

SYCAMORE • ORIOLE

by

Ken McCullough



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Introduction

Ken McCullough's poetry reminds us of the most basic facts, one of which is that poetry itself, before anything else, is a journey. The journeys that McCullough takes us on are distinctly American ones, treks that guide us down, under, through to the intricate and regenerative lower layers of existence that hide beneath the daily surfaces of our lives, like the crystal lingam ensconced in a deceptively rocklike geode:

I scout south along the ridge
 down the saddle to a shabby weald
 where, on another trip
I found a field of geodes
 —a crystal lingam
 ensconced in every one
 still here by the hundreds
the size of coconuts

“Geode”: earth-form. For McCullough, the world is a geode, a stone with crystal-lined cavities that are accessible only by the kind of penetrating attentiveness that poetry demands. McCullough's journeys, after all, are journeys of language, a rip-rap of words that move us step by step to a dawning realization, the oriole (from “aurora”: dawn) in the sycamore.

McCullough's characteristic line in ***Sycamore • Oriole*** (developed from similar shorter works in ***Creosote*** [1976] and ***Travelling Light*** [1987]) is one that moves the eye around, short ocular journeys back and forth but always and inexorably down. The lines work like water does in the Lao Tzu proverb that opens the book:

“Nothing is weaker than water
but nothing withstands it
 nothing will alter its way”

The lines have an insistent flow; they respond immediately and abruptly to any interference, but the jagged flow always arrives at vision: nothing impedes the ultimate descent.

I know of very few poems that prepare readers so carefully for the journeys they are about to take. These are poems of a vision quest, but the vision and the quest require a preparatory regimen, both for the narrator as he hikes deep into the sacred lands of Montana and northern

Wyoming, and for the reader whose vision and whose questionings will be trained and tested as the eye follows the I deep into unfamiliar territory. The ocular gradually becomes oracular; the seer as observer gathers his observations into modest prophecy and becomes momentarily a seer of another order.

The most essentially American quest is the peeling off of layers of "civilization" in order to touch the buried spirit of this paved-over land: it is a descent through the palimpsestic layers of American history in order to touch, if only briefly, the savage mystery that this culture has been so intent on forgetting, on denying. The historian Frederick Jackson Turner, in his influential 1893 essay on "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," wrote of how "American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier," and how the American character can be understood as a desire for "perennial rebirth" by a "continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society." Turner portrayed the archetypal American quest as a powerful and irresistible decivilizing transformation:

The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin.

In ***Sycamore • Oriole***, McCullough records and takes us on this same journey of native redefinition:

off with hiking boots, socks, denims
tie on elkhide moccasins
—buck naked otherwise

. . .
Enter the lodge

These poems take us to earth places where ancient rituals still work, where sage-smoke rubbed on the body can "drain the poisons" from a self that has for too long ingested (and been ingested by) a civilization hell-bent on turning the world to profit: "there is power in the symbols/ though my own faith be weak."

Again and again on these journeys, McCullough arrives at magical spots. These moments never ring false, nor are they arrived at easily: he never abandons the problematics of being a white male Euroamerican

trying to imagine his way to a native encounter with the land of his desire.
Even at a key moment of unity—

I stood in the meadow
 before we whites had come here
and felt the pines breathe with me

—a phrase like “we whites” modulates the achievement and quietly acknowledges allegiances that cannot be erased, even as the self feels those allegiances dissipating. Deep in a native sweatbath ritual, McCullough is nonetheless precise and honest (and often funny) about how he is destined to be “a mere pretender/ pseudo-Indian.” But such awareness does not preclude a leap of imagination, nor does it preclude learning a new discipline, nor is the attempt to merge natively without efficacy:

 sweat, snot
tears, toxins
 flowing out of me
I clear my nose
 backwoods fashion
Let what is broken, knit!
 Make the two voices one.

Making the two voices one is every American poet's desire, and McCullough comes close to achieving the impossible melding, to incorporating the tensed cultural dialectic into a unified dialect. When the narrator re-emerges into the American cultural present and reverses the stripping off of his civilized clothing—

 take off lungota
 slip on watch cap, jeans, shirts
and high school wrestling sweatshirt

—we experience the conflation of McCullough's American upbringing with the strangeness of native rituals. The “wrestling sweatshirt” has become a sign now of something more than a high school past: the effect of the sweatbaths persists under (and redefines) the sweatshirt, just as the body's memory of the lungota remains beneath the jeans, and the narrator will now wrestle with the attempt to live in both lives, to dress in two cultures. Back down from his spiritual journey up Mount Hornaday, he

knows he has been to a very different “high” school (“This place was my teacher, my Marpa,” McCullough writes in a recent poem about Hornaday), has sweated for a different set of purposes, and has learned he must now wrestle opponents unlike any he has faced before. Once the redressed body has been stripped and put through a set of ancient rituals, it must wear its old familiar clothes in an unfamiliar way; the identical clothes no longer signal the same identity.

So, when the narrator climbs Mount Hornaday in his “un-Injun” fashion, he realizes

. . . you can set yr sights
surprise yrself
at yr
pilgrim’s progress.

The “yr” is part of McCullough’s dialect of ease and informality (working to de-form and re-form and in-form the shape of the poem), but this slangy abbreviation—“your” trimmed to “yr”—also neatly captures a cleaning out of a part of the self, turning the self lean, emptying the vowels, ridding the self of selfishness, a ritual of purgation, surprising yourself by discovering the ur-self that offers a unified base, a centered point of light around which “you can set yr sights” and begin yr progress.

