

Wood

A cylinder of maple
set in place and feet spread apart,
the heavy maul, fat as a hammer
but honed like an axe, draws
a semicircle overhead and strikes
through the two new halves
to leave the steel head sunk
a half-inch in the block
and the ash
handle rigid in the air
A smack of the palm, gripping as it hits
the butt end, and the blade
rolls out of the cut. The half-logs
are still rocking on the flagstones

So much less than what we have been
persuaded to dream, this necessity for wood
might have sufficed, but it is what
we have been taught to disown and forget
Yet just such hardship is what saves
For if the stacked cords
speak of felled trees, of countless
five-foot logs flipped end over end downhill
till the blood is wrung from your back
and snowbound warmth must seem
so far off you would rather freeze,

yet each thin tongue torn from the grain
when log-halves were sundered at one stroke
will sing in the stove
To remind you of hands. Of how
mere touch is song in the silence
where hands live—the song of muddy bark,
the song of sawdust like cornmeal and down,
and the song of one hand over another,
two of us holding the last length of the log
in the cradle as inches away the chainsaw
sputters and continues to rip through hickory

for Maxine Kumin

The Voice of Someone Else

I've lived under this big porch a long time.
Where you are—where you breathe
and talk and things come to hand—
is above me: warmth, painted wood,
prospects
But I like this lattice-shadow better
(You may remember now, with a chill,
how you caught a glimpse of my eye
on you, from in here, but it doesn't matter
what you think you saw in the checkered light—
fine skin and jewels, or a curved beak,
or fur, or scales that rustied
as they disappeared.)

I am my own keeper. I have lost nothing
Every old thing is with me—the afternoon
when the field burned, and the good belt
with the turquoise buckle, and the long game
under the lights . . .
But also the stories that your sister told
her friend when no living thing was listening.

When I come up, it is by a passage
inside you, to look out through
your eyes, that are mine any time I want
Likewise your body, likewise your soul
The things that rouse me?
Hurt, strength, good weather, bad weather,
accidents, secrets being told, secrets
held back, and then, knowing—
this comes from far off, calling me from above—
that the hand is holding a pen

