

The Campaign Trail



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Our people will say if questioned that they found the trail and left it unmarked all the way to the wilderness clearing where the two rivals were apparently unbeknownst to each other to meet, less strange to each other than to this forty-by-fifty-mile parcel of land so recently annexed from our neighbor to the north. Was it a rest-stop, a soul-restoring brief detour for the woman and the man our two warriors? Was it a sanctuary, wild or human, was it a thoughtful retreat? we asked, not quite knowing if what must surely have been an unplanned get-together betrayed in fact that they read each other to a *t* ?

No question as to the later hours, we have those on record. The earlier we have had to infer, for these two acted almost independently of us. And ahead of our plans for them in these closing weeks of the struggle, the fight with tooth and claw to the finish, if we believed in the finish, of this hunt for victory, for the other's inner flaw or failing, for some weakness in the jugular. Yet that they had arrived we do know at this targeted clearing of this new territory of ours along different routes, as if there might be two trails, two trials, as an Aussie correspondent said it, and must have made camp at the end of the day, these blood rivals, if in fact it was not, as scripture puts it, prepared for them.

What are they rivals for? we want still to see more surely. As if it were us. Two leaders at it and each other night and day to lead the nation and lead each other even? Until now, at the several centers of command, it had seemed in all honesty that they could use some time alone, in which to think, and in a beautiful, as yet unknown, untouched, in fact just annexed parcel of our nation ever young and growing. Quality time we dare say, the very term and concept cited as we will see elsewhere by the man.

A moment apart—from the public contest and its rigorous conventions: the great leap upward at start and finish of speech; a rolling and bulging of eyes to show the most white; extending the tongue wordlessly—what the people live for in their leaders. A need to know their feelings not their thoughts, their childhoods and formative years, hobbies, promises, significant relationships and favorite food groups, so the people wherever they are can decide which one they want not even so much to govern the nation as Be There for them. A burden for the man and the woman warriors this hunt for the people's voice and to *be* that voice; yet more, to be believed.

The woman was coming from the southeast we know from one witness to her vehicle thirty miles down country; whereas the man, from the west and north and east it seemed, if that is possible, more forthright yet elusive. Each in some unspoken silence needing to be alone and, as it turned out, each armed. Deserving to be alone, we would hazard, though what they or we deserve became moot long before the rights on which our nation was founded proved a fiction to be remade moment upon moment as each of our rivals in words but more in deeds has revealed along the road, the endless pilgrimage, the trail, the way. For what right does any of us have to anything at the end of the day apart from what we claim to the death, if we believed in death. To know your target and set it free, we like to say. Yet lured they were, these rivals, and by curiosity, animal and mineral life, by well advertised fossil wealth, history, silence, empty land ours before we were the land's, and then by the very weather, forecast to be bad, threatening a hybrid storm never before seen if there be people in this freshly acquired real estate of ours to suffer it.

It was late when they arrived. Late by the clock, by the sky, by the voices of the trees, many-timed too by the delicate, reassuring stink of

one deciduous burr oak leaf the woman crumbles to release a scent reminiscent of the potato trees she walked among with her great-grandfather, a preacher / farmer / hunter/small businessman, just those values she has often brought up in her speeches, a man who she once but only once had stunned her handlers and biographers by saying had brought *her* up. Strangely like her rival's childhood, the thin man of many ideal origins, dreams, races (if there be such a thing as race, he has added late one night in a university dorm—himself a veteran of reverse outsourcing that brought him and his facets to our shores).

“*You*,” she said, hearing a sound, a soft shoosh bird-sound and/or a syllable—“old”?—finding across the clearing before she knew it the figure in jeans and windbreaker and modest backpack. *You* was what she said, her voice unnaturally soft, in fact making no sound at all we think though he grasped her sense, the flaxen-haired woman as well known to the man and the world as he now to the nation and to her stare across the clearing. “A piece of him,” he joked, and as often before, she strove to place his familiar and she hoped borderline inappropriate words. Though her dead reckoning of danger and opportunity at once in his unexpected presence fifty yards away was less clear than her suspicion why and how he'd come (for *her*, she thought). “I see you're ready,” he said.

