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.