The vision quests in this book—the mystical encounters with bear, rattler, and bull elk, with chipmunks, chickadees, and butterflies—are finally in the service not of a retreat to the past (to be “the first to step here/ in 100 years”), but rather of a life lived in the present. The sacred and remote landscapes in these poems open finally onto the secular and the familiar; the piss firs and chickadees yield the sycamore and oriole. If the journeys recorded in this book were initially withdrawals precipitated by the death of McCullough’s father and the absence of his son, the journeys work through loss and guide McCullough back to renewed relationships with both father and son, lead him to the mystery of generation(s), to the discovery of the centered “path of light” that passes from father to son—the “stream of light” that, like the water, brooks no interference:

. . . I see behind his black eyes
my own son, his grandson
and a path of light opens
running through the three of us

Sycamore • Oriole concludes with a stunningly lyrical pentameter set of instructions to McCullough's son, yielding the fruit of his journeys. They are directions to a place where there are no dams, to a place where his son might hold his own ground, where he must learn to "Breathe. Speak sharply." In this book, Ken McCullough teaches himself—and all who are lucky enough to read him—the same lesson. On this journey you will travel light, and to light.

Ed Folsom
Iowa City, Iowa
June, 1991

for

*Bob Love
Kelly O'Dell
Marie Sanchez
Duncan Galusha*

*and in memory of
John Wooden Legs*

Bozeman, Montana

Lame Deer, Montana

Mount Hornaday, northern Wyoming

1975

Daysweat

✘

breeze

just getting up
in canyons to the south
slow silver strands
streaming from the aspen
leaves twitter
a week from their yellow swansong
in the clearing
brittle ribcage
overgrown with thistles—
sixteen willow branches
bent to form a frame
red, white and black
bands of horsehair
bind the joints
stand of horsemint
rings the center hole

char

at the roots of the thistles
door due east
clots of sodden elkhide
where we used to sit

I haul bulky tarps

and drape them on the frame
mildewed canvas/ smell of childhood
check for light leaks
crawling
in the womb-dark place

at the miner's sluice

fill bucket with glacier run-off
minnows tremble in formation
in reflection
of ferns on the other bank
"Nothing is weaker than water
but nothing withstands it
nothing will alter its way"

✘

break off
 dead cottonwood branch
the heartwood
 a five-pointed star
 —symbol of the Great Spirit
place the tinder
 four sticks on top of it
 running east-west
four north-south
 stack the rest in a cone
 moving as the sun moves
 place rocks at the cardinal points
 then pile the rest
 kneel
 facing east
 light the tinder
and watch
 the Shape-Changer's
 cautious tongues
off with hiking boots, socks, denims
 tie on elkhide moccasins
 —buck naked otherwise
 Tote logs from back of camper
 rasp of bark on arms and chest
 stoke the blaze
 singeing arm hairs
 to tight black wires

✘

Enter the lodge
 bundle of sage
in one hand
 buckskin
 pouch in the other
crawl around center hole
 clockwise
 as the sun moves
spread sage on my spot

and sit by the bucket
full-lotus
drop cluster of sage on the embers
thick smoke
sharp dry
the scent of a woman
from the high desert
catches my breath
my eyes water nose runs
With cupped hands
take the smoke
and pass it over my head
brush over arms, legs and torso
to drain the poisons from me

take out
poke of kinikinik
of sweet Ann root
mixed with Half & Half
tamp into old briar
light up with ropey stem of sage
this smoke
sharpen the focus
and no three-day carcass breath

a pinch to the west rains
the north winds
the east— sun/light, fertility and knowledge
south— the womb and tomb of life
the heavens
the earth
to yours truly

Grand/mother
when this, my flesh
feeds crows and blowflies
and the bones are bleached
and scattered in the sun
leave
a stand of mint to mark the spot
or if I fall in marshy ground

let me
become a bed of watercress
I feel you here, faintly
Come to me!
You have cast your net
over all your creatures
but I fear
snares and nets
Help me!
I know
what I believe
but do not
believe what I know

✕

the rocks
glow orange
spit dances on them
evaporates
With forked limb
roll them
into center hole
sweat
stings the eyes
I crawl through the flap
ass in the air
balls swinging
in the four-legged darkness
no fear of it
but sometimes I want to stay here
Dip sage in bucket
swatch the rocks
which hiss back at me
violently
steam rises
fills the lodge
and a wave of sweat
sloughs from my body

“Only one who takes upon himself
the evils of the world
may be its king”
I, no king— a mere pretender
pseudo-Indian
slumped inside my own emotions
begin to weep—
sweat, snot
tears, toxins
flowing out of me
I clear my nose
backwoods fashion
Let what is broken, knit!
Make the two voices one!

