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In late November, 1528, a handful of Spaniards, survivors of an ill-starred expedition to Florida, were washed ashore in the Gulf of Mexico near the present site of Galveston. One of these men was Nunez Cabeza de Vaca, thirty-eight years old, the lieutenant of the expedition. Despite the severest privations, de Vaca led two other Spaniards and a Moor on a journey across the entire continent, barefoot and naked, which occupied them eight years.

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de Vaca in a Vanishing Geography

... the power of maintaining life in others lives within each of us, and from each of us does it recede when unused. It is a concentrated power. If you are not acquainted with it, your Majesty can have no inkling of what it is like, what it portends, or the ways in which it slips from one.

Haniel Long, Interlinear to Cabeza de Vaca
(based upon de Vaca's journals and a
letter to the King of Spain)

7/8/86

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My Brother Breathes Beside Me

My brother breathes beside me in the dark.
Our room constricts with the insistence of lungs.
With effort we pass the air between us,
Exchanging, lung to lung in our sleep,
What little there is to share.

Some nights, listening to him breathe in the dark,
I am taken by the profundity of his life
And the maintenance it exacts. For there's a place
Between breaths where his body is empty,
Where lungs fall slack and the blood thirsts
At membranes, those troughs of continuence.
It's in this pause that I sense
A crevice, like a fault of the earth,
Split his being between air and death.

And some nights, as our lungs lift and fall in the dark,
I try to match the rhythms of his life
Breath for breath. But
Even that syncopation is impossible: our needs
Or their timings are different.
So as we lie in the laboring night
Our room narrows to the distance of air,
And I must be content with the measures of his living,
Be vigilant for failures, ready with air.

Last Ring from the Skeleton's Finger

You feel them green and fluvial, ancient
space as it opens inviting you back
to bow and spin as once you did
in a phantom time
now marooned.

You feel them sisters, the wild chalk dancers,
whirling and whirling
in a kingdom of continual permission.
You hold me hard and say
you love me.

Won't or can't, I don't
follow: your child, your
girl, a lost
private place, a nerve mesh,
primary, and you strain
toward it, a hag
rubbing moonlight on sacrificial blades,
deep in a forest of water.

It's a dream, that return
unknown and new,
without memory or expectation.
We are a lovely choir of lies;
I call your body rainbow ghost,
field of white clover, horse
galloping on satin hooves.
But when I touch your body
it opens like an old woman's wallet
stuffed with her children's pictures. Opens
on stale picnics, yellow, summer
and rubble.

How many places must I
lay my head before
I rest? How many
shadows must I swallow
before the walls are calm?
And that solar birth

of novas caving into
coherence—where is it,
life-star of even light?

*Reno and neon, drunk again;
Over the hill and 'round the bend;
Coming at you, so let me in.*

Coming to in the blown room
or clinging to tape-scabbed stools
of all-nite diners
like a larva to a stone.
But fearing salvation, secretly loving
the pain, wailing "It's lonely,
lonely," while something
profound, perhaps the courage to be
nothing, waits
trembling in my next breath.

Judy, the blood begins dreaming of itself,
a dream
Denying the sanctuary of dreams.

Judy, Judy, I don't know your gods.

The American Specimen

The cop they sent by to seal your house up
said it was a mess, nearly every bone
broken. Figured "way over a 100"
when you lost it. Shook his head.
And why I remember again, and why,
Howard, I devote this to you,
I don't know. Maybe
it's fear, the fear
and strange voluptuousness
I felt on hearing the details—
like the time I crouched under Debby's window
and watched her undress, feeling invisibly
there, logy with musk I could only imagine,
oddly calm in the roar of her light and the wild
straining to see.
Maybe because I never got close.

