Han-sol, the sports teacher, crunches down a last seaweed roll, sighs, and rubs his stomach with exaggerated contentment. He signals Kate and holds up eight fingers. ‘Shelter!’ he shouts twice and folds his hands into a pillow then rests his head upon them. He snores theatrically with one eye open and fixed on her.

‘It’s eight kilometres to where we’ll spend the night?’ Kate interprets hopefully.

‘Okay-okay,’ Han-sol confirms. He springs to his feet. Young-jin, the pre-service sports teacher, follows suit and they do hip-swings and toe-bends like athletes about to hit the hurdles. The pretty Maths teacher watches and giggles. ‘Jiri San!’ Han-sol shouts, and thirty students swallow the last of their lunches and should their backpacks. The bus the school has hired to drop them at the village of Dae-song-gul, reverses carefully down the narrow road. The expedition up South Korea’s tallest mountain begins.

Kate smoulders as she settles into a position at the rear. Mountain climbing in the heat of the day! On bellies full of rice. It’s hard to tell if it’s usual Korean practice, or just the way this school does things. With the first six weeks of her contract over, she’s certain that she’s managed to land the most chaotic private school in the country. If only my boss was here to explain. He’s the only member of staff with fluent English. Perhaps he’s sick of my questions. She’d understood him to be climbing Jiri Mountain with them, but at the last minute he’d boarded another bus with a different school group for another destination.

Han-sol leads them past the rice paddies of the rice-farmers’ village; once they enter the forest of the lower slopes they’re out of the midday sun. Perhaps they know what they are doing after all. The gurgling water course that surges down the mountainside and the chattering of the teenagers soon fill her with bursts of happiness. She composes the diary entry that she will write when she reaches the mysterious ‘Shelter’: Jiri San (Jiri Mountain) is about 2000 metres high, the highest peak in a series of mountains some 360 kilometres in circumference. The humble path we took is carved from centuries of human engagement. Now I understand why Asian poets from ancient times to the present venerate such mountains and deem them lords, chiefs and emperors.

So-ji from her Third Year Conversation class – a girl she knows only as one terrified of English – is stumbling along in front of her. Whenever Kate had pressed her to contribute something – anything – in English, So-ji had only managed to whisper mournfully, ‘I’m tired.’ Now she hikes, barely lifting her feet. Kate observes her technique curiously.

They pass a sign: LAST BATTLEFIELD OF THE LIQUIDATED GUERRILLAS. Kate’s composing her next diary paragraph: I passed the place where Chinese-backed Communist forces met a significant defeat. The battle here in the southern temperate forests decided the outcome of the war and therefore, I guess, the partition of Korea into North and South. Wild strawberries and blood. She doesn’t know who, if anyone, back in Brisbane will show an interest in her experiences, but
nevertheless, she writes a report every evening; it helps her to create a version of what might have happened during the day.

Stone takes over from dirt. Boulders seem tossed by gods at play. So-ji is still ahead but the others are now impossible to catch, and the forest is silent. They arrive at a giant rock slab near a waterfall. There is Han-sol, waiting for them.

‘Go ahead,’ she tells him, gesturing so that he understands. As the senior teacher, he needs to be with the majority. ‘We are fine.’ If So-ji’s blank face doesn’t worry him, why should it worry me?

‘Okay-okay,’ he responds gratefully. He leaps up onto a grey boulder and disappears.

Kate takes the lead now, and she grows increasingly happy with their slow pace. Slow is restful. It means really seeing. Big group chatter, whether Korean or English, is not her thing. I loitered, delighted by rushing water, she writes in her head. I sat on boulders, listening to the mountain. When So-ji next catches up, the teenage fiddles around with the zips of her backpack, extracts a painkiller, and mimes how much the backpack makes her shoulders ache.

Pathetic, Kate thinks. But the mountain is lovely and her mind unleashes another spiel of prose: It was so alive with birdsong and the green promise of summer; pure water unlike any other. Impossible to constrict the experience into words. Superlatives like stately, majestic, and extraordinary don’t do it justice. Jiri Mountain cannot be viewed from the scale of ordinary human thought.

Slower and slower they go. So-ji indicates her rapid heart-rate by tapping her chest. The track becomes ever more steep and tumbled and they are stationary more than in motion. Kate accepts that she may have to take So-ji back to the village for medical help. With keywords and mime she asks, ‘Go down Dae-song-gul?’

So-ji sways with her eyes closed, yet gestures – up.

Kate’s method is now: walk, wait, distract. She adopts a faster pace and chooses a boulder to rest upon; when the girl catches up, panting and afflicted, Kate points out her discoveries: small seeds, tiny perfumed flowers caught in the nets of cobwebs, a red worm blindly hunching up and down, two trees embracing, a green twig shaped like a dinosaur.