Good speakers, each, yet now even her own long-leveled aim was the issue she had come here almost by chance to worry with a dearly missed emotion all but unnameable, for she now thought this duel with herself was why she had slipped away from her handlers incredibly, her wardrobe friend, constant updates, and from her public obligatory feats of agility—the great leap five or seven feet vertically up into the air, arms outstretched, at the beginning and at the end of the address; the enlarged eyes required of her but not her male opponent, whose notorious concentration was expected in mid-speech to change the color of his eyes from brown to blue to green and back, as too he must inimitably *lean*—toward the whole world which had him in its hand (why not hers?—though sometimes hers); and required of him *and* her, embraces gauged instantly to each person old, young, gendered, health insured, needy, sometime foreign; conferring a Christian thought through the sinew and ingenuity and virtually exposed bone of certain bodily exercises the tradition of our country and these damned

transcontinental contests demanded of its would-be leaders and the endless speaking engagements and her factual preparedness and tongue for prophecy: today a scant hundred thirty-five miles to the south and east to set off here almost unrecognized in an old experimentally environmental vehicle she had found in a driveway and piloted here.

And so, while she heard herself say to this slender, tall, perhaps overeducated rival, “Do your people know?” (that is, that he was here—the overnight liability more his than hers)—he a person of color suddenly alone with her, equally famous now and able if not to read her mind, to guess her thoughts—to which his quick shake of the head, his wide, full lips pursed, worried her thoughts again of whether he, this brown man, her rival *genetically* she realized, had come from west or east, or even north, she thought—no law against it, no laws or rights anywhere except what you claimed, she privately knew. (And she had never had a ready read on compass bearings.)

While she smelled what? The trees, some rot, some real matter, him even though not from this distance surely—*how* black exactly were we talking about, while he, thinking of her instincts and recalling the émigré Pole’s tale of water and canoes and initiation in which if you really read the words you saw that the sun had to be coming up in the west, saw to her left as did she at the same moment through a distant aisleing thinning of the trees a sudden distance of aerial space a jump-off from what must be a cliff edge beyond which through gathering twilight stood a horizon not of events this time but of a conflagration as beautiful as the end of the world, a sunset she would not have to share, whatever direction she was looking, the sun dying in the east or north or upside, where lay the lands of our neighbors from whom we had a few short weeks ago annexed this small but valuable pocket of wooded, fossil-rich land fifty by forty miles but more than its sum of two thousand square miles of land with its great water table not horizontal but vertical down and down like a flumey flue an add-on destiny for the nation when we put it to work, the northern rim of this new territory now our rim and border, already manned by a border patrol the equal of any this side of China.

One trail to the clearing, it was said and therefore thought: so the man and the woman had arrived by their curious routes nonetheless of one same trail passing into and/or leaving the clearing, with in

store for them a savage, never documented animal in the woods, a stormy night, and a contrary denizen, a reputed man, an independent who came with the territory—but what did they first find? Embers of a campfire waiting in the light of the late late day, on the horizon below the cliff beyond which one heard the sound of still waters lifted by a wind itself the natural frontier our nation is about, final sunburst flooded by evening, while high above in the last light and airspace of our new territory an eagle circled for rodents, its white wing patches identified by the man—exclaiming softly before he'd seen the woman—as those of an “immature golden” (as American as we could have wished)—and that then they, these two weary warriors, were surprised to see each other across the clearing appearing from out of nowhere, entering from the woods as we had planned—yet half a day ahead of us, as if they had known our plan and, if you will, stolen a march, in order to seize a solitary time however brief never imagining that the rival would arrive at the same moment to say nothing of the same place.

He from the west, though mysteriously not only west; she from the southeast as we had foreseen after a series of engagements, the toll of casualties growing by the day—the fading but brave little (yet not little) campfire like an end of the ongoing trail—though we had lost track of them for a day unthinkable and by the time we were able to observe them many hours later in dark of night they had evidently survived together and kept alive this earlier discovered and soon to be legendary fire they had found flameless but for two pinkly twined tongues of blue jetting like signals or souls, the Campfire waiting for someone to slide the long tree limb along, burned black only at one end yet now with brush and caches of already hewn hardwood logs both campers had gathered even alert to what had previously in the last of the light of the sun that seemed to have died in the north appeared to be an abandoned den deeper into the first and second growth evergreen dark and a small curving sound or song from those woods that they had after all not been asked into, as the man observed to the woman, who pursed her lips skeptically at his useless thought.

No killer instinct, she had long since concluded

And too thin. To be a leader of substance. To win (she thought).
Too thin to win, this man with whom she might spend the night now

virtually upon them—a man should have a certain ... a capacity to ...—A *man*? she caught her temper in mid-flush, a *male man*?—well, he should cast a certain shadow, whether white or not, whatever certain breakdowns of the electorate who, bless them, don't believe in evolution in their heart of hearts really and truly or feel comfortable with, you know, we know, about him or bottom line like ... Though “white,” she answered the critics of her honesty, meant not “white *wash*” but beige or in fact pink like her own husband somewhere across the country keeping the home fires burning tonight. In fact any everyday white blue-collar worker from any of our red zone American towns with blue and yellow soccer uniforms and green soda pop can see through your words—in fact you're too thin to lead she read him almost to the *t* yet quite liked his thinness like some vanishing point where she could have seen her life if she believed it could be relived.