Youngest D.A. in the state, golden
and chosen boy,
you should have quit.
Believing in justice you hated
the law, the grease and deals,
adulterous judges awarding
impossible alimonies, petty vendettas,
the whole game. Drunk enough
you hated the law, then drove home
to next day show the jury
films of some black man up for drunk driving
trying to walk the white line
after two cops had kicked the shit out of him
in the courthouse basement.
And in how many private trials
convened late in your empty house
did you brutally prosecute
your ache for boys, guilty

as charged, guilty, convicted, sentenced
without mercy to denial?
"Quit," I told you
the only time you asked. But
you let it slide, using every rationalization
that ruins sleep.
You died, I think,
an accidental suicide:
you couldn't believe your own lies.
Scotch after scotch
I watched you hammer it down
in the dens of strangers, in the dark bars
of Arcata among athletes over the hill
and unemployed loggers numbing themselves
enough to go home.
I watched you sink in your own vast tar,
barely struggling, almost
resolute, like a mammoth
who deep in its dim brain felt
extinction glowing.

And I watched, days after your last murder conviction,
when you turned,
drunk,
and bellowed down the bar,
"I'm the American Specimen, friends,
and law in these parts
say they die—*dig* it?—*die*!
Don't none of you motherfuckers
flinch; don't none of you say
your hand ain't on that switch!"
You sliced your palm when you slammed
down the glass. "Judas Christ,
that's me," you laughed
as I drove you back from the emergency ward.
Then, parked at your house, you refused
to get out, to go in, and began
weeping,
confessing most of what I've felt to say here,
your head down on the dashboard

and your eyes closed.
I tried from the little I knew,
to say what I thought was true
in the kindest possible way.
You told me to shut-up.

Maybe down that long straightaway, flat out
in the fastest Porsche they make,
you were trying to break through.
I don't know. But I know the road
as well as you did, and when Bob
told me you were dead
and what had happened, I felt
you slamming
through the first three curves leading
into it, sick at yourself,
drunkenly infatuated
with the distance between your reflexes
and the car's response, then
suddenly sailing out
of the last long curve
and bearing down on it
hard, the broken lines
fusing in front of you, ripping it
into high, moonlit
eucalyptus blurring
in the black rush,
memory
of that one little jog curve
blurring, burning
away, all the say
down on it and then over
and over
and over,
like an answer you want to remember.

Howard,
I pray you had time to scream
the scream
you'd been holding
all your life.

Song for the Threshold

Fallow deer climb weakly
Through the Month of Bright Leaves,
Foraging toward the timber line.

Father of Owls, we are dying.

Our tamawaris did not return
From his fast of prophecy on the mountain.
The elders have ordered impossible sacrifice.

Monarch of Elk, we are dying.

The skies are dark, but it does not rain.
Salmon throng at the mouth of the river
But no song clears the blood from the water.

Confector of Clouds, we are dying.

Hunger claws our women's bodies, the children
Watch the river and no longer play. Late
Into evening, the men weep secretly.

Mother of Blooms, we are dying.

Above dwindling fires stand the smoking-racks,
Barren. All the dogs have been eaten.
Our chants and our rituals, exhausted.

Dark River Spirit, protect our journey.

Dying

As your eyes
close,
their falling lashes strum
thin strands of protoplasm
connecting the stars.
The chord
tapers toward
silence
but holds at the edge, soft,
resonant, low; like
a child humming to himself.

"Some Words" over a Mountain Man's Grave

The buffalo are gone. They sleep,
now, in the humped, scudding clouds.
A dove sweeps by,
looking for water or a roost.
I suppose the sunset's colors
have always been the same.

After all the dogs and dirt
you had to eat, I pray
that your old bones have found, far down
in this cold earth,
their lost family. Up here,

the falling light leads
to a different dark,
and this child's lonely,
traveling west again. But
I imagine you didn't shine
to such sentiments;

the high solitude of the trail
was your fierce, silent strength;
and—rightfully—you never told
how to follow a tree's breathing
to water, or how to receive
the stillness.

Goodbye to Bluebird

Like blood
leaking through eardrums
we gather on a scorched plateau
overlooking saltworks
and a dying sea
to watch those left of the angels go.
Quietly, deeply, our children
weep.
No one moves to console them.

Once these angels of our other lives
came down singing
of good work and green blood,
of the true family, friends,
the human hand. They came
as envoys of our selves,
summoned
against the terrible waste
our lives allowed,
descending from their high fetal orbits
to kiss our brains and dance
evenings with us in orchards
swarmed with bloom, to lead us
asleep in our lovers' arms,
saraband, gleaming with sweat.
But angels must be nourished, and for all
the reasons that punish sleep
we never cared enough.