I feel free! Free from language. Free from thought. In a continuous unfolding of wondrous moments. I am the seed; the worm, the game of the squirrels in the oak. But the girl worries her.

So-ji’s concept of rest is to stand and sway. When Kate decides to order her to remove the burden of her pack, So-ji gladly shrugs it off then suddenly falls onto the path and bunches into a ball.

‘No,’ Kate instructs. ‘Like this,’ and she models stretching out in abandonment on a huge bed of rock. ‘Cool down,’ and she squats by the rushing water and splashes her face and neck. So-ji doesn’t respond. Kate has no idea what is actually going on: Ageing woman teaching young woman about life? Australian female teaching Korean female bushcraft? Low-status teacher landed with problem student? Who knows. The WRONG WAY – GO BACK signs on the Brisbane freeways come into her mind. She laughs aloud. ‘Sorry,’ she apologises when she realizes how startling So-ji has found her outburst.

They plod through the afternoon.

‘Night coming,’ Kate warns. ‘No sun. Cold.’
So-ji stares back from behind spectacles, uncomprehending. They inch onwards – a progress during which So-ji struggles and Kate stretches out on one of the immense boulders that dwarfs the track, with the leaves of trees all around her, to wait for her. She’s in space, floating in green beauty. Except for occasional lapses into vivid fantasies, she feels surprisingly little agitation. In one fantasy she tells the school nurse: So-ji must see doctor. Very sick. Or the school principal: Help this girl. Body problem, mind problem. The desire to scare off So-ji’s boyfriend, a Fourth Year Conversation student, is particularly strong: Don’t marry this girl. She is trouble. Weak. She must never have babies. Leave her while you can! Mostly she watches squirrels or whatever else her senses gravitate to – until So-ji melts into view and flops down.

_Poor little bugger. She might even die._

Kate now calls her ‘love’ and ‘darling’. Smiles a lot. Extends a hand and hauls So-ji up the toughest bits. Hands her the water flask. It’s like being soldiers. The love that comes from struggle. She is totally with So-ji but she’s also wedded to her own pilgrimage. _No human being could come between me and the mountain_, she writes in her mind.

‘Solly,’ the girl manages a couple of times.

‘It’s okay,’ Kate answers. ‘No need to be sorry. You’re doing great.’

It’s 8pm and dark when they reach a signpost in English, the second all day: NATIONAL PARK SHELTER 3 KMS. All day – and they’ve only done 5 kays! It’s now urgent they simply get there. ‘So-ji, backpack – NO!’ she orders. Abandoning it is something Kate’s been urging for hours, and finally So-ji accepts. Kate rummages through So-ji’s expensive toiletries and empty snack food packages until she comes to something useful – a headband torch, the kind cavers use. ‘Put on,’ she commands, wondering why So-ji didn’t break it out earlier instead of relying on Kate’s torch to shine the way. She stuffs So-ji’s pyjamas and toothbrush into her own pack and hangs the girl’s backpack on the signpost. Koreans are honest – in the morning, it’ll be there.

The next section is very steep. Kate looks hopefully at her companion, but instead of demonstrating renewed energy, So-ji appears more defeated than ever. Kate takes note of her own energy levels – she feels strong. Good. The night promises to be long.

They go as usual, up the boulder track, slowly. When the cold descends, Kate lends So-ji her own jacket. They’re startled by something in a bamboo thicket. ‘A bear? Is it a bear?’

So-ji doesn’t answer, she’s lost in exhaustion. Through the tree canopy, the moon shines.

‘Ka-ay-te! So-o-o-ji!’

The call she’s been waiting for. ‘Coo-ee!’ she answers. The diary: _The whole world should know about this useful Australian bush cry, this acknowledgement of being lost and found_. ‘Coo-ee!’ she sends through the deciduous forest until Han-sol and Young-jin crash into view.

‘It’s So-ji,’ she’s quick to tell them. ‘Help her.’

The ‘rescue team’ has torches but no food, blankets, or First Aid, and the men confess they’d lost the way more than once on their way down. Han-sol also mimics his plight of having had no dinner. Earlier, when Kate had packed her kit on the floor.

_Heaven’s Gate._ Lesley Synge.
_TransnationalLiterature_ Vol. 4 no. 1, November 2011.
of the staffroom, she knew Han-sol judged her provisions as foreigner stupidity; now their raisins, cucumbers, cheese and almonds become their feast.

‘Dessert not ice-cream,’ jokes Young-jin. ‘Dessert – song.’ He shines a torch under his chin to illuminate his face. ‘Only you,’ he begins.

‘Elvis!’ Kate recognises.

‘You light up the darkest night. Only you-oo-oo-oo-oo.’ Kate claps. The girl smiles weakly. Above them the starry sky.

