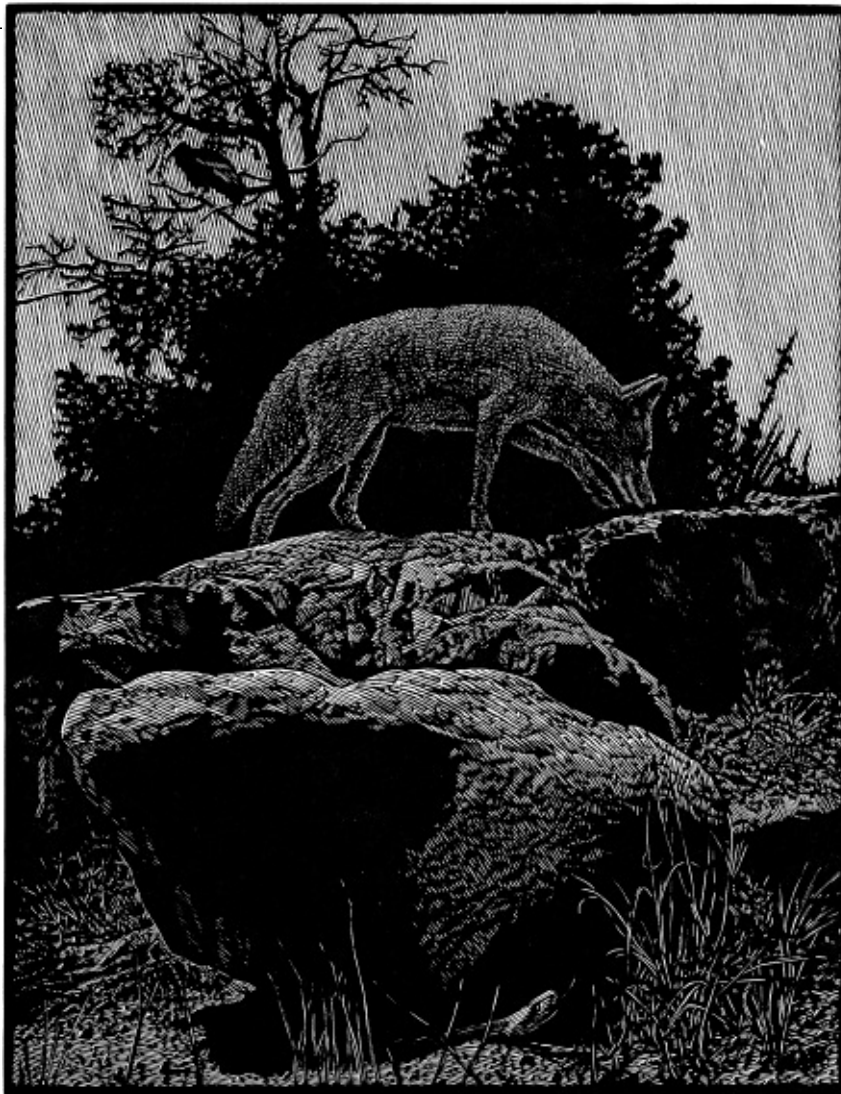


Outside

STORIES BY BARRY LOPEZ

Engravings by Barry Moser



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SIX SHORT STORIES BY BARRY LOPEZ

Introduction by James Perrin Warren

Afterword by the Author

Engravings by Barry Moser

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INTRODUCTION

THE STORYTELLER

BARRY LOPEZ HAS BEEN publishing short stories and essays in distinguished literary magazines for nearly forty years. The relationship between landscape and the imagination is a central concern in his work, as is the role of storytelling in bringing communities into healthy relations with the land. The essay “Landscape and Narrative” (1984) resonates deeply with the aims and methods of the stories in *Outside*. The essay opens with a gathering of hunters in Anaktuvuk Pass, in the Brooks Range of Alaska. Lopez sits among a group of men listening to hunting stories, and he is particularly taken with the stories of wolverines. One man’s story of an astonishing encounter between a hunter on a snow machine and an intelligent wolverine dominates the opening, but the effect of the wolverine stories on the group of listeners is even more astonishing: “The landscape seemed alive because of the stories. It was precisely these ochreous tones, this kind of willow, exactly this austerity that had informed the wolverine narratives.” The stories make the landscape come alive because they have truthfully evoked the landscape in its particulars. That is the physical landscape, which Lopez calls the “external landscape” or “exterior landscape” in the essay. Another landscape is the “internal” or “interior” one, and it might be called a spiritual landscape or mental landscape. For Lopez, as for traditional indigenous storytellers, the truth of the story and the value of the storyteller rest in the unimpeachable authority and integrity of the external landscape, which the Navajo say exhibits a “sacred order.” If the story is successful, it brings the external landscape and the internal landscape into harmony, creating a sense of well-being in the listener and healing any disharmonies in the internal landscape. For Lopez, storytelling connects directly to spiritual rituals and ceremonies of traditional indigenous people, and the qualities of storytelling he values most focus on the role of the storyteller in forging a healthy community living in a healthy landscape.