...my son
delicate nostrils
puffing easily
in deep sleep
stretches
snuggles like a bearcub
tiny beads of sweat
on the bridge of his nose...

not for myself alone
but that I might become
a fit instrument
to bring back news
to him, to your other children
that they might not spend their souls
...but *Thy* will, *Thy* will
be done

let me
follow the blazes
read the spoor
and when I hear your wings
overhead in the night
smell your shadow
watching me
from a grove of lodgepole

do not let me
 run in sleep
 but turn to face you
hear you say
 “This is my beloved son
 of whom I am very skeptical
 I will not let him
 rest in still waters
until he walks these parapets
with his eyes closed
 and sees by this light
 that shines within him”

✘

I chant in a high falsetto
 no meaning to the syllables
 a mindless song
 the song goes flat
 old weary distant
the energy soughs off
 my son, his mother
 my weakness darkness
 I am not worthy to receive you
 but only say the word
 and I shall be healed
 maybe
 if I stay on this path
 to the next promontory

strip off
gray-green leaves of sage
 and rub them on my body
 drop them on the rocks
May this smell
 cleanse all those above, around
 and beneath me here
may this smell
 bite back into all of us
 living here on you, Mother

The steam losing its power
 feel for the handle
tip bucket on the rocks
 inhale a double hit
 and let it
 fill my sinuses
a hoarse growl
 involuntary
issues from my chest
 as I fight passing out
 When it passes
I sprawl to the doorflap
 my head through the entrance
 I have to squint
 against the brilliance
no feeling in the left leg
 pinpricks
 as blood
 surges through constricted vessels
I have to crawl
 using my elbows
When I am out
 push to a standing position
 and stagger up the path
 —though it's 80°
 I shiver uncontrollably
foot and leg buzzing with feeling
 crabwalk up the bank
 grab a stump and
 swing down in the sluice
 up to the waist
 ice rush
 balls shrink up inside my body
foreskin there for a reason
 push off and fall backwards
 with Banzai yell
totally immersed
 shock jerks head out of water
 snorting blowing snarling
thrash a bit, then
 haul myself out

clamber up the bank
and stand there
arms raised reborn
not a birth in terror and pain
but each dwindling cell
replaced
I scan the Bridgers
purple and gray
through an ancient golden light
across the valley as it was
5,000 years ago
this water ringing down
taste it
see it sparkle as it did then
the tastes the smells the sounds
fill my body taut
I stand
naked before you
humble but not ashamed
the neighbor's chainsaw
snarling in the timber
ready
ready to begin

Ascent

head north
on trail that follows Pebble Ck.
bushwhack off
toward sheer face of Hornaday
into same shady meadow
last summer/ full of King Boletus
—big white heads
some beginning to redden
a little salt a little butter
the biggest
a meal for two
pick up game trail
other side of meadow
entrance guarded this July by
large fly Amanita
blood red cap as big as my fist
white warts on its surface
like bits of cottage cheese
—from a distance
a cartoon sesame bun
but don't eat this one
Initiation rite of shamans in Siberia—
eat seven of them
fall into the underworld
and be hacked apart by a raging dwarf
(same height as a mushroom)
the proposition, then
to find the parts and
put yourself together again
before you surface
to the conscious world
never eat them raw
or cooked up fresh
The shamans
dried them like chilies
softened them up by chewing
then swallowed them whole
When the cache ran low

had a fellow
partaker
piss in a cup
held yr nose
and swilled it down
the buzz
still strong
symptoms: nausea, barfing
thirst enough to drain an ocean
blue skin and foaming at the mouth
blindness, visions
non-stop babbling
singing and marionette twitching
able to
swing a full-grown yak
over yr head by its tail
set off
in the dead of winter
and run non-stop to the next village
50 miles upriver
and get there
yesterday
some say
the cult
crept across the boondocks
to Norway
Berserkers
stoked up on them
before they stormed the battlefield
—they “went berserk”
not so, say the acid scholars
fly Amanita the same
Soma of the Rig Veda
rarely leads to violence
its cousin
the Destroying Angel
more lethal
symptoms
sometimes a day late
then

your body turns to stone
from the outside in

but they live East of here

(never eat a white Amanita)

on up the trail
a few distant relatives
leathery, distorted
some inky blue
some bruise-purple

easy going now
on moss-and-needle matting

up through the trees
huge cloudbank on Hornaday
squatting like a shy old invertebrate
unwilling, unable to move
just a wisp of it
spills over a cliff

another sign of autumn

✘

trail dips at a little creek patch of sunlight
I kneel
balancing backpack
and suck in water
cold enough to make my teeth ache
At the back of my neck
feeling of being watched
I look up
slowly

—in shadow
on the other bank
a ten-point whitetail
broadside

its head turned toward me
eyes dark with curiosity
nostrils flex
as it scents me
flies buzz round its head
our eyes stay on each other
then it raises its rack
haughtily
prances off through the trees
without looking back

✘

pick pale yellow
coral mushroom
from backside of aspen
nip off a bit peppery taste
Before I'd come out West
I'd never eaten mushrooms
not even storebought ones
—tidy Anglo-Saxon bugaboo
against the toad's stool

I'd travelled light before
on other treks up Hornaday
packed no food—
cooked up cinquefoil roots, cow's parsnips
dandelion greens, ate berries
This alpine flora—
unless you eat things
when they're ripe—
is either toxic
or tastes like tripe
—alpine huckleberries
will send you to yr bed
if you eat them when they're red
—fruit of
one of the lilies
a cherry tomato
lookalike
is tart and pleasant

when it's bright red
otherwise
the game-day trots

but why food at all?

