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At Niaux

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becoming again like an airplane's black box meticulously recording.
And I will see on the hill the crevices where footholds tighten,
and the smoothnesses where slippage threatens.
And then a steepness breeding lilies, milkweed, thorns.

AT NIAUX

Fists and wounds of light, battlements and ranks of light: we
leave them outside, wander in with flashlights
whose beams flirt and shiver on the walls. Here is the
clay floor, slippery, soft, and here
the anxious dark I carry within me as I walk.

The ground bulges as if it did not want
our footsteps. The drawings of animals are almost a mile
in. Each morning my dreams disintegrate, coming unstuck
from their sleepy frame, the canvas in flame,
or a film's edges melting and curling as it burns,

but these walls dream their animals unceasingly,
the chargers, the mothering, the injured ones, the gravid,
the gaping nest of each eye fiercely open.

We walk on and on.

These flowers are like the pleasures of the world,
but there are no flowers here. The walls loom up,

half flash-lit, half in dark. *A headless man? The garments
of Posthumous? This is his hand, his foot mercurial,
his mortal thigh. . . .*

The walls conspire, make up stories. No. They're murder
without plot, betrayal without motive, the aura of crime
but not the crime, the humming of it like shockwaves
through water.

Who walks ahead of me? And stops, as if by a river
whose surface holds the stark

reflected autopsy of stars, or his own face
 lying in its watery distortions,
mouth slightly open, as if wanting to speak. . . .

We have come a long way. We put down our flashlights, shut them off
 to conserve battery power, the guide writing in a book
the time of our arrival in this far chamber
 of the cave, her light the only light now,
the black air behind us crawling over itself
 and over itself,

while the animals rise up beneath her light, streaked and fleshed
 onto the walls, fetlocks, horns, candor of unchained
instances, graceful summations
 in this velvety unyielding hiddenness,
not roughed-up by doubt or vertigo.

I remember, *Twas but a bolt*
 of nothing, shot of nothing. . . . the dream's still here.
But this is not a dream. Most delicate and fiercest venturing,
 how did you come to make these animals that do not
fade? Reindeer, bison, and horses moving off
 into the blackout that won't kill them,

the blackout advancing, caressing the wreckage and the leaping,
 whatever is brought to it, anything at all, our hands
our faces, anything,
 the blackout singing, taking it all in.