Han-sol, content because his belly’s fuller, cups a hand around one ear. They all follow suit, leaning intently into the cool dark air – into which Han-sol releases a wholesome fart. This time So-ji covers her mouth and giggles for a full minute.

Once it’s time to move, the teenager reverts to helplessness. Slight though he is, Young-jin piggy-backs her. Han-sol mimes an apology to Kate – an old soccer injury means he is unable to carry her. She assures him that it is unnecessary; senses there would be something improper about him even touching her.

So-ji is the most difficult of all burdens – a dead weight – and Young-jin can’t help but bump her against the sides of boulders occasionally. She clings to him as stubbornly as a baby monkey.

The distant lights of the National Parks Shelter bob into view and Han-sol sends out a whoop. They’re now at a spring that flows from the fissure of a giant cold boulder. Kate shines her torch onto a sign: SPRING WISH GRANT YOU. Young-jin, whose English Kate realizes is good, explains that since ancient times the spring has been famous as a source of vigour and fertility. As Han-sol guzzles from the communal plastic ladle, Kate senses a poignant moment – he and his wife are without children, and although he’s not the oldest son upon whom the pressure to continue the bloodline is intense, Han-sol is self-conscious and sad about this lack. She intuits a prayer for a son.

Young-jin accepts the ladle next. Kate knows his desires too. In a staffroom confidence he revealed that his girlfriend had dumped him. ‘I cannot love again.’ Damp, humiliated eyes. The pristine waters from the ancient shrine are supposed to help with this kind of dilemma too.

It’s Kate’s turn. She knows the Koreans pity her for being alone and divorced. She focuses on her two grown sons. While she spends these three months abroad, they’ve moved back to the family home to look after the cat and to save on rent. She drinks and wishes them happiness. The water’s purity is overwhelming.

The adult trio watches expectantly as So-ji drinks but soon it’s clear that the magic water does nothing for her. The young teacher hoists her up onto his back again and, with Han-sol relieving when he can, struggles heroically over the last stretch. Whenever they pause, the Koreans sing traditional songs and Kate does ‘The House of the Rising Sun’, the only song she can remember. At last – after rounding a boulder, the Shelter.

Kate cannot believe her eyes – it’s an enormous, well-lit, double-story building with a helicopter pad. I’d expected a couple of huts made of mountain stone – not this, she is ready to write later. The rather useless Maths teacher runs anxiously towards them with a bottle of rice wine, and So-ji faints dramatically at her feet. Then two men wearing National Park uniforms rush down the Shelter staircase to carry the teenager away.

‘Medical room,’ Young-jin explains between gasps of exhaustion. Han-sol
unscrews the cap of the bottle and drinks.

Kate’s tired – suddenly and completely. The Maths teacher escorts her to the pine loft for WOMAN HIKER. What a scene it is – hundreds of sleeping Korean women wrapped in blankets on the floor. Like seeds in a giant seedpod, or some weird scientific experiment, their bodies lie, one next to the other, as if awaiting some miraculous awakening. After the day’s solitary walk, Kate finds their numbers astounding. So Jiri Mountain is riddled with walking tracks? Why had the teachers chosen the lonely path from Dae-sung-gul? If only So-ji and I had passed one other human being – just one! Her colleague pushes at a slumbering student to make a small sleeping space for Kate. Before her eyes close (wishing for a bed; wondering about the distance to the next National Park Shelter), she sees two teenage girls sprint up the dormitory stairs giggling happily. One is So-ji.

From midnight onwards, alarm clocks ring and a number of hikers in the huge hall dress quickly and leave for the summit. At least that’s what Kate surmises. At dawn, she dresses, packs, and finds a picnic bench on which to wait. From it, she watches successive waves of Korean hikers depart – yesterday’s lonely mountain is today crawling with people. Her fellow-teachers are nowhere to be seen but she recognizes clutches of their students heading off. Who will look after them? She sits and sits. The dorm is hotter, stuffier and noisier than last night’s. People squash everywhere, on stairs, on landings. Although it comes here every year, Kate’s school hasn’t made a booking – the way they run things! – so its members are scattered everywhere. She winds up on a patch of pine floor between strangers. The teachers

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straggle in with So-ji in tow. She’s managed to walk all the way but poor Young-jin is again exhausted, this time from carrying not only his backpack, but So-ji’s which was retrieved, somehow, from the signpost. Han-sol’s old knee injury is playing up. The pretty Maths teacher is subdued.

Kate feels isolated. In the crush of people, she suffers an acute attack of culture shock, and loses her toiletry bag and shoelaces. Sleepless, stressed, she decides to strike out for the summit with the other early-risers. She substitutes strips of green plastic for her lost shoelaces and places a don’t-worry-about-me, have-a-happy-holiday note on the Maths teacher’s blanket. Young-jin will translate it.

