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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 journey 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.

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

   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 re-dressed 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

\[
\text{. . . you can set yr sights}
\text{surprise yrself}
\text{at yr}
\text{pilgrim’s progress.}
\]

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:

\[
\text{. . . I see behind his black eyes}
\text{my own son, his grandson}
\text{and a path of light opens}
\text{running through the three of us}
\]
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

x

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”

x

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 crick  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

x

pick pale yellow
coral mushroom
  from backside of aspen
  nip off a bit  peppy 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 Homaday
  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

        x

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
grun 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 guv'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
ensconced 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 commeal
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

-\[x\]-

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
Aldebaran
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
Jasper

Jasper Crazy Woman's face
had been split with an ax, then
put back together kittywumpus.
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 oriole
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
going out to go 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

dthis 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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