

## Places

### To Lake Turkana

We sat on benches facing sideways  
atop a reconditioned lorry;  
our bags and gear were stuffed between.  
We had left the tarmac in Nairobi,  
lurching off onto rocky roads,  
north into the hills and bush country  
towards lakeside Loiyangalani.

We camped in crummy canvas tents  
without mosquito netting. The nights  
were hot and sweaty, insect-bitten;  
the days were full of gorgeous sights,  
dry and dusty, camera-ready—  
vast vistas and vibrant villages  
so poor they shamed your privileges.

We traded tee-shirts for trinkets,  
or handed them down the sides of the truck  
to shiny-headed smiling children.  
Size didn't matter to their good luck:  
dressed to the knees, they ran barefoot  
and boisterous down the dirt tracks,  
branding Coke and Nike on their backs.

We stopped at the crest of a lava field  
for our first view of the windswept lake;  
camel traders trailed off in the distance.  
It was a desolate place, hardened in heartache,  
weathered and barren and bleak in the heat.  
But the water was a marvelous blue,  
and rich and potable, we learned, too.

Luckily, we had brought our own firewood.  
We made time to take a languorous swim,  
then headed off to the small encampment  
of beehive huts at El Molo. That was grim,  
more for us than them: they seemed happy.  
I bought a tribal basket made from reeds,  
ringed in cowrie shells and colored beads.

At seventy-four, my mother survived  
on a carton of cheap cigarettes.  
I was half her age then. The trip was billed  
as an adventure you wouldn't forget.  
I can see her in her crushed white hat,

smoking under an acacia tree,  
cradling her morning cup of coffee . . .

It was a long way to Lake Turkana,  
so sweet and sad to remember, *bwana*.

## Places

### A Country for Old Men

That's what I call where I live now.  
No sandy white beaches, but plenty  
of white hair and white-frosted staff  
wearing their names on their lapels.  
(Sometimes I get a bracelet with my own.)

It's pretty easy to get a visa.  
One time it was shoulder pain, but even  
the flu might do. The more exotic,  
of course, get special attention,  
and are treated like celebrity.

Many border-cross for the wrong reasons  
and get frisked in examination rooms.  
Some come to train on exercise equipment.  
More often now, I seek a cure  
for my many ailments at the grand spa.

That's the impressive white building  
on the hill, with extensive wings and wards,  
singles and doubles, some en suite.  
It's pretty well booked all year round,  
but they'll make room in an emergency.

The beds are small but quite adjustable.  
There's room service and fresh linens,  
and usually lots of cut flowers  
and exhibitions of bright artwork.  
You meditate in a body tunnel.

I would make your reservations soon.  
I kept saying I was never going back.  
I couldn't afford it. Things were so expensive.  
But I got discounts and subsidies, and they  
offer a variety of payment plans.

Those I have met who travel a lot  
call it by its nickname, the Last Resort.  
I know it's a haven for drug-dealers,  
but everyone's so warm and welcoming.  
They answer all your questions, even the hard ones.

## Places

### **Birthday Photograph, 1984**

This little boy went to college.

This little boy stayed home.

This little girl had a baby.

This little girl lived all alone.

And this little boy played wolf too many times with the pigs.

Saved here, together, from all those places,  
they wear cake and ice cream on their faces,  
and lick the frosting from their plastic spoons  
in crooked tassel-cone party hats, smiles light as balloons.

Hey, Diddle, Diddle, how cows jump over moons!

## Places

### At the North Pole

The ice was two to three meters thick.  
It took us three days in an icebreaker,  
leaving from Murmansk, where temperatures  
flirted with the sixties. It was freezing,  
of course, when we got there, two below  
Celsius, to be exact: the middle  
of summer with overcast skies  
and limited visibility. Not  
like the brochure with its beach ball sun.  
Still, after all, we made the most of it.

Rangers set off with their rifles  
to secure a safe perimeter.  
A classic British telephone booth,  
lipstick red, popped up in the snow.  
I called home on a satellite phone,  
but was caught off guard by the machine  
that answered. What does one say, except  
'guess where I am' and 'sorry I missed you'  
when no one's really listening?  
And who knew what time it was precisely?

