

red horse

Just out of the corner of my eye, as I was taking the Bialetti off the stove in the morning light, a large red horse jumping over a hedge, its head and neck surging to pull its thinner body up and over. Not the shape of a real horse, I thought later, more like a chess piece or a seahorse,. But not till I had turned and searched the landscape to the east. No giant leaping horses, nothing remotely resembling one. Still, it would be nice to know what made that impression, so after I had rinsed the coffee stain off the rug I led my eye slowly along every contour between my window and the rising sun. But the shadows were shorter and the gleams were different. I saw several interesting buildings and a car park I had never seen before, though. There was a Gehry-style office building, solidly collapsing, a traditional Canadian school with a high flat front, a church with a silver-painted spire that made me think of the Ottawa valley, and a temple with a gold dome. I could roughly figure out where each of these was, all of them in the east towards the airport, from wandering around the city and by checking on the map against streets and buildings I knew.

The next morning just as the sun was at the same point - so a little earlier, since it was Spring - I inspected the landscape again. No leaping horse, but I saw the Gehry wreck, the school, the silver-spired church and the temple. Every morning I repeated the search. It helped me get up in the morning. After a few days I could find all of them in half a minute, whether the light was just breaking over the city or whether the shadows had got shorter and there were long streaks of yellow light along the roads and between the buildings. Before long I could do it on rainy days or near sunset too. Every now and then when I had forgotten to watch for it I got a flash of the horse, just a momentary image in the corner of my vision before I swung around to look eastward for it. I gave up removing the coffee from the rug. I tried standing at an angle to the window and attending to the edge of my visual

field, but to no avail. Too deliberate. I explored the city on foot, and went out of my way to find the buildings I had seen, always with that red shape crouching in a dark corner of my mind, ready to leap into view. But it never did. I found the school and the church, all within a block or two of where I expected them, though it wasn't until I went along a back alley that the school looked anything like it did from my window. The Gehry was a mystery to me, and architectural guides to the city were no help. Then one day, when the whole project was beginning to lose its energy for me, walking through the park that connects my apartment district to downtown, I looked in the ornamental pond and saw the reflection of a garage, a perfectly ordinary four storey parking garage with a gas station on the ground level. I couldn't see it from my apartment, artfully hidden behind a row of cedars, but its reflection, with the large mirrored office building behind it, was the shambling gravity-defying shape I had noticed on the morning of the horse.

I only stayed in the city a few years. It was going to be two but it turned into six, one way and another. So the buildings that had once been interesting mysteries had become familiar landmarks. My final departure approached: I did not expect ever to return. Most of my belongings had been shipped and I was left with a suitcase of clothes, my laptop, and the bialletti. The last morning came, the last time I would have a strong coffee watching the sun rise out of my high window. I found myself going through the ritual of the first months, looking for buildings and placing them on my mental map. I could see the school and the church, and I could reconstruct the rambling approaches I had taken before I had learned to go straight to where they were. I could see the park and the reflection of the garage, and with a bit of effort I could reconstruct an adventurous upside-down building out of it. But the temple: that was the one I had never managed to find before I lost interest. There it was, so clear in the morning light, its dome glistening with a tiny image of the rising sun and throwing a moving glint on the courtyard in front of it. It couldn't be where it seemed, three blocks along the road

running north from the park. I'd been there a dozen times, and all around. Ah well, you never get to understand everything.

The taxi came, a long black hearse-like limo, not the yellow cab I had expected. There was plenty of room for my bag and computer in the trunk but I sat in the front anyway. I explained that there was no hurry getting to the airport since I had allowed plenty of time. "No hurry for you" said the driver, "but I have others to collect, and they're not all as willing to leave". I didn't ask what he meant, but watched the familiar streets and buildings for the last time, telling myself that if we got there early I could have the second coffee I had skipped. I checked my wallet for money but only found some coins, and a five dollar bill which I would save for the coffee. I would pay the driver with a credit card and give him the coins as a tip. He didn't deserve more if he was going to be so gloomy and unaccommodating. When I looked up from this we were leaving the neighbourhood, just passing the park and approaching the road that leads to the highway. "Where are these next customers of yours" I asked, not caring about the answer but wanting to get him to speak. "Over there" he grunted, and gestured with his head. I tried to follow the direction but my eyes stopped half way, in the window by his head, just disappearing backwards, the temple, its unmistakable dome.

- "Stop", "turn around", "Go back".
- "Sorry, Sir, you're not my only customer this morning."
- "Well, at any rate tell me what that large building with the dome is. A temple?"
- "Can't say, could be too many. The red horse school used to be somewhere around here. You're not thinking of Bialetti's junk yard are you? He specialises in copper. Or the Buddhist centre, but it doesn't have a dome."

Then we were on the highway, heading east to the airport. I gave the car guy his fare, and a few grudging coins. There was plenty of time for my coffee. I

ordered a double espresso and sat sipping it, looking back, westward, to my former life. The runway went that direction and I could imagine myself taking off and climbing sharply, with the morning sun behind the plane. If there was a low cloud and we delayed rising through it we would climb over some low hills and the tall buildings would be in front of us. Just for a moment the plane would cut the line from the sun to my old building, and I imagined it blinking hello to someone drinking a morning coffee behind a window.

My flight was called and we left, taking a completely different flight path. I saw no familiar buildings and I could feel all those years and all that knowledge dropping as if none of it had really happened.