impossible to fall off mountains you fool* and with a yodel of my own I suddenly got up and started running down the mountain after him..." I am butted again by the wind, and squat lower and hold on. Perhaps on the way down...

But finally there it is, and worth it —

Alpine summit  
all the clouds going  
the same place

The air is light and incredibly bracing. It smells of snow and rock, old and unsullied. We can't breathe enough of it in, after the smoke and catarrh of the keening. We speak in great fogs which dissipate instantly. I can feel the chill deep in my lungs, and it is a calm thing, something good. I want to carry that with me all the way down the mountain, back through the city, through the country, through the air, all the way back home.

Alpine meadow  
in the center of the bowl  
little me

down the mountain —  
the bumpy flight  
of a falcon's shadow

wolf scat . . .  
the dog and I  
both stop

## IN THE DARK

The crossing is even slower going back. We are told an airstrike took place just over the border last night, and the area remains unsafe. From up here on the ridge we can see the cratered valley. A few vehicles are left behind, smoking, but all else is quiet. The driver asks around, and we agree to go on.

after the bombing  
random flights  
of swallows

The bus pulls in at M., a gritty industrial town, to bright sunshine. We decide to stop. At a café a

few blocks away Z. spots someone he knows, and soon we have a place to stay. We drink beer and tell the story of our journey. Though we hadn't discussed it, we both omit the morning's passage. Already I have trouble seeing it clearly in my mind. Clouds roll in and a cold rain begins to fall. It is the kind of rain which swallows light, and we make our way to our friend's crowded apartment very late and very much in the dark.

out on strike  
the uncomfortable hang  
of his hands

night lightning  
the silhouette  
of TV aërials

Balkan lunch —  
the blade of the knife  
licked clean

## ONE ANOTHER

The next morning clears, and I walk along the river, kicking marrons into the water and watching them float downstream. The current is swift, and they are out of sight in seconds.

From across the river the aromas of strong coffee and roasting meat come in from the Turkish quarter, and I am pulled in that direction.

vaulted bridge  
a stranger stops to light  
my cigarette

The sun multiplies itself throughout the bazaar

in the caches of beaten and burnished metalware, the cobblestones, the rounded piles of fruit. I squint and pretend to look at some rugs in the dark of a tent. I am offered apple tea, which is soothing and hot, and makes me aware that for all its brilliance it is a cool day and I am slightly shivering. The shopkeeper is friendly and well-read, and we spend a pleasant hour discussing, in English, the impossibility of ever coming to understand one another.

a foreign tongue —  
the grounds of coffee  
in the demitasse

small talk  
the curl of smoke goes wild  
just over his head

hazy moon  
the Muslim woman's eyes  
behind her veil

## NO PLACE

It gets greener as we move closer to home.

It is balmy when the bus pulls in, though it is after sundown. We stow our duffels beneath the seats of the village bar, drink local beer, listen to Leonard Cohen on the PA. The leaves have been gilded during our absence, and the street lamps light up the undersides. Young girls, born after the songs were first recorded, sing along out of tune and rhythm, and with laughter. When the owner makes signs that he'd like to close, we walk the small town center, not yet ready to go home. We are still within the bubble of this trip, and are resisting its bursting.

returning home  
the chessmen have maintained  
my lost position

The next morning we arrive at the airport in plenty of time, then sit in a smoky bar without saying much. The airport is brightly lit, generic, not any place specific but a place between places; really, no place.



the morning star  
over the mountain —  
longing for home

goodbye hugs  
all the places  
where we touch

crowded terminal  
the begging man talks  
to himself

## OF THE WORLD

I suppose I slept, and have some recollection of ragged dreams—of the glinting of multiple suns, of firelight and wine, of planets and the baying of wolves. The man in the next seat jostled me each time he shifted. His gold incisor shone when his mouth fell open in sleep. He was grizzled and smelled of goat, a nomad bereft of his flock, on his way—where?

home from abroad —  
on the kitchen table  
the atlas of the world

V. met me at the airport, and what I spoke was jumbled together, a mass of images without focus. I slept more in the car, and all night and into the morning at home. At my late brunch I find she has been having a journey of her own.

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