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MARVIN BELL

The Book of the Dead Man (The River)

Live as if you were already dead.
—Zen admonition

1. ABOUT THE DEAD MAN AND THE RIVER

The dead man stands on the bank of a river that overcame its banks.
He stands where the river has made a new road to ride.

He strides the shore and salutes the ones in boats looking to help,
the homeowners returning in rubber boots, and the store owners
who carried their inventory on their backs.

He pictures the convoy of artworks spirited away by night to the big
city.

He doffs his cap to the sandbaggers and the boxers of books, and to
those whose signatures can float a loan.

The dead man earlier hath seen the river complacent, he hath
stopped it in time, he hath likened it to the curve of space.

He hath seen in it the impenetrability of time.

And if he must swallow hard nature's indifference, still the story was
always about the planet, never about us.

Now he must witness the depth to which thinkers go not to say so.

Here is the mud so full of life forms, and now the river makes a
deposit and backs away and makes another and turns and makes
another and so on.

The dead man is bigger than the river only because he lives as if he
is dead.

He is greater than the planet only because he lives as if he is pure
energy.

What size shirt and cape fit a man of pure energy?

Does he wear galoshes or waders, does he stand on the water or
slumber on the bottom, is he human?

The dead man stopped asking when he eased the separation between
here and there, now and then, land and sea, angst and regret.

The dead man's life is about what is happening.

2. MORE ABOUT THE DEAD MAN AND THE RIVER

The dead man does not hold still for his portrait.
He stands at river's edge in a watery wind, as elsewhere he lay on
thermal ground to dispute the horizon.
It was the thunder that crinkled the paper and his picture.
It was the water that erased it, the fire that made ashes of ashes,
the air that carried them off, and the dirt that colored them.
The dead man has found a replacement for the self.
He has absorbed the solitudes that gather in crowds.
He has heeded the alarm of the crow and the bark of the rooster
as they marked out the day.
Now he adopts a posture that pressures the edges of the picture, a
bearing that disperses the one self, a carriage about to go.
How shall he throw out his arms if not akimbo?
How shall he be less than haphazard, less the dumb luck collector,
less the random apocalypse that blinked from another galaxy?
The dead man is face up to the sun and stars.
He is the longitude and latitude of his whereabouts, the wrinkly
motto of his forehead, the tattoo in the mud attributed to aliens.
The dead man stands for a portrait that is all hello.
What would have been anything without the dead man?
It was history in the making when the dead man first appeared, he
is the reason you turn the picture over to check.
Until the dead man, there was no water under the dam, there was
no past.