

ANNE CARSON

124 / PLAIN WATER

Kinds of Water: An Essay on the Road to Compostela

St. Jean Pied de Port

20th of June

*the good thing is we know
the glasses are for drinking*

Machado

At the foot of the port of Roncesvalles, a small town bathes itself. Thunderstorms come down from the mountains at evening. Balls of fire roll through the town. Air cracks apart like a green fruit. Underneath my hotel window is a river (La Nive) with a sizable waterfall. There is a dark shape at the edge of the falls, as I look down, knocking this way and that in the force of the current. It would seem to be a drowned dog. It is a drowned dog. And I stand, mind burning, looking down. No one is noticing the dog. Should I mention it? I do not know the word for *drowned*. Am I on the verge of an ancient gaffe? Waiters come and go on the terrace of the hotel bar, bending deeply from the waist to serve potage. A fathom below them the dark body slaps. At the foot of the falls, where water is rushing away, a fisherman casts his line over it. What sense could there be in things? I have come through countries, centuries of difficult sleep and hard riding and still I do not

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know the sense of things when I see it, when I stand with the pieces in my hands. Could there be a sculpture of a drowned dog on the ledge of an ancient waterfall? I watch and pass, hours pass. My mind a laughingstock. Evening falls, the shape is still there. Fisherman gone, waiters whisking tablecloths on the terrace. What is it others know?

Pilgrims were people who loved a good riddle.

Estella

25th of June

*like lame-wheeled carriages
we creep forth reluctantly
on the journey from the capital*

Zeami

On dark mornings in Navarre the fall-off hills rise in masses, flat on top. White clouds bite down on them like teeth. In my country too it is morning now, they are making coffee, they are getting out the black bread. No one eats black bread here. Spanish bread is the same color as the stones that lie along the roadside—gold. True, I often mistake stones for bread. Pilgrims' hunger is a curious thing.

The road itself was built by the pilgrims of ancient times as they walked. Each carried a stone and set it in place. As is clear from the photographs, these were in general stones of quite good size. While the pilgrims trudged, they would pretend the stones were loaves of bread and, to keep spirits high, they sang songs about bread, or about the rock that was following them. *¡No me mates con tomate, mátame con bacalao!* You can hear this one still, in bars, some nights. Don't kill me with tomato, kill me with cod! What is it that keeps us from drowning in moments that rise and cover the heart?

Pilgrims were people whose recipes were simple.

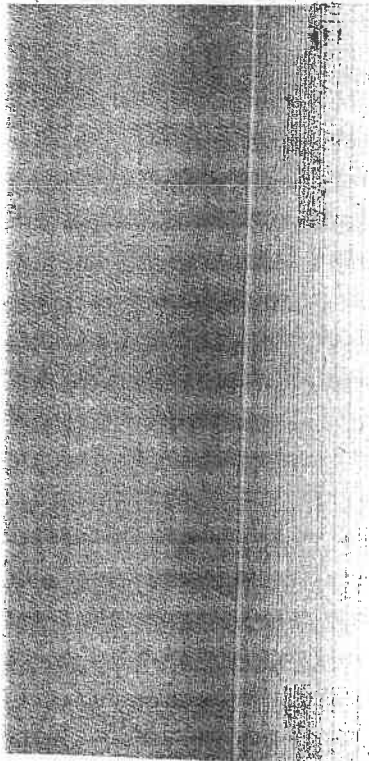
Frómista

7th of July

*as one turns about the moon
understands one's very heart*

Sozei

Hills continue to pale and scarify. They look shaved, like old heads of women in an asylum. What is the breaking point of the average pilgrim? I feel so lonely, like childhood again. What kind of ensnaring can touch the loneliness of animals? Nothing can touch it. No, maybe that is not altogether correct. This evening My Cid gave me a back rub and spoke to me, more kindly than he has before, about his mother, who suffers from a wasting disease. Once, when he first learned of her illness, his heart broke. Then he set about taking care of her, with back rubs and other attentions. A voice coming from behind your back can be different. Animals who ride on top of one another do not have to see one another's face. Sometimes that is better.