But this man, knowing her strangely like some native who'd been here before her, this late-model backpack of his—she sensed him, smelled him—in another country she could almost like him, get accustomed to his face, use him. A distance between them, as they talked for the first time as ... as what? Vacationers, prize-winning campers, hopeless humorists, make-believe comrades, ill-equipped spouses by some arranged marriage improvising some mutual decision-making technique near physical—a closeness contracting through the time itself of this clearing they had accidentally gained as representatives of their nation. He spoke of the fossil beds here, he was asking if the white race talk meant really the fossil subject—was that what was coming up in her mind? The fossil record? With its proof not so much of Darwin's bleak rightness as of Charles being himself a child of, even incarnation of, the intelligent designer.

Smiling, perhaps somewhere in pain, she all but loved his vulnerable thought, this man. Yet now this opponent of hers, this man of color he ... he spread his arms to the trees, the sky, the nation, a mute speech all but sweeping away whatever truly had brought him here today. And her. With a new in-and-out, back-and-forth field of time whose very quality was to grasp a future.

Lured here, they half-knew, like prosperous but tired but happy tourists who at a tipping point had heard of this place unspoiled, this territory recently annexed by our nation for its own good from our

northern neighbor. It was to have been an unplanned get-together, tryst set up by us to give them some quality time, a rest from months of strife, talk, partial truth, ignorant armies. When all the time we had this trail to follow if we would, as the intimation came to meet us in our dream that this new territory just annexed might offer a special campsite to resolve or retool or half silence all this talk. No roaring camp, no big two-hearted river (though who knew?). Waiting maybe for a three-day blow ... these two chatting quietly.

As God was their witness, their limbs loosened with the toilsome months along the trail, the campaign to turn the nation not just to words but with great leaps upward to health, wealth, sense.

Knowing each other curiously, negotiating their situation politely, gathering wood, reconnoitering the clearing. Negotiating the next few, well, *hours* in an exchange almost jocose at times, argued like two lawyers in cahoots across the hard ground. Though feeling each other out not undarkly, nonetheless, the still green branches of blow-down she found herself gathering into a pile upon which to place she knew not what cloth or fur to pillow the spirit from the night of trees, of animal life that would contemptibly dare to take advantage of her—attempted rape by the unknown that did not know it was already known by her even as also we are known as scripture will say in even such a place as this.

Did silence fall between them? He found his matches, she a personal flashlight in her bag; she complaining that the administration seemed unconscionably undecided whether to call this new region a territory or a district; he that a one hundred and some foot Coast Guard cutter had just been flown in—yes, she had heard that too—to close that part of the new northern border that was a huge kidney-shaped lake known for fifty-pound walleyes; she, that among multiple other things, it reminded her of a dangerous and ravaged part of Africa she had visited; he, that there were 13 ways of looking at the lake—a charming word from him, an echo somehow for her, as he approached her now, and she said a storm was coming up and maybe they'd be among the first to help the survivors; he, that the weather coming here might well be artificially precipitated by the Administration. And just like that they sat down, they were sitting shoulder to shoulder, grounded, she remembering she'd wanted a vacation in Michigan for some reason, demographics,

waterscape, no reason, and then they heard their stomachs growl, it reminded her of her husband ... Yet it was the woods, wasn't it? And they were up in a second standing back to back, buttock to buttock, for they were hearing more than their inner selves, but what?

We know they were in the woods soon afterward, where lingering music of late sunset layering its touch among the trees led beautifully beyond a huge hemlock to a bouldered den and a shock it held in store. Here the man, the woman a few yards behind him, had surprised an animal he had never seen, fangs tearing at the yellow-pink hams and inner thigh of a fawn caught in a trap like those sold in our country to tourists. About to come at him, gory teeth like eyes, this dark, bushy-coated, heavy-clawed wolverine-like creature (unlike what we're familiar with along the northern borders of our nation)—longer-tailed yet almost bearlike, its claws disproportionately heavy for its body—turned back to feed a moment—yet *that* proved almost a ruse or a stark evolutionary vagary of the creature poised to spring. Yet as, suddenly, the man, always game himself, dodged its strike, and dodged again—and would have grappled fatally with it in a moment, had there not flashed into his hand a blade seemingly too long for the compact switch-blade unit housing it, a blade unfolding somehow out of lengths of itself—a shot now exploded from behind him in an instant smashing the wolverine's head to blood, the animal already incredibly by two strokes of the man's knife disemboweled.

