



carl vigeland
**THE BREATHLESS
PRESENT**
SONGS OF LONGING AND LOVE

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*River does not run.
River presses its heavy silver self
Down into stone and stone refuses.
What runs,
Swirling and leaping into the sun, is stone's
Refusal of the river, not the river.*

— Archibald MacLeish

*To know serenity the dove must fly
far from its dovecote, its trajectory
informs it, distance, fear, the racing sky
are only understood in the return.*

*The one that stayed at home, never tested
the boundaries of loss, remained secure,
only those who win back are ever free
to contemplate a newer, surer flight.*

— Rilke

*The long-drawn virgin vales; the mild blue hill-sides; as over these there steals the
hush, the hum; you almost swear that play-wearied children lie sleeping in these
solitudes, in some glad May-time, when the flowers of the woods are plucked. And
all this mixes with your most mystic mood; so that fact and fancy, half-way meet-
ing, interpenetrate, and form one seamless whole.*

— Melville

*What are we? you asked a week or year later,
Ants, bees, wrong numbers
in the big rotten soup of chance?
We're human beings, my son, almost birds,
public heroes and secrets.*

— Roberto Bolano

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THE BREATHLESS PRESENT: Songs of Longing and Love tells several intersecting stories in language that mirrors music's power to recall love and heal loss. In a voice that is at once rhythmic and hypnotic, penetrating and rhapsodic, the book takes the reader on a journey, much as the author's own search for meaning or understanding took him repeatedly on the road before an emotionally charged realization that "home" is not so much a place but a state of being. Divided into four parts, the book recounts the author's relationships with an unusual group of people, ranging from an early mentor and one-time neighbor, the poet Archibald MacLeish; world-renowned jazz musician Wynton Marsalis, with whose bands Vigeland traveled for many years; the author's charismatic, tormented father, also a musician, and his mother, fighting for her life in a Bronxville hospital; and his teenage daughter, a runaway whose disappearance is recalled in an anguished monologue and whose return is celebrated with an extraordinary invitation to go on tour with Marsalis's band. In vivid, passionate detail, *THE BREATHLESS PRESENT* also constitutes a kind of writer's autobiography, becoming both culmination and "illustration" of its title, affirming in all its pain and joy what it means to be human.

Excerpt

Years ago, Maren, when I was plotting and sketching one of my many unpublished stories during the lengthy period when I was learning to write and taking care, near and from afar, of my dad, for whom the pains of his life were finally more than he could bear, and recognizing the responsibilities of being married, and taking long walks along the South River and through the fields Mr. Harris hayed and up into the woods behind the farm to the border of Archie's estate and then across through the woods to a mowing hidden high up in the hills (how I would love to show you that magic spot, Maren, there was an old apple orchard near it, too, back when the land was open enough so you could see the whole verdant valley where we lived)...anyway, one of those unborn literary efforts, something I kept coming back to again and again, stayed in my mind as a phrase, *the dance of my friends* was the phrase, which in my mind encapsulated an ambition to circumscribe a collective sense of the lives of certain other people as I understood them, their loves, their losses, all held within a consciousness that first formed itself on summer walks long before, in Vermont, where as a boy I used to hike alone across a meadow whose top looked out in every direction, with the lake we stayed at spread below me, back when our family was still more or less intact, my uncle still living...there was a girl, too, who was more interested in some older guy I of course therefore hated. No one, I thought, knew then knew what I knew, I mean knew within me what I already was sure that I knew about the grandeur of the world, the seasons, the sky at night, music heard over the lake in the evening, the fragrance of that meadow and the sounds there, crickets and birdsong, the immense expanse of sky. Once or twice, hiking that hill-top meadow, I took my clothes off and walked bare-assed through the field, the hay and juniper scratchy but otherwise it felt wonderful to do that, and I would think about it sometimes later. The dance of my friends was really the dance of a friend, one friend, one person, that face and that shape and touch and voice and heart mixed in my mind with the wildflowers and pools in the brook years later where I'd stop to spot trout and the paths through the woods that I knew by heart, when we lived so happily at that Conway farm, and there would come these moments when it would all soar, when I thought I could fly.

