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Blessing at the Citadel

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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 Nalakihu
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.