

Equivalence

I

His loved ones went looking for him. They guessed it was his time, but they couldn't resist. Things were always that way. They searched at the coast because he loved the sea. They combed the dunes, questioning the birds, aloft on the updraft. In the roving eye of a gliding crow, they saw it. The empty blackness through which vision peered. An equivalence. They were in the wrong place. Time would run out. They consulted each other. They set off for the mountains, where they soon found his footsteps, gentle prints in the dust, even and flat. They felt hope that he must be walking slowly. They pushed on, doubling and tripling his pace. They scaled the foothills and ascended into clouds, adding tracks all around his, which seldom varied. They determined all the places he stopped, encouraged by the quantity. They guessed at long rest breaks. Some of them worried he was ill. Others shook their heads knowingly. They climbed and climbed, racing up the mountain.

II

He paced the cliffs, deep in thought. The sun set and rose many times without breaking his reverie. Then he noticed his foot prints, stamped over each other in countless layers. A confusion of contradicting directions. A physical analogue of

his life at that moment. An equivalence. He stopped and bent down, running his finger around the intersecting outlines of his shoes. His hand drifted inward to his foot. He forced an insight. The moccasins. They were the problem. They weren't tied right. How could he continue if they weren't? He unfastened the laces and loosened them in their holes, wiggling his toes. He adjusted his feet and flexed his arches. Yes, the moccasins required something, but what? It wasn't clear. Although he tied them many times, each new arrangement was the same in some way, always imperfect. He paced the cliffs over and over. Days passed and nights descended. He walked in his sleep and woke up walking. Sleeping and waking merged into one. The cliffs hardly registered as dangerous or off limits.

III

Deprived of their danger, the cliffs revealed their hidden essence, what his loved ones called an equivalence. The moment in one's life when purpose and self are not separate, but reflect together in everything. He gazed over the land beyond the cliffs and saw the foothills and valleys as the substance of a dream. Was he dreaming it now? He looked down at his moccasins and discovered they were not on his feet. They sat together at the edge of the cliff, toes pointing into the dream. He approached them and bent down, but they were already close to his face. He pecked at them with his nose, which was hard and black, like the beak of a crow. He shadowed them under his wings and a sudden wind lifted him and

stole him into the sky. He soared in effortless circles, barking with a voice like rusty nails pulled from wood. The wind carried him to the sea, where he glided by a family in search of a loved one.

IV

They reached the cliffs and discovered his shoes. It was too late. The dirt along the edge was worn into a path with two dead ends. No one dared cross it for fear of disturbing the dream on the other side. An equivalence. They recognized and honored it. They waited for night to fall and built a fire. They sat in a circle and chanted and wept. They took turns telling stories, each involving the loved one as part of the ritual. When the stories were over, the fire burned out, turning to smoke. They clasped hands and spoke a prayer together from memory. Then they went to the edge. The moccasins were gone.