The six stories gathered here show the growth of a storyteller. The collections *Desert Notes* (1977) and *River Notes* (1979) are closely linked to one another, and they give us a strong sense of Lopez as a young writer, since many of the stories date from the early to mid-1970s. *Field Notes* (1994), closer in chronology and form to the collection *Winter Count* (1981), is the work of an accomplished writer of prize-winning fiction and nonfiction. Even as a young writer, however, Lopez clearly avoids the role of the romantic, isolated artist. His contact with indigenous storytellers reinforces his sense of the writer as serving the cultural memory of a community, reminding us how to live a decent life, how to behave properly toward other people and toward the land. The name he provides for this figure of the storyteller in *Arctic Dreams* (1986) is “*isumataq* . . . a person who can create the atmosphere in which wisdom shows itself.”

Wisdom is not owned by any person or culture or language. In defining its outlines in *Arctic*

Dreams, Lopez imagines a scene in which such wisdom might show itself. “I could easily imagine some Thomas Merton-like person, the estimable rather than the famous people of our age, sitting with one or two Eskimo men and women in a coastal village, corroborating the existence of this human wisdom in yet another region of the world, and looking around to the mountains, the ice, the birds, and see what makes it possible to put it into words.” The figures in Lopez’s imagined scene form in effect a group of estimable storytellers from different cultures and traditions. Their goal is first to bind the human wisdom into the land with words and, second, to use their words to bind their human communities together with the land. Storytelling embodies, then, a conversation with the land, and in its most elevated and authentic form it combines the empirical, aesthetic, and spiritual landscapes.

Like the Inuit *isumataq*, Thomas Merton (1915–1968) figures the wisdom that shows itself through storytelling. Lopez considered becoming a Trappist monk and in November 1966 stayed at the abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, Merton’s monastic home. He was especially attracted to the combination of physical labor and spirituality, to the contemplative life. For Lopez as a young man, the contemplative life involves the risky decision to become a professional writer. It is with a sense of vocation, then, that Lopez quotes Merton’s *The Wisdom of the Desert* (1960) near the beginning of *Desert Notes*: “With the Desert Fathers you have the characteristic of a clean break with the conventional, accepted social context in order to swim for one’s life into an apparently irrational void.”

The stories in *Outside* break from convention with a great enthusiasm for experimentation. The first-person narrators are so persuasive that readers are sometimes fooled into thinking that they represent Lopez himself. The early fictions do not employ conventional characterization, action, plot, conflict, or resolution. The narrators of “Desert Notes,” “The Search for the Heron,” and “With the Birds’ Hearing” resemble one another in their physical and spiritual journeys across the landscape. They encounter animals, sometimes in extraordinary ways that may recall the wolverine in “Landscape and Narrative.” They place their faith in the landscape, in what the landscape can teach them, in the beauty and wonder of the land. They are often solitary, isolated from any social context, but they are not alone.

In the other three stories, the first-person narrators focus on human communities, both in their weakness and in their potential strength. “Twilight” begins and ends with the narrator seated upon a “storm pattern rug woven out of the mind of a Navajo woman, Ahlnsaha.” The first half of the story details the numerous owners of the rug from 1934 to 1966, each of whom becomes progressively less certain—or truthful—about the tribal origin of the art or what its proper function should be. The second half of the story evokes, in present tense, the narrator’s visions as he sits on the rug at twilight, “the best time to see what is happening.” In contrast to the lies told by salespeople in the first part of the story, the narrator’s fleeting visions deliver momentary truths. The visions mix images of nature and culture as the narrator works through the senses of sight, hearing, and smell. The visions deliver an ambiguous sense of truth—sometimes promising much, sometimes little. In hearing the flight of the gray eagle over the desert, however, the listener becomes exquisitely intimate with the landscape. In creating that sense of intimacy in the reader, Lopez works powerfully on a personal level and creates yet another sense of intimacy.