Giri Bala, India
on aether sun and air
Therese Neumann, Bavaria
40 years
on a consecrated host a day

faith, me heartee
for *this* vessel
to dine on fare so spare

✘

climbing now
the trail rockier
frequent stops to catch my breath
and glimpse
ubiquitous chickadees
zipping in and out

scare up a blue grouse
roar of its wings
snaps me
back to center

it's starting to get dark

water break
at stream of ropey lace
cascading down moss
rockface

last water
before I come down the mountain

off to the right

I hear a waterfall
I go that way
 across the grain of the ravines
finally give up the idea
 and climb straight up
 breaking off a sturdy limb
 from a dead piss fir
 to use as an extra leg
—straight up is un-Injun
 but you can set yr sights
 surprise yrself
 at yr
 pilgrim's progress

Prelude

a few feet off the trail
 deep slashes on a big tree
 ten feet up—
 bear with the highest marks
claims the territory
'tis a griz

 pop of twigs
 as herd of elk
 gallops into the dusk

wind shifts the smell of water
 sweet water
 fills my nostrils
 and then wild roses
 a whole valley full of them
comes to life in the evening's air
 but too late in the year for roses

 I notice
 a circle of stones sunk
 into the ground—
 a wickiup ring
 left by the Sheepeaters
 a good spot, then—
 other moccasins have worn
the ground smooth here
 a hundred years before

the equinox—
 maybe the Old Ones
 will come out
 and dance around me in a circle
 la noche encantada

✘

in a fold of

meditation blanket
in the backpack
hoisted up a tree
a small pouch—
my son's umbilicus, a scraper
obsidian bird points
& five claws from the left front paw
of a black bear

coming down from Hornaday
on another trek
got in some loose rock
and braced myself
to keep from sliding off a cliff
hand
fell on this paw, intact
attached to ulna and radius
from which the flesh was stripped
—no other bones around
(after the berries dry up in August
griz go after blacks)
with my Buck knife
I sawed off
the desiccated paw
and packed it out

down near Mt. Langford
a griz followed me for two hours
never saw or heard him
just the stink of sulfur

Moon full tonight
sleep only in short spells
waking up
to follow the shifting firmament
snuggle down with head inside the bag
and sink in easy sleep

✘

A heavy weight across my body

Am I dreaming? No.
I want to give the weight
a left jab or forearm shiver
but the grunt stops me—
cross between
grunt and insistent idiot whine
A lot of good the hatchet
out there on the ground

The beast
fumbles through my stuff
but why stretched out across me?
my scent has spooked it
not one iota
Finally it gives up
lifts its bulk
by pushing on my chest
with front paws as it rises
goes over
to where the pack hangs
& lets loose a burst of sad complaints
before it moves
up the hillside

When it's gone
I untie the bow to my bag
and poke my head out—
in the moonlight
see its silhouette
two-year old male
No grizzly
but glad I hadn't
given it a shot
trapped inside my mummy bag

twice my weight still bawling

I take
three draughts of sharp mountain air
and settle back
into the cool nylon bag

—an outward and visible sign
and all's right with the world

hang onto yr hat, bucko

Over the Top

birds wake me
up and on my way in minutes
grasping
scrubby
mountain mahogany
juniper
twisted in human shapes
and on and up
for three hours pushing it
until I recognize
palisades rimming crest of Hornaday
scramble to the top
& pile some stones
to mark my way back down
over the edge of the world

the top of Hornaday
laid out like a golfcourse
in Scotland of the imagination
open, rocky, trim
with lots of natural hazards
but here
pterodactyls glide in for amphibious landings
on the sheep wallow ponds
pristine in the distance

benchmark says
MT. HORNADAY ELEV. _____ FT.
—close enough fr gov'mint work

on the flat at last
center my backpack
and step out randy as a goat
bearbell dinging
singing a Hank Snow medley
incipient blisters
sighing "Hallelujah!
We shall be released!"

to my right
up ahead
a small butte
where I'll find my power spot
in the krummholz; the "fairy woods"
piss firs dwarfed and fused in grottoes
where elves and other small ones live:
the small hard wind-twisted
Sheepeaters
hair sawed off with obsidian
straight across like Incas
hunkered at a fire
with the best view around
chipping at feathery
almost transparent bird points

around one boulder
I always come upon a man
mummified
yellow-brown skin
varnished across his grin
some wisps of blanket stuck to him
reclining
in the posture
where he'd sat to dream
some 90 years ago

✱

deposit backpack
at base of bluff
slow circuit of the meadow
then sidehill to the top

the east edge—
a broken line
of piss fir and limber pine
the rest bare
except for scattered boulders
dropped in hasty retreat—
not hard to imagine

dinosaurs in the valley below
to their shoulders in sulfured mists
and why the Crow thought it
 haunted
and up near Three Forks
—Logan, to be exact
 stumps of palm trees
 petrified

I scout south along the ridge
 down the saddle to a shabby weald
 where, on another trip
I found a field of geodes
 —a crystal lingam
 enscensed in every one
 still here by the hundreds
the size of coconuts

 back up the ridge to a spot
 on the edge of the bluff
 almost where I'd emerged
 when I'd sidehilled up
 —elf grove
 five yards behind
 on either side

sit rest

 the two ponds to one side
 below me

 mountains 360°

I have lived here five years:
 a distance in my eyes now
a puffiness in my face—
 the detritus of knowledge
 has settled in
but still no wisdom
 and the boyhood grace
 has blown away
 leaving cracked bedrock

