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The Lost Journal of Meriwether Lewis

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MERIWETHER LEWIS: Co-commander of an expedition to the Pacific Ocean, 1804-6. Found dead under mysterious circumstances, either murdered or a suicide, in central Tennessee, Oct. 11, 1809.

THE LOST JOURNAL OF MERIWETHER LEWIS

Fort Clatsop,
Feb. 20, 1806

Have I come all this way but to stare at grayness?
(It was Gray, too, who first ran this bar, an apparition,
sails so white shouting skipped the river like stones!)
My maps mold and smear. Ants of rust crawl my rifle.
Once I was proficient at aiming, measuring. Nothing
escaped the ire of my rifle, my will. Days, I collected
specimens and fossils for the President, nearly a father,
who does not send a ship to retrieve me from the rain.

I encase myself in pelts of the Sea Otter, nights,
and give off my derangement like breath, like steam
from the skin of a water animal. I esteem other days,
when encouraged by the season we departed Mandan Country.
Then, as now, it was my legs—that rusted in Winter,
that would madden me. I stretched them that Spring
and found them sound, and full of the flesh of dogs,
embarked, toward whatever Spring and West were.

Tattooed with the names of English traders, the squaws
lie down one long last time in their blue beads,
with ulcers and sores, with their seaborne venereal.
Down our path of honours I see more traders,
(neither tongues nor feet can outdistance them)
weighed with baggage, and all honour ground down—
one step in these bogs and land shakes for an acre!
I am not a trader. I am an explorer, feverish with rain.

Clatsop. Killamook. Chinook. O! Rain-stained names
speak more than I am able, as in this Western downpour
I am compelled to be mute. I kneel in fir needles,
and while buckskin rots vapouring from my back
I pray trees catch storms like sails forever.
From this outlook on Cape Disappointment I scan for a ship
but there is no ship for father or son, and I steer—
to camp by the one earthly rudder left, my own.

*They think this is wilderness; visages of murderers
wheeling closer in October leaves on the Natchez Trace.
The pacing Meriwether Lewis halts, listening. Suddenly,
his tongue is too big for his mouth, his mouth
outsizes his head and his head is a wreath of smoke
above the creatures that run for his money saying:
this is wilderness. Cottonwood leaves are falling,
over empty cartridges, over their spent hearts.*