

Inversion.

I've been walking up this track now for the best part of an hour and there's still no sign of an end. Still no natural branch off to the left, or right for that matter. My designated hill looms ever larger as the kilometres pass below my boots. Its flanks lofting from my feet to vanish in dramatic style. Steep sides cascading down crag pocked slopes, boulder strewn and scarce of vegetation. Ahead lies the bealach, the top of this pass and my turnoff.

Suddenly my track stops, terminates, ceases to be under my feet. Replaced by black sucking organic soil. Peat hags and pools of stagnant water rule this landscape, their influence felt in the glen far below as they ration their life giving moisture into embryonic river courses.

No matter, my way lies up, away from this sponge-like morass.

This is hard work, placing one foot in front of the other. The incline is relentless as its dew-glazed grassy banks yield to my progress. My foot slips every third stride on wide wet green fronds. No path here, I left that behind when I turned off the track.

Cloud engulfs the upper slopes not far above my head, creating an artificial ceiling between this hill and its neighbours. My horizon lies far out to the west, trapped between walls of a U-shaped glen and capped by this grey barrier to the heavens.

An invading chill heralds my arrival at ceiling level and I look westward to find all of my views are now down. The slope carries on, climbing ever upward into a world of near monochrome. From here I enter the twilight zone, Rod Serling's surreal landscape of the mind. A land of swirling chaos where the only tangible reality is the ever changing ground beneath my feet. I have been in this world before. I do know the way.

Up.

Deviate left or right and I am lost, no longer in control of my own fate, no longer able to predict what lies in store for me. On either side waits the land of dread. I remember the rocky crags seen from below and know their kin hide within this world. I recall the slopes of scree, their boulders loosely held against the hillside.

This cloud is not too bad, not too thick. I can see to each side and a fair bit ahead, about 10 metres of visibility before every thing fades into mist.

Up, I am still going up.

It feels like I have been ascending this same slope for hours now, this same incline and this same monotonous view. With nothing to see but a 10 metre patch of ground and grey shapes swirling through a grey backdrop. There is nowhere else for my mind to take my imagination. I have exhausted all the important stuff, all the stuff I came out here to get away from. Its next port of call is into the unknown, into the land of dread and into madness. A matter of life and death. Stange, this always ends

with David Niven sitting on an escalator, passing through grey clouds and musing on his past as he ascends to heaven.

Heaven can wait because I have some action here.

My slope is levelling out and the grey above me is getting brighter. The walls of my 10 metre wide prison dissipate with every climbing step. Blue sky fades into view above my head and suddenly I am on another planet. A once-elusive sun shines brightly behind my back as I turn to face my new vista. The edge of a billowing sea, its grey wisp-like waves lapping at my feet, stretching into the distance.

Its surface broken by an archipelago of peaks

all over 900 meters high and all bathed in the same clear beauty. Warm air has purged the summits of its cold damp cousin and holds it trapped at that lower level.

My peak stands close by, its majesty truncated and rendered to a mere stone-strewn grassy hump with a cairn for a crown. But amid these others it holds its own. Grass greener, stones brighter, their cristaline content glistening as they cast sol in all directions. I stand at the edge of one fine crag, the sun again at my back and look down into this fascinating sea. My shadow cast upon its surface for all to see, and round its head, a halo bright with light and every colour of the rainbow. This celestial being can't be me? I raise my arms and true enough so does my shadow, my brother of the sky.

Today is a good day to be alive. Alone on the planets surface with creation as my companion.



The only sign of human life the occasional contrail, a chalk line on a clear blue board. Thirty minutes later and I have reached my summit. Shirt off, pieces out, flask open and tea poured. I sit with my back propped against the cairn. Not for me the westward view. There lies only cloud stretching over a shrouded sea. My choice is north and east where peak after peak can be seen, each picked out in dramatic style by this 3000 foot high shore line. Each standing aloft, their lesser neighbours hid from view under waves of shifting grey.



The air up here is clear to an extreme point. A photographer's dream. The light true to all the colours. No heat haze, no atmospheric pollution. I have never been able to see so far with such clarity. Every single point is sharp, every island brought just that little bit closer. Even the texture of the cloud's surface is picked out in light and shade.

I can't be the only person to witness this splendor. Surely someone stands on another hill enjoying this rare scene? I look through the clear air and pick out three small shapes moving along the ridge of my hill's closest neighbour. Three

black silhouettes on the last few yards before they, too, can relax and drink deeply from this well of delight.

I hear a motorbike far in the distance its high-pitched whine defeating this un-natural insulation. The only alien sound in a world built for peace. There are no roads near enough to cast such a distant noise but there it is and getting clearer. A thumb-size ball of fluff crosses my sight. Its small wings struggle against logic to propel it along, and then my miniature motorbike is gone. Lost amongst the scree to dine on the few alpine plants that hide there.

A slight breeze keeps the tide rolling past my summit and briefly opens a window down through the cloud to the world below. A reminder of my other life and of the route I must walk to return to it.

I am not alone.

Two shapes have appeared on the faint summit path. Their destination obviously my eyrie. I would love to linger but I have feasted well on this amazing vista and locked its memory in place with a final draught of honey-sweet tea. I will share this day with these usurpers and the best way of doing that is for me to leave.

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I have only witnessed four cloud inversions in thirty years of hillwalking. Brocken spectres are rarer still, but the memory of each fuels the soul and drives misguided wretches like me to dizzy heights in the foulest of weather. Mountain-top bumble bees aren't well known but they do exist. It is the one insect guaranteed to bring a smile to my face.

Photographs:

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Inversion 1&2, Roy Mitchell.

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