DISCOVER AMERICA

POEMS

1976

Nils Peterson
John Galm
Naomi Clark

Editors
## THE JOURNEY

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**Forewords**

Kathleen Fraser, Robert Hass, Josephine Miles

**Afterword**

Thomas A. Vogler

* The San Jose Awards, National Bicentennial Poetry Awards Competition.
† The Holly Drew Geary Cooper Award, National Bicentennial Poetry Awards Competition.
This publication is made possible by grants from the Fine Arts Commission of the City of San Jose, the English Department and the Office of Continuing Education of San Jose State University, and several private donors. No less important were the encouragement and moral support provided by the members of those institutions. We are grateful also to Arlene Okerlund, Editor of San José Studies, for her advice and counsel; Sheila Evans and Jack Canty, graphics consultants; to Carol Abate, Ann Gmelin, Lou Lewandowski, Cornelia Marini, and Eliane Roe for their cheerful help in proofreading; and to Jean Dahl, Doris Donatelli, Janet Stevenson, and other members of the English Department staff for their patience and aid all through the competition and the preparation of this anthology. Especially, we are grateful to Kathleen Fraser, Robert Hass, and Josephine Miles, who insisted that such a collection must be published and who provided us, from the more than 2,000 submissions they read, with the fine poems from which these here printed were drawn.

Nils Peterson
John Galm
Naomi Clark, Editors,
Discover America:
Poems 1976
The judges' selection of poems to receive cash awards in the National Bicentennial Poetry Awards competition was made anonymously. The judges' recommendation of poems for inclusion in this collection and the editors' final selections were also made anonymously. To our delight poets from seventeen of the fifty states, from the District of Columbia, and from Canada are represented. Many important poems could not be included, but those here presented chant not only in their single voices, but in duets, trios, even in chorus, speaking to each other as to all of us.

Because of unavoidable delays between the announcement of the awards and the completion of preliminary plans for publication of this special issue of San José Studies, a few poets made arrangements during that interim for other publication of their submissions. For permission to reprint those poems, we make grateful acknowledgment:

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The advice to emigrants of the 1840's and 1850's in "More than They Thought," by Charles Vandersee, is quoted by Terry Coleman, Going to America (New York: Random House, 1972).
The Fine Arts Commission of The City of San Jose

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It is not often that a City has the opportunity to participate in the publication of fine poetry. The Fine Arts Commission of the City of San Jose, when it gave the Bicentennial Poetry Celebration its 1976 Art Award, had every reason to expect a successful publication. We have seen and heard Gwendolyn Brooks, William Everson, Howard Nemerov and Mona Van Duyn, but this graceful volume has surpassed our expectations. A city is not often a "necessary angel," but with works like this one, that is a role that San Jose will find it increasingly easy to play. The splendid cooperation that we have had from the University and particularly John Bunzel, John Galm, Nils Peterson and Naomi Clark has made the poetry celebration and the publication of this verse more pleasure than work. On behalf of myself, the Fine Arts Commission and, most of all, the people of San Jose, my thanks to San José Studies for this gift.

Conrad L. Rushing
San Jose State University wishes to take this opportunity to express its thanks to the City of San Jose, to its Mayor, City Council, and the Fine Arts Commission for their cultural vision. San Jose has become a place where the arts flourish and nurture us all.

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Vice Mayor
FOREWORDS

What surprised me in reading manuscripts for a poetry competition as formally subject-dictated as that for the Bicentennial Poetry Awards was the range and intensity of dialogue going on between the poets and their materials . . . how a really extraordinary number of poets found unique and personally compelling connections between their own psychic/spiritual journeys and the unfolding history of that schizophrenic and ungainly prodigy — The United States.

What I expected and dreaded was a massive gathering of self-congratulatory clichés celebrating with a kind of low-level hysteria and repressive lack of humor our great country, as though it were a platonic form as unassailable and uncomplex as a plain pine table. There were those. But the amazing thing was that, sifting through over two thousand manuscripts, I should find so many that demanded my serious attention, that in fact put me in contact with historical or psychological material that added to my store of perceptions about myself as a person being deeply affected by the precise and dramatic struggles of women and men who preceded me in the last two hundred years of becoming American.

The impossible task then became that of choosing which poems should take precedence as winners. representing so many strong and exciting contenders. For, finally, after hours of private readings followed by polite and reasonable discussions of "what makes good writing," then out-loud readings of each of our favorites followed by committed personal attempts to convince one another of the virtues of those poems we separately found most deeply moving or most freshly invented, we still couldn't agree unanimously, as a committee, on the final selections. If we'd had our way, and more money to give away, a much longer listing of poets would have figured in the final "winners." It was because of this that the idea of publishing a larger collection was conceived — to give readers a chance to share our amazement and pleasure in the quality of writing, personal exploration and historical drama evoked for us as three working poets, taking on the task of receiving the responses of those among us who are listening closely and seeing clearly.

Kathleen Fraser
July 4, 1976
South and west of Monticello in the Blue Ridge mountains there is a natural bridge of limestone carved by a pleistocene river now dwindled to Cedar Creek, a tributary of the James. It makes a pretty scene, the stream running through a defile of ochre cliffs two hundred feet high, the bridge arching over the fissure and trailing sweet-smelling vines into the canyon. Washington visited the place in his rambles as a surveyor and Jefferson eventually bought it. It comes to mind because, if you visit there, you can still see the old shack which Jefferson had build just under the bridge and in which he installed a slave with a manuscript book for visitors who wished to record sensations of sublimity after having·viewed this natural wonder.

"So beautiful an arch," Jefferson wrote, "so elevated, so light, and springing, as it were, up to heaven, the rapture of the Spectator is really indescribable."

This is an anthology of American poems two hundred years after the fact. They are full of rage, elegy, irony, hunger for roots, written in a durable American tongue by poets who live in every part of the old colonies and the new wilderness on which Jefferson, like Wallace Stevens and John Ashbery after him, made purchase by trafficking with the French. They are poems of the American empire and of hatred for empire. They seem to me to have a common characteristic. There is not a poem here not touched in some way by a deep sense of loneliness. This may have to do with American space or the act of writing or our vile commercial culture. In any case, it is here not as a commentary but as a fact, like Manhattan or the Natural Bridge. We make of it what we can.

An American-born African with a manuscript book in an isolated canyon in the Blue Ridge, miles from anywhere, what did he think about, I wonder? More particularly, I wonder what he made of the task assigned to him, whether he had a flintlock to hunt wild quail and passenger pigeons, whether there were trout in Cedar Creek then, whether he could actually read whatever effusions the rare visitor may have inscribed, did he have a woman with him. The pleasure of these poems, their salience and human strength, is that they provide many different answers to these questions.

Robert Hass
August, 1976

The startling characteristic of these poems for 1976 is not only their number, not only their easy workmanship, but especially their richness of material. Bryant's *Prairies* and Whittier's *Snowbound* have come to life again in the places and times of these devoted surveys and reminiscences. Grandma Moses has been taken as seriously as Norman Rockwell, and a fine sampler sense prevails, though in larger stitches. It is a phenomenon when, in the twentieth century, poetry can be read for information: about the ways of buffalo and whales, about George Washington's wooden teeth. Great halls used to ask their bards to sing about the past in celebration; San Jose State University has made the same suggestion, to illuminating effect.

Josephine Miles
July, 1976
The leopard with the harmless kid laid down,
And not one savage beast was seen to frown.

When the great PENN his famous treaty made
With Indian chiefs beneath the elm-trees shade.