A red carpet led to the dipping hole,  
where a few braved the polar chill  
in bikinis and cutoffs, posing  
for our makeshift paparazzi  
as they leaped out on their leashes,  
then struggled back to the ladder  
with dagger strokes and lockjaw grins.  
Reality celebs, they donned thick robes  
and tossed back shots of Russian vodka  
while loud music bounded across the snow.

Someone with spunk had brought a Santa suit  
and cartwheeled and cavorted  
over the spiritless white landscape.  
We were the hundredth ship to reach true north,  
so formed the numerals in linked human chains,  
while the moment was captured on video.  
Later, I grabbed the ship's anchor line  
and tugged dramatically for a snapshot;  
others danced around our maypole,  
where the world supposedly was spinning.  
I thought of the billions below us,  
in all directions and predicaments,

working through the day's obstacles.  
We stood unclocked above it all,  
though I felt guilty and undeserving,  
remembering the poor explorers,  
their frostbite and scurvy, the hellish  
sledging over hummocks and pressure  
ridges, facing impossible open leads,  
desperate to stake their claim here.

I left my footprints far out from the ship  
that looked planted on a blank canvas,  
where foreground and background merged.  
One day, I thought, they'll be no place to stand.  
A bell buoy will mark the spot; then  
adventurers will head there to ring it.  
So much of life is lived on an east/west  
axis, following the rigors of the sun.  
But you reach a numb point, much like ours,  
where the sun does not set or even run.

The ice pack floats over a deep ocean  
and drifts in different directions.  
Where we planted our flag will not be north,  
exactly, tomorrow: it's a moving  
target on the ice, like many  
deep-brooded things I can think of—  
an explorer's frozen ambition,  
a couple's melting glacial love,  
the whiteout of forgotten youth.

There was nothing there but that cold hard truth.

## Places

### Cinnamon Bay

In the mid-60s, we had to rent a jeep to cover the four crow miles to camp, tentatively setting off from Cruz Bay over the rutted, steep, and windy road along the coast, my father at the wheel, honking at the sharp corners to avoid trucks and wild donkeys, the occasional sandaled native with her bulging satchel, while a rich vegetation smell, and sweat, cloaked us in the heavy humid heat.

The commissary where we registered is gone now, a simple stone edifice that fronted a card file for an office, and stored basic foodstuffs and frozen food. With our key to a screen-walled unit, we followed the trail past sway-backed palms to the corner of a cottage near the beach. There were two cots and a picnic table, a lectern stand of a grill, and a view of the water that no one could forget.

The sand stretched for more than a quarter-mile, curving like a smile, white as dental bone, water the rich turquoise of mouthwash. A few hundred yards off, a cay beckoned to be reached on a raft. Canopied hills rose sharply on all sides, holding us captive in its warm tropical embrace—I was simply awed by what my father found to share with me. Donning my swimsuit, I rarely took it off the next two weeks.

As you lay under a sheet, the night breeze brought you a pageant of smells from mangrove and bay rum trees, the padded sounds of feet pattering to and fro the shower house, the background noise of waves, exhausted, collapsing on the beach. During the day, the sun kept a watchful eye on its guests, families with children drawing in the sand, women reading and tanning in their beach chairs, snorkelers' heads, swimmers floating on their backs. In course, I found a fifteen-year-old girl companion, and barely saw my father

after that. He took his early morning walks  
along the wet line of the beach, making chat  
with campers and beachcombers, or luffed  
in the light surf. At dusk, as the sun set,  
he would stand before the grill tending burgers  
in trunks and an unbuttoned linen shirt.  
I don't recollect what we talked about,  
or even if we talked, but rather listened.

Some times seem just so perfect, pure and plain,  
that powerful natural forces ensure  
they will be brief. Whenever I returned,  
the joy was there but not the sentiment.  
The Danish sugar cane plantation life  
had long since disappeared before our visit.  
The Park that we glimpsed in its infancy  
grew polished as a gem set with diamonds,  
till its jewels were stripped by Hurricane Irma.  
I heard that leaves on every tree were gone,

sucked up by her Dyson-like device.  
So have my thoughts gone into a vacuum.  
I have one picture of my island girl,  
but don't remember even kissing her.  
It's taken all these years to understand  
how losses grow gradually and more clear,  
as coral wavers in underwater light.  
The last time I was there, at the rock end  
of the beach, I looked in vain to find  
my father's ashes, now indistinct from sand.