By such writing, we come to accept that magical transformations join human beings to the landscape and to one another. The narrator of “The Falls” accepts as fact that his unnamed friend is a shamanistic shape-shifter who can become part of the landscape. The narrator’s intimacy with his friend allows him to tell of the man’s vision quest in the Crazy Mountains as if he were himself part of the man’s journey. The man visits the narrator occasionally, at ten-year intervals, but even when the

narrator misses a visit he can sense his friend's presence. At the climax of these repeated visits, the narrator witnesses the man's leap from the falls, and he implies that the man becomes a salmon as he dives into the water.

Clearly, Lopez's narrators bear witness to extraordinary patterns and purposes. They must listen attentively to what their story must become. Those are the elevated demands placed on Marlis Damien, the narrator of "Empira's Tapestry." Impressed by Marlis's storytelling, Empira gives Marlis the storyteller's stick from Ghana, appointing her the witness of Empira's life and art. By telling her story truthfully, Marlis gathers the threads of Empira's tapestry, showing that she understands Empira's admirable strength and integrity.

By such gatherings, individuals and communities can flourish. The storyteller is vital to the community and to a healthy landscape, but the vital relationship is also reciprocal. Barry Lopez shows his gifts as a storyteller. And by such gatherings as this one, we show our reverence for estimable lives and places. In those ways, we participate, along with Lopez, in the long history of storytelling. We become part of the atmosphere in which wisdom shows itself.

—JAMES PERRIN WARREN

Outside

SIX SHORT STORIES BY BARRY LOPEZ

In the early 1950s, when people living in the Los Angeles Basin spoke of going away for the weekend, they often east over the mountains to the Mojave Desert, they would say that they were going “to go outside.”

&

DESERT NOTES

DESERT NOTES

I KNOW YOU ARE TIRED. I am tired too. Will you walk along the edge of the desert with me? I would like to show you what lies before us.

All my life I have wanted to trick blood from a rock. I have dreamed about raising the devil and cutting him in half. I have thought too about never being afraid of anything at all. This is where you come to do those things.

I know what they tell you about the desert but you mustn't believe them. This is no deathbed. Down, the earth is moist. Boulders have turned to dust here, the dust feels like graphite. You can hear a man breathe at a distance of twenty yards. You can see out there to the edge where the desert stops and the mountains begin. You think it is perhaps ten miles. It is more than a hundred. Just before the sun sets all the colors will change. Green will turn to blue, red to gold.

I've been told there is very little time left, that we must get all these things about time and place straight. If we don't, we will only have passed on and have changed nothing. That is why we are here, to think, to change things. It is why I came to the desert.

Here things are sharp, elemental. There's no one to look over your shoulder to find out what you're doing with your hands, or to ask if you have considered the number of people dying daily from malnutrition. If you've been listening you must suspect that a knife will be very useful out here—not to use, just to look at.

There is something else here, too, even more important: explanations will occur to you, seeming to clarify; but they can be a kind of trick. You will think you have hold of the idea when you only have hold of its clothing.

Feel how still it is. You can become impatient here, willing to accept any explanation in order to move on. This appears to be nothing at all, but it is a wall between you and what you are after. Be sure you are not tricked into thinking there is nothing to fear. Moving on is not important. You must wait. You must take things down to the core. You must be careful with everything, even with what I tell you.

This is how to do it. Wait for everything to get undressed and go to sleep. Forget to explain to yourself why you are here. Listen attentively. Just before dawn you will finally hear faint music. That is the sound of the loudest dreaming, the dreams of boulders. Continue to listen until the music is gone. What you thought about boulders will evaporate and what you know will become clear. Each night it will be harder. Listen until you can hear the dreams of the dust that settles on your head.

I must tell you something else. I have waited out here for rattlesnakes. They never come. The moment eludes me and I hate it. But it keeps me out here. I would like to trick the rattlesnake into

killing itself. I would like this kind of finality. I would like to begin again with the snake. If such thing were possible. The desert would be safe. You could stay here forever.

I will give you a few things: bits of rock, a few twigs, this shell of a beetle blown out here by the wind. You should try to put the bits of rock back together to form a stone, although I cannot say that all these pieces are from the same stone. If they don't fit together look for others that do. You should try to coax some leaves from these twigs. You will first have to determine whether they are alive or dead. And you will have to find out what happened to the rest of the beetle, the innards. When you have done these things you will know a little more than you did before. But be careful. It will occur to you that these tasks are silly or easily done. This is a sign, the first one, that you are being fooled.

