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Robert Hill Long

DOING HATHA YOGA

Unroll the mat in the basement, tell myself *OK Go*, and lift my bulk into the shoulder stand: aiming feet overhead till they drain white like water-lotus roots strung up to dry. Come down, evolve through a bestiary of postures: belly-up fish, cobra swelling to strike. Hover through locust, through crow, stretch my neck to a swan's, my legs to a peacock tail; lick the salt from my graying ape-muzzle. Then relive the inventions of men: the bridge, the wheel, the plow, the shooting bow. Hold each pose for all the sweat it's worth, flushing each image with blood. After thirty minutes, salute the sun and gratefully sink into the corpse.

Read their poems aloud, use the force and stresses gathered from a life resolved to the high, dry divide of its middle years. *Don't let them see the icy rock, the few alpine flowers you're allotted.* Walk among the seated, deer-nervous bodies, touch shoulders lightly, the old mammal reassurance: *once I sprang through lowland woods, too, and scared myself.* Sit by one and say, "Show me the face you had before you were born." Pronounce her name, and nod, and ask, "How does a mountain teach a deer to sing?" Surprise her into the utterance that will revise her into a human, a poet. *But do not ask her to breathe the thin cold air you inhabit.*

If you can imitate deer, you can counterfeit human: you can buy Safeway foodstuffs, crossing off your list, steering the cart with your daughter hanging on its prow. You can prepare meals for strangers as though they are the only angels you will accommodate in this life. Your daughter and the daughters of friends, pick them up, drop them off, dance, mask-making, fairy magic parties, let them develop the talent for doing without you. Read the bedtime stories with faithful inflections, as

the small blue-furred monster, the flightless bird, nasal and hugely
naive. None of this is to be remembered. Not a single errand or shred

of altruism, none of the consolings or funny voices, not a drop of sweat. Whatever falls to you, as inspiration or work or counsel or song, will fall away through the stone cracks, it's best to let it fall to the strange angels and animals below. *What can a divide do with its ice and snow?* I write on the blackboard. *Resolve it into water and air, and let it go.* "That's a heroic couplet," I point out.

Don was the name the newscasters used-I don't know what name his mother used. I used Don when I spoke to him. My teachings were good and Don was too far gone, or else Don was straining toward a zero-degree atmosphere above my resolutions of rock and ice. Which of these wrongs accounts for the pistol cocked and tucked under his chin? *If each day is a bullet*, he wrote, *each second is a grain of black powder*. His notebook was cross-wired with injunctions to purity, black and tiny as Bible sentences, and with vinings of insane metaphoric desire. On an empty page I wrote *We'd better make an appointment together*. But he didn't show, not as a deer or a swan or a patient student of mountains: instead, on TV, he showed me the blank face he had after he died. Oh, Don, this page too, and all the moves I made on it, is another exercise that ends in prostration.