Peaceable Kingdom by Edward Hicks
Courtesy New York State Historical Association, Cooperstown
THE JOURNEY

WOMEN IN EARLY PLYMOUTH

cat tails and rain

in one room a cloud of
smoke and roses, dung

corn husks the babies

crawling thru their green
the old bones

chickens squawk she
puts her head down
on her knees

sees blood

the children with

loin cloths fleas

yelping thru the

maples

no barley just this
damn corn no
beer i am
english i want an
english bed she

throws something
into the dust

feathers blow up

burn her lips

Sun on the water
vetch blue

berries minnows
green fire
shimmering

the mussels

scallops Crows
pecking at sea

weed Her blood
fills with sponges

blue cabbage
how it ripened
for the fair
in Sussex

She watches the
dragonflies

dandelions twisting
on water blown
toward land they
may never root
in either

*
his breath hot garlic
slipping up behind her.
7 years of dust smoke
and garlic his
fingers like dragon's
teeth. Her arms
don't stop shaking
7 years working
in his house fighting
those heavy fingers,
hairs on his nose
dreaming that garlic
clove with spines
thick as a tree
to crush his tongue

sleeping under a rug
near the bed

listening to crickets
to what the skin
goes thru

Later
feeling the warmth of
the bricks against her
belly

climbing down
running out thru the
pumpkin leaves the
dark green oaks
damp tunnel

Some young girl
reaching under her
linen shift
touched her thighs
counting the days
since the bans

*sky of smoke and
lemon Thunder the
leaves turning
inside out A
woman hanging roses
in the doorway not
understanding their
lust (rehobeth
swansea eastham
pulling the men like
some woman As if
roots would choke
them after so long

*
shells in the yard
years of clam shells

How could 7 have
lived in this room

Moths beat against
oiled paper years

like jellyfish
animal flowers
transparent slippery

The old woman
dreams bracelets

of kelp ropes
of darkgreen

seaweed twisting
around her sons

who move closer
smiling

*a winter of spitting up blood
frozen dreams coughing

they say i'll never have
or at the most one child

Oak branches reddening
pussy willows sun

I can feel it on
my fingers

John doesn't believe them either

*indian fire
in the hills the

smallest child
sleeping next to her
skin she
dreams its
wakes up screaming
is it

true the
skulls dried flesh

around the
house, hair

a village where they
died so fast the
bones could never
be buried

*
earth thaws
and freezes
again

Women cut
the dried
fish smaller

white sky,
branches like
antlers

Near the door
a dead thrush,
no meat on it

* gulls in the blue
air a woman
watching. frozen
salmon sun the
bristles of stiff
pine she leans
closer linseed
smells like some
place in england
bayberries the
color of smoke
If she could just
write someone
about this

* in one room

guns pewter barrels
pans embroidered
linen clutter

of babies corn
leaves kittens
the wind a shawl
of milkweed
apples

blazing red
tupela this

woman shelling beans,

she is september

looking back at how
she's come to this
and not sorry

* 

Lyn Lifshin Niskayuna, New York
(From a series of poems on the women of early Plymouth)
NEW WORLD EXHIBITION
(From a longer series)

I. MORE THAN THEY THOUGHT

They had to be satisfied with earth’s own colors
when they first made pottery in the new world.
Clay red, like the signifying sky.
Gray of the sea storms that they had to face,
or else break brush toward the gray smoke
of the red India men. Black tracery
from the barks of trees, like the lead
of the idol windows heavy on their minds.

Then soon necessity made them bold.
Needing unnatural beauty,
and shape in their land without profile
except for the mocking crackling leaves
and the shore that changed with the tides,
they saw they had more than they thought.
It was the early American effort, pure and chaste:
Urine they saved, all shades, and tobacco juice,
to give gold to their dinnerware,
the brown of old leather books to the shapes
on the table,

and the full force of reproach
of man the discoverer
against God, the mere maker of raw materials.

II. AMERICAN CONSTITUTION
(Found Poem)

It is by no means so formidable an affair as is
imagined.
Take a warm grey cloak with loose sleeves, a
cotton peignoir, and all other dresses
made to close in front.
Get your digestion in good order before starting.

It is very awkward to lie in your berth and try
to hook-and-eye behind.
Actors, singers, dancers, authors take the trip
across and back without the slightest
repugnance.
Take the necessary medicines, but by no means
make an apothecary shop of your interior.
Take woollen stockings to keep your feet warm while you are ill.
Help out the rations on board with a little good tea.
Nobles and squires go for pleasure.

We have found cayenne pepper in soup very comforting.
It is seven weeks from Liverpool, steerage three pounds ten shillings.
Thick gingerbread cake and oranges and apples are good for you.

Get your digestion in good order before starting.

Charles Vandersee  Charlottesville, Virginia

AUTUMN NIGHT

The crowing wind rakes the stiff weeds
and the cowering hermit thrush
ruffles the hide on backbone of cow
red-wing blackbirds scatter
above the elm roots sunken in the flooded field
I hear the hollow wail of a flute in my bones
Like the fox's cry over the new fallen snow

There are no footprints when I go out to look

Marcia Smith  San Francisco, California
THE TRIAL OF MARTHA CARRIER

... several of her own children had frankly and fully confessed not only that they were witches themselves, but that this, their mother, had made them so.

— Cotton Mather

she had a face that could kill a cow or knock a man down at fifty paces. she could, that rampant hag, merely by touching one bent finger to the side of the insult that was her nose, whittle down the brightest family hearth to ashes and tepid darkness.

this Thursday last did I see yon hag consort in a sty with two grizzled swine — transform them she did into comely young men; fondle them, take supper with them in the mud, the three of them boiling into mad cackles in the still of night.

at her command, it was testified, the mating dance of mute swans exploded before the eyes of children into bloody, twitching rape. fathers saw ignorance in the cheeks of their sons; sons read lust or failure in a father’s wrinkled face; and such wounds she kept open with her art as have lasted nearly twenty centuries: wounds which smiled wide enough to admit four inches of knitting needle were, upon her being seized, closed with a wet kiss. drinking wine, gulping bread in the dark of the forest she was queen of hell, heiress to all, a smiling harlot for a weary succession of armies, intercessor and confessor, every infant’s fear, and mother.
declared to be the most human,
convicted of a cold conformity:
the beast of beauty,
a little flower of evil.

David Citino	Marion, Ohio

SALEM LADIES

When the broadface moon laughs down on the pumpkins,
and the frogs in the hollows all croak from the shade,
then down with the washing and the sewing and the cooking,
and down in a nightgown to dance in the glade
with the devil in the light of the moon.

When the bell in the steeple is still in the midnight,
and soft are the breezes through the grasses on the graves,
then down with the tallow and down with the pickling,
and dance like a shadow where the corn silk waves
with the neighbors in the light of the moon.

Hey, Goody Crisp, put down your ragged washrag;
Hey, Goody Davis, lock your pantry and go
where brooms are for riding and babies for the cauldron;
come down in a nightgown to dance in the glade
with the devil in the light of the moon.

Up in the cold dawn, kettle on the hob;
first, feed all the children and make all the beds;
then chase all the outdoors with a broom back out;
then dinner for the children, and in again the out;
then teach them their letters and teach them their prayers;
then see to the supper, and the candles, and the quilt;
plan for the market and the garden in the morning,
and put them to bed; then put him to bed;
then up in a minute with your black gown and rest him,
and then lie there easy, if you can, in the moon.

Or come with the neighbors when the wildness is on them,
come with the ladies from the houses in the dale,
come with the matrons when the laughter is upon them,
come shiver and quiver and howl and wail.
Hurry to the circle where the long red beard is laughing, leaving tiny hoofmarks in the wide-eyed moon.

Fire in the morning for the never-quiet kettle; fire for the water at the bedside of the births; fire at the noontime, in the sky and in the kitchen; fire for the supper and fire for the hearths; fire for the cleaning and the heating and the eating, but no fire for burning, no fire at all.

So, when all the breathing is steady in the bedrooms, and the unmade beds are all full and still as tombs, then, down with the parents and the babies and the husbands, down like a secret to whisper in the midnight, down like a tiger to dance in the circle, to dance with the devil in a circle, like a planet, to burn in the darkness as wild as a star; come down, leave your nightgown, to glitter in the fire with the devil in the light of the moon.

Frank Dwyer  New York, New York

LETTER FROM THE COLONIES

Two days into this region and already I have trouble with sleep....
the winds blow nightly....It is exhausting to keep writing down descriptions of fine full trees, the bushy animals, herbs such as I had never thought to stoop and touch and how this river flows, the banks of this river, gorges, waterfalls, glades, even the rain comes down I think wrongly....It reminds me of cross-hatching, as it seems to slant back and forth across a mountain or a valley, caving one part in and bringing one to light and I am tired but elated....Too much wonder, too much awe....It is not England, not safe like England....Raw, wild, wilderness such as would make you gasp. Passions I would you never suffer (though I remember how the strength of you surprised, embarrassed, on that first dark night
in the bed, your body unclothed) have their grasp
upon us all, I think. . . . It is the Autumn
of this unstructured world. Leaves have blown away
from whole mountainsides. . . . Clinging
to rocks and the unclothed branches I have pulled
myself to such heights. . . . I have stood before
such vistas, I fear I shall never
again be sensible to small
delights, the pleasures of quiet piano.
Yet I miss
you, I miss you. By the firelight, writing
you this letter,
I can see my hands tremble, you observe
even the slant of my words upon this paper
has changed. . . . Were you here
we should be resting sweetly in some pine
bower and your limbs would once again
so delight me that I should not speak. . . . My love,
I thrill to the word America as I
thrilled to find you so uncalm. . . . Tomorrow
more walking. . . . We are all transformed,
the very least of us, the stupid boy,
the dumbest of my men. . . . They hang
upon my words, they are desperate for words,
something to make this all seem civilized, a first
taming, to tell them what
they are seeing, they are feeling. . . . Never have
I felt this power, this duty
to record. . . . We have lain down
beside a broad lake where the deer
step into the water, unafraid. Great flocks
of geese are upon it also. . . .
Only once before
have I so felt I lived,
breathing with your body heaved to mine.