I hope you won't be here long. After you have finished with the stone, the twigs and the beetle other things will suggest themselves, and you must take care of them. I see you are already tired. But you must stay. This is the pain of it all. You can't keep leaving.

Do you hear how silent it is? This will be a comfort as you work. Do not laugh. When I first came here I laughed very loud and the sun struck me across the face and it took me a week to recover. You will only lose time by laughing.

I will leave you alone to look out on the desert. What makes you want to leave now is what is trying to kill you. Have the patience to wait until the rattlesnake kills itself. Others may tell you that this has already happened, and this may be true. But wait until you see for yourself, until you are sure



TWILIGHT

I AM SITTING ON a storm pattern rug woven out of the mind of a Navajo woman, Ahlnsaha, and traded to a man named Dobrey in Winslow, Arizona, for groceries in August 1934.

In the fall of 1936 a Swedish farmer, Kester Vorland, his land gone out from under him in the Depression, leaves his wife and three children in the car and, picking his moment perfectly, steps back into the store to steal the rug while Dobrey is busy in the back with a broken saddle. He trades it the next day in Flagstaff for groceries and \$25 cash and moves on to Needles. It is bought later by a young man named Diego Martin who takes it back to San Bernardino, California, with him. He boasts of it to his friends, a piece of shrewd buying. When he is married in 1941 he gives it to his wife and, one fall September night, they make love on it, leaving a small stain that the girl, Yonella, can easily point out but which Diego will not believe, even when she shows him. He believes it is a stain left by an insect and he forbids her to show the rug to anyone after this. He dies in a bar fight in Honolulu on April 1, 1943, a corporal in the Marines. Yonella sells everything. An old woman with red hair and liver spots on her throat pouch named Elizabeth Reiner buys the rug for \$45 and takes it home with her to San Barbara. In 1951 her daughter comes to visit and her grandson John Charles who is ten begins to covet the rug; when the mother and daughter fall into an argument over something, the older woman angrily gives it to the boy (she snatches it down off the wall), a demonstration of her generosity. She later tells her daughter not to come back again and begins to miss the rug and feel foolish. The boy doesn't care. He vows he will always write her at Christmastime, even if his mother forbids it.

On the train from Los Angeles to Prairie du Chien the boy keeps himself wrapped in the rug like a turtle. He sits on the bed in his underwear with it over his shoulders and watches Nebraska. When he is sixteen John Charles falls in love with Dolores Patherway who is nineteen and a whore. One night she trades him twenty-five minutes for the blanket, but he does not see it this way: it is a gift, the best she can offer, a thing of power. That night she is able to sell it to a Great Lakes sailor for \$60. She tells him it is genuine Sioux, there at the battle of the Little Big Horn, and will always bring a good price. The sailor's name is Benedict Langer, from a good Catholic family in Ramapo, New Jersey, and he has never had hard liquor or even VD but in three weeks in the service his father said would make a man of him he has lain in confusion with six different women who have told him he was terrific; he has sensed a pit opening. The day after he buys it Benedict gives the blanket to a friend, Frank Winter, and goes to look for a priest in Green Bay, the football town. In March 1959 Frank mails it to his parents for an anniversary present (it has been in his footlocker for eighteen months and smells like mothballs, a condition he remedies by airing it at night from the signal deck of the USS *Kissell*). He includes with it a document he has had made up in the ship's print shop to the effect that it is a

authentic Pawnee blanket, so his parents will be proud, can put it up on the wall of their retirement home in Boca Raton, Florida, next to the maracas from Guadalajara. They leave it in the box in the hall closet; they do not talk about it. Mr. Winter confides to his wife in the dark one night that he doesn't believe in the powers of medicine men.