All my life, Maren, there has been in my mind a sense of these two worlds, that mountaintop and my core, two places, what I will call for the moment the outer and the inner. Trying to resolve the tension between these two worlds has been my private preoccupation for as long as I can remember, going back to my Buffalo childhood when my room was in the rear of the second story of our brown-shingled house, with a window that looked out on the driveway and the neighbor's adjacent yard, and another yard

beyond that, lit at night by a hooded lamp suspended from a corner of that family's house about 20 feet above the ground. During the long Buffalo winters, I used to get up in the night and look out my window at the snow, thick flakes falling steadily and quietly. Wondering if there would be enough for school to be called off the next morning, I would watch the flakes falling in the light from that neighbor's lamp. I loved the silence then, our house quiet except for the furnace clicking on every so often. We had no storm windows, and so with the window open a crack some of the snowflakes would blow into the room and land on the sill, where they would quickly melt. I liked to take a little snow on my hand and lick it, and sometimes I would touch another part of my body with it, trying to imagine where those particular flakes had commenced their brief winter journey...from how high in the winter night sky, formed I supposed somewhere far out on Lake Erie, beyond its forbidding winter shores, windswept I was certain and forlorn, out past the beaches where we swam in the summer, where I was in love with a girl whose family moved to Toledo, Ohio, at the far other end of the lake. Maybe this snowstorm had started there. Who knew? Who ever knew? We live our daily lives, of course, in the outer world, the world of jobs and family responsibilities and school and mowing the lawn and doing the laundry and going shopping and talking on the phone, all those things that if we are lucky and have our health are a form of grace if you will let yourself think about them that way, be open to them that is, and thankful. And I love that outer world, love the sense of speed driving on the open road or the smell of woods on a walk after rain, swimming naked, the icy chill of the wind on a chairlift in winter. I love the responsive action of the piano keys when my finger tips touch them and the shock of cold metal on my warm lips when I pick up my trumpet and blow through the mouthpiece. I love the pure *sound* of all the instruments on stage or on the bandstand. That isn't music, of course, I mean just those instrumental sounds: the outer world. Not until you're at the other place, *within*, can there be music, which at the beginning of my travels struck me as a paradox. Something had pulled Wynton and still did, compelled him to *go*, even as he had confessed when I asked after we met that he didn't "know" where exactly he was *going*...and so I wondered, what was it, and I wanted myself to "go," to experience, understand...just as I'd read that he, too, at the age of 17, seeing an announcement about tryouts for musical study at Tanglewood had auditioned, been accepted, and *gone*, never come back really, on the road forevermore, so even that year right after Tanglewood at Juilliard in New York City was only another waystop to...where? And how could I get *there*, too?

But to go back again to the beginning: you were just a baby, Maren, born a few months earlier, when your brother and mom went with me to hear Wynton that first time at the Iron Horse Café in Northampton. So your age parallels the chronology of my friendship with him. You weren't yet two late the following year when Wynton returned

to the Horse, continuing to come back to the small, cozy club long after he was so popular that he could have filled a much larger area hall, because he liked the crowded space, with the audience sitting at tables right next to the stage and squeezed onto the stairs to the balcony, and because he remembered that its edgy, imaginative founder, Jordi Herold, had first booked him before he was well known.

At about that time, our Conway farmhouse was for sale, the old place on the ridge of the hill where the town's school once was. We'd lived there since just after your brother was born, fixing it up room by room, doing much of the work ourselves and planting a gigantic garden with asparagus and strawberry beds, near the maple by the corner of the huge barn that we'd finally had taken down because it was more than we could handle. But the whole place was; your bedroom at the front corner above the stairs never had heat, in fact the entire second floor was without heat or electricity when we moved in. The outside of the house hadn't been painted in more than 50 years, so the clapboards on the sunny side of the house were not only completely bare but curled from exposure to the weather. We'd replaced them, and fixed the shutters, wired the upstairs and gotten heat in most of the rooms, and downstairs the kitchen had been transformed from a small room with a linoleum floor with pipes that sometimes froze in the winter to a much larger area with new counters and cupboards and a hearth for the stove which burned wood that I split and stacked.

