

CODE, MEMORY

Walk in, to a Ticino alp's
wild strawberry midsummer,
see the blues flit, conjure up

a young Russian with a net.
Elsewhere, by lamplight,
one you loved can look

at the old photos and say
"you smile like your father,
he also wore a cap."

The way lit up in '53,
two young men just willing
a model into being. Walk,

toward them, past a monk
tending peas, on to stains,
agar plates and centrifuges,

come, walk by the light
of signals from within, past
x-shaped diffraction patterns;

on, past '53, heady
with the logic of splice
and heal, the profligate

wonder of polymerases,
into denominable bounty,
down this biochemical

rope trick of a molecule,
its rings' sticky signposts
tied to a backbone (chain,

chain, chain, she sings)
run -- of sugars, unsweet,
and phosphate triads.

There, there's memory's lair,
the inexpungable trail
of every enzyme that worked,

and those that did but
for a while, every affair
the senses had with a niche,

the genes turned off
as we came out of water,
what worked, what nearly killed --

the insinuating virus, code
immured in coiled softness,
coopted symbiotes. Move,

for here wiggling and collision
gauge shape, down necklaces
of meaning interrupted

by stutters, the ons, offs,
intent, a tinkerer's means
to function (that escapes us),

on, to difference, earthy life,
its dendral arms hazarding
berry and you, to the butterfly

that lights on torn up earth
in Srebrenice and Złoczów,
that flies to the far place

love obstinately chose.
An Alp... is to be climbed;
they did, our mid-century

helixeers. But oh, an alp
is also a sweet shoulder
of a mountain, that meadow

reaching for snowline, the place
where men drive cattle, rest,
move higher. An alp is clover,

a place to feed, and watch
another blue, now the morning
glory's winding grasp and

climb. The word sings, in alp
and alkaline phosphatase
and DNA, in nuanced refrain;

this side of memory, of a world
that was; and one that will be.

--Roald Hoffmann