On July 17, 1963, Frank Winter dies instantly when his foot hits a land mine in the Mekong Delta. His father waits a month before donating the blanket and the boy's other belongings to Catholic Charities. Father Peter Donnell, a local priest, a man of some sensitivity, lays the rug down on brown wall-to-wall carpeting in the foyer of the refectory of the Catholic Church in Boca Raton, arranging two chairs and a small table precisely on it (he likes especially the Ganado red color) before the Monsignor asks him to remove it. Father Donnell keeps the rug in his room, spread out flat under his mattress for a year. He takes it with him when he is transferred to Ames, Iowa, where it is finally bought in an Easter bazaar as Father Donnell endures a self-inflicted purging of personal possessions. It is bought by antique dealers, Mr. and Mrs. Theodore Wishton Spanner of Jordan Valley, Oregon (and they sign the register). The following winter I buy it from Mrs. Spanner who tells me the rug has been woven by a Comanche who learned his craft from a Navajo, that she bought it on the reservation in Oklahoma. It is certified. I take the rug home and at dusk I undress and lie down under it so that it completely covers my body. I listen all night. I do not hear anything. But in this time I am able to sort out all the smells buried in the threads and the sounds still reverberating deep in the fibers. It is what I have been looking for.

It is this rug I have carefully spread out now, east and west over the dust. It is only from such a height above the floor of the desert that one is able to see clearly what is going on.

The moon has just risen; the sun has just gone down. There are only a few stars up and a breeze blowing in from the south. The air smells like wet cottonwood leaves.

This is the best time to see what is happening. Everyone who is passing through will be visible for a short time. Already I have seen the priest with his Bible bound in wolves' fur and the blackbird asleep in his hair.

I see the woman who smells like sagebrush and her three children with the large white eyes and tattered leggings. I see the boy who rolls in dust like a horse and the legionnaire with the alabaster skin polished smooth by the wind. I see the magnificent jethery loping across the desert like a greyhound with his arms full of oars. I watch cheetahs in silver chariots pulled by a span of white crows. I see the rainbow in arabesques of the wind.

The night gets deeper. I pull down to listen for Ahlnsaha: she is crying in Arizona. This is what she is singing:

Go to the white rain

Ta ta ta ta

Go to the white rain

Ta ta ta ta

I see the horses

Ta ta ta ta

They are feeding above there.

There is no rain; there are no horses. Her music falls into pieces with her tears in the dust like lies. She

smells like your face in wheat.

~~The moon is up higher, clearing the thin clouds on the horizon.~~

The two girls with the sun in a spiderweb bag are standing by the mountains south talking with the blue snake that makes holes in the wind with his whistle.

I can smell the heat of the day stuck on the edges of the cracks in the earth like a salt crust after tide. I lay back and watch the sky. I close my eyes. I run my hands out smooth over the rug and feel the cold rising from the earth. When I come again I will bring a friar's robe with a deep cowl and shoes of jute fiber. I will run like a madman to the west all night until I begin to fall asleep; then I will walk back, being careful to correct for the tilt of the earth, the force of Coriolis, reading my breviary by the precise arrowlight of stars, assured of my destination.

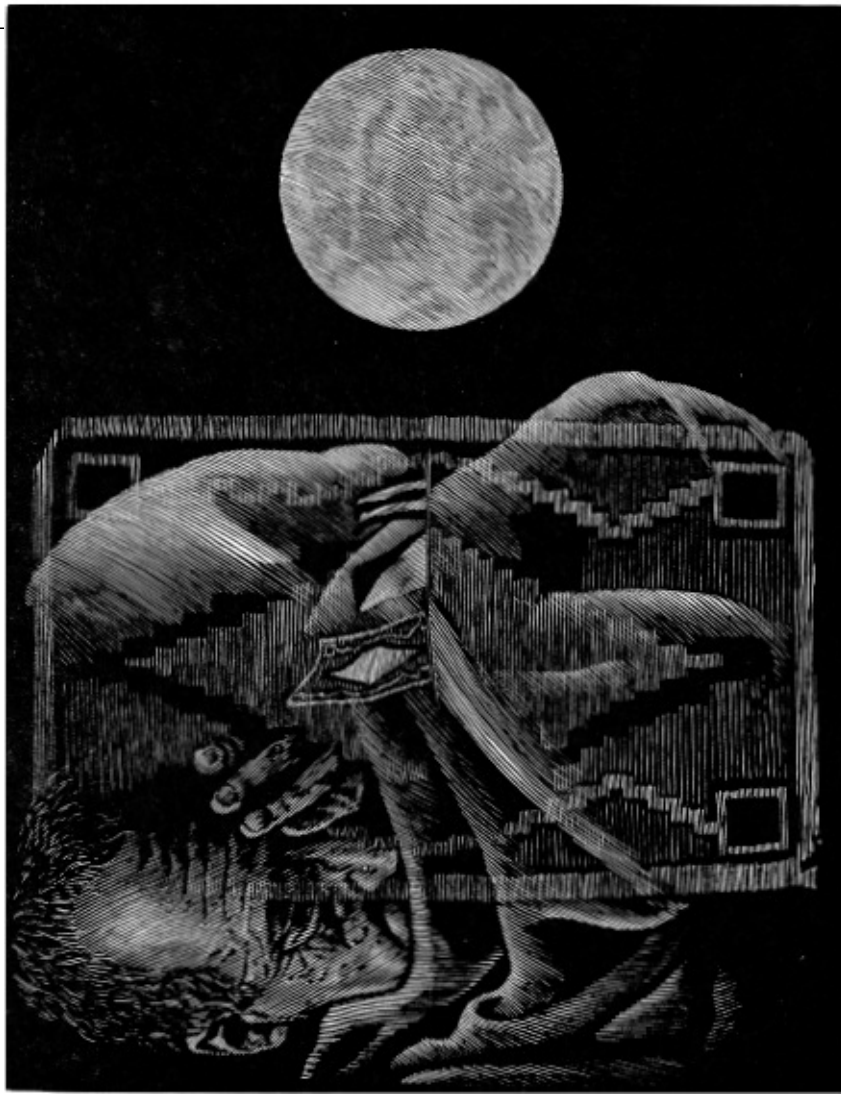
The spent day hugs the desert floor like a fallen warrior. I am warm. I am alert for any sort of light. I believe there is someplace out there where you can see right down into the heart of the earth. The light there is strong enough to burn out your eyes like sap in a fire. But I won't go near it. I let it pass. I like to know that if I need it, with only a shovel or a small spade, I can begin digging and reach the day.