Ruined and weak, tumorous,
the angels recede, trumpets
spilling rust

on the flyblown human face
draining in the dark.
The next angels
we must build in our bodies
and spring them whole
from our hands, our genitals, our throats.
Pain, the perfection
of character, a lifetime devoted
to excellence are required
to make even one.

It is time to live seriously
with the trees and stones,
time to throw away
what we won't need in the hills.

Rooms

Opening rooms, rooms
that vanish.

Wandering through changes
in the wind and the light.

Weary, as birds
left by the Ark,
circling a world all water,
seeking a tree, a nest,
must have been weary.

You prepare to die.

To close your eyes

and allow it in,
the owl and the broken abacus,
the last
beautiful secret.
Then there is fire in the water
and the moon
moves through you flexing
her hard incandescence.
You are her prophet, chosen here,
and must make raw pilgrimage,
return
with opened dreams
of nakedness and love,
then live to free
the faces around you, the ones
that watch you sleep,
dreaming this,
fallen, blown away.

Blaze

Whatever it was that carried me
climbed the other way
when night forked.
My energy
gnawed by shadow, my precosity
exhausted,
it is the first loneliness
and maybe it lasts.
Maybe
it whups you into the mud.
I don't know.
I love you and can live alone.
I respect those lost here and those
who turned back from the cones of semen
in the stars' quicks
to accept the consolation of irony
and quarter their recklessness.
That may come. It may be too high
or too dark, too silent
where I'm going.
But I'm going.
And therefore rid my pack
of the useless:
nostalgia, self-pity, the charm
of my youth, fear of the dead,
every received idea, all
the money and maps.
The only thing I keep
is a tin cup.

Before Sunrise

I hear
you moving
naked
back through
the dark house
to our bed.
The world
is perfect.

The Stone

—for Sylvia

Of two great masters they say
One died silently, with a smile;
The other, screaming his head off.
There are no conclusions to be reached.
The stone keeps falling
Till it hits the earth.

To Mayakovsky

Night dropped like a bloodsoaked towel
Midnight hung a basket of snakes in the rafters

A new white shirt lays near a broken quill

Mayakovsky, it's one o'clock again, the hour
cattle freeze and seeds
blister with snow

At one o'clock the jeweled net is full of holes
Old loves bite the shoulders of other men,
whisper their names in the undertow
of wheat as the last tremble
slides into the river
Salem's children touch your hands
and half of humankind wanders
in the pyramid of sleep

This is the space of the dream
Stalin combs his mustache
Hitler combs his mustache
Johnson laces his corset

We are awake but we are blind
By touch alone we load the gun
with dreams broken, ignored, or misunderstood
But Vladimir, listen:
beyond the splintering of small bones
and the split root's shriek, like
an echo preceding speech, raindrops
dripping on a bell.

Love Song

In touching we sometimes forget the blessing.
Luminous under the skin, the whale's heart
Pounds dark tiered fathoms of singing, a
Permission, a light beating lambent between our bodies.
That heart, that singing, that light,
That paradise past a child's awesome heaven:
Our bone heat blazing. The space
We warm lying here and held, melts back
To raw energy. A hot
Green jumble in which genesis
Opens and roots. An immensity clement to whales.
Loam. Perfect fir trees, like the skeleton
Of our soul. Folding. Doubling. As
The mother of our next life
Hides us in our dreams.

Shepherd's Songs

I WIND EGG

A ewe off by herself, sagging
in black-oak shade.
Something, most likely coyote,
has torn a big chunk
from her right ham.
An iridescent swarm of flies
whine in and out of the wound,
and a clot of maggots,
like squeals of mercury,
dig toward the bone.

