

Footprints

By Annie Dillard

5 On the dry Laetoli plain of northern Tanzania, Mary Leakey found a trail of hominid footprints. The two barefoot prehumans walked closely together. They walked on moist volcanic tuff. We have a record of those few seconds from a day about 3.75 million years ago—before hominids chipped stone tools. Ash covered the footprints and hardened like cement. Ash also preserved the pockmarks of the raindrops that fell beside the two who walked; it was a rainy day. We have almost ninety feet of their steady footprints intact. We do not know where they were going or why. We do not know why one of them paused and turned left, briefly, before continuing. “A remote ancestor,” Leakey guessed, “experienced a moment of doubt.” We do know we cannot make anything so lasting as these two barefoot ones did.

15 After archaeologists studied this long strip of record for several years, they buried it again to save it. Along one preserved portion, however, new tree roots are already cracking the footprints, and in another place winds threaten to sand them flat; the preservers did not cover them deeply enough. Now they are burying them again.

20 Giacometti said, “The more I work, the more I see things differently; that is, everything gains in grandeur every day, becomes more and more unknown, more and more beautiful. The closer I come, the grander it is, the more remote it is.”