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from The Astonishing Weight of the Dead (“The Call,” “I’ll Be Right Back”)

Tom Wayman

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From *The Astonishing Weight of the Dead*

TOM WAYMAN

The Call

Rain in gusts all day
that slackened a little at dusk
but the night
dripping. I sat
in my room
in the dormitory at the edge of the woods
by the edge of the sea.
As I finished a page
in the glare of my desk lamp,
as my fingers caught the paper's upper right corner
to turn it

I heard a voice
—urgent, but without sound—

Go outside

I glanced through the window
at the drizzle
lit with walkway lights.

Again the voice suffused me:

You must go outside

The tone was uncompromising.

Go out and

across the road Impatience vibrated in the words
and a sense I was being drawn
to a purpose: a moment
or presence.

I stood
uneasy. But I walked downstairs,
through the main doors

and felt the first drops soaking into my shirt
to skin. The voice remained certain:

Across the road

Enter the forest

On the closest shoulder of the highway
I paused.
I peered over at the tangle of underbrush and
evergreens. I saw only
rain.

The voice propelled me forward.
On the other side of the road
I halted that much nearer to the woods,
shivering in the chilled damp of my clothes.
Black sky. Heavy downpour now. Wind in the
cedars' gravely swaying tops.

What would meet me in the dark?
Nothing but branches and roots
and the massive trunks of the trees
showering me
with winter rain:
icy ocean's breath
calling me *fool*

Or a tall man
waiting ahead in a clearing
—one eye socket horribly scarred,
a raven walking the wet ground
at his feet,
a horse nearby
cropping grass in the forest's
deep silence

Or a fire far off
that as I approach
I see is ringed with
cloaked human shapes
seated at the hissing flames
A face—now male, now female—

lifts in my direction
as I struggle in the drenched brush
toward them

I trembled
to guess the unknown I was called to
Because I could not understand in advance
this event
I was afraid

Then the sound was the drops
driven by the gale against the hard
surface of the road
and the leaves.
Behind me, past a lawn, the dormitory
rose through rain like a lighted ship.

I turned
to look at the building's doors, stairs,
my room. I began to
retreat.
Yet the instant I swung away
I knew I had spurned a great summons
or gift,
an enormous
chance.

I'll Be Right Back

When the last of my chairs
is loaded on the truck
I'll be right back

The boxes of books
wholesaled away, my files
and trunk full of mementos from childhood
bagged for the trash
I'll be right back

The last poem of mine
finally excised in the anthology revision
I'll be right back

When no one alive
remembers there was a person with my name
I'll be right back

And I don't mean reincarnation
And I don't mean
soul
I don't mean
we're all part of the biosphere
Nor do I mean
random evolutionary chance

I mean I'll be
right back