

I.

A meteor startles the night sky,
my body radiates with
sudden flames—

The light quickens like a silver fish
racing with a black river,
the sky's dark vault.

Progeny of the snow mountains,
guardian of their solitude,
enduring through eons of time,

crouched among blue-rock massifs
above the high rangeland
I stand watch.

My ancestors' bloodline expresses
its nobility in me.
I am a miracle long gestated

in purest snow.
When I die, I will be re-absorbed
into the snow country's ancient silence.

Meanwhile, in this existence,
I merge with the steep mountains'
mist and windborne frost.

I inhabit the Realm of Mortality
but prowl the interstices and margins
of another existence. Eyes like black onyx.
Sight and knowledge coalesce.

In the Book of Origins I am
not a verse in the opening lines.

The peaks are far older, fixed
silent as time—And their silence
inhabits me. What I am

cannot be captured in written language
bestowed from the sky through our sages;
traitorous speech can never express

all that I am, beyond boundaries,
beyond abstractions. I am
a momentary spark on the night.

Leaving a faint trace, my essence
eternally in wild prospects,
I belong where I am.

Integral and sufficient, deathless
I will endure even if
the land of snows crumbles.

2.

In the rock's angular maze
my silhouette blooms darkly.

I am substance and nothingness.
Guarding the domain of the ancestors,

I read the coded scent of prey.
I obey my innate hungers.

Seen in shadowless midday
I am the deep prehistory,

Time beyond time,
time's beginning and time's end—



3.
Stars fall, the body adrift
among frozen rock falls and ice.
Weightless soul, eyes' green glint,
I leap into metallic air.

My presence reaches vast
distances, movements too quick
to track, sounding a note

no one hears, a motion
no one sees, my scent,
my breath, my memory
populate the wilderness.

But do not hunt for me:
each step, each trace,
each apparition is a ruse.

4.
I am the Snow Realm itself,
I am stealth and wind.
You might hear rock-joints flexing,
Or see spiraling eagles paired

in combat, swift rivals—
These are shadow selves
in the give and take of light
and dark. If the raptor finds

no prey, it is a sign I am here.
If a marmot scrambles in fright,
its alertness is a sign of my
home, habitat, and range.

The human domain shudders
with deception and greed.
But that realm is not mine.
You won't find me there.

5.
That plant and this animal
are a foreign language to you.
I am nature's brother.
I do not weigh the worth
of other living things.

In truth, each soul is essential
to the warp and weft of being.
In truth, this cosmos
did not arise to be chaos.

Its fine threads have woven
my existence with that of ibex,
marmots, and all other creatures.
Not one is a loose end to be cut,
or else the whole unravels.

This enigma is beyond solving:
ferocious or afraid, hungering
or devouring, without distinction,
not one is superfluous.

6.
Some admire the prints I leave,
*beautifully shaped as the petals
of plum blossoms impressed in snow.*

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But in truth they are the signature
of everything unknown. They speak little
about the mystery of being alive,
and they are not me.

A shadow language
between life's frailty and
extinction's finality, my tracks
are not the code of a shaman

—though in speechless language
they augur the rising winds turning
to icy gales and heaving blizzards
that will sweep all of this away.

7.
You may imagine I am
your own speculation,
your refuge, a benign remedy, as if
a creature in a long-forgotten
experience or a Dream Vision.

But I appear to you now
incarnate, glorious
as sunlight shattering
on a dish of silver coins,
and undeniably other.

I am geometric order
against the chaotic scree,
steadfast against thrashing winds
that howl in blue cataracts;
around me red petals in snowfall
color the air. I am fleetness in repose,
golden curve of palpable time,
robust and inviolable.

Finely contoured of black and white,
sculpted in bold relief.

A knife slices the air,
heaven's hurled lance, the swift
arrow, an elusive gemstone
splintered from Dream Visions.

The shape of rebounding cascades,
a gift-cloak, sacred cowries
sewn on a warrior's tunic,
a king's missing crown,
resurrection from Earth's womb.

