

Excerpt From: The Last One Up the Mountain, Non-fiction Essay

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On July 8th, 2014 Israel launched a retaliatory attack on the Gaza strip after an extremist Palestinian group kidnapped and murdered three Israeli teenagers the month before. 17 days later I stood on the crest of Mt. Nebo along the Israeli-Palestinian border. Mt Nebo is just thirty-eight miles as the sparrow flies from where the teenagers' bodies were discovered in Hebron. I was aware of this proximity in some vague manner as I traced the jagged line of the river curving through the valley.

On top of Mt. Nebo there is a tourist center made up of a chapel, a museum, a bathroom, and bowls of water and birdseed set beneath the trees for birds to feast on. There were dozens of sparrows and doves, playing in the water, chirping and flitting from tree to bush. They stared at the tourists who milled around from between branches.

The museum at Mt. Nebo is a small building with stone walls and slats in the ceiling that let in light and wind and dust. It shelters a varied collection of broken columns, ancient mosaics, and other relics. The artifacts on display are arranged in jumbled masses along the walls without attention to aesthetics. The bathroom is very large—to my reckoning, almost half the size of the museum itself with several western-style toilets. The years-long buildup of fecal matter in the bowls made a rather more lasting impression than the size, however; the doors and windows were left open to let the pine-infused breeze in. The toilet paper lounged next to the sinks (a few half-spun rolls). I used the bathroom quickly, coaxing a few bubbles of soap from the dispenser for mixing with the trickle of water from the faucets.

The view was beautiful. Haze rested in the Jordan valley to the northwest, blurring the sight of Jerusalem 46 kilometers away. The dust also made it impossible to see the eighty rockets that would flare up into the sky that day. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict was in the back of my mind as I looked down on it, but I wasn't thinking about the hatred that was ripping towns and flesh apart. I wasn't thinking of the Hamas-led government that had praised the murder of a 19-year-old, and two 16-year-olds. I wasn't thinking about the teenaged Palestinian who was burned alive by three Israelis in retaliation. I wasn't thinking about the conjugal relationship between the rockets and the sparrows—don't we describe them in the same way: diving, soaring, flying?

I remember the scent of dust in my nostrils and the pine-swept hills so well, but despite their lucidity in my memory, the peaceful, pastoral scene I remember seems a false memory in view of the war and turmoil taking place concurrently. I wonder how I could see the valley filled with shadows of death flying over and through the streets and only think of the sparrows. I could have been 10,000 miles away, in Arizona for as much as I was thinking about the world of borders, politics, and pain as I stood on that hilltop.

Mt. Nebo is known in the Bible as the resting place of the prophet Moses. After leading the disobedient Israelites in the wilderness for forty years, the new generation that was able to enter the lands promised; but Moses, as punishment for his own disobedience, was not. Moses is said to have died on Mt. Nebo after surveying the valley after watching the Israelites enter the valley.

The valley today is bold with green surrounding the Jordan River, Jericho visible in the dusty haze twenty-six kilometers away. I imagine the Israelites into the valley as Moses, gazing out on the same valley towards Jericho, the first city to be conquered. He would have been the

last one to climb up the mountain, and according to the Bible he would never descend into the valley below. I imagine he felt regret for not entering the land that Israel was promised, or maybe relief, knowing he would not take part in the destruction and bloodshed it would take to establish a fledgling country.