

The dragon and the moon and the mountain

By Debbie Bayne

Last June I went on a camping and walking holiday in the Sierra Nevada Mountains in southern Spain. This is the story of my holiday.

The week has been organised to coincide with the full moon. On the first night I lie in my tent, the flap open, moon-bathing all night. I feel like a newly hatched chick in a high nest on a ledge, as though I am perched on the edge of the world 4,500 feet up. I have never felt so securely and safely held by the earth before; caressed and cradled, softly supported, looked after. I am in awe and wonder at the moonlight and the strength of the earth beneath me. I don't sleep. I am hot and wakeful, excited, astonished, peaceful; a whole procession of things. The moon bathes me and I expose as much skin to its blue liquid-light as I can. It's not like sunlight, it doesn't burn but feels much more powerful, it sinks right through my skin and mingles with my blood, working alchemy on me. I get up in the morning knowing that something has happened – I am changing. I feel that I've been touched by something so big that I can't name it. It happens to me every night, and every morning I get up grinning and speechless.

During the day there is sun and the land soaks it up, stores it, basks in it, like a lizard or a snake, and then radiates it so that heat infuses me, penetrates me through my feet as we walk. Each of us walks at a different pace, so we walk mainly alone, meeting up to rest. I like this aloneness. My holiday has turned into a quest, and questing is mostly done alone.

We climb the highest mountain on mainland Spain. It is called Mulhacen and is 11,411 feet high. It takes two days. The first day is horrible, there is no path, it is so steep that I have to use my hands and the ground is covered in prickly plants. I have demons flapping around me, tripping me, guiding my hands to the thorniest places, driving stinging sweat into my eyes. I can feel their black leathery wings slapping my face, I can smell them, I can hear their whispered taunts. I cannot go back - there is nowhere to go back to - I can only go forward. At last I get to the end of the climb. I cannot imagine doing this for another day, and I go to bed telling myself that I don't have to. I know that in practical terms this is true, but I also know that the land has cast a spell on me, so really I have no choice but to go on. The next day is different. I find the rhythm of breath and heartbeat and feet.

The mountain is talking to me.

I can feel its gigantic pulse, hear its breathing. I can feel the dragon that lives inside it - vast, visceral and hot, powerfully, frighteningly alive. I realise that the dragon has been speaking to me at night as I lie awake in the moonlight. The surface of the mountain is made of its shed scales, glinting and pewtery,

streaked with rust and fire. As I step on them they clatter and clink like hot glass and the Dragon Mountain tells me how to walk: Breathe. Take one step. Do this and reaching my summit is inevitable.

I do as I'm told and once I've got the rhythm right my inner world becomes only my breathing and matching my steps to it. I love the simplicity of this and the nothingness that exists outside of it - I have no thoughts, only my body, and my body is climbing a mountain, because it is breathing and taking the next step, over and over again. I reach the top, giggling and sobbing and staggering, my fingers and toes tingling from lack of oxygen and cold – there is deep snow at the summit that the combined forces of sun and dragon haven't melted by June. This is another world.

Coming back down is as hard on knees and feet as going up was on heart and lungs. By the time we get to where we're staying for the night I am more exhausted than I've ever been before. The next day we leave the mountain and walk down over long, gentle, grassy slopes back to our campsite. I feel triumphant and ecstatic at having done something so enormous, and at having received such a profound gift. Eyes have opened in my feet, my skin and my body so that I sense the earth differently now.

When it is time to come home to Scotland, I find that I've fallen hopelessly in love with this land, and leaving is incredibly painful. I know that these mountains are now an indelible part of my heart, lungs, feet, belly. It's not possible to erase them, I will always be called back and have to return. I am both scared and excited by something having this power over me.

When I get home I paint the dragon and the moon and the mountain.