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Herbert Morris

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HERBERT MORRIS

A HAND

It has been with me thirty years,
longer than I remember, sharer,
sail in the wind, seabird, self-bearer,
darkest of my extremities,
shaver, change-maker, middleman
between my days and me, between
my vision and my life, loving
what I have loved, learning from me
commitment, fervor, fever, giver
of gifts I gave and gifts I didn't,
writer of letters hotly written,
lyrics, devotions, chopper of wood
for winter fires, cupper of water
for summer thirsts and wistful mouths
leaner than ghostly, past the mere lovely.

It has been held from dusk to dawn
through darknesses too infinite,
too crucial to be counted, touched
such bleaknesses, such wilderness,
so many lights and pieties,
such desolations, such drowned faces,
such brevities, such braveries,
oracle, agent, healer, holder,

shaker and shaper, mapper, maker,
faker, feeler, feigner, taker,
fabulist, puppet, conjurer,
marionette, illusionist,
vaudevillian in a glove,
magician's something-up-the-sleeve,
prevaricator in the wings
serving one master thirty years
and then some, longer than it wishes
to be remembered, put to bed
by him each night, sleeping with him
and with whomever else he chooses
town after town, night unto night,
from carnival to carnival
(or had you thought, my innocents,
he slept with art, and lived by light,
dragged from one village to the next
burdened with memory and baggage
flaking to dust only for magic,
subsisted in the mornings on
bread of illusion, jam of myth,
a brew of sleight-of-hand, an egg
[should he be able to afford it
this week] soft-boiled, hard-boiled, scrambled,
that imitates the universe
in a chipped saucer, faintly sour
by the time he has haggled for it
at the stalls, deftly borne it through the
mud-spattered alleys in one hand,
back to his tent, propped on the table,
studied it, held it, turned to cook it).

This morning, in its tasks and chores
given to shaping something for
someone with whom it deeply lives,
it gored a ring of blood and flesh
precisely at the geographic
center of its dominion. Tonight,
and for the next few nights, I read it
like a small map etched in my palm
whose atolls ridge the surface in a
fury of bright mercurochrome
sunsets and bull's-eyes, reefs of coral.
Later, it shall be put to bed,
as always, taken with me into
the darkness for as long and deep
as we may travel, in the night
given the sleeper at my side
for whom it lives as much as I
in the name of all things night-breathing,
gift of the token of unstinting
gesture and making, symbol of the
perpetually opening
and yielding in us, through the night
dreaming what we dream: demonstration;
sum of the dim extenuations
however they may live in us,
wherever they escape us now
and sail this moment small and pale
in other lives, disguised as mercies,
remembrances, a look, a touch,
available, redemptive, naked,
a wound, or star, or water-flower.