I get up and saunter
to the north end of the ridge
steep drop-off
Cut-off Peak in the midground
slumped like a heathen fortress
disguised as Birnam Wood
this end of the bluff
somehow impoverished

then back to my spot
and clatter down through loose rock
& grasshoppers
to retrieve my gear

the hairs on my neck
tell me

this is the place

✘

from buckskin shoulder bag
take paper sack of cornmeal
ground in handmill at home
scrape the loose gravel
around with my boot
smooth out an eight-foot circle
dribble cornmeal
in a scrawny trail around the edge
clockwise, to keep out the uninvited
—there is power in the symbols
though my own faith be weak

I decide that
after I've settled in
I won't step beyond the circle
'til the course is run—
This won't be
no overnight conversion, though—
I am Cancer (hard shell
hard sell)

born a Baptist and guilty
until proven otherwise
If They want me
They'll have to earn it

piss around the circle's edge
to mark my territ'ry
presumptuous, perhaps
(Mr. Griz
my friends remind
won't pay no nevermind
to *that* particular etiquette)
but Moccasin Joe
(ole Juan Osa)
my friend and brother—
he knows
he'll find no Luger in my gear

break off piss fir boughs
for mattress on the pebbly skin—
with each branch
pitch handful of cornmeal
at base of the trunk
leave trace in the pouch
for the unexpected

take out large buckskin bag
stuffed with sage
picked down near Gardiner
unlace it
scatter sage on my sitting place
spread the groundcloth
roll out the sleeping bag
backpack as a backrest
off with the Frankenstein boots
and lay socks out
for sweat to evaporate

fringe of crusty snow
on shadow of an elf grove—
claw out a handful and

rub it on the soles of my feet
then my forehead
stinging my brain alive

chronic aches
run straight through—
too many spirits
of the fifth kind
too many lifetimes
strip off the denim shirt and jeans
put jockstrap
in outer pocket of the backpack—
naked, now in the middle
of everywhere
unfold Chinese-red lungota
loop it snugly between my legs
and wind it around my abdomen
—erection rears its surly head
tie on elkhide moccasins again
red bandana around my forehead...
If a Parkie trailcrew
wanders through
and finds me in this getup...
but this ain't Grand Central
and the trails
kept up by deer, elk, sheep
and Bigfeet

✕

I bow in the six directions
sink to the cold nylon
doubled to form a cushion
facing East
two o'clock
shut my eyes
and fall out into long slow breathing

an old farmhouse an orchard
three towheads
swooping in like swallows

when they're called to dinner
fading fading

fingers meshed in a socket
in front of my crotch
my erect penis strains against the red cloth
with my left hand
lightly palpate my testicles
tightened against my body
—will there be
any other progeny?

then, in an hour
the shadow of a tree
touches my right knee
and the temp change brings me
to the surface

I chant spontaneous
Shrii Ram, Jai Ram
Jai Jai, Ram Om
in a clear tenor
so resonant
my skullbones buzz
on the verge of pain

within a minute
a dozen chickadees
flutter down and light
on a small boulder
a few feet from me
I can see
the energy in their eyes
their sharp little tongues
they twitch and flap
with a steady tweeping—
my voice's frequency
has crossed their wires
it draws them to me
but they don't know why
or what to do

I chant until my cords
 have come unstrung
and when I stop
 the silence

—in an instant
 the chickadees are gone

✘

a few wisps in the sky—
don't be misled

up this way
 She'll lure you do you in—
while you're in there shooting stick
 and swilling rotgut
 She'll drop it down to 35 below
 If you skid off the road
in a snowbank three miles from home
they'll find you in the morning—
 oblivion
 will have sailed
deep inside your eyes

Except for June through August
 I keep a mummy bag
 stuffed behind the seat
—if you flirt with Her
 be ready

Should I take this gear
stuff it in the backpack
 pitch it into space
then see what happens?

I once picked up a hitchhiker
 who wore just a pair of shorts—
 no gear, no money
 and a sunburned grin
on his way to Seattle

from Bangor, Maine
a part of me
wants to be

that free

In a week I'll leave this life behind me
my son, his mother—
to a new job, the ocean, palmettos
and graceful women
the drone note will
dissipate, I hope

but diaspora
fouls the corners of my vision—
for this next act
play it as yourself, friend

STRANGE LANDS AND SEPARATION
ARE THE STRANGER'S LOT

“A wanderer has no fixed adobe;
his home is the open road.
Therefore he must take care
to remain upright and steadfast,
so that he sojourns only in the proper places
associates only with good people
that he has good fortune
and can go his way unnoticed.”

✘

late in the afternoon
take off lungota
slip on watch cap, jeans, shirts
and high school wrestling sweatshirt
sit again in meditation
peek with one eye
at chipmunk
sneaking up the bluff
hiding behind small boulders
comes within a few feet
nibbling corn meal
closer, it stands on its haunches

worrying weed seed from a stalk
near edge of ground cloth
then, with bold eyes
hops on my knee
scurries up my arm to my shoulder
and sniffs at my ear
—all I can do to keep from barking
at those tiny claws
on bare skin
—curiosity satisfied
he scoots over side of the bluff

