

Four Poems

Leath Tonino

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The Botanist

Leath Tonino

for Cyrus Guernsey Pringle (1838 – 1911)

The botanist collected specimens
from nine until noon, when the monsoon
rains came, then sheltered beneath
a brown felt hat, ate his simple lunch
of cheese, bread, and eggs.

Never drank tea, coffee, or alcohol.

Four years in a row traveled
56,000 miles by train and foot.

Was a shy man, a Vermont farmer
famous across Mexico for his knowledge.

Said he knew 10,000 plants by name,
a couple of friends, but often forgot
who was president of his country,

of any country.

Thunder River

Leath Tonino

Soon after his wife died
of leukemia, Ed and his good buddy,
an artist from Taos, hiked down
to Thunder River in the Grand Canyon.

They went into the cave
from which the water falls, that black
hole in the red limestone wall, and vowed
to write and paint the West.

Ed leaned against his friend
and cried. His friend, who had recently lost
his father, leaned back and cried.
Tears flowed out into sun, into space.

And then the part of this story
that isn't often told—they rose
and hiked up to the North Rim, soft purple sky
all around, lightning in the distance.

What Kind of Earth

Leath Tonino

John Muir, rambling the North Country woods,
once in a swamp found, and sat down beside,
a rare orchid, *Calypso borealis*,
and over its beauty and fragility,
so it is said, fell to pieces,
fairly cried.

What kind of earth
is this that grows

such flowers,
such men?

Brothers

Leath Tonino

for Henry Thoreau and John Thoreau

In 1839 they fall in love
with the same woman
at the same time,
a seventeen-year-old
named Ellen,
and spend two weeks
paddling the local rivers,
camping out,
watching birds fly
with their reflections.

Upon returning,
one brother proposes marriage
and his proposal is accepted,
but Ellen's mother
convinces her daughter
to break the engagement.
The other brother writes poetry.
He proposes marriage through the mail.
"I never felt so badly
sending a letter in my life,"
Ellen will recall.

On the first of January, 1842,
the older brother nicks his finger
with a razor while shaving.
The finger goes black and stiff.
Ten days later,
in his little brother's arms,
he dies.

The trip down the rivers,
the reflected birds.

They were best friends,
two years apart in age.