

# Hiking Seven Rila Lakes with My Youngest

We scale the mountain in a 4x4,  
up a rutted, muddy road.  
The engine strains in low gear,  
like a mistreated mule.  
The driver leaves us below the lift,  
satisfied to count our fare.

Rilska Skakavitsa

waterfall

Водопад Рилска  
Скакавица

The chalet in sight, my son and I rejoice—  
the zenith of our slog and suffering.  
For him, a modest challenge,  
one of many still before him.  
But for me, a torrent of doubt,  
a contest with my waning vigor...

The remainder of the hike,  
with the bitter wind at our backs,  
rekindles a lightness in my stride.  
The Stygian pall begins to lift—  
hikers emerge from the haze,  
like souls journeying into the afterlife.

Up to the chalet we ascend,  
my youngest bounding before me,  
while I lumber up the slope.  
Already my breath labors,  
faded muscles in my legs fire  
as I coax one foot, then the other...

At the shelter, I muster my reserves.  
My son and I debate the best  
path on the map—right or left?  
Given the conditions, he thinks  
the left will serve us best.  
I accede, then zip my coat.

The path climbs, then descends,  
climbs, then descends again.  
Icy drizzle spatters my clothes.  
My gaze stays fixed on the ground,  
assessing each step for dry footing,  
following my Orphic son ahead.

Wear the first lake: a locked lodge.  
Still, I vainly search for a doorway  
or an overhang from the wind and rain  
where I might eat my sandwich.  
My mind is too feral to enjoy the lake;  
a haggard animal at odds with nature.

Halfway through the hike...  
I have surrendered to the trial—  
a sodden, diminished mortal,  
looping the highland trail.  
My son—my age when he was born—  
I am now his weary shadow.

*"Man's very wisdom is but the instinct of the race in action."  
—Jack London, "The Law of Life"*