Dick Allen        Trumbull, Connecticut

INDIAN QUEEN

History tells us
he worked, without notes, living
alone at the house
of Jacob Graff. The table was his design. He dined out.

And somewhere in this seventeen-day adventure he changed a key phrase to *pursuit of happiness*. Locus came off *property*.

Perhaps the idea came from extraneous thoughts on Locke, writing of power and drunks and freedom; taverns and understanding.

Perhaps the idea came with a bottle of Trent, the violin's bent or the serving, bared breasts of a wench at Indian Queen.

We know such ideas were cradled in warm caverns; we know grand schemes came with toddies, ordinaries, pewter mugs and thick candles.

Craig Harkins Fishkill, New York

LEXINGTON, MASSACHUSETTS – 1775

You always start somewhere and in Lexington it was rock and forest: boulders inlaid like pearls on a necklace of emerald and gold curving back from the neck of the sea. Along the Charles were peeling birches, boulders tossed up by frost and ages of ice. And beyond them, cathedral pines branded with the crown's arrow for masts, and boulders big as pews.
Forest of maple, forests of cherry and beech and maple, of hickory, red oak and sycamore.
But always the rocks. Hundreds, thousands of rocks. My ancestors made a house of stone, a mortarless house, with rocks so varied, so myriad, they fit snug as jigsaw pieces, which in fact they were: a Christmas glacier puzzled over our three parcels of land and hidden beneath the trees.

And, having built a place to live, they still had stones enough (like loaves and fishes) for a potting shed, a smoke house, a wall around the east forty, walls around twenty acres of apple orchard and twenty of pear. Rock for a wall around the small truck garden, a well built of rock, a low wall bordering the road to the house, and the road itself of crushed stone.

Neither walling in nor walling out. Rock does not burn, does not wash away in a spring rain, cannot be covered with quicklime and buried like the body of a girl raped in the woods. One can make cairns, small piles as offerings to Celtic gods, one can build houses and, after them, walls, even bridges (though they are more difficult) but the land is not disturbed in any case.

Take all the rocks you find. Build cabins, walls, even wells and smokehouses, still there will be a boulder you break your plow on.

It is cold at planting. It is cold under the harvest moon. The land is shadowed by rocky hills. The corn, windblown and spindly even in good years; the wheat, windblown and spare.

That year the planting was late. Winter hung on like a white-tailed shrew. Few men had plowed their fields, waiting instead for the promise of spring, for mild westerlies.

Below the east forty were white pines: pure stands of trees growing trunk to trunk, and taller, more ominous with the dawn.
Behind them, a regiment closing in; 
before them, dry walls collapsing in the frost.

Then, the sound of muskets, 
the wind, sharp and cold from the east, 
and promises 
broken like branches on an April morning.

Michael Hogan       Florence, Arizona

GEORGE WASHINGTON: Soliloquy, With Footnotes

No, my teeth were not of wood 
but of the hard tusks of the hippopotamus. 
Everyone asks about this: 
schoolboys and pilots, corn country wives, 
brokers, plumbers, mistresses sheathed in furs; 
just as all the tourists 
romping through Valley Forge 
comment on the apparent comforts 
(the torch-bright chandeliers, 
floors bright as wooden glass) 
of my headquarters there. 
The contrast is great, I concede, 
between that place and the windowless huts 
of the troops. But the cold was deep there, too, 
and the wind swept even those floors, 
and my bones were often blue 
in spite of the hearth fires 
or Martha’s knack for turning seeming straw 
and scraps into an earnest feast.

We, the higher echelons, 
did hold entertainments, true, 
to help thaw through the blistering chill 
of desperate night, and day’s duress, 
but played as much for the raw rank and file 
as for ourselves. On one rude stage, 
which I myself supervised, 
my officers staged some plays 
(Cato was one) 
against the blizzard’s nibbling tooth; 
in sunlight there was cricket and ball.
"Frivolity," our critics said, they safe at home in softer beds, less threatened by death's most unfrivolous breath.

Underneath, there was always the nagging wound of sorrow for my half-armed, hungry men.

I felt superabundantly for them and from my Soul pitted those miseries which it was neither in my power to relieve or prevent.

Except for spirit, we were all in rags — and, hidden by that wig of mine, how often I ached from the brute pain of those African tusks chomping, grinding, in my head.

I said then, and later, and you will find it written, my grammar poor, my spelling clumsy:

I often think how much happier I should have been if I had taken my musket upon my shoulder and entered the ranks...
or, if I could have justified the measure to posterity and my own conscience, had retired to the back country and lived in a wigwam.

*He knew the back country well, the French bullets, the Indian arrows. At age twenty-two, tall and reckless and hot-boned, Lieutenant-Colonel out of Virginia, horse-straddling, ambitious, green, seeking a battle-self,

I heard the bullets whistle and, believe me, there is something charming in the sound.

*That was before he led his tattered rebels on, men bootless, patched, who on parade through Tory crowds wore ornaments of leaves picked from a ditch. Their blood sank through the snow (but the deep dye remains) while Congress and a nation stalled, contended, bickered, and complained about the commander who would be King; a fop, some said, with a tyrant's tastes.
On paper, good John Adams moaned,  
“I am ashamed of the age I live in!”

*Father of his country,  
but stepfather to the widow Custis’ children.  
He married her, the whisper went, for her wealth.  
But she was ripe-cheeked, even in winter,  
warm without quilts, faithful,  
knew how to create a banquet out of crumbs.  
   
He was taller in death than in life,  
claiming to be only six feet,  
but the undertaker, measuring him in the coffin,  
recorded that he was six-foot-three.  
Tailors set his height one inch below.  
Tall enough, in any case,  
to be a target, to march, and suffer  
jeers, the bloody flux, fever,  
and early smallpox digging craters in his face —  
and those wild, alien teeth.  
The wigs that crowned his scars are dead,  
his river polluted,  
his slaves turned into leaf mold  
along with Martha, Adams, Jefferson;  
redcoat and rebel; soldiers, farmers, steeds...

but there is something there, yet, that breathes:  
reckless, hot-boned, seeking a self  
beyond the bullets’ “charming sound,”  
at Mt. Vernon, Valley Forge, in the air of Virginia  
over the undulant hills —  
and in Iowa, Texas, Oregon, Tennessee —  
something that stirs, still, and tells us more  
than his moonlit, or sun-starred, monument.

   
Adrien Stoutenburg  Santa Barbara, California

AFTER AN INQUIRY OF ANTON MESMER  
FRANKLIN ADMONISHES HIS GRANDSON

William Temple: each day you find  
lessons for living;
heed them: "An empty bag cannot stand upright."
"Men and melons are hard to know."

But most, give light to darkness, and always be first in labor and clean clothes, for these become a man.

Do not trust to gloats, fops, quacks, sluggards, or plump maids, for they are swift to show false knowing and guile.

And now, if you will, arrange for me my warm nightmare, for the air is damp and chill. What do you make of dreams? I have been reading Prevost where he scoffs:

"It is supposed that the night of the lady Aiguemerre's dream was a summer night, that her window was open, her bed exposed to the west, her blankets disarranged, and that the southwest wind, impregnated with molecules of floating embryos, fertilized her." No, not that one, Billy, the common grey gown, if it can discourage dreams. Imagination only brings on lust. Marry older women, Billy, for they are ugly, and will always be grateful to you.

And the body ages downward, so even if the face be old, why, the hips are still good. Your father knew this, I told it to him, and I knew because I had to find it out. Do you know? Tell me, what are the physical manifestations of this wonder called animal magnetism? Don't be so taken by it. Can it magnetize the wind, will it gather first light with darkness, reconcile an old printer and his southwest son? There's a lesson in it, about your father, wherever he's gone.
The grey one, please get it, 
but first a whiskey, and have yourself 
one too. You're not a bit 
your father. He never had the courage 
of his shyness, not once 
I remember, so he was never in control, 
now talking with one 
hand over his mouth, now in a blind rage 
at some meaningless 
and insensitive gesture which only he 
could see as a slight 
to his person. Which perhaps it was. 
Don't miscast it, boy, 
the object is he lived too much inside 
himself where dreams 
are dark. Is there any homily for it? 
I can't say. But it's why, 
when the larger Revolution was at hand, 
he elected his revolt 
against me. And having to remain loyal 
to something, he remained 
a Loyalist. Not that he chose any more 
than he chose your mother, 
but that he chose simply by not choosing. 
By dreaming. Logs run 
on the rocks where canoes run clear. 
I am glad it is over, 
that we have judged and found Mesmer 
wanting. We observed: 
L'imagination fait tout; le magnetisme 
nul. And Deslon, 
who backed Mesmer in every wantonness, 
said to us: "Sirs, if 
treatment by the use of imagination 
is the best treatment, 
then why do we not make use of it?"
I swear there is no 
reason among poets and charlatans, 
and sons. A door 
opens, the love of a generation passes, 
and it closes. The hour 
is late, Billy, let us seal the spirit 
of the night with one 
last round. Like whiskey measured 
to a fifth, I take 
self-measure from my full deficiency. 
Tonight I'll drink down 
what I lack. Tomorrow I will be wise.

