

GESTURES IN WAITING

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A few years ago I saw a man hit a large buck on I-80 in Nebraska near the Platte River—or rather I saw his blinking hazard lights as I approached and then the animal, his hindquarters shattered, trying to crawl into the woods on his front hooves, so human-like and pathetic in his crawling that the rack on his head seemed more like a gigantic, marvelous crown; the deer was making a snail's progress, but I thought I could almost hear the flint of his hooves strike the edge of the pavement, and the man standing there in the dark not knowing what to do; or knowing but not yet resigned to the carrying out of the deed.

The buck wasn't going anywhere, was in fact straining to move inches, like two-thirds of its body went slack, the kill still making its way up to his heart and head. Then I was already beyond them, shooting into the dark, but this troubling tableau has never left me, the roadkill that was not yet killed, the driver looking after it in bewilderment. And I thought I knew then, or think I know now, that what I saw could only take place where two worlds would always collide, places and spaces swapping bodies and souls for a heartbeat, the collision resulting, as all such collisions do, in confusion, crinkled fenders, and death. But it is possible that for just an instant, a flash, a revelation, the driver was catapulted back to a time when he did know what to do, when it sang in his blood like the purpose of his race, that he had to break the deer's neck with his hands out of mercy and offer the body up to his god; but just then he stood fixed and paralyzed around his own defunct will.

Where was the glory in it? The modern world vanished in a heartbeat behind this bewildered man standing in the fog, the cherries of his hazard lights strobing in the dark. I thought about what he would do, how he was suddenly thrust into a moral crisis whose resolution was startlingly clear: to finish what he had accidentally started, to accomplish what he had never done; to go back to the way of blood-born mercy; to find a way to bless the animal, to ask for its forgiveness, to return once more to the elemental state where there was no buffer between him and the natural world. For I could see in those flashing seconds the doubt on his face, doubt caused by fog and

fear and the animal crawling on its hooves to return to the woods.

He could not know what he acted out for other drivers and me, the sudden tearing away of layers; he could not take the deer and talk to him, could not sing over him or nurse him back to health; every second he waited the suffering went on, right in front of his eyes, the suffering of a four-hundred pound animal, the suffering he had caused through no ill will of his own. He alone had the power to stop it—and how unusual this must have been, how out of keeping with the rest of the day and the rest of his life. And now the clarity of the situation seems like a revelation to me, the ritual unfolding and the reason all the way back to Abraham, how the man ought to take care of the dying deer. It was a holy highway moment, a sacrifice to our high speed way of life. I looked back into the trailing mist of five a.m.: by the time I reached Lincoln an hour later the deer would be dead and the man who killed it would never forget it, as I have never forgotten.

Often when I am out running, I pass by a dead badger or deer, and think about the fatal collision and the death that came quickly or took hours, wondering how recent the killing took place and what the terms were of the final encounter. I can't help it. Like a dream scene without dialogue, I reenact its brief, fatal moments, knowing the conclusion before it begins. I imagine the car swerving to avoid the animal, the sickening thud, the innocent and astonished bleat at the end of it, like a lamb calling for its mother in some godforsaken place, and the crude aftermath of blood and hemorrhaging. I carry the knowledge of the roadkill for weeks, for months until it flowers in unexpected moments like this one. The meditation comes of its own accord, unbidden and unprompted, as if the psychic energy of the dead animal is still circling above it in a flickering horn of invisible light coming out of its body. It's just roadkill after all, a sign of our chaotic and random times. Usually the animal lay just off the road prone in its grotesque death posture, eyes still open, the eerie sensation creeping into me that it will startle as I pass and make a charge at me before disappearing into the trees. I hear the slow wave of an approaching car at my back and calculate the trajectory of the hit, the impact and shards of broken glass. But what troubles me now is not their numbers so much but how similar they look as they lay there, most within mere feet of the pavement, as if prescribed by some fatal rite no one has ever articulated.

They're waiting for deliverance in attitudes close to prayer and surrender, prostrate before the sky, waiting for the unseen to steal into their bodies and

carry their spirits away, like the stealthy wind that raises the grass of their fur; they're waiting for grace, for some kind of healing balm, for something or someone to take them back to the woods of eternity, or the long lit grasses of twilight; they're waiting for a loving hand, for someone to bless their bodies, to take their carcasses away and redeem them somehow. They're waiting in a way we cannot fathom, like pebbles, like hay under the moon. Surely someone, somewhere should be appointed to mourn them or sing their praises, some highway shaman or holy woman? Could we not agree that something should be done to recognize the carnage and the waste?

When I see roadkill, I think of all manners of hollowness, of garish photographs in tabloid magazines, shattered beer bottles, cigarette butts and glass ashtrays in highway motel rooms; I think of a blue, flickering TV in an alcoholic's room; think of the myriad empty things that I pile up around us in daily life that do not add hope to anything, litter blowing from landfills and ending up as pendants in trees, shredded fan belts, debris from the catastrophic fall that keeps on falling. I see the semblance and spirit of this fall everywhere, in the parking lot of K-Mart and its brief flock of blowing trash bags, in the slashed tires behind Wal-Mart, in the broken bottle of vodka glittering in the sun. It's all a brief segue into the void, into a nether world where the mechanism of our fantasies stops cold in the face of reality. I see it in the dead deer's face, in the dead cat whose eyes no longer hold the wonder of marbles or the shine of obsidian stone. But I go into these eyes anyway because I cannot help it, spooked but fascinated for the nothing I see there, and the curves of myself looking back from the pealed edges of a perfect sphere; I go to the place where no one returns and no one lives, the hint of angels nowhere to be felt, and the sense of this emptiness filling the air around me and the animal that lay there.

When I see roadkill I imagine an impossible scenario, a single, nameless beam of light coming from far away that no one can see, beyond the province of radio waves and the Internet, coming to touch the dead animal with the particles of its rays; I think of the troubled passage of all living things in the world, those who die unredeemed and those who live on in hope of this redemption. But it's not found on the highway. Maybe, after all, this is why roadkills work their influence in me, because there is nothing and no one to take them away but the flies. They are so abject and abandoned after all, beneath the consideration of any one passing them on the highway; their deaths do not matter except as obstacles and objects of disgust; they

don't even exist as natural wonders or vermin anymore. But I think they are waiting for something, though I do not know what it is; I think their bodies stiff with rigor mortis are gestures in waiting, waiting for the possibility of a far away light. I think the thing they wait for is almost here, just out of reach, maybe here already in the way the sun lights up the hide of a dead doe fresh from killing. She lies outside of Alma on a lonely country road, her finely knit body delicate and slim as a sleeve of supple muscle ready for the leap, her fur glowing, no way to know how she died, only that she is here, her fine head bent a little back as if to get a better look at what she cannot see, her lifeless eyes staring up at the sun in glass vacancy, her broken bones waiting to be delivered to the place where all brokenness is healed.