There are many people silently striding along the mountain-top in cold, 3am air. Kate copies them and snaps her torch off – the moon’s light is truer. The exodus towards the peak is with the aim of seeing sunrise, she writes in her mind. It’s a tradition rarely achieved because of cloud. But when she stumbles and twists her ankle slightly, she tells herself to forget about the diary and to just walk. She doesn’t feel odd being alone because many of the shapes moving in the dark are solitary ones. The final ascent is steep and she scrambles over rocks. The green plastic cords which she’s wrapped around her boots loosen sometimes and she has to pause to re-fasten them, but she makes it.

The peak! The peak!

The human atmosphere is charged. A high school group from the city of Taegu has claimed the highest outcrop; men with tripods the most eastern edge. An ocean of dirty-white, pre-dawn cloud reaches as far as the eye can see. Within seconds, the clouds change. They are not ordinary any more, but Cloud Beings. One advances from the west, flowing in a powerful grey wave. A perfect cold front formation? Or a Dragon King?

The drama heightens as the Beings fly faster. Heaven is opening its gate. To the delight of the people, at 5.10am, official sunrise, a bright pink sliver rises. The puny journeymen and women from the Earth Realm urge this miracle on. The gods in the Heaven Realm hear them – and they make their pink sun grow from a psychedelic eyelash into a molten lantern. Cries of joy ring out – now it is full, whole! A pure pink circle of fire. The Taegu students on the crag unfurl the South Korean flag and sing the national anthem. The men with cameras snap their shutters tat-tat-tat. Cloud Beings swirl around the summit – celebratory, fast, and victorious. Kate raises her arms like a bird. Her heart beats fast.

It’s quickly bright. The now-silver sun’s impossible to glance at. Miracle over; time to go over the edge, and down.

It’s all tangled boulders but the path to the village of Jung-san-ri (where she’s told there will be a bus station) is always there. Its guidance takes many forms – tell-tale wear on a rock face, a helpful rope, yellow tape on a tree. Again the surroundings give Kate bliss – the green leaves, the sparkling rock flecks, the carpet of brown conifer needles. It’s as divine to look back as it is to greet each new turn.

She is passing Bupgyesa now, a holy place since the sixth century when Buddhism first arrived on the Korean peninsula from far-away India via China. She stands a long time in front of an ancient rock pagoda in the temple grounds. It has survived marauding Mongols, numerous invasions by the Japanese, interest from the Red Army of the People’s Republic of China, and American soldiers. Before leaving,
Kate drinks from the temple spring. Ah. She feels as if she could live forever. She tightens the plastic strips on her worn boots and laughs. *I look like a madwoman, too poor to buy laces. Have I ever been so happy?*

Kate sits on a huge rock and eats the last of her supplies. Then down and down. Young men (university students? army conscripts?) who have overslept and missed sunrise, come galloping, calling to each other. School students chatter past in chaperoned caterpillars. Human traffic pours up too. It’s Saturday and workplace groups climb in corporate T-shirts. Kate’s knees bend reliably, hour after hour, one step at a time.

The gradient flattens. Koreans reach for their cell phones, check messages, make calls. Picnic grounds, a souvenir shop, the Jung-san-ri bus station. The ordinary world again.

Back at her digs near the school, now so deserted, Kate stretches out on her bed in the Corpse yoga posture. Exhausted. She lies unmoving, noticing only the soft steady rise-and-fall of her breath. Sometimes she remembers those handsome young warriors galloping back down the rock steps from Heaven to Earth. Instead of the pages and pages she’d rehearsed, all she writes in her diary is: *San = mountain. The two syllables of ji-ri suggest a place where the foolish become wise. Jiri San = Wise Mountain.*

School resumes – and it feels like a drag, as if Jiri San is the sole reason for coming here. Daily she quells an impulse to return home immediately. When she is reunited with her sons she’ll tell them, ‘I’ve crested the wave. Stared into the future and seen The End. I’m over the hill, my darlings!’ They’ll laugh. She wishes she could spare them the rest – the cancer, the doctor’s prognosis. ‘No need for panic,’ she’ll say. ‘Death is natural. And I’ve decided to try some chemotherapy after all. I’m not frightened of anything anymore. I’m ready.’

It’s with effort that she honours the last weeks of her three-month contract. Though she loves the students. And the teachers, Han-sol especially, that lovable monkey with his tricks and antics. Loves them all. And as for So-ji, whenever Kate encounters her she addresses her inwardly, *Delightful girl! I needed you to hold me back. I was the stone, you the slingshot. When released, you propelled me far. A million blessings to you!*

How joyful to see her chatting away in English to anyone who’ll listen. And still with the same devoted Fourth Year English Conversation boyfriend.