I shoot her in back of the head.
Blood blurts from her nose
as she slumps.
Under the gunshot and flat *whop*
of the skull-blowing bullet,
a sound, like
I've heard with the slap and suck of bellies
when fucking leaps for its flood,
heard once from a speed-freak hitting
the jackrabbit vein to his spine,
again in an alley ringing with tire irons,
and when Grandpa, a cranial artery
blown, dropped to his knees:
a sound
ripped from the plexus,
from the very nervemeat, a clear & raw
syllable, blunt, muted, involuntary
UNGGH!

Before any word ever howled around its shape
mad with meaning, with metaphor and loneliness,
that sound was song enough
and understood creature to creature
that some animal had reached
the edge of its form, the full
pure pain and panic, and let go
helplessly into what is next.

II FULL MOON LOTUS

Calling, calling, a tunnel of ice
underwater, larynx, cochlea, spirals,
the screams' whirlpool. I awake.

I saddle my horse
and gallop through Northfork
wired to each decibel of
airless suddering bleat.

The eagle flies, filling the moon,
and I know what I'll find knotted
under the screams. A ewe,
her lamb hung in birth,
flat on her side and pawing.

How long
did she stumble, humped
with impossible labor, the lamb's head
dangling from her, before
she went down
exhausted, with only
that last blind animal energy left
to wail help, warning, or deafen the terror
when the eagle came down like a gavel
and began to feed, taking first
the lamb's eyes, then its lips and tongue,
and hooked to the soft
essentials, the ewe's vagina?

Already death shivers
ripple under her wool
and the eagle slides on an east wind
her warm blood in his throat.

I do what is left me: with both feet
against her rump, hands around the lamb's
thin wet neck,
jerk him out.

Her uterus comes too, hemorrhage
after hemorrhage making her hind legs kick
till I cut her throat.

I empty with her,
fascinated by the moonlight on her womb,

remembering, like opium, back and softly back,
once tilting an abalone shell
at a full moon to catch
the pearly wash of color, margins
dissolving in a rush and ebb of utter iridescence.
Her moon-glazed eyes, the blood, the
trembling light:
I can smell the ocean, and hear it,
feel it and rain and every inch of
feeding river whisper:

"Don't cling; don't cling.
Death is the worst we offer, and that
is easy. Like
throwing open a window.
Like turning over in your sleep."

III THE LAMB'S EYE

Snow falling centuries to reach me,
the space between flakes, between
faces, a memory bobbing
on a river of dreams, kindness & kisses,
that space
like the air in a ringing bell
rushing suddenly into shape:

the ewe, heaving to kneel out of a drift,
the lamb's whole head dangling
out of her, hung-up
in the dive of birth.
With my horse's lead-rope
I tie her to an oak,
pry
into the bloody steam of her vagina
working my numb fingers
under the lamb's front legs,
trip them free
and slide him out in my arms.
Dead.
A snowflake melts on his open eye.

Because you'll talk to anything
out here, I tell the ewe as I
release her, "We did what we could
but he's dead."

She noses the corpse
then walks away, afterbirth
swinging between her back legs.

But since I've come here to listen
to the songs a man sings himself
alone in the hills,
I look in the lamb's eyes
a long time.
Beautiful, like dreaming of sleep.
I watch his tongue turn blue,
the birth fluids freeze, how the snow
seems to hesitate before touching him.
It is almost dark when I return.
I'd slipped him under my capote
and rode on down the ridge.
Then, against my belly, a heartbeat,
another, stronger, then a warm nose
prodding me for a tit.
Joyous,
I huddled over him
bleating my idea of their welcome,
weeping for the first time
since my teens.

The lamb is stiff. By the tail
I pick him up and shake off the snow,
hang him on the fence
so he won't be counted twice.
By tomorrow the ravens
will pluck his eyes. So
the song curves through
a dream. The lamb's eyes
in the gut of a raven, dissolving
in flight; and the sockets,
the aching sockets, slowly
filling with snow.



This edition of 500 copies was typeset on an IBM composer, printed on an offset press, hand bound and hand distributed. All the tools and skills were given freely or secured by trade. The total cost of the edition was under \$150, that for materials. The book provided an occasion for friendships, skills, and other energies to join in a specific production. Because we wished to avoid the commodity spectacle the book bears no emblems of the marketplace: price, copyright, names. It is a gift. Pass it on.

