

SYCAMORE • ORIOLE

by

Ken McCullough



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## Acknowledgments

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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  
sharpens 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 crik 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  
         ensconsed 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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