This time is the only time you will see the turtles massed on the eastern border for the march to the western edge where there is water, and then back the same night to hide in the bushes and small insects dazed to lethargy in the cold. I have spoken with these turtles. They are reticent about their commitments. Each one looks like half the earth.

This is the only time you can study both of your shadows. If you sit perfectly still and watch your primary shadow as the sun sets you will be able to hold it long enough to see your other shadow fill up when the moon rises like a porcelain basin with clear water. If you turn carefully to face the south you may regard both of them: to understand the nature of silence you must be able to see into this space between your shadows.

This is the only time you will be able to smell water and not mistake it for the smell of a sheet of granite, or confuse it with the smell of marble or darkness. If you are moving about at this time, able to go anywhere you choose, you will find water as easily as if you were looking for your hands. It may take you some hours, even days to arrive at the place, but there will be no mistake about the direction to go once you smell it. The smell of water is not affected by the air currents so you won't need to know the direction of the wind; the smell of water lays along the surface of the earth like a long stick of peeled elmwood.

This is the only time you can hear the flight of the gray eagle over the desert. You cannot see him because he fades with the sun and is born out of it in the morning but it is possible to hear his wings pumping against the columns of warm air rising and hear the slip of the wind in his feathers as he tilts his gyre out over the desert floor. There is nothing out there for him, no rabbits to hunt, no cliff faces to fall from, no rock on which to roost, but he is always out there at this time fading to gray and then to nothing, turning on the wind with his eyes closed. It doesn't matter how high he goes or how far away he drifts, you will be able to hear him. It is only necessary to lie out flat somewhere and listen for the sound, like the wrinkling of the ocean.



The last thing you will notice will be the stones, small bits of volcanic ash, black glass, black tourmaline, sapphires, narrow slabs of gray feldspar, rose quartz, sheets of mica and blood agate. They are small enough to be missed, laying down in the cracks of the desert floor, but they are the last things to give up the light; you will see them flare and burn like coals before they let go.

It is good to have a few of these kinds of stones with you in a pocket or cupped in your hand before you go to sleep. One man I knew, only for a short time, was sure the stones were more important than anything else; he kept a blue one tied behind his ear. One evening while we were talking he reached over and with a wet finger took alkaline dust and painted a small lightning bolt on his right cheek. I regarded him for more than an hour before it became too dark to see. I rolled myself up in this blanket and slept.

THE SEARCH FOR THE HERON

THE SEARCH FOR THE HERON

I SEE YOU ON THE FAR SIDE of the river, standing at the edge of familiar shadows, before a terrific chorus of young alders on the bank. I do not think you know it is raining. You are oblivious to the *thuck* of drops rolling off the tube of your neck and the slope of your back. (Above, in the sweep of cedars, drops pool at the tips of leather needles, break away, are sheered by the breeze and, *thuck*, hit the hollow-boned, crimson-colored shoulders of the bird and fall swooning into the river.)