Jay Meek             Syracuse, New York
When I see you
you are standing hour after hour
watching the winding of silk,
shifting your weight, swaying on bare boards,
on the straight line strung between black-
spoked windows, high under the eaves;
your hand in yellow light that seems moist —
yes! like drops condensing in a globe —
as you draw the ivory pick from your apron,
strum and strum the thread even;
hour after hour winding silk
not meant for you:
crimson lining for the lady's toque,
cream sheets for the marriage bed,
shirred bodice to show to advantage,
peach silk stockings, rich glaze for the skin
or another skin of silk to rub against flesh,
loops of thread drawn from a basket,
satin stitched roses on a Spanish shawl —
all the silken ease of having and having more;
even the stiff crackling black of mourning
drawn from your hands which wound and smoothed
in long hours when you could not stroke
or touch or lean your cheek against the rainbow sheen,
not once to drowse or dream or you would be pulled
by the sleeve or the hair into the winding mesh;
and we who began pushing against your ribs,
growing in the whir and grind,
who heard the striking of cord, the tuning of harps,
who breathed in the crimson lining of your womb,
reach for silk, pull at the rough knot of your dark hair
wanting!

Open the graves of the workers!
Pale silk winds from their skulls,
their shrouds starred with blue
in the damp graves of Delawanna.
Give us smooth thimble feel
and thimbleberries which stain the mouth,
cool peapod greenness:
silk to eat and silk to touch
with drowsing forgetfulness the plump
pillowed wrists of our children
reaching for jagged sparks
catching at fingertips
rush of static silver on the surfaces of light
side by side smooth flesh against flesh then
deep sleep

locust whir of flying bobbins
worked out of skin at last

Miriam Levine  Arlington, Massachusetts

SLEEPING RABBIT’S SPEECH TO THE HORSES

When I wake to walls and bars,
Wet heat the color of moss
Asleep on the eyes of water,
And I place my hand on the grain
Of stillness, for the sky
Is a wall, and the birds and stars
Move painted in their spheres like lightning.

I remember the sunflash of whiskey
On splintered wood, how we rode
Down the untracked whale of iron
Motion caved on his cinders
Spouting fire down the rails,
How the men who lived inside him
Ran white-faced wound by a sheet
Of arrowheads and cries; and your hooves,
My brothers, stirring a taste of blood
And dust as we beat open the houses
Mounted on his wheels, and coffee
And salt we carried away, the powder
Like warm snow, and we drank until the sun
Stuck to our breath and the bolt ends of cloth
Exploding in rainbows from your tails
As we rode away.

I rode with Tall Bull and Man-Who-Stands-Under-The-Trees. We rode south,
Crow-zagging our trail from the soldiers.
We rode all night, one mounted thing,
Dragging our colors like a dance
Thrown back to wind and moon.
At dawn, crossing a small, staring herd,
We killed one buffalo, and made the fire,
And ate charred hump passed
To the four directions, and our heads
Ached and were proud to ache,
And the buffalo were closer to us,
And the soldiers, the soldiers.

Michael Shorb  San Francisco, California

THE LAST DAYS OF TAMSEN DONNER

November 3, 1846 – April 15, 1847

(Tamzen Donner was a New England woman – a poet, teacher, mother – who went west and traveled with the famous Donner party from Springfield, Illinois to the Sierra mountains in 1846. These are her imaginary journal entries made during the last months in the California mountains.)

November 3, 1846, by Alder Creek in the California mountains.

Stopped.
We can go no further.
Here steep in the mountains
the flakes thicken down
heavier and heavier
the white veils swirl between us
and the pass

George with his injured hand
starts to fell the trees
to build a shelter
but the snow falls and falls
fat flakes
sent to wind us in a
thick sheet
we have no time to pitch a tent
we make a shed of brush
roughed over with pine boughs
rubber coats blankets and skins
the two little ones sit on a log
snug in a buffalo robe
cheerfully watching us work
thinking it fun to catch the snow
on their tongues

inside this strange
dwelling place
I must build a fire
and make another nest

November 25, 1846, by Alder Creek.

When I look at this strong man
lying injured on his bed of boughs
or watch him sleeping vulnerable

I remember him
as a motherless boy:
what makes the ordinary features

of an ordinary man
suddenly uncommon
or the usual events of a usual life

mythical and rare:
I think of him as a boy of eight
sent out into the fields to play

in clean new overalls:
and the skunk he met
braver than he    who baptised him

with its generous stink
and the farmer’s wife
who buried his shoes

and his spoiled brandnew overalls:
how ashamed he was
the frightened boy

now my tidy husband elegant
and courteous
even in his pain

lying here with his festering wound

December 26, 1846, by Alder Creek.

I have come up out of our black hole beneath the snow
(where the children sleep all day in damp clothing
and George lies without stirring)
to breathe the sharp white air
these mountains
comfort me
a blazing army
straddling the sky
with their long pyramidal pines
dark green black green
trees trees a profusion of trees at last
against the emerald lake

these shapes these colors cleanse my eyes
and I turn back to our damp cave
a little stronger to confront
the next meal and the next day and the next

January 7, 1847, by Alder Creek.

I thought of mother’s bread, as a child would, but did not find it on the table.

The field mice
that creep into the camp
we catch and use
to ease the pangs of hunger
pieces of hide
we cut in strips
singe scrape and boil
to glue:
hard-to-swallow
marrowless bones
boiled and scraped
we burn and eat
we chew the bark
and twigs of pine
to keep from crying
for meat and bread

February 19, 1847, by Alder Creek.

There is no choice.
We have survived these months in our dark hole
under twenty feet of snow
with nothing to fill us
but gristle and dried buffalo hide,
but now I must send the two oldest girls
with the kind men who have come
to lead them over the pass to Sutter’s Fort.

We are dying of hunger, of cold, of despair.
And I am not sure
with only a few skins left
how long we can keep from eating
the bodies of our dead.
George begs me to go with the children
but I can not will not leave him
to die alone.

*March 1, 1847, by Alder Creek.*

Must we devour ourselves
in order to survive?

    is this new continent
    a place where we can live

only by thrusting down
that fragile barrier

    the ancient loathing
    to eat each other’s flesh?

for my children I find it
not so hard:

    I must give them
    nourishment

from whatever source
they will not question where

    but for me
    I cannot see

how I could bear to live
by eating my friend’s death

*March 15, 1847, by Alder Creek.*

My three little ones left with the second rescue party two weeks ago.

My children move in my mind
like miniatures
painted on ivory:
one light and willowy
one rosy dark
and the littlest
a frisky animal
that refuses to be tamed:
she reaches through the frame
and pulls at my skin
a baby sloth
clutching its mother’s fur
I etch them in my brain
like diamond scratches on a windowpane:
arrest their images as though I were
a limner passing through, a peddler
of portraits

_April 10, 1847, by Alder Creek._

How can I store against coming loss?
what faculties of the heart
can I bring against this parting:

we traveled across the land
towards winter not towards spring

I watched the children become solemn and thin
our wagons and housewares
brittle
depleted

when I buried my boxes
my watercolors and oils my writing desk

I felt I had given all I could part with:
that was what the desert demanded of me:
then the canyons and boulders

ate at the wheels of our wagons
squeezed the life from our oxen

and we learned to part from our
livestock our friends
our comfort

how can I part with
my sustaining love
who was father

to the whole camp, orphans and families
who whistled us up at dawn

who nooned me in the shade
and fed me at sunset
the darks and lights of his eyes

playing over me like sun and clouds
on a highhearted summer afternoon:

how can I learn to sleep
without his shoulder
to bed down my griefs?
the sun stays hidden
for months the sky has wept its snow

April 12, 1847, Alder Creek.

Hunger. The lightness of it. I feel my legs will not hold me up any longer. I am gossamer as a feather. Sounds enter the senses sharply, colors are very bright, I am filled with light, a music that the saints sought and called God. I am not quite in touch with the ground, I am outside my own body. It would be easy to join the air and float into nothingness.

April 15, 1847, in the mountains.