China City, Indiana

Rattling through the ghost cornfields of Indiana at 3:00 a.m. under a gold slipper moon, with handfuls of fog throwing themselves at the windshield and Ray Charles on the radio, I am thinking the difference between women and men is a boundless sea. *You can reach the opposite shore if you repent*, says classical Chinese wisdom. *You turned my night into day you made my dreams come true*, says Ray Charles, *you thrill you*. We have been driving since early morning, since the bold, serious green hills of Virginia, since a mountain pass where General Jackson was shot by his own men on an ink black night in 1863. Cross fire. After cross fire there is not much to talk about. What is love like for you? is a question I am not finding a way to ask as the dark thrill miles go ghosting by and old Earth begins turning toward her meteor showers of midsummer. Watching the edge of his face in the dark, something comes at me. You. Thrill. You.

clothesline. Bad at knives. Bad at water fetching. Bad at unpacking. Bad at packing. Bad at shortwave radio tuning. Well the anthropology of camping is a hardy subject. We can trace it back at least as far as the summer of 1553, when the Hades emperor of China packed up the imperial court, including three hundred palace women and the household goods loaded on 1,110 carrying trays, and trekked them to the Ta'o River region to view the landscape. His consort at the time was the forty-year-old Lady Cheng, with whom he shared delight in the printed page—nearly one hundred trays of poetry, essays, medical textbooks, drama, detective novels and pornography. From the emperor's own brush we have four sheets of calligraphy on what made a woman a woman, what made her part her lips and close her eyes. It is a beautiful scroll, in the dry and lean style cultivated by that period.

Dawn. The emperor turns in his sleeping bag. Opens his eyes. Smiles and says quietly, "Fuck me." *Bad at pelting the rat for fear of smashing jade bowl beside it*, says classical Chinese wisdom. Lady Cheng's special interest was mapmaking.

Lachine; Quebec

To desire and be desired, what could be simpler? A woman cannot tell a simple story, my father used to say. Well here is what it looks like on the videotape. You see desire go traveling into the total dark country of another soul, to a place where the cliff just breaks off. Cold light like moonlight falling on it.

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Oriole, Indiana

Listening to ancient trees stream upward in the China black rain night of Indiana and the long river sound goes plundering, harpooning past. Lying on my back with arms folded on the chest, a posture I find helpful for thinking, while beside me the emperor sleeps. Forest birds perch together all night but when day breaks, who the enemy is is no longer clear. Drops of water from a leak in the roof of the tent are hitting my forehead one after another like items on a list. I am bad at building a fire. Bad at folding the tent. Bad at driving the truck. Bad at sticks. Bad at snakes. Bad at coffee. Bad at

It was a full-moon night about a year ago, the first time I went to his house. I wore a gray dress with buttons, and not telling him that it was the first night I went to any man's house, ate chicken. Then he so carefully washed each pot. Standing at the sink he rinsed each pot. Standing there he dried each pot. And said. Turning, "I like this dress." (Why?) "Because there are so many ways to take it off."

Who thinks herself a treasure is soon parted from it, says classical Chinese wisdom. What makes life life and not a simple story? Jagged bits moving never still, all along the wall.

Illinois, Route 19

Cornfield after cornfield after cornfield. Through southern Illinois and across sullen Missouri where the ends of the sky fall open and into hot Kansas where they dropped and stay. *Another thing is you know one thing is*, Carmen Macrae is singing on the radio, *I don't want to be free*. One thing camping is is an excellent way to confront the difference between women and men. The emperor is videotaping out the window while I drive. Explaining to me that in classical Chinese the character for *cornfield* plus the character for *oneself* mean freedom. Well I came on this trek to leave one self behind. Like a painting, it will be erased, I thought, and the suffering too. For desire is like the secret of the suffering of a work of art, dispersed over the surface of the beloved's body, residing everywhere and nowhere at once. *You know I'd rather be a blind girl*. I came on this trek to videotape desire—to obtain cheap, prompt and correct facts about an object to which nothing in the world exactly corresponds: *Than to see you walk away with another love*.