Perhaps you know it is raining. The intensity of your stare is then not oblivion, only an effort to find a spot between the rain splashes in the river (past your feet, so well-known, there beneath the hammering surface, like twigs in the pebbles) the movement of a trout.

I know: your way is to be inscrutable. When pressed you leave. This is no more unexpected or mysterious than that you give birth to shadows. Or silence. I watch from a distance. With respect. I think of standing beside you when you have died of your own brooding over the water—as shaken as one would be at the collapse of a cathedral, wincing deep inside as at the screech of an overloaded cart.

You carry attribution well, refusing to speak. With your warrior's feathers downslapped at the back of your head, those white sheaves formed like a shield overlaying your breast, your gray-blue cast, the dark tail feathers—do you wear wolves' tails about your ankles and dance in clearings in the woods when your blood is running? I wonder where you have fought warrior. Where!

You retreat beneath your cowl, spread wings, rise, drift upriver as silent as winter trees.

I follow you. You have caught me with your reticence. I will listen to whatever they say about you, what anyone who has seen you wishes to offer—and I will return to call across the river to you, to confirm or deny. If you will not speak I will have to consider making you up.

Your sigh, I am told, is like the sound of rain driven against tower bells. You smell like wild ginger. When you lift your foot from the river, water doesn't run off it to spoil the transparent surface of the shallows. The water hesitates to offend you. You stare down with that great yellow eye, I am told, like some prehistoric rattlesnake: that dangerous, that blinding in your strike, that hate-ridden. But (someone else has insisted) you really do smell like wild ginger, and snakes smell like cucumbers. A false lead.

Cottonwoods along the river, stained with your white excrement, are young enough to volunteer a complaint about you. They have grown so fast and so high with such little effort that they cannot understand neither failure nor triumph. So they will say anything they think might be to their advantage. I, after a somewhat more difficult life, am aware that they will lie, and that lies serve

their way.

(It was one of these who told me you were without mercy and snakelike.) One of them said something about your fishy breath—vulgar talk, I know. But I heard it out. It is, after all, in the branches where you have dreamed at night, as immobile as a piece of lumber left in their limbs, and considered your interior life. This idea attracts me. I know: this is not something to inquire into with impunity, but I did not start out on this to please you. And in spite of my impatience I am respectful.

One dream alone reveals your grief. The trees said you dreamed most often of the wind. You dreamed that you lived somewhere with the wind, with the wind rippling your feathers; and that your children were born of this, that they are the movement of water in all the rivers. You wade, it suggested, among your children, staring hard, pecking in that lightning way your life from the water that is your child; and sleeping in trees that do not hold you sacred.

I know why you appear so fierce and self-contained. I can imagine fear in the form of a frog with your beak screaming and you, undisturbed, cool. When you finally speak up, feigning ignorance with me won't do; enigmatic locutions, distracting stories of the origin of the universe—these will not do to expect the wisdom of the desert out of you.

The cottonwoods also told me of a dance, that you dreamed of a dance: more than a hundred great blue herons riveted by the light of dawn, standing with wind-ruffled feathers on broad slabs of speckled gray granite, river-washed bedrock, in that sharp, etching backlight, their sleek bills glinting. They begin to lift their feet from the thin sheet of water and to put them back down. The sound of that rhythmic splash, the delicate *kersplash* of hundreds of feet, came up in the sound of the river and so the first was lost; but the shards of water, caught, blinding in the cutting light (now the voices, rising, keening) began to form a mist in which appeared rainbows against the white soft breasts; and when drops of water dolloped like beads of mercury on the blue-gray feathers, small rainbows of light here and in the eyes (as the voices, louder, gathering on one, high, trembling note) rainbows—the birds cradled in light shattered in rainbows everywhere, and with your great blue wings fanning through the brilliant mist, open, utterly vulnerable and stunning, you urged them to begin to revolve in the light, stretching their wings, and you lay back your head and closed the steely eyes and from deep within your belly came the roar of a cataract, like the howling of wolves—that long moment of your mournful voice. The birds quieted, their voices quieted. The water quieted, it quieted, until there was only your quivering voice, the sound of the birth of rivers, tapering finally to silence, to the sound of dawn, the birds standing there full of grace. One or two feathers floating on the water.