The stuff of legends that moment when, seeing this angry glutton indigenous to our northern neighbor about to rake her rival's arm shoulder neck rib groin, the woman had drawn from a side pocket of her tailored camouflage fatigues a pistol she liked the feel of, the heft, the history of freedoms in, though had never fired: a souvenir slipped her somehow in public by a forestry-and-marketing professor at a truck stop where she'd gone formica to formica, hand to hand, at midnight—liked *her*—as a *woman*—and admired her animal eye-color change from hazel to blue to green, one of her recent feats a feature of her no-holds-barred campaign answering her opponent's own iris-pigment menu, still more his simultaneous look left and right embracing a range of people and what is in them.

How could the man have skinned and butchered and cooked their prey *and* left quality time before they settled down for the night? We

may never know. “*Veni, vidi, vici*,” he mutters at his work. “I could taste him,” the woman said standing by as the man peeled away in a mess of harsh hair and fur a section of hide and flesh warm with then intestine that fell crawling around his wrist and as he reached the blade to grope for rib between rib and said, drily, “It’s a sow” (wondering if that was the right wolverine word for a female, if this thang *was* a wolverine), in the corner of his eye he saw the partly eaten fawn move, the dead wolverine’s prey, for the act of inhaling had slid its eye to one side, and its breath-out then was its last—and the woman, “An inch or two to the left and it would have been your head,” and he, “It was what it was,” and she (for the fawn did breathe once more), “Thanks, are we gonna eat the baby too?” yet he (meaning the pistol), “How did your handlers let you ... where did you ...?”—

—as time, whose quality or qualities once upon a library table he had found for himself with science, philosophy, and international law all working together in his thesis—what was it?—extended audaciously our own look back into where we *are*, Time’s aspiration imagining we grasp what grasps us and our institutions. His knife does its work. “Getting some experience,” she murmurs needing to defend herself now against who could quite say what. Experience is also the lack of it, experience is experience, he thinks, and cuts himself almost unnoticeably in the thick of his work, and what will happen next, he asks, eating and sleeping and in the sky and tomorrow? A boy’s thought, she replies. The lost sun speaks dark wind now. Well experience comes from you not just to you, he said. She gasps. “There you go again,” she cried suddenly and he looked over his shoulder to see her pocket’s cargo where it belonged, but it was the wind she had cried out upon, from the cliff, the cold grace that knows us in the sky, she recalled someone thinking. “Well I hope you can cook,” she said like a mind reading what a girlfriend—was it in college?—had said to a guy when he had done something ... what was it?

Home again, the fire rises to the occasion, it is not angry at the meat, the lean, the gristle. The storm somewhere near the clearing but not here, the flames gnaw at the night. She has found a thinly surfacing spring running past a corner of their camp and brought him to wash his wound water in a dented beer can left in the fire with other plausible litter provided by our advance team that traveled this trail of

our future leaders, which was reopened after a racist sniper from our northern neighbor or a separatist, or both, shot two hikers a fortnight ago evidently tragically just as they turned, hand in hand, to look each other in the eye outdoors.

Yes, I can cook, he says. They exchange a look. Is the river its water or the banks that shape it, she thinks out loud, and she knows he is listening with those big ears of his she doesn't mind, for, in a gust of smoke coughing, he jokes, "Is that your Christian energy plan? You're sounding like me." "Can't stand the smoke get out of the kitchen," she says, time elapsing how, when—for she is like a woman who has agreed to spend the night with a man she hardly knows.

They were the land's, the land vaguely realizing northward toward water. Something we were withholding from our land of the living. It comes out of nowhere but months of talk, what he says now, but out of nowhere still: they have no right to ask if and where and why you go to church, temple, or—it's unconstitutional, he says to the fire. She pricks up her ears, some woods person's instinct, something Out There, while with one part of her mind replies out loud, "Unconstitutional, eh?"—for in her heart of hearts she knows those founding fathers would have been astonished to find God in the 3-person of our checks and balances laboring openly in our vineyards loving every minute of it.