Vespers

due South, through a gap
the Tetons
jut of hip, full breast
la grande teton
I can hear
the song of flowers driven inward
deep in the cells a death without complication
to the west smoked broken quartz
intense peach at the horizon
floating up to pale lavender
two camprobbers
voop voop voop in for a landing
strut squawk looking for a handout
adjourn in brisk jay fashion
to the east Abiathar and The Thunderer
stained deep indigo
Venus appears
in the crack
between sundown and moonrise
a coyote yips
and his younger brother reports
deliberate on the breaths a meditation
in a week
I could break that code
an elk from another planet
bugles for his mate
and the wind comes up
as the moon
pokes its dome over the mountains
by now above me
the Bear rides low in the sky
looking for a place to hibernate
the Hunting Dogs yapping at his heels
Mizar his eye
at the bend of the Dipper
and Alcor, its companion
barely visible
(the "human beings" knew them as

the Horse and Rider)
the diamond of Delphinus
forms Job's Coffin
Aldeberan
the Bull's eye
Cygnus
hangs there as the Northern Cross
These designs—
mariners and shepherds
what else to do
with their time at night?
a shooting star another
and a third
so close I expect to hear it
then a small bright object
steadily across the sky—
a satellite
you can tell the time by
As the stars loom closer
an electric hum
like distant crows
I am falling up to
a huge necropolis
lit by torches
my breath swarms the moonlight
and I start to chant:
I do not presume to come to this
Thy table, Mother
without my knife in my boot
I must make my choice
before the wall of ice falls away
If you ask me
can I identify insanity for you
I'd have to say
I've explored the mainland
but my maps might be
too particular
like the divine geometry
you've etched on my fingertips
I travel this new road
because I want to

though I do not feel
or see where it leads
let it be
on this side of the river
let the snow
with its simple thirst
take time to invent my fragrance

Night Visitor

the moon comes up
 long shadow of myself
 on the ground in front of me
 chanting
 up and down the scale
the tide rolls in
 inside me
something moving
 in the loose rock behind
 larger than a scamperer
 not bear elk or coyote
 unless the chant
 has lured them
I do not turn and look
 safe
 within the syllables
the shadow of something else
 at the edge of my own
 I keep on chanting
 though every muscle tightens
 now the shadow
 takes on definition
 obscures my own
I chant I do not turn
 I can see behind me
 without turning—
 there
 two feet away
coiled and ready to strike
 the largest rattler
 I have ever seen
 flat triangular head
 poised three inches
 above the level of my own
 slightly swaying
 the black beads of its eyes
smell of
 ripe cucumbers

tongue flicks in and out
it is coiled but not rattling
I gaze straight ahead
this beyond me
I chant more loudly
hoping for protection

What is it
I have called up?
twelve feet long
big around as one of my thighs
—no rattlers above 3,000 feet
but this at 9,700
and out in the open
this time of night

I look in the eyes again
just as it rears its head
imperceptibly
and strikes
the top of my head—
flash of white
incandescent light
as it forces
down into my body
through the opening
it has made in the
crown of my skull
its body
coursing into my body
one great muscular
pouring in
pushed
pushed to my outermost walls
finally
I disappear

...an hour later
by the turning of the heavens

I return
sitting in a half-lotus
right where I had been

Thinking Back to a Peyote Meeting Late That Spring, Lame Deer

Jasper

Jasper Crazy Woman's face
had been split with an ax, then
put back together kittywampus.
Though he came late to the meeting
they made room for him up front.
His neighbor tuned the skin with extra care
before he drummed for him.
When Jasper sang, the voice was high
and flat like an Okie woman
at a Pentecostal hymnsing.
His eyes looked up and out.
His song stitched itself across
the years of my aloneness
and it fell out like fine sand.
Most sang for fifteen minutes
before the drum was passed
but Jasper wheeled out into the night
to look inside his people
one by one.

Invocation

The name of Jesus Christ
would wander through a song
but otherwise
the language was Cheyenne.
After Jasper sang
the second time
the roadman
asked me why.
To have my family back, I said,
that you pray for me
to be strong, to wait.
And they did. I sank down
and wept and the prayers
circled over the embers
and they glowed like the
heart of the world.
We are your family
We are your heart your heart

Then I went out
into the darkness
under the crooked signs.
I stood in the meadow
before we whites had come here
and felt the pines breathe with me.
A sadness, a sadness, a sadness
echoed to my depths.
The pain of life was splitting me.
The teepee behind me
shimmered
and the songs within
lit the stars
like ice.
You are the guest here,
not the taker—
no judge,
not even of yourself
I knew I didn't have to

but I went back in. Now,
my own life, every mistake
each lie, and mean spirit
marched up before me. Leave me!
end it! get out! save yourself!

Brothers

Just before the sun came up
odd croaks outside the teepee.
The doorman raised the flap and
two deaf brothers in their sixties
moved clockwise round the circle.
They sat in the place we made
to the right of the roadman.
For the next eternity
he spoke to them in sign—
long stories that others
now and then would add to.
And jokes that made the circle
bray like goats and donkeys.
The deaf men's laughs were wheezes.
I laughed, too, but only twice
did I have the slightest clue.