Marthasville, Missouri

What is it men want? They talk of pleasure. They go wild, then limp, then fall asleep. Is there something I'm not getting? Classical Chinese wisdom recognizes five conditions of getting. It is not like. It is like. It is just like. It is only like this and not like anything else. It is. The ultimate nature of conditions, for example, is just like water. The ultimate nature of water is like the pleasure of men. The ultimate nature of the pleasure of men is not like the pleasure of women. A Missouri thunderstorm racing across the sorghum fields with its huge dragon paws dropping the sky open, you can stand and watch it come toward you for half a day and not know if it is near or far off, you can see it fold back into itself and vanish conditionless as water—is not like anything else, is only like this. The air is dark as murder. Radio crackles. *Standin' in the rain*, Robert Johnson is singing. *Ain't a drop fell on me*. Is it true men envy women their way of making love? Slow and spiritual is how the emperor describes it. *My clothes is all wet*. Sometimes he closes his eyes and says, "Make me your boy slut." *But my flesh is dry as can be*.

Kansas, Route 6

Light lopes along the wall. We are driving west, there is the limitless green limit of the horizon. Clouds bigger than clouds. I am wondering about the color green. Why it hurts like sound hurts inside a jar. I can see it speeding up every stalk two

hundred miles away. But the emperor is in an historical mood today. He knows a lot about the American experience. In the 1880s when settlers first came to the 80th parallel in Kansas, they knew it would be dry but, believing prayer could influence climate, which for about ten years or so sure enough it did, they named the towns names like Burma and Memphis and laughed at the light. Then the wind changed. And the immortal diamond forepang struck them like matches, burned them to the ground. This is not what he is saying but it is what I know. I am the one who watches the way plants sweat at noon come at me, slap my mind across the room. That is who I am, those three things.

Kansas City, Kansas

In camping, cryptic rituals of the lost tribe confront the anthropologist. I am learning to read a map. There are many small numbers. I navigate us across Kansas and into a large ruined area where crumpled fenders and auto parts are lying about. It is hard to find the exit. "Women don't know maps, I never met a woman who could read a map," says the emperor. Well I haven't been a woman for long, I will keep working on maps. They imitate reality in somewhat the same way sex does desire, curtly. *Make me your fuck boy*, I hear one of us whispering in the midst of dark tent nights—where do I go for a map into that country?

Gunnison, Colorado

Camping is radical economy. We use the world for space, its light for fear. No liquor. Same foods. Few objects, but this is controversial. On my side of the front seat when we drive, on my side of the tent when we camp, I have three bottles for water, three notebooks with pens, three rosaries. The emperor is careful of them when we pack and unpack. He looks at them. He looks at me. We had a quarrel one night about half a year ago I remember, we traveled to that crude coast where everything breaks and turns simple again as a protein structure. According to Aristotle, there are three kinds of argument. The kind that shows and destroys. The kind that gets out emotion. The kind that makes big things small and small things big. The kind where a man says to a woman, "Well I guess you'll just have to watch me jack off a lot," Aristotle would call an effective use of standard names. After a quarrel, rooms are quiet. The hard little ash leaves were blowing against one another outside. Two small night rooms: in one a man is whistling, stops.

Montrose, Colorado

Camping is an exercise in mind's abstinence. When everything has disappeared into the light, *everything has disappeared* appears. It is the inversion of dreams replacing sleep. It is time to go to a motel. The emperor is surprisingly docile. "You choose," he says as we cruise the motel strip of Montrose. "These places all look like whorehouses to me." "Whorehouses," in his accent, takes me by surprise. I blush to the backs of my eyes. On the radio, Ray Charles is singing "Beautiful Maria of My Soul," a song that exists in twenty-two versions. *Love makes fools, fools make love.*

I awake blank at 4:00 a.m. The motel room has drained itself out the back like an eyeball. When I am unable to sleep, I lie quietly and make a list of differences between me and Kafka. Kafka had thirty-seven dreams in his life and only one concerned sexual activity. In the dream Kafka goes to a brothel with his friend Max. They each choose a girl. Amid

sport Kafka has two thoughts. First he thinks, This is so much fun why isn't she asking me to pay? *Not the same fools.* Second, he observes that her back, when she turns away, is covered with big red circles that are coming off on his hands like wax when he touches her—as though from a crumbled seal. *Not the same love.* He awakes blank at 4:00 a.m.

