

Narvik Twice

Dennis Haskell

There were few of us left
when the long overnight train
trekked at last into Narvik.
Above the Arctic Circle, I
stepped out into fragile,
delicate sunshine, the only one
not hunchbacked under a pack.

Forty-one years ago
we both humped one
and no-one else stepped down
into dark, furious blasts, the
winter air that seemed to gulp you in
and freeze your lungs.
Our journey had been fjords,
solid lakes, waterfalls
stopped in mid-sentence,
pines in snow overcoats
and ice sculpture birches
with sleet for leaves.
A customs officer – they had
such creatures then – rescued us,
drove to the youth hostel:
closed. Then to a guest house
warming to the only tourists in town.

The station is just the same,
I'm pretty sure, just as small
and inconsequential, with a walk up the hill

I do remember, now
I've come back alone.
Narvik is bigger no doubt
but still just a town:
there's nothing here
beyond memories
that make me
what I am. Some of them
I'm discovering again.

I walked the streets, and ate,
so little else to do.
For no-one there did I
have any meaning, nor they for me.
The next day summer was over,
the streets feted with rain.
You are dead. Why have I come?
A need to tell myself
that it is over, to seal
closed our love, our marriage
and all that it meant?
Sometimes now I reel
like a ghost in my own life.

I stood on Narvik's streets
with that increasingly familiar
concoction of satisfaction and pain,
adrift in Norway's drizzling rain.