He-Who

Whenever I looked up
he was staring straight at me
one eye ablaze.
The fat woman next to me
chortled—
she knew the score.
I asked her
to nudge me when his guard was down.
In a few minutes
her elbow grazed me
but just as I flicked my eyes
his way
he was locked on me.
The fat woman
insisted I take more powder—
like trying to swallow
the pulverized
bones of your ancestors.
I got sick—
nothing much came up
but the fat woman
gave me a grin
knowing this bit of humility
would make me less
an observer.
The doorman came with a shovel
and scooped up
what I'd disgorged.
So the night went on—
I'd look up
and he'd have his eye on me.
Finally the light came
through the wall of the teepee
and the smoke turned bright blue
and we broke the fast—
dried corn, some meat
that was pretty rich
spring water

and fruit cocktail.
We went outside
and I wandered
five feet up
with a brittle grin on my face.
“What kind of meat was that?”
I asked the roadman.
“Do you remember that black Lab pup
you were playing with last week?”
That dropped me down a foot or two.
Then I looked for my nemesis—
no sign of him.
The fat woman nodded up a knoll
toward an aspen grove.
A figure curled up in a blanket.
I sneaked up, quiet
in my moccasins
and came around the figure.
It was he, looking up at me
with that incendiary eye.
Later, the fat woman told me his name:
He-who-sleeps-with-one-eye-open.

Cloud

the axis of the sun
 runs straight through me
I am
 half man
half other
 beside myself
each breath
 takes place
 this place
 as its home
 I look
 straight ahead
a white blur undulates
 at the edge of my vision
small cloud of moths or butterflies
 given the frantic nature of their flight
 the swarm moves
 across the flat below me
butterflies, small ones, thousands
 light on the hillside
 just beneath my spot
 a few mavericks still flutter above me
their wings brown ochre, dove-gray
 with an eye on each
 pale yellow stripe an ivory band
 they are settled now
though one might drift like a mote
 they flex their wings
 straight up in unison
 in slow pulses
I've seen a gaggle of cabbage moths
 chase hilarious
 across a clover field
 but never such a congregation
though they do not touch
 the song they listen to
 is clear and sweet

but too benign for mating
I sit
in this delicate grace
and tears roll down
through the parched valleys of my face

✘

as quick as their descent
they arise *en masse*
across the surface of the ponds
and down the lip of the mountain
I follow them out of sight
then notice the ground
and the grass around me
everywhere they've been
is spotted red
droplets even on my clothes
I touch one
as thick as blood
and taste it
bitter sharp
a shiver up my spine
the bones of my skull
ring
like thin crystal
as the light comes in
the sky-prow
parts the curtain
and I see you
standing
in your heavy clothes
the breath in your nostrils
visible
in the midday air

✘

sitting again—
pass the rudraksha beads
twixt thumb and index finger

the sweet air
 washes over me
and I am adrift
 until I sense someone
and the smell of meat gone bad
 I turn my head
 slowly
—there behind me
 rack down
 is a bull elk
 trained on me—
afraid that he might charge
 I push myself to him
 through my eyes
his head stops bobbing
 as if to listen—
 takes two steps toward me
 paws three times
 with his right front hoof
and canters away

Return

clamber over the rim
head light as cottonwood down
so take it slow
—in the loose rock
the first marker
placed there on the way up
in case I'd become so disconnected
I wouldn't strike off
in a wide demented circle
until they came in after me
I could step off into the air
soar like that eagle
on a thermal there
above Mt. Norris

I gain speed as I rumble downward
—forget about the markers
these feet
with minds of their own
I give them full rein
half-run half-glissade
I land on a goat trail
that winds along a ledge
trail splits and my feet
say switchback—
the direction we just came
hollow nimble goatman
I hear
the waterfall I couldn't find
on the way up
and then I scamper under it
as it cascades out over the trail
the spray hits my face
absolute perfect
but it doesn't
interrupt my pace
around next bend of the trail

a cave
slopes back 20 feet in the rock
two long shelves
chipped into the wall

a quiet here I've never felt before
I could be here forever

on one wall
the silhouette in gray rock
of a faint black hand
Time curls on itself in a corner
and sleeps.
A man sang to a woman here
and they died. A man's secrets
in the powdered earth—
powder so light
it hovers in a cloud
around my feet
—in the dirt a stick
with carved designs
all but obliterated:
porcupines had nibbled
the surface smooth—
a Sheepeater place

I am the first to step here
in 100 years—
when I know
my time has come
I will steal to this place again
be
redistributed
a death
with no supporting cast

I stretch out on my back
cool in the cave
slight chill as the sweat
evaporates from my skin—
pillowed in the dust

I look in the tops of the pines
and feel someone moving along the trail
a shape shifts into the shadow
no anguish in his face at last:
my silent father

*

home for the last time
I glassed the trees
with the new binoculars he'd brought from Vietnam
he joined me
waiting for me to begin
but I did not
He said "Do you see that o-riole
up there?"
I said "No, where is it?"
"Up in that big sickymore."
I went through the motions
of focusing on the oriole
too ashamed to admit
I had no idea
what a sycamore looked like

we stood there
he waiting
me unable to speak
then I excused myself—
important calls to make

in my room
I looked out the window
saw him bend
to the soil of the garden
crumble a handful in his large fingers
hold it to his nose
and smell its richness—
his eyes were closed

the next time I saw him
he was in his casket

*

I tell him that when he
left his body
we were both broken, beyond repair
but his visits to my dreams
have helped to heal us
in one dream
in Grandma's front parlor, Staten Island
(maternal side)
we are all assembled
Christmas, probably
dressed in the styles of the late 40s
post-war optimistic, laughing
getting ready to go out visiting
my father is relaxed, cracking jokes
suddenly, he pitches to the floor
holding his chest
—we all know what this means
Mom becomes hysterical
he calls to her
asks her, please, to be calm
I kneel next to him
and cradle his head
the sweet smell of witch hazel on his face
he looks as he did
the day he took me to see Ole Miss
play, 'Bama, with Connerly at quarterback
—clear skin, flushed with life
the wrinkles gone
the thinning hair jet-black
his eyes are glowing
he has ripped through the pain
to the other side of it
he turns his eyes to me
and I start to speak
to apologize, but again I can't
it is choked back inside me
he takes my hand
in his iron grip
“Don't worry... I know...”