8.

The seasons wheel toward April,
new birth says no to hesitation.
Ice burning off, life's rampage,

the mating wind's trumpet blasts.
Those just appearing
are given names.

The incomplete are completed;
in the ceremony of the newly born,
divine rituals are sung.

The Cosmic Mother arrives
lifting her voice in a chant
awakening the gods of fertility.

Eagerly in pursuit—decentering thrust—
Free-falling—lightning flash—
Bending desire's bow—well-cut gem—

Unresisting—leaping in tandem—
Tongue tip of musk—braced for mating—
Sprinting and winning—jaw loosening—

Incomparable flights—
Sunlit spray of dissipation—
Weight and absence—teeth grinding—furtive—

Phosphor of veins—succulent gift—
Breathing in and out—abruptly arching—
Intensity at beginning—pounding dance—

Death's pull toward the scarp—
Emptying—emptying—emptying—
Dream Visions—earthquake trembling—

Offerings made—hollow void in the earth—
Swift surrenderings—breaking into fragments—
Fountain—fountain—fountain—swirling vertigo—

Cliff walker's trembling—swooning—
Stillness after lightning—anticipating—
Mountains' echoes—involved.

9.

Leaping ravines dividing being
from not-being, overcoming gravity's
imperatives, I ascend the frost-laced rock.
I appear out of darkness like a photographic
print from a developing bath.

I clamber on the spinal nerves of precipices,
nimble among boulders as if
caressing the strings of the *xianzai*
or the keys of another music.
I am the navigator of high terrain,
position of line, magnetic needle.

Tireless in the hunt,
swift as sunset, the winds
in awe, I am lord
of the mountain's laws,
a brother among the Twelve
Tribes of Snow.

I turn and descend, hold
a moment, body in balance,
dismissive of death's razor.

10.

In a Dream Vision my mother appeared,
Gazing at me, her eyes bottomless.
In accord with our natural laws,
at the age of two years I set out
to emulate my ancestors,
to win even larger battles
—their glory unmatched for eons,
ferocious guardians to the death.

I advance steadily, overcoming,
overcoming. I call out the names
of the forefathers, their faces and forms
in the mirror of snow's Deep Time.
Like them, I am of Sky and Earth,
spirit and body, and from birth
understood my sacred obligation.

Life trembles in my jaws
and thunders from my throat.
Aware that death comes,
I gaze into the future's Wheel.



11.

Some say the benign mountain gods
protect us from avalanches,
diseases, and misfortunes.
Beyond these peaks, wherever I look
I see in this pure radiant glow
all creatures warmed in snow light.

I see a black eagle soaring
until it's out of sight in the slate-blue air.
On the lower slopes I see
curling upward from a herder's camp
a thin ribbon of cooking smoke.

I see yaks as if from another world
cooling themselves in shady marshes.
And farther off, azure haze hovers
over a stream's new ice.

Mind and spirit go their ways.
I dissolve into my inner thoughts.
Through a green portal, I hear
Sky Realm conversing with Earth.
Spontaneously, my tongue begins
a prayer for all creation.

12.

In scripture I am named
Serpent Spirit of the Peaks.
My life's karma is worth
a hundred horses, one thousand cows,
ten thousand human lives.

The sacred books say
that if a hunter strikes me
he will kill only one of my infinite lives,
a phantom of my true self—

bloody tracks will not lead to me.
Yet to harm even one of my forms
is a sin against the cosmos. Silently
I part the night's curtain,

My eyes are like the hooded heart
of a stone.

I feel the Earth's heartbeat.
My mind plunges into Deep Time.
I look into the night sky and grieve.

13.

With his hand's slightest movement,
a finger against a trigger's click,
a hunter fires. Echoes crackle
and rebound and rebound
through the chalk-blue gorges,
tolling the death of my brother.
Despite our keen eyes,
the bullet is sent too swiftly.

Blood-red lightning scorches the ranges
and the rising sun stops his breath.

