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Blessing at the Citadel

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Blessing at the Citadel

By the time I had walked out of the canyon
toward the end of a day of deep quiet
and daydreams among lizards and wrens,
a day of clarity in the sun and puzzles
in the shadows where I found the petroglyph
of a running animal pecked into the rock
at the base of the canyon a thousand years ago,
the animal I thought at first was a horse,
but after looking awhile and thinking about it,
realized was a mountain lion, I was ready
I thought for anything.

I was feeling strong, light, open.
I was ready to sing for a stranger,
or walk into the cinder hills with one
of the spirits of Lomaki, or put on a black
satin cape, step out of my dusty shoes,
croak, and flap off to ride thermals
with the ravens. I was that happy,
as if a new depth had entered my life.

When I came upon the tattooed family
posing for pictures among the walls and rubble
of Box Canyon Pueblo, and noticed

their station wagon with Indiana plates
and the trailer with the words *Skin Tattoos*
painted carefully in big black letters,
I considered asking the smiling father,
his tattooed belly bulging proudly beneath
his shirt, to make a portrait of the lion
on my chest. I was that happy.
But asked instead, how you doing?
Pretty good so far, he smiled.
And I went on walking across the road,
past a battered pickup, to Nalakihi
and the Citadel, home to the Hisatsinom,
ancestors of the Hopi, guardian spirits
of the land nicknamed America.

I suppose I should keep this to myself,
but there are things in a life that happen
only once, and make us who we are,
like being born from one woman
or the first true kiss that makes
all the others possible. I suppose
I should hold my heart hostage
to a regular beat, and if it must go faster,
they say, it should do so gradually
so it isn't strained or damaged
so the whole system starts to break down

and the invisible bird that flies
back and forth between the extremities
doesn't burst into a sudden scattering
of individual feathers.

But there they were, three of them,
standing at the top of the Citadel
in late afternoon light, silhouettes
among the rocks rising like gods
in human figures from the ancient walls.
I stood quietly on the trail below
until one of them came down to me
and put a hand on my shoulder, lowered
his head, opened my shirt, and spoke
in the old way directly to my heart.
Don't go any further heart, he said,
until you are blessed. He rubbed hooma
over my chest and touched my forehead
with the white dust of cornmeal on his fingers.
He poured hooma in my left hand
and placed a sprig of cedar in my right.
Go pray, he said. What for? I asked.
Pray for now, this place, all your relations.
Pray for the hostages.
Then he walked off down the trail

to join the others, not gods
but poor, living men from Moenkopi
here at the home of their ancestors
to pray for the world and bless a stranger.