Mesa Verde, Colorado

Camping is an immense life-form in which many small consciousnesses are working away like roots. Captive themselves. Taking on its color. Inching downward. At Mesa Verde we are camped chockablock with hostages from other places, Nevada, Japan, dogs, each on a gravel pad just big enough for the car, tent, clothesline and radio if you put the radio on top of the car. *I guess I just like to dream.* One tree each. It is prohibited to camp anywhere but on the gravel pad. It is forbidden to make fire except in the pit provided. It is unlawful to walk or move except on the trails marked. It is not permitted to appropriate, excavate or destroy any object of antiquity you may find. Billie Holiday is singing on the radio, *Of a cottage by a stream.* It is unacceptable to bite out parts of your face from inside and spit them at the blue nonstop volcano sky. *With my man.* The emperor is busy in the fire pit, cooking chicken with his headset on, dancing a little and repeating classical Chinese idioms. *A waterfront pavilion gets the moonlight first. Sure as eggs. Climb the wall.*

Mesa Verde, Colorado

Life is points on a journey, it seems generally agreed. Between the apriorities howl strong winds. Yet the traveler, once in a long while, comes to a place he is sure, without a doubt in his mind, never having seen it before, is the one he was seeking. He enters. At first everything inside is so saturated with strangeness it is hard to breathe—but look now: already it is drying in from the edges like rainwater in the March wind and he will in fact never after be able to recover that blankness in which he saw it first, the surgery of first look. That moment of pure anthropology.

My first impression of you, a storm-dark night, crowded cocktail party, Billie Holiday on the radio. Sitting straight-backed on a straight-backed chair, the long white hands crossed at the wrist. Good he is homosexual, I thought and began to talk to him about inks. *Was so indescribably new.*

Zion Canyon, Utah

Camping, like religion, will make clear to you your one true enemy. Part of the religious process of leaving Utah is a ritual called "the straight shot." That means we wait all day, depart near sundown, drive across Death Valley by night and arrive in Los Angeles when the dawn is breaking. I like this idea. Yet I find myself arguing lengthily against it, as if that is who I am. The emperor gets very quiet and goes off to sleep in the shade. That is who he is, he can sleep anytime. So the hours of the afternoon slowly pile one on top of another. I sit in the truck, practice shifting gears. Time has a gender; I suppose you know this. For example, the first afternoons of a love affair are some of the longest time in a woman's life. If there is a telephone in the room, it is better not to look at it. But even so, you will have a growing sense of the hours of his afternoon running

parallel to your own like a videotape on another channel, and feel them slowly rising up, building up, piling up, one by one until it seems at last they are all balanced there at the top of the light well and ready to drop—straight down wide open to the night. Well enlightenment is useless but I do not like the fact that a shot has a target. We are driving to Los Angeles because he wants to live there. When the ritual is over, campers go their separate ways.

Los Angeles, California

The void opens. It is blank hot hungry dawn on Sunset Boulevard as we rattle down the foreplane of the light. The emperor has one hand on the radio dial, switching from talk show to talk show. *Do I know how love begins? Yes I know how love begins*, says a calm female voice. The emperor switches the station. *Before the evolution of the universe there was a long plane sheet of galaxies, stretching for at least a billion light-years, that scientists call "the great wall."* From somewhere distant in space but surprisingly close to the beginning of time, light from a quasar or quasi-stellar object began to arrive. There was a concentration of matter so massive that it was exerting a steady gravitational pull on all the galaxies of the great wall. Scientists call this pull "the great attractor." Some believe in the presence also of exotic particles known as "dark matter" and there were shock waves from exploding stars. A faint ringing sound. The wall got bumpy—static interrupts the voice, the emperor switches the station. *Do I know how it ends?* He snaps the radio off.