Cobblestones of light have poured my path east to west:
the gull swoops in the low tide
leaving little crab claws washed out pink
where the Atlantic sun sucked out the quick

WHERE IS THE WEST

If my boundary stops here
I have daughters to draw new maps on the world they will draw the lines of my face
they will draw with my gestures my voice they will speak my words thinking they have invented them

they will invent them they will invent me I will be planted again and again I will wake in the eyes of their children’s children they will speak my words

my boundary stops here

Ruth Whitman Brookline, Massachusetts
RUFUS PORTER
(American painter and inventor, 1792-1884)

for Jean Lipman

My fathers made Boxford, Massachusetts. They drove out the trees, then straightened and smoothed the land like bedsheets. They were proud to call themselves the first settlers. Once when I was fifteen, imagining myself inside a coat and vest and static beard, I stepped out of that body and walked to Maine. There, looking upward past the roofs of Portland, I found that god-damned tower. Lord, what a sight! A flag calmly unwrapping the sea-breeze, the windows spiralling high above the town. When I travelled its stairway, the light leapt and leapt for me until I could see Casco Bay and clear to Paris. Here, I told myself, here is a place where I can live. And so I stayed in Portland, becoming a house and sign painter, sleigh-painter, drum-painter, drummer, fiddler, schoolteacher, gristmill-builder and a member of the Portland Light Infantry, in five years. Then something big happened. I was on my way down through New York State, pulling a cartload of pai·behind me and trying to figure how to free Napoleon from the island of St. Helena, when I envisioned a blimp. There it was, lifting off a hayfield and rising higher than the Portland Observatory in no time flat; then sort of pausing to turn and float the light. Good God, it was beautiful! Fitted out with a rudder, a steam-powered propeller and last but not least, a saloon which contained the small smiling faces of Napoleon and yours truly. I shouted for a full minute before I noticed the farmers in the road, leaning on their scythes. How could I tell them I had just begun to invent the future? I kept right on going through New Jersey, painting portraits and considering how to put the American farmer on wheels. For the next several years it gave me pleasure to imagine his solemn figure seated on a Rotary Plow, an Engine for Harrowing, Sowing and Rolling at the Same Time, and a Car for Removing Houses and Other Ponderous Bodies. My favorite invention, however, was not a farm machine or my walking cane that unfolded into a chair or even my three-wheeled steam-carriage
controlled by reins: it was the blimp. 
The fact is, I chased that god-damned balloon 
through five decades trying to find someone who could see 
the sense of it. Once, in 1849, I even wrote it up 
as “R. Porter & Co.’s . . . Aerial Transport for the Express 
Purpose of carrying passengers . . . to the Gold Region 
and back in Seven Days . . . for $50.” Of course, I lied 
about everything. There was no company, 
there was no blimp, there was, in short, 
only me, Rufus Porter, feeling so damned free 
in my mind I was on my way to California 
already. Thinking of me, imagine that flight 

upward beyond the immovable farms, 
beyond whole towns clinging to earth, beyond the earth. 
Imagine me standing up to shout among the clouds forever. 

Wesley McNair North Sutton, New Hampshire

SCRAPING THE FRONT PORCH

All day I have been waiting for him 
to slipper over, the old muskrat 
next door at the Home — 
to slipper over and stand around 
in the glassy fog they feed his eyes, 
and finally ask — as he has three days running — 
“What do you figure happened to Alice 
after Uncle Chuck never came home from the Navy?” 
Then honk his nose, twice, farmer style, 
and slipper back again, dragging his ankles . . .

And scraping away 
I have been thinking —

. . . Maybe the summer they laid on this green 
he was eleven — 
and chirped he could outhit Sisler, 
and chirped he could outfox Dempsey, 
and chirped about joining the Navy, 
and later did join the Navy 
when he was, what? — thirty-three — 
when the green had long been covered by gray, 
when the big elm out front had long been sawed down
and the swing dangling crooked
from the first fat bough
was also gone, though fixed in a sepia tint upstairs
among the dust,
among the album's grins and squints
and slicked-down hair . . .

But Uncle Chuck never came home from the Navy,
and his only words the neighbors ever seemed to remember
were, what? “Put up your dukes.” Or, “Paste him, Alice!”

Whatever happened to Alice
after Uncle Chuck never came home from the Navy?
I think she ended up always
a little bit chilly
in Kansas, in Garden City,
and there, in the formerly fancy mezzanine lobby
of the Windsor Hotel,
she caught a glimpse of a man in a sailor hat
and thought — as the fussy companion furiously knitting away
beside her
certainly did not —
that it was Admiral Halsey
and pitied the poor man's palsy.

That's what happened to Alice, finally —
senile in a gray old hotel, a run-down, formerly grand palace
in Garden City, Kansas, away beyond Topeka even,
the one moment to alternately perk up and sadden
her last days
a fuzzy notion that someone passing unsteadily through
the tiered, tiled, and dusty mezzanine lobby
in a sailor hat
(a stranger in fact,
a stranger who carried a bottle of Mohawk
Apricot Brandy in a paper sack,
and later, upstairs, would finish it off by five o'clock
in the afternoon
and then fall asleep in his sockless shoes,
his hat capping his face
to keep away the flies)
was the famous, gutsy Admiral Halsey
whom Uncle Chuck had once observed firing
a slice of chaw
over the side of the Hornet
and wrote home about it — “He's just like you and me, Sis!”

Yes, that's what happened to Alice, finally,
after Uncle Chuck never came home from the Navy —
and she married Henry Struble down the block
and brought him here, to this spot
I hunch over crablike,
and kissed him,
asking for help, for names,
to fix to the kicking beneath her apron.
"Here, Henry — feel. Feel me," she said.
And Henry Struble from down the block,
little Henry whom Uncle Chuck had once slugged in the chops
for beating him soundly at mumblety-peg,
felt her —
though it made him tingle in a funny way,
like all of his innards had fallen
asleep (like his leg sometimes did)
and were buzzing to wake up —
or Cleo if it's a girl . . ."

And it turned out to be Cleo, pretty Cleo
who hated her name and therefore, one messy
November afternoon in Adams Junior High
when all the kids were gawking up at the drizzle
because Mr. Hicks was slobbering on and on about some foreign dog
swirling around the earth every couple
hours or something,
she changed it;
changed it to Trixie.

And it was Trixie Struble who,
later, when the last gray layer was going on, flared up
in the mind of a boy working his way through college,
a boy named Hugh
whom Henry Struble would have sent packing
had he known that the boy could think of nothing
but long-legged Trixie upstairs
trying on pair after pair of shorts,
each pair as she tossed it away
fluttering down like a great boneless parrot
toward the floor,
beneath which Hugh, sweating like crazy over his brush,
imagined her,
imagined her pearly all the way up, not a pimple anywhere,
and could not stop —
as later boys named Bryon and Roy and Cloyce
would also be moved to pretend
and die,
or go into the hardware business,
or become momentarily graceful in sports
and then die, quickly, eating too much —
something big and marbled with fat on a flowered plate
on top of half a quart of whiskey —
or marry her, as Willie did,
Willie who loved his Harley as much as himself
and called it his hog and caressed it,
and who would go roaring away in a burst and a squeal
and serve his time in a little backwater patch
he figured wasn't worth it, or the powder to blow it up,
and come back with a blackish-purple ripple across his cheeks
where the lead lay making him itch and burn
when he stayed on his hog too long;
and who, one day, would go roaring away for good, away from Trixie,
with Boots his girl behind him, hugging his itch,
go roaring away toward Kansas,
toward The Sunflower State
where pretty soon in the yellow-white light of afternoon,
the yellow-white light slicing in from Holly, Colorado,
Alice would touch her companion's arm
and say, "I believe that man over there is Admiral Halsey,"
and feel pity for him; and later – after the crippled
colored gentleman who stuttered, who had ridden beside
"Black Jack" Pershing in hot pursuit of Pancho Villa
in April of 19 and 16 and suffered the wound
which turned his left foot around to nine o'clock,
after he said to the ladies
he'd be leaving the elevator now till morning —
she even considered walking up the single flight of musty stairs
to seek the Admiral out in his room,
to ask if Uncle Chuck had uttered any last words;
for she had come to believe that the world was sinking,
for surely she was sinking,
and if Uncle Chuck had had a glimpse, or a hint,
or something to pass along
she would certainly like to know,
because everything else was hard to see,
not just hard to hear
and understand.

Yes.

But he won't hear me —
He'll just stand around and watch
and finally scratch his turkey neck
and say what he has to say
and honk his nose, twice, farmer style,
and slipper back where he came from . . .

To rock away the afternoons,
eyeing a big spider with furry legs
waiting black and plump in the latticework,
to admire the Irish doily look of her labor,
to see a couple of flies get caught in the center
and watch their kicking fetch her
quickly, crabwise down
to spin her silky stuff around them,
wrapping them snug in immaculate pods, forever.