he smiles, beatified through the pain
his eyelids flutter
he is gone

this time, he does not speak to me
but I see behind his black eyes
my own son, his grandson
and a path of light opens
running through the three of us

his face goes under black
then deep violet, with gold specks
and my body shakes—
I lie there
lighter, then lighter

when my bones return
I stand
and these winged feet
float me
the rest of the way
down the mountain

at trail head
I come down on
five-man crew & their chief
a brown woman
filling out her flannel shirt & jeans—
her prankster eyes
match
her green bandana
(Ruth Roman on a better day)

I jabber on
through sun-cracked lips
about sign up top
(no mention of the “weird” stuff)
& somehow it comes out
she is one-fourth Arapahoe

after we’ve smiled at each other
& smiled again
she sez “back to work”
and leaves me there
still grinning

the others nod and move ahead
and I cruise down to Pebble Crik
to find my quart of Oly
pinned beneath some rocks
press the chill brown glass
to my forehead—
Thor’s nectar
through a glass darkly

with shaky hand
twist the silver cap
and chug it down
Ah! Basho Buffo! Holy Holy Han Shan!
the light
cranks up three notches &
I fall on my butt on the bank
of this holy shoal
and laugh

and begin to cry
and laugh again

✘

I call from Gardiner
ask you to do up
some homemade burritos
your voice is kind
but hesitant
we hang up

I could wash your feet
I could sing of more sons
and tell you how I feel
but it's no use

as I walk to the truck
the time has come:
I divide our love
by truth
and come up wanting

but it ends up in the soul
and I must stand down
to taste it anyway

Instructions

Trace the backbone to where it disappears.
There, gentians suck the color from the sky.
You will see dancers, barely visible,
stumbling through the aspen as if drunk.
When you hear a crow's call rise like hunger,
traveling south, turn and sit. A fine pollen
will settle on your hair and shoulders.
Bring no weapons. Several bears will cross you—
even if a grizzly raises up and paws the air,
hold your ground. Breathe. Speak sharply.

It will be years before you get here.
The first time, be alone. If you need me
look over your shoulder, fifty paces back.
Call and I will see with you through your eyes.
And on this morning, this first morning,
you will sense love, the skin laid out for you
to put on for the rest of your life. It
will be blue— not the color of mountains
as the sunlight fades or of mourning,
but the color of feathers and of eyes
and of old ones who live beneath the snow.

You will hear the rhythms of an ocean
and your body will rise in slow spirals
up to the high place. From there you will see
the deep obsidian face of your past.
Deny the terrors. Let the quick lightning
writhe through you to set root in the center
of the earth. It will turn your blood to vapor.
You will smell, then, something like gardenias,
but far beyond its wildest echoes, so
clean you will weep tears of tourmaline.

You will know when to come down. Follow the
old road, the glad ice on the stream of light.
There are no dams here. The bark on your hands
will be white, my son, your eyes green moons.
Begin running ahead of time, into time,
no matter—you can dream now, forever.

Notes

Daysweat

The quotations on pages 1 and 5 are from poem 78 of Lao Tzu's **Tao Te Ching**, translated by R.B. Blankney

Ascent

The King Boletus is *Boletus edulis*. My favorite Boletus, for its name and no other reason is Miss Alice Eastwood's Boletus (*Boletus eastwoodiae*).

The fly Amanita is *Amanita muscaria*.

The destroying angel is *Amanita verna*.

The coral mushroom is *Clavaria pyxidata*.

The "cherry tomato lookalike" is the claspleaf twisted-stalk, *Steptopus amplexifolius*.

Over the Top

The quotation on page 27 is taken from The Judgment of the Lu hexagram (The Wanderer), Book I, **The I Ching**, translated by Wilhelm and Baynes

Ken McCullough was born in 1943 on Staten Island, near New York City. However, his formative years were spent on the island of Newfoundland, a place more akin to the locale he considers his spiritual home, the mountains of Montana, among which he lived while teaching at Montana State University. His formal education took place at St. Andrew's School (the scene of ***Dead Poet's Society***), the University of Delaware, and the Writer's Workshop of the University of Iowa. Along with teaching and traveling in the United States, the British Isles, Italy, and India, McCullough worked as a union laborer, helped write and produce programs for South Carolina Educational Television, and was a dedicated baseball player, giving up that sport at the semi-professional level only after turning thirty-five. It remains an interest of his, however, along with Chinese brush painting, acting, and the experiences and studies behind ***Sycamore • Oriole***. Previous publications include ***The Easy Wreckage*** (1971), ***Migrations*** (1973), ***Creosote*** (1976), ***Elegy for Old Anna*** (1984), and ***Travelling Light*** (1987). McCullough has received an Academy of American Poets Award, an NEA Fellowship, the Capricorn Book Award of the Writer's Voice, and a Ruth Hardman/***Nimrod*** Pablo Neruda Award. Currently, he resides in Iowa City, Iowa.

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