I understand it is insensitive to inquire further, but you see now your silence becomes even more haunting.

I believe we will dance together someday. Before then will I have to have been a trout, bear scared from your stabbing misses and so have some deeper knowledge? Then will we dance? I cannot believe it is so far between knowing what must be done and doing it.

The cottonwoods, these too-young trees, said once, long ago, you had a premonition in a nightmare. An enormous owl arrived while you slept and took your daughter away, pinioned in his gray fists. You woke, bolt upright, in the middle of the night to find her there, undisturbed beside you. You aired your feathers, glared into the moon-stilled space over the water and went uneasily back to sleep. In the morning—your first glance—the limb was empty. You were young, you had also lost a wife, and you went down to the river and tore out your feathers and wept. The soundlessness of it was what you could not get over.

The cottonwoods said there was more, but I put up my hand, tired, on edge at the sound of my own

voice asking questions. I went into the trees, wishing to cry, I thought, for what had been lost, feeling how little I knew, how anxious I was, how young.

The big maples, where you have slept since then—I resolved to ask them about your dreams. No they refused. I climbed up in their limbs, imploring. They were silent. I was angered and made a fool of myself beating on the trunks with my fists screaming, “Tell me about the bird! It is only a bird!”

Learning your dreams unnerved me. What unholy trespass I had made.

When I regained my composure I apologized, touching the maple trunks gently with my fingers. As I departed a wind moved the leaves of a low branch against my face and I was embarrassed, for I was waiting for some sign of understanding. I walked on, alert now to the wind showing here and there in the grass. The wind suddenly spoke of you as of a father. The thoughts were incomplete, hinting at something incomprehensible, ungraspable, but I learned this: you are able to stand in the river in such a way that the wind makes no sound against you. You arrange yourself so that you cast no shadow and you stop breathing for half an hour. The only sound is the faint movement of your blood. You are quiet enough to hear fish swimming toward you.

When I asked, discreetly, whether long ago you might have fought someone, some enemy whose name I might recognize, the wind was suddenly no longer there. From such strength as is in you I suspect an enemy. I have inquired of the stones at the bottom of the river; I have inquired of your other enemy, the pine marten; I have waded silently with your relatives, the bitterns, alert for any remarks. All to no avail.

I have been crippled by my age, by what I have known. As well as by my youth, by what I have yet to learn, in all these inquiries. It has taken me years, which might have been spent (by someone else) seeking something greater, in some other place. I have sought only you. Enough. I wish to know you and you will not speak.

It is not easy to tell the rest, but I know you have heard it from others. Now I wish you to hear it from me. I took bits of bone from fish you had eaten and pierced my fingers, letting the blood trail away with the current. I slept on what feathers of yours I could find. From a tree felled in a storm I took your nest, climbed with it to a clearing above the river where there was a good view, as much sky as I could comprehend. Bear grass, pentstemon, blue gilia, wild strawberries, Indian paintbrush growing there. Each night for four nights I made a small fire with sticks from the old nest and looked out toward the edge of the shadows it threw. On the last night I had a great dream. You were standing on a desolate plain. You were painted blue and you wore a necklace of white salmon vertebrae. Your eyes huge, red. Before you on the dry, gray earth a snake coiled, slowly weaving the air with his head. You spoke about the beginning of the world, that there was going to be no fear in the world, that everything that was afraid would live poorly.

The snake said coldly, weaving, yes, there would be fear, that fear would make everything strong and lashed out, opening a wound in your shoulder. As fast, you pinned his head to the ground and said—the calmness in your voice—fear might come, and it could make people strong, but it would be worth nothing without compassion. And you released the snake.



I awoke sprawled in bear grass. It was darker than I could ever remember a night being. I felt the sp
on the planet where I lay, turned away from the sun. My legs ached. I knew how old I was lying the
on the top of the mountain, a fist of cold air against my breast as some animal, a mouse perhaps
moved suddenly under my back.

An unpronounceable forgiveness swept over me. I knew how much had to be given away, how
little could ever be asked. The sound of geese overhead in the darkness just then, and all that it meant
was enough.

I leap into the jade color of the winter river. I fight the current to reach the rocks, climb up on the
and listen for the sound of your voice. I stand dripping, shivering in my white nakedness, in the th
dawn light. Waiting. Silent. You begin to appear at a downriver bend.

THE FALLS

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