Gary Gildner          Des Moines, Iowa

RIDING WESTWARD

Riding Westward
as on a Thruway in an Ohio night,
sleekly contending with concrete and wind,
we are all driving across this long land.
The radio from Del Rio, Texas, finds us,
like the eye of God, an awesome comforter.
A ship on an anchor rode of enormous scope,
we are swung hard across a northern latitude
from that south fulcrum of music in darkness.
Sweet humming vehicle, the pistons play
a subtle canticle
of peace and speed
rushing us before an Indiana dawn.
Now as once our destiny is Westward.
Dumbly committed by geographic fate
to fling ourselves at mountain and prairie,
we create our nation's pilgrimage
to the Pacific a hundred years of ease late,
every Chevy impelled by a heritage
buried deep in the genes of terrain.
The wide plains west still call to us,
beckoning with vestigial promises of space.
The Mormons' ruts still mar the salt flats,
diminishing four generations
that stand between these two American times.
We speed past Indian mounds and Army forts,
tranquil in our expectation of machines,
our history become a schoolboy's task.
Yet we are all in our long day's Westward drive
redeemed by history. We climb
the mountain passes others found. We ford,
on cantilevered steel, their streams, and find
the Pacific waiting, certain of our coming.
We come because our history demands
we race and beat the rising sun,
moving always into our own long shadow,
the future cold, memory warm on our back.
Like iron ducks in a gallery, we dive
down the Western curve and rise again
to ride the gully-carving torrent
of history to the ending sea.

Whatever rhythms spin man between the poles,
here the patterns of distance and the pulse
to meet have hammered us out.
Wells Fargo stood where Howard Johnson now
salutes the Westward roamer or salesman,
V-8 engines have subdued the Rockies.
But what we must do has not changed,
nor can the patina of concrete change it.
Turning from the sweet sun of our ancient home,
we face our wilderness again and always,
and speed, like the sun itself, West.

Barry Targan   Schuylerville, New York

Pony Prayer Translation From Blind Lazarus to Christobal
At Circle of Enemy/Always/Warrior, 1874-1974; 1976

Who remembers?  This year of fasting and prayer:
Leaves racing to their doom
Taken aback in confusion
With a wild dervish spin;
Mad vocal foaming of angels in the wind,
Wisps of smoke — spontaneous combustion,

1874.
The world came to an end.
(A litany for my ponys shall i sing?
No poor man was i then!
Shall i sing in liturgy of my ponys?
Greystreak of Earth Fire, High Pockets of
Devil Music, Spotted Lodge of Victory,
Blind Sire of Three Fucking Mare . . .)

But the voice is wrong;
1874 — full of white man's time;
Voice too strong.
I am — the cracked and brittle ancient voice
Of a forgotten people.
They the word; the voice i am.
1874 — our time, no more.
Forced to count days as burnt out fires.
And this voice is wrong,
Full of shit and spit;
Vague murmurings of healthy denial.
It should be cracked and stretched and dried:
My pony guts, my pony hides.
Should be powdery, dry, crumbling beneath touch.
Blinding eyes in puffs of wind whipped pain:
My vulture clean pony bones ground in the last
Indignity, profitable conservation; fertilizer.

(. . . Lame Three Foot Handsome Saddle Breaker, Hard Jaw Belcher
Bluish Moon . . .)

1874, a fertile year — ha!
Drought and gun smoke blackened faces.
Ha-Hay-na!
Scream of joy.
Tossing livers high,
Sticky sweet blood drips down your arm.
How ignorant is our wealth!
Fresh water springs among the final Buffalo —
Hardwood bow and chinaberry trees:
Slit a man open to the benevolent sun,
Roll upon buffalo hump backed mother earth
Caught by human fragrance between our womans' legs,
Bend a horse to gentle hand (or beat him with
Rawhide feelings of loneliness,) absorbing him
Through the skin.
But our ignorance did not know enough to divide one
Year from the next.
Three-Fingered Mackenzie-ne Bear Man taught us.
Taught us in the mangled scream and twisted limb of
A generation's (1000) slaughtered pony.

(. . . Sand-Slit Eyes, River-No-Name, Buffalo Ball Teaser . . .)

This voice:
Children die, caught by an arrow in the throat,
Spinning from a pony flank to lie in broken
Loose limbed pose upon buffalo earth;
Is pain of life.

(. . . Coarse Mouse Dung Hopper, One Foot Always Dancing, Red Deer
Spotted Coyote Dream . . .)
This voice:
Children freeze — no blankets;
Children starve — no food;
Watch feet swell and crack run red and die
Without pony breath;
Is death.

1874, Three-Fingered Mackenzie-ne Bear Man
Shatter our silence,
Destroy our final Kwerhar-rahnuh (Kwaina/Quohaha)
Ignorance —
Vultures settle black night expectation upon the cliff face.
Whoreson-flesh-eating Tonkawa step
With deliberate (gingerly; clear-silent-visible-breath-morning-air,
Our ponys no warning scream.
Betrayed-no-doubt.
Though stretched upon a wagon wheel
Demands no traitor’s tongue
And some would say José Tafoy worked his medicine well,
Our end, our destruction —
Evidence of his bravery! Ha-Hay-na!)
Stride down eight hundred feet among
Ragged red earth covered white rock.
The breeze stops, pauses in pale deceptive light.
An eagle turning on morning search for mice
Loses a single feather,
Spiralling gently to earth as the world
Shudders, gasps a final breath and disappears.

Caught before our morning piss,
Ponys stampeded and gone . . .
(Eagles fucking in the wind.)
Black Backed Buffalo Haired Warriors follow the Whoreson-Tonkawa . . .
(People racing to their doom.)
Three-Fingered Mackenzie-ne Bear Man find
Only empty tents and dried meat,
The hollow obscene taunts of a hungry people . . .
(A devil dance red morning dervish spin.)

(... Jumping Fire Beneath the Feet, Two Coats Winter Lodge, Bloated
Water Boy/Girl . . .)

1875, and the rest is simple; we die.
In long days, Sky turned and rain disappeared,
Driving contention among Painted Arrow People;
Throwing Away Boy People.
In long nights, Wind turned and People disappeared.
Tall grass hump backed buffalo mother earth
We walked through; bitter cold, sleet
Frozen ground clutching bellies;
Driven grass before faceless, raging wind.
Walking belly low bare foot with rage and death.
For lack of pony breath
We died one by one:
   When earth, frozen, yields grubs no more,
   When prairie dog deep within, is found no more,
   When there were nuts no more.

( . . . Running-Forgets-Which-Foot-Comes-Next-Sometime . . . )

The Laughing Black Bird People disappeared in mid-stride.
We thought they had chosen the warrior way,
Become a spirit mountain.
The grass greened and there were no Buffalo,
No ponys, no food, no children;
But still Three-Fingered Mackenzie-ne Bear Man
And his dark buffalo haired men:
   The war of the knife was our way.

1875, Last/Eagle/War/Chief led us in supplication.
1875, beg cattle from the white man
   Controlling our hardwood bow and chinaberry trees.
We, too, disappear in mid stride.
We, too, no longer spoke to the wind.
   The Wind turned his back, no longer spoke, no longer we listened.

( . . . Mountain Pony No Good Fore Foot Grass Tripper . . . )

1875, beat wives.
1875, die of blindness:
   Ditches dug for irrigation
   Flow with dirt and dust.
   Water moistened earth sprouts flagpole;
   Costing a year's supply of food — 1000 lives.
1875, we live in dung heaps;
   Fenced not by broken promises,
      For we are liars burned to the soul
      And War of the Knife was always our way,
   But fear of winter's new cold;
   Cold marked by white (spit) man's sun,
   Sun of burnt fires;
   And Coyote's twitch lipped laughter;
Satisfying the expectation of missionary protectors.

1875, we have time
   Under a burnt sun and dead world,
To be amused upon the speech of a soft
Round bellied man who has never
Stroked the hair nor fondled the breasts
Of buffalo hump backed mother earth,
Telling us how to grow yellow corn —
In earth meant for Buffalo/pony/hunt.
(Reaching across some burnt suns
To grab the first soft voiced snake-balled
White (spit) man and twist his head off —
From the neck — Red blood as salve for the wounds
Of benevolent sun upon buffalo earth —
Instead we bartered yellow corn for pony,
Had to dark night belly crawl the pony!)

But our silent laughter is mockery, hypocrisy —
We have forgotten:
Dark night belly crawl,
Humid sandy shores
And water washing our dreams.

We have forgotten
And now count years,
Count years!
Forward and back —
Count by incidents:
The burned out fires of the hunt,
The tracks, the deaths, the rapes, the births;
We have forgotten the hunt.
But in this shit heap,
Lacking ponys and corn
The people must grow, instead;
So this voice is wrong!