You were too young when we moved to remember it, but I can still see the path in the valley below our hill that we took to the swimming hole and the dirt road up the next hill that your mother liked to hike with our retriever Molly and the fields across the valley where I went on my cross-country skis after a storm, once with my brother in a deep snow when we had to make tracks and we ended up on the far crest in a clearing where, looking back, I could see our house with its lights sparkling as evening came on and I tried to imagine the lives within it at that moment, my children, my wife, my sister-in-law, my mother who'd come out from Northampton for dinner: human lights.

The date I returned home from my job and saw the For Sale sign in the front yard, next to the tall maple where we'd hung your sister's tire swing, I stopped my car in the road and stared, then opened the door, got out, and pulled the stakes of the sign from the ground. But I knew we had to sell, and the following morning the sign went back in. I was doing some ghostwriting for a businessman just then and office work for a small, early-music outfit with offices near Northampton in an old mill building where the main tenant was an organization that employed the physically disabled and mentally challenged. Seeing some of those people every day made it difficult for me to feel sorry for myself, but I was restless. A book I'd recently published, with the naïve expectation it

was going to make me famous, had yet to go into a second printing. Each day at noon I would escape from work into town, walking the gray streets, or to a nearby 9-hole golf course. There, though the golf season was officially over, I hiked the deserted, frozen fairways and hit a ball around the small layout with a 7- or 8-iron. Squeezed between a small, wooded mountain and the four-lane pavement of an interstate highway, the course's location beckoned me like Huck Finn to light out for the territory.

Bundled up on a late autumn day, with the wind blowing near the base of the mountain where the course bordered the woods, I let my thoughts swirl with the oak leaves, always the last to fall, brittle on the ground so they made a crackling sound when you stepped on them. How beautifully their light brown blended with the faded orange and red of the maples. That afternoon I returned to my small, stark office in the old mill building, with its view of a 7-11 across the street and a Mobil station beyond, and late in the day as I watched the sky grow dim and the streetlights come on snow started to fall. By the time I left for the half-hour drive home it was snowing harder, big wind-driven flakes making the sidewalk slippery and the visibility poor. The cold wind felt like a slap on my face, as if someone or something were trying to wake me out of a deep, protracted sleep.

Wynton had left me with a phone number for his road manager that first time we met, the year before, and the next day, still chilly but with the snow gone, I called it. Matt Dillon, "Monyure," answered, and after I reintroduced myself and briefly made small talk about the *Time* Magazine piece I'd recently read and asked about the tour, how was it going—I think they were in Ohio just then, or Ontario—I said I see you're coming to Northampton again soon, and before I was able to say anything more Matt asked, "Do you need tickets?"

And that is actually how my road life began, Maren, with that call, though I was pretty clueless when I made it. I certainly had no expectation that I would eventually visit every state but Idaho and the Dakotas with Wynton, travel to Europe and the Caribbean with him, and spend so much time at Lincoln Center in New York City that as you know it has become a kind of second home to me. During one stretch of nearly a year when you were little I was away from you and the rest of our family three weeks at a stretch, then home for a week or so, and then gone again...searching for something, the bridge between my outer and inner worlds, certain I was about to find it at the next gig or town in a chance encounter with a stranger, a surprising conversation with Wynton or someone else in the band, a solitary moment standing to the side of the curtain, backstage, or by the stage door, staring down a quiet street or from a window high in some

hotel overlooking the city or the mountains or the sea. By the time you were a teenager I was still on the road, not as often in fact but still in feeling.

Carl Vigeland has combined lifelong interests in music and sports to create a body of work that explores the phenomenon of performance at its highest level. He is the author of six books: *Great Good Fortune, In Concert, Stalking the Shark, Jazz in the Bittersweet Blues of Life* (with Wynton Marsalis), *Letters to a Young Golfer* (with Bob Duval), and *The Mostly Mozart Guide to Mozart*. A former newspaper reporter, Vigeland has written about many different subjects for a wide variety of magazines, including "The Atlantic Monthly," "Boston Magazine," "The Boston Globe Magazine," "Conde Nast Traveler," "Country Journal," "DoubleTake," "Downbeat," "Fast Company," "Golf Digest," "Harvard," "New England Monthly," "The New York Times Magazine," "Playboy," "Sports Illustrated," and "Yankee." A graduate of Harvard, he is a lecturer in journalism at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, where he lives. An amateur pianist and trumpet player, Vigeland is also an expert skier and golfer and has written extensively about those passions and the travels they have inspired.

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