For a hunter's thoughtless kill,
humanity is convicted, mind and heart,
for its sins against life. The bullet
rips my brother's gray throat,
and the mountains skirl.

The red foxes begin keening,
boulders weep crystals of ice,
and the red wormwood
plays death's flute song.

And the face of a glacier howls.
And the sky rolls with thunder.

Red snowfall rains all night
for the death of a single snow leopard
and for the curse of mankind.



14.

Do you wonder why I hide and mourn?
I prow through human language,
twisting and untwisting its coils
for a phrase equal to *terrible darkness*.

In the shadows of boulders
my mind is hazed and rugged
from harrowing my thoughts.
I gauge the present age of terror.

Over glacial time life refined
ways for creatures to survive together
and flourish. The same solar fire

that warmed them, warms us now.
The same moon bends down
like a sustaining lamp on a low branch

and advises us to hear
what animals in the Earth Realm
are saying, and to tend the wishes
of the numberless sky spirits.

Though sun and moon
still turn the seasons,
time and nature
are unraveling.

Humanity's clanging steel and its tall buildings'
sterile shadows are wounds
in the Earth's green lungs.

Year by year the living tribes decline,
swept into extinction.
The human species too is mortal,
not absolute. And perhaps
it is already too late.

I wish to say this in truth to you:
life has an infinitely slow beginning.
When one creature is taken away,
all bend together toward disaster.

There is no other place for any of us to go.
This is why I show myself to you
and speak of sorrow.



15.

I am not myself unless
among silver rock shelves
on the axis of a ridge line.
At night, I watch the cosmos weave
galaxies of swirling rosettes,
like my beautiful coat,
spun with the world's grace.

I sniff the scent of grasslands
hundreds of miles away.
Faster than wind I know precisely
the hiding places of red deer,
and where blue sheep drink from glassy streams.
I know beforehand the paths they will choose.

I hear the settling of rock dust
blasted from a boulder in a star cluster
light-years away and long ago extinguished.
Out of the bottomless black holes of space
I see the soft brightening
of unborn dawns emerging.
In a Dream Vision I recognize
what I was before this incarnation.

I too turned prayer wheels for redemption.
Despite my nine lives,
the flow of things will lift me
to a separate world in a different age.

16.

Without pen or ink,
I leave my testament to you,
for your descendants and mine.

Listening to the land's patience.
From mountain peaks, I have seen
the brilliance of sunrise
reflecting from spotless glaciers
and know that the beauty of dawn's light
forgives the fires of sunset.
Over days and seasons,
hunger and gladness
come and go, the hunt
succeeds but often fails.

Still, the Earth gives.
There is beauty more radiant
than the heart's imagination.

I have watched time,
a single-minded glacier,
flow like autumn water,

The changing snowpack, the embered stars
Raining down like dew,
And a light from the sun's halo
Flashing into this world and flaming out.

I will tell you my secret:
I have never witnessed a hell of any consequence,
but I have seen a way toward Goodness.

17.

Wait another moment with me.
I am hard-pressed to tell you:
do not hunt me any longer.

While we are together in this world
I am your brother in blood and bone.
Before a final reckoning comes

redress the terror.
I hear other souls whispering
in an ancient story,

my ears fill like a vessel.
My name and theirs can be
your stay against misery.

Listen well. I don't need gestures;
in this world of many worlds,
any endurance is singular.

Do not show my image
To the ones who feign redemption
or want moral advantage.

They mistake my image for what I am,
and in truth I know the danger
of their rival claims on me,

of their actions in the name of protection.
We've always said to you, for what we are
there is no substitution.

Listen! we are still with you,
this is not yet our farewell. But the final leaving
will not be postponed forever —!

*February 14–18, 2014
Written in haste, Kunming*



*These “camera trap” photographs are provided
courtesy of the Snow Leopard Conservancy
www.snowleopardconservancy.org*

*A camera trap, or “trail camera,” is a remotely
triggered device that takes noninvasive photographs
of animals in the wild in the absence of researchers.*