(. . . Grass Green Ankle Blood Drinker, Vashesti-Kathalla,
Vashesti-Kathalla . . .)

If you and i but know
This voice is wrong;
To speak of our Life
(Or our death)
Always in relation to white (spit) man:
His time,
His gifts,
His perversions,
False is false is false.
The white (spit) man is
No more than a minor irritation,
A boil upon our ass;
A minister of death no doubt
But no more important than your arrow shaft in me,
Or mine in you —
But . . . but . . . but . . . but . . .
The death is real: A world dissolved in liquid illusion.
The white (spit) man illusion.
"Death Real is: Kwerhar-rahnuh disappear may.
  Sagetage-ne disappear may . . ."

(... Three Rib Dog Meat, Yellow Eye Tree Humper,
Grass Drifter Basket Foot, Greystreak of Earth Fire, Vashesti-Kathalla . . .
The sun will pour life on the earth forever . . .
  (I rode my pony till it died.)
The earth will send up new grass forever . . .
  (I thrust with my lance while i bled.)
The stars will walk in the sky forever . . .
  (Leave my pony's bones on my grave.)
Aheya aheya ya-heyo
Sun burn forever but
Nurnernah slide away
Aheya aheya ya-heyo
Ya eye heyo aheyo
Earth turn forever but
Nurnernah slide away . . . !)

"... But the People survive; perhaps.

Our song is the wind."

Bruce Edwards    Three Rivers, New Mexico

MANIFEST DESTINY

I am the daughter of Manifest Destiny
spawned by the Brooklyn Bridge.

My mother's mother came from Sicily.
She thought if she could raise a daughter in NYC she
would be free, the daughter of a widow in a new land.
My mother thought if she could raise a daughter
in Hollywood Cal she would never be
oppressed, she would never be
afraid to skate, she

could be anything.
She got my father to agree.
He is a great believer in natural selection.
And so they rushed
across the June desert.
My father quit his job at Charles Pfizer,
full of faith.
In the sun I was the chosen,
and I grew up with the elect:
gophers, and lizards.

I was plump.
In a skinny family
that is considered a good sign.
In my mother's veins ran
the American plan.
I was plump on hope.

In Hollywood, backstage of the American dream,
stars are daytime fare,
routine. When I
appeared
I wanted some wise men to fall in line,
attend the scene.

I chafed at ease.
Calvin's daughter,
itching in seventy-six degrees.
Still, no one was more surprised
when I lit out
than me.
When the territory has all been taken,
where can you go,
when you have to go West?
I had to go West.

I retraced the trail
of hope
not quite so far as leering uncles
but at least as far as Autumn.

My mother, alarmed
by this streak of atavism
appearing in the family,
worried if perhaps I take after
Aunt Mary (on my father's side).
She was fat
and married to a garbageman.

I wonder myself.
Pioneers never question
but I am a throwback. I howl
at every sunset. I worry.
And the mail brings rebukes.
I am accused of heresy.
As well a salmon question.
Does the mother swallow
wonder where she went wrong?
It's all heredity.
I inherited a need to overtake
cliffs, and to long —
I follow tradition helplessly:

I cannot be satisfied,
I will not stay put.

I am the heroine
sent out
for the Brooklyn Bridge.

I have to carry it
arched across my back.
And when I return,
the receipt sighed by the Mayor of NYC,
will you believe?

I am capable of anything.
I make lakes where my boots fall.

We will all sit on the banks
of a great dream
and fish. I will catch
pennies
and rain will mean we are
blessed.

I will breed daughters,
and daughters, and
we will always
go West.

Barbara Ann Clarke Mossberg  Bloomington, Indiana
THE LAST WHITE MAN

lived in narrow places provided by
competing museums that sing him to

sleep, the sleep a reflex, the sleep
but deep holes through the world. The

boiled eyes (as old women called them
for their blue was grey bloat on

boiled lamb's-eye iris) look down
as a reflex when we pass like hands to

stop the light, stop the scholars
from their soul dissection. Sometimes

he would lie for days on raised platforms
earning his keep by vomiting through the bars

his liquid poems; sometimes scream and
scare mice away. He was cared for by specialists

who believe he trusted them and stumbled through his language
on the legs of wild goats; one word at a time

they smeared round his mouth and one by one
he spat them into books, rows and rows of phonemes

and spots. He was draped in plastic
to conceal the thin layers of hair, straight and waves

all at once, and the body never naked but for
razor marks from students who analyzed his hair and

analyzed his skin and analyzed his reasons
for having been. A few of us knew him

as the poor paper man in his only stand. Societies we formed
for his protection and care. In pride we saw

that his captors were gentle.
The last white man

was fed wheaties.

(For Ishi, the last Yahi-Yana Indian in California, whose last years were spent
as a resident artifact at the University of California Museum of Anthropology;
presumably they were studying his anthro-ness.)

Wendy Rose Berkeley, California
South Dakota by Robert Freimark
Serigraph from the Fifty States Series
Heat wave: the summer begins with a splash,  
Pale backs redden, we flex our muscles  
And take the plunge; we're in it up to our necks.  
Tossing our manes, kicking up our heels,  
We laugh, shout, taste the freedom of cool water.  
Wearing jeans and long, loose hair,  
The big boys rush in like Minute Men;  
They swim to the raft, heave ho,  
And tilt the big girls into the water.  
The little boys, clutching their inner tubes,  
Watch and stagger on sharp stones,  
The little girls show what they can do,  
Immerse themselves, kick, keep afloat,  
The babies test their limits.  
Mommies must watch, daddies must play,  
No one must notice the stealth of old women,  
The knotted bodies of old men.  
In the distance sails glitter like flags,  
The shore water is leaf-green, bleeding  
To sky-blue, fading to granite  
Where the sun glances off like steel shot.  
Nobody wants to think today,  
Nobody has to remember anything,  
Shirts read: Love, Drink Beer, Discover America.

Jane Flanders      Washington, D. C.
Once the Spirit of the Buffalo,
Unaware of rifles or sudden fences,
Spread wide over the lands —
As wide as the sun reaches
Reached the buffalo.
Teachers in a New York City
Blockhouse, PS Zilch,
Tell me I am superstitious
"To actually in today's
Scientific world continue believing. . ."
In the Buffalo Spirit.
I scoff at these instructors
In dark corridors
Where they cannot grade my contempt.
Before their white faces I suggest,

"Would not the buffalo act more like a buffalo
Than a crow?
(Boof! Phallus!)
A prairie dog acts like a prairie dog.
The spirit of a species
Is figured by my science
In its unity with itself
As it remembers to be
A goldfish or a mutton sheep or a man."

I have an infinitive
Splitting English teacher
Who tells me,
"That's a cute* idea,
But it's not on the Regents' Exam, Pidro."
And I hear her "pee-drow"
The way a buffalo
Hears echoes of itself
On the walls of
Narrow canyons
As it listens for the coming
Of wide stretches
So its thundering herd
Can spread.

*cute is the equivalent of B+ I found out.

Edwin Brush Livermore, California
The backrest goes bang.
Windblown, martial,
she careens into English class.
Begins to hurl words like hand-grenades.
On the wall, the daytime map ("Mineral Resources of the World")
jiggles with each blast.

"Hey, maestra, is true, the gringos got New York
from the Indians for twenny silver bucks?
How come they got everything first,
the gringos?
The Indians very — how you say in Ingles —
tontos, no?"

"Down in the Valley, Valley So Low."
Stiff voices mouthing words on white cards.
María sings fierce.

"Hey, maestra, is true, cowboys can go anywhere?
My papa left 15 years ago.
Me, I came last year.
First, they put me in lettuce. $2.40 an hour.
Later, zinnias. Blue dust. You sneeze all day. So what!"

"Winston Tastes Good Like A Cigarette Should."
"Hey, they say rolling cigarettes
pays more than in the strawberries. Still,
too many coyotes. You know what is — coyotes?"

7 o’clock p.m. Main Street.
"Ladies and Gentlemen: For Your Viewing Pleasure,
Left to Right:
Larsen’s Market: ‘Tuesday Special, Pork ’N Beans 7/$ 1.00.’
Choice Lot. ‘Sacrifice — Built to Suit. After 5. 764-3675.’
José’s Cantina. ‘Ladies Invited. Happy Hour 4-6:30.’
The Trailer Cinema. Matinees, Sat. Sun., ‘El Espectro de la
Muerte’.
"
On the corner, the billboard, gap-toothed:
"May the ind Always Be At Your ack."

"Hey, maestra — there’s a factory I heard about
they make nylon wigs the color of
cholla cactus;
they got transistor radios, too,
neon lights, everything!"
Her eyes make great leaps in their whitened cages.
Who's walking with José?
Will Socorro be Homecoming Queen?
At 5 a.m. yo sing Las Mañanitas for Ester,
she'll rip her cotton shirt,
climb up the vines, squiggle over a windowsill.
At 7, her brother, cock-proud, steers her elbow
through the trousered gauntlet:
her ripe breasts blind everybody, blazon of the zinnias.

