IN THE WAY OF SPEAKING

The man began to climb just as the sun rose, and the starlings'

scat song was for him, alone. He picked up a stick to swat grass

leaning into the trail, at every thistle crown. His boots grew

wet. He was bent down over a beetle when she came down the hill.

They laughed, the early walkers. He said something about wanting

to reach the top before the sun rose. She said it won't be

today, you'd have to get up earlier. He thought about both of

them standing together at a fence, slowed to speak by the

yellowing light on a roan. But what he said was that he was

sorry, he was out of breath, and she replied that she was on the

easy downhill part. He remembered coming up early one morning

and seeing her dozing on the sofa, poorly covered by a sweater

and a newspaper. He had brought her a blanket and covered her

and said nothing. Now, on the trail, the man pointed to the

horizon and said that he had never seen the sea wrapped around

the land so far to the south. Birds flew into the silence. He

went up the slope, she down, and when he remembered to glance

back she was around the bend. The man climbed higher, stopping

to watch a skunk, head down, cross to grub for some food. He

thought I'm like that skunk, like the curled poppies. High on

the ridge, he lay down on some flat rocks, let sun the warm him.

He thought of what he should have said. Perhaps he slept ten

minutes. Then he woke suddenly, stood up, stretched his arms to

the sky. A few feet away on the stone lay a rattlesnake, its

head following his hands. He put them down slowly, said "Sister

rattler". The snake's skin shone in the sun. "I love you,

sister rattler. I want your power". The man stood, eyes on the

snake, stood still, until the memory of what she had said once

about keeping calm and not moving if bitten, so that the venom

not circulate, burst into his mind, breaking his and the

rattler's space. He jumped from the rock and ran down the trail,

not looking back.