"A piece of him," it came to her, his words so self-effacing, she thought they were from the Avon Bard when some medieval noble, asked if he was ready, laid his neck upon the block, it moved her the more she remembered a play *she* had been in as Portia dropping mercy like rain upon a place of justice. "You have survived your experience," he said. "I'm not so sure," she said, and picked out a faint glint back in the trees and at the same moment a glint in the dark sky like a tonal frequency there then gone, and wondered if their privacy was breached. "What, though, is it we have survived," he said to her, as she let her eyes seem to close but in thought not sleep. "If you have to ask that," she murmured, "we don't need some philosopher as king."

Yet now far keener than a philosopher's parse is detected suddenly the surveillance unmistakable, violently unsurprising after all these months in the public eye, the discovery simultaneous by the two of them as a couple, her hand suddenly on him, his forearm, his spare shoulder and rib, seeking *his* anger wherever in his body it might be

found—our satellite listening system at last kicking in, thought both, now huddling, preparing for the night and acquainted with it they now in some intimacy knew—beyond speech, the blank terrible chance — like a blanket absent but to be replaced by the not-too-wide, not at all thick, NASA mylar tarp the man unfolded from his pack—that she, still young, would not get what she deserved, nor even quite he, imagining how his government might work.

Just then in her reaction to the triple pop from vein of hardwood log—locust, she thought, recalling the man who had made her a gift of the pistol or her father or her child—though where were locust trees here in this tract of earth vaguely realizing outward or even inward toward and away from our northern neighbor?—the man with her saw her face as he might upon waking in the fresh damp of dawn, makeup-less, as formed as chiseled Presidential stone, her skin both fresh from the unknown of sleep and worn by the terrible campaign waged from war zone to war zone for weeks reflecting years of belief that what she ran for was hers already while her opponent elsewhere put it to a field of mystified but impressed migrant farm laborers, You would not seek me if you had not found me.

“Why did you come?” she says, her eyes closed. “Because you’d be here. Also the fossil beds.” “Why?” she said. “These very,” he said, “small Cambrian soft-bodied animals—the fittest don’t necessarily survive.” “But me?” “One of yours told one of mine you had a free day.”

We watch them really sleep—together sleep. She wakefuller than he for certain moments. A pallor in her heart. A new state of affairs in her mussed hair—while we prepared to defend the signed contract covering the use of these audio-visual tapes rolling far and near. She’s cold, he too, they may be dreaming now (of which they will later compare notes uncannily kindred, of the iron kettle, it sings on the stove, a time to plant tears the almanac says) yet dreams are pathless pathmaking.

Watched, however, even into their joined and interinanimate dreams not so much by our satellite in its synchronous earth orbit able to record only a dream’s visible signs, but in fact now by another, a third person, were their eyes open upon this creature standing over them with what looked like a chain-saw or a ghetto blaster, a denizen of our northern neighbor we had learned originally but a separatist at the very moment that our own nation had annexed this region?—and

now and now and now—what was this language he spoke, picked up by our satellite like the images of these three people down to the very interlaced fingers of the two sleepers on the ground still adream, closer perhaps than ever, what did they, we, our technology, hear him say, this weird mountain person caped and overalled could he be speaking of our own election campaign—your stomach growls—a light from the very breath of the speaker: “I know you both, I’m here, I left, the army, the country, the church, thrown out because I didn’t believe as you, though my belief is just as much a belief as your own knowledge in the absence of evidence and you share mine though you don’t know it and I would vote for you both had I the vote but I am here,” the wilderness man continued, his eyes under the killer-shaggiest of eyebrows turning into luminous mist, his time passing perhaps and his voice receding, until our man on the ground, letting go the woman’s hand yet gripping it again, now protectively aroused to eloquence spoke up to him, upward, still aware of the battery-operated chain-saw half swinging above them—“You are, you are, you’re saying why wait, aren’t you? Why I know you, you are Ahab on a stump speaking to all of us”—*all of us* the syllables seemed sucked upward and toward a glinting acoustic receiver out in the trees near the wolverine’s den—sounds of us like thoughts we have retracted, thinking better of them; and he was gone, the atheist deserter once a litigant suing our government, now a denizen of this new territory. Gone now from their awakening view, the woman and man on the ground, turning toward each other chilled, their stomachs growling, hands clasped in some fugitive and passing union, thinking almost one thought if that.

This might have been inferred by our extreme lenses from the position the next morning of the sleeping bodies—the embers ready for the next camper or campers, though this protected territory not yet legal for visitors. The two known tracks gave access to the clearing from the dense old growth woods of this new 40- by 50-mile tract just acquired by us from our northern neighbor, is all we need to know. The still frontier-like state of our union. Waiting the return of our rivals to the campaign reflecting as we with our endemic lens might too on the survival of the campaign trail in a new century.