for William Goyen

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Toward the still center

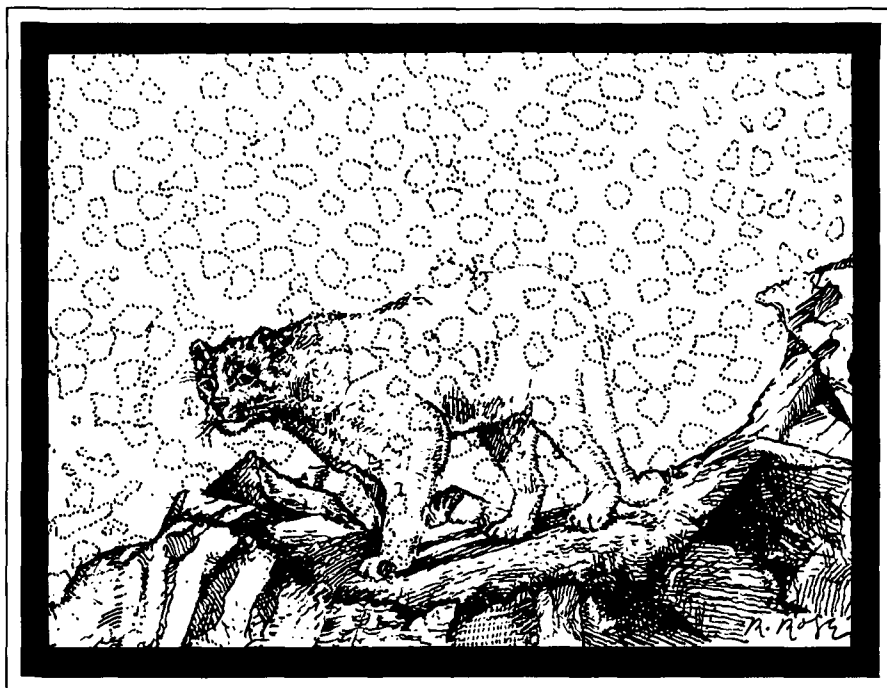
JOHN GORDON

THE SNOW LEOPARD IS A rare species of great cat about six feet in length, reportedly very beautiful, which ranges through the Himalayan wilderness. The pure white of its coat is of course the perfect camouflage for its surroundings; as its name may suggest, one has difficulty distinguishing field from foreground, "snow" from "leopard." For anyone trying to pick it out of the white landscape, the possibility of its presence can give the mountains a constant feel of immanence. "It is wonderful how the presence of this creature draws the whole landscape to a point," writes Peter Matthiessen, who in 1973 sought the leopard through Nepal and Tibet, and who from the experience has written a book not quite like any other.

Matthiessen and his crew never do see the leopard, but that hardly seems to matter. The book is a quest, but a transcendental one, toward the still center of the turning wheel: here one of the oldest stories of the West is written, incongruously, by a Buddhist. From the beginning, he seeks the white creature blending into the landscape rather than standing out against it. At the end, the point is not to have seen the leopard; the point is to have looked for it and, with the new focus made possible by its unseen presence, to see things "as if the Universe were coming to attention." The animal after which the book is named is both central and irrelevant; the important thing about it is that the reader learn not to care whether it is seen or not.

If you read *The Snow Leopard* to find out what happens next, you will not read very far. The author who in his previous book, the splendid *Far Tortuga*, very skillfully kept things moving

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RICHARD ROSE

along, has turned inward, from storytelling to spiritual autobiography and the related form of meditative lyric. He recalls, this time, Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley—his descriptions of mountains can give the eerie feeling that Shelley's "Mont Blanc" is being unconsciously reincarnated in prose—and in the mountainous setting so beloved by the Romantics, he seeks the awareness that lies at the heart of the Romantic sensibility, the miracle of the here and now. If the "now" is miraculous, the "next" of course loses interest, and narrative, which is a succession of "nexts," goes out the window; the hunt for the snow leopard ceases to matter.

The principal weakness of Matthiessen's book is that his lyrical resources are only occasionally equal to the demand placed on them by a 300-page book that aspires to represent, and perhaps embody, the circularity of things, and so rise above anything as time-bound as a plot. A thoroughly first-rate writer of prose, he is still frequently just so-so as a poet, and although his writing is at a high level, it is not always high enough to support a narrative ramble filleted of anticipation.

But if as a writer he is nowhere near the equal of the great lyricists with whom he invites comparison, as a mountaineer he is clearly their superior, and that turns out to matter a lot. It is important that he has really spent several strenuous weeks climbing through the harsh and daunting terrain he describes and learned the right names for things, every bush and

bird, as a natural extension of his writer's gift for finding the right word. At his best, he renders his visions so that they can be envisioned:

I grow into these mountains like a moss. I am bewitched. The blinding snow peaks and the clarion air, the sound of earth and heaven in the silence, the requiem birds, the mythic beasts, the flags, great horns, and old carved stones, the rough-hewn Tartars in their braids and homespun boots, the silver ice in the black river, the Kang, the Crystal Mountain. Also, I love the common miracles—the murmur of my friends at evening, the clay fires of smudgy juniper, the coarse dull food, the hardship and simplicity, the contentment of doing one thing at a time: when I take my blue tin cup into my hand, that is all I do. We have had no news of modern times since late December, and gradually my mind has cleared itself, and wind and sun pour through my head, as through a bell. Though we talk little here, I am never lonely; I am returned into myself.

He has taken himself to the remotest and most mythical of places, and brought back an account both scrupulous and moving, surely the best yet written. It is heartening to know that the legends can melt under scrutiny and still leave a region that transfigures someone tough enough to get there. The visionary tapestry of mountains, ice, wolves, eagles, and blinding light is peculiarly dignified by the narrative's constant simultaneous attentiveness to fractious sherpas, sheep shit, and the expedition's unavoidable grunginess. Despite its metaphysical enthusiasms, *The Snow Leopard* is best at particularizing the fantastic—as dream travelogue rather than dream monologue.