LAURENCE LIEBERMAN

SKY DANCE OF THE HOWLERS
(GUYANA RAIN FOREST)

Hurtling full-throttle
in the long narrow speedboat, bouncing to frequent
liftoff on the swells for forty miles
down the Essequibo, we pass
two historic mining towns, both dubbed Gateway
to the Interior. Soon we approach
a great river crossways—resembling traffic intersection
of two major road arteries—and turn right
down the Mazaruni.
We cruise below the chief maximum security
prison of Guyana perched on a cliff
summit, which overhangs the shared
pool of two rivers. So few escapees
from Mazaruni

Island Prison
succeed per decade. Why?
It’s too remote from land sites
that can support fugitives…Beach landing at the inlet
leading to Marushka Rain Forest. We step gingerly
from the boat, one
by one, each hefting his share

of loose supplies
for the six-mile-hike through the forest to the falls
and picnic lunch. Jamal, our veteran
host, scolds each of us to take
utmost care stepping ashore. Be watchful for tricky unseen divots and furrows
in the offshore waters. Then he trips, himself, while carrying the bulky
wide freezer chest, crammed
with ice, cokes & beers,
and lands on his spine—loyally keeping both arms around the box, hugged to his chest
as he sprawls on his back in the pebbly shore pools. He bounces back to his feet,
perhaps too shamed
to admit his pain. See, an example of your worst-case clumsiness, he quips, mocking himself, leaving us amazed he’s not stricken by the fall…Marc, sandy-haired & blue-eyed, bushy silver-speckled mustache, has small delicate features, he’s much the shortest man in our troop, but spry and agile. Parks himself under the freezer chest, and no one can wheedle it away from him, nor lend a hand. He props the chest upright on his head, and starts across thirty-meter-long slick mossy log that crosses the wide river tributary racing twenty feet below. He takes big proud bouncy steps like a balletic tightrope dancer, a classy balancing act, while I bring up the rear hauling two plastic water bottles, thin under my arm, one hand free to steady my cowardliness. I drop to a crouch at three intervals spaced out over daredevil eel-slimy bridge, our makeshift walkway, then grasp the bark to get my nerve back. Not looking down…Marc is belting out refrain-strophes from a bravado
song of free-lance
miners staking claims in the Bartica diamond mines.
No miner himself, but he grooves on
maverick entrepreneurial spirit,
giving voice to it as one who comes by the just-
struck-it-rich in the outback strut,
naturally; he does three skips and hops to my one-by-one
halt patter. Anabel,
the woman to my rear, Mezzo-
warbles her melodic
question to Marc. *Are you a son of mixed ethnic
bloods?,* too polite to say *half-breed.*
His giddy sforzando rich-voweled reply,
sung in tenor long-held notes. *Yes, I’m
half-rabbit, half
mountain lion.*
He trots out a nimble
polka step to evoke his dual
animal-soul
hoofer’s art, the ice chest bobbing so evenly
we might forget its outsize weight…and we’ve made it
safely across
the mossy gangplank without

a spill. We squat
on rocks lining the margins of a thin waterfall,
and pick at our stir fry box lunch
with plastic forks or chopsticks.
Val squeals! Thrusts his lunch-kit back into our
freezer chest. *No meat for me. I’m veggies
man.* Two or three small shreds of chicken, mixed with rice,
spoiled the basketful.
He won’t touch *the grub,* as if
merest speck of flesh
has contaminated the whole food supply. He snaps
up a spiral of bananas and bounds
behind the falls to chaw his fill of fruit
in seclusion, well out of view of
us carnivores.
A few peels come
  spinning like pinwheels
  over the cascading streams, one
  by one, hidden
Val yelping like the family of Howlers
in the treetops overhead. He tosses a few yellow
  chunks at the lower
  branches, to lure the graceful
  chimps to clamber
down from their lofty roosts, which incites them
to frenzied acrobatics. We make out
their purplish underbellies swung
  from tree to tree: two full-size monkeys, five
or six tots, crisscrossing each other
  like a synchronized team. But they keep to the uppermost
thin limbs and branches,
circling round and round between
  many adjacent trees,
  so close we can’t tell them apart. Howlers remain
too shy to drift down to the flung bait,
  but their whoops get ever more frenetic.
Val’s teasing keeps them awhirl
  in a flurry
of short orbits.
The smalls hop on elders’
  backs and shoulders, hitching brief
rides. They respond
to our shouts and arm waves, but none is tame
enough to approach…Val returns, stalking hip-deep
in the churning
  falls, half swimming, half lunging
to catch oomph
of ripply billows, and riding the few rapids
into shore. He pops up smiling
on the bank. Offers to lead us
through the six-mile-hike of rain forest.
*Soon we'll all be drenched, he says, dripping
from scalp to footsoles* like himself, and it’s true.
Though hot sun blazes
on the treetops, a finest mist
of rain keeps sifting
down, and down, upon our upturned brows, wherever
we stroll. *What can be the source?,* I ask.
*No single storm cloud in view.* At last,
coming in spurts, torrents chase us
down narrow paths

Between the thick
aisles, near-symmetrical
columns of tall slender trees. Next
the rain grows
so steady and dense, it seems an irreducible
medium of air itself. A liquefied and ever-palpable
atmosphere. Or wet
bodying forth of that tangible

saplike ooze
we slosh through…Val in his truest element,
he’s at the ready for my claptrap
bevy of questions. Youthful
prized horticulturist and noted mail-order
for-export tree and shrub dealer, he’s
fast and fulsome with arboreal info. *Notice,* says he,
*how most of the trees*
in this grove are propelled
straight-up-and-down,
trunks and limbs all slender and nearly at perfect
right angles to earth, almost no tilts or slants.
*The magic is all in these trees. Oh, how
their leaves drink, seep & exude vapors. See
how they breathe…*