Do the fields end over here?
Will the roads keep going?
María — reluctant virgin — far from Guadalupe,
bunch of flowers under her mantle,
baseball cap crammed, back-to-front — yawns,
quits thinking about it.

The priests keep droning about devils.
Dios, what do they know!
Once, in the movies, a hand grabbed her thighs.
She punched hard, vayate! Now she's learning the
karate chop.
You yell, spring, your hand becomes a knife!
Here I come, ayyyyy!

Still, she moons, hoards soap,
showers a lot.
The ocean and city are scary.
Safer among highway signs.

No exit. Stop.
Do Not Enter. Soft Shoulders.
Slippery When Wet.
Jesus Saves (Crossed-Out) SUCKS.
Work crews winking with red flags.

Once she saw an Anglo lady snapping photos.
Her husband polished his glasses, put on a crown
of bulls' horns, arranged a smile.
In six months, the picture will read
"Merry Xmas, the Dawsons."

She'll get a camera, too — why not?
Sell popcorn Sat. nights.
Go walking with José. Maybe — —
get married one day — —
it's possible.

The schoolgate squeaks.
The stores shut down.
The gas stations become stage sets: Closed To Visitors.
The produce trucks rattle highways, 
leaking beets, radishes, cauliflower all over the roadbed. 
The billboards flap, clipped dodo-birds, 
chained to last year's Brilliantine.

Into the swelling wind goes Marfa. 
Grit glistening in her snake-coiled hair, 
spitting words, songs and terrors at the darkness. 
"Hey, maestra, you know what? 
I'm gonna go to Beauty College!"

Lotte Marcus Salinas, California

CLOSE TO THE EARTH

Outside the subway stations, 
heat collects & the city sways like a mirage.

I am unemployed. I know if I stay in bed 
while office workers rush through traffic,

daylight will pass into these condemned buildings, 
& I will wake up, out of place.

Many nights I look up at other buildings, 
wondering where ambition can take me.

Maybe I would spend hours measuring the fall. 
Maybe I would live quietly, close to heaven.

Across this city, on steel girders, 
my father drills rivets, 
looking out at waterfront property. 
With tradesmen, he talks of retirement, 

how the easy life comes late 
& a man moves back to his first dreams.

Some nights, when the heat clouds my mind, 
my father & I climb the scaffolding.
We tightrope walk the girders
&., at the edge, he reaches,

like a young man straining
for those twenty-story heights.

And I stand flat-footed, common as any worker,
watching greed rise from the ground.

Jody Swilky
Island Park, New York

THE FLAG FACTORY

YARDAGE HERE ISN'T FOOTBALL.
WHEN YOU CUT WHOLE CLOTH,
MEASURE FROM THE FRINGE.

The signs hang below our business license,
above our union chapel, for the benefit
of feeble-minded workers.
No lazy-fair here, no 19th-century sweatshop.
We just help the handicapped
and pay the minimum wage.
They're lucky to get it, when
they can't make journeyman —
ones without legs can't operate the treadle,
one without arms the spindle,
while ones without eyes can't tell red dye from blue.
All-American here. No wetbacks or
WithOut Passports —
it's flags we make, not jeans.

We lay out our pattern and measure from the fringe.
Our country 'tis of thee, sweet land of industry.
"The business of America is business," old Calvin said.
I'll buy a lot of that. "The buck stops here,
to quote Harry, right in my pocket.
Until it pays Cadillac riveters and baseball stars.
The money flows. What makes America great.
Take me, for instance. Started at the bottom,
kissed it soft and often, moved straight to the top.
That's a suntanned schnozzle now.
So we take our yardstick—
business booming. This Bicentennial’s just the ticket.
Vietnam killed it for a while,
but we’re back.

In another room a veteran hums
of the land of the freak, home of the depraved.
He snickers.
Stars what he got for three limbs,
lost to jungle and our foreign interests.
“Thirteen stripes for dead Indians,”
he whistles now, but no need to shiver.
He means the bottles, empty in his room.
He sews, not corn or wild oats,
but banners for West Point,
P.T.A., and Cub Scouts, dreaming of fucking
when he had a dick,
when he helped put a Dick
in a White House
that wasn’t his virgin bride.

She married a stockbroker, he hears,
after writing him: “Dear John . . .”
His own name Jack, he
forwarded the letter
to the place addressed.

Such bitterness! Can we not rejoice—
give us your weary, your poor,
your huddled masses, and we’ll make of them
our whores, our hustlers—

You, too, Jack, can become a Meyer Lansky,
a Bugsy Siegel. They started where you are
with dreams in their hearts, prayers on their lips.
Hands that traced Betsy Ross
designed Murder, Incorporated.

You know, Jack, you’d be shot for such thoughts
in most countries.
Here no one listens.

We buy off our rebels if they get too loud—
Eldridge Cleaver came back to claim his royalties.
Jerry Rubin sued for his.
The sons of lawyers meet over Marx—
the author, not the toy trains.
The sons of workers study law.
The sons of Marxists work.
- Back to work, Jack.
The Fourth's coming,
and who'll want a flag in '77?

No elections, no celebrations . . .
hope for a popular war,
lest you get laid off.

(Get laid? Off? Jack wonders,
hemming on the fringe.)

Merritt Clifton          San José, California

tokens and tolstoy

uncle graduated from juilliard
into a subway change booth
and while he played checkers with tokens
a strategy in his fingers
composed melodic lines

he watched his music
pile into slices of untried bread
but in the frail light of a token booth
as he read the sight out of his eyes
tolstoy kept his mind fluorescent

unlike america
nodding on a theme without variation
uncle lived in the sweatshop of cleavage
and mutation
never putting injunctions on his imagination
or allowing anyone to sit in on his intimacy
for no credit

he never put himself through poor mouth audits
posing as a mister pitiful
punchy from history and raggedy up the ass
with ancestral dues

such has been his life
yeasty in neither exaltation nor deprivation

substance is its own validation
the province of poverty is not with him
but in a country refusing induction into
its own wealth
by not venting the mystery singing in risky terrain

Wesley Brown  New York, New York

SCRIMSHAW: All-American Voices,

to the bone, to the bone

I. Personae

The poet said:
"We wear the mask . . ."

but
sometimes the mask
wears us. What/

who is your mirror??

Mine is a prism.
My mask is a mirror,
my veil a voice,
my voice an echo.

II. Calling Names: Margin Notes

Me?
I love South Sea, African and Indian
Semen's Bethel.

The world is a treble-crown-knot.
I love to sail forbidden seas,
and land on barbarous coasts.

My seed is as the dust
of the earth . . . if you can
number the dust of the earth
then
shall my seed also be numbered,
these are the sons of Ishmael,
and these are their names —
Who ain’t a slave?

Cockades: mulatto, mestizo, eurasian.

Bloodknots: Blackwall hitch, reef knot,
clove hitch, turk’s head,
granny knot.

Empire is macramé: Knot-in-and-out-knot,
jamming knot.

Call me Tashtego:
... a white horse, and he that sat
on him had a bow;
and a crown
and he went forth conquering and to conquer.

We saw the white horse and man as one being,
our religion giving the white man ideal
mastership over every dusky tribe . . .
Who ain’t a slave?

These tattoos are scrimshaw on
faith is my marrow

Who ain’t a slave?
My archipelago is now a pox.
My volcanic island a chancre,
the sea a missionary. It has
blue-green eyes. Night’s glaucous stare
gives it white skin.
I eat rotten fish and stale loaves.

Who ain’t a slave? Call me Queequeg.

Slave?
Always calling names.
Always calling me Ahab.
Projection is a bowsprit.
I am Paggoo. We Shall Overcome.

... to him that overcometh will
I give to eat of the hidden manna,
and will I give him a white stone,
and in the stone a new name
written
which no man knoweth
saving he that receiveth it . . . Nigger
Sequid vuestro jefe... 
Always calling me out of my name, 
calling me everything but a child of God.

Celestino: was a bowsprit

I love to sail forbidden seas 
and land on the cliffs of Dover.

The same snowy mantle round our phantoms: 
all ghosts rising in a milk-white fog. 
The supernaturalism of this hue. It shadows 
forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe... 
The thought of annihilation is not a color 
so much as visible absence 
of color and the concrete of all colors.

The Man Who Killed A Shadow. 
The wretched infidel gazes himself blind 
at the monumental white shroud that wraps all 
the prospect around him.

Celestino: Wonder ye then at the fiery hunt 

for the Wright whale who ain't a slave? 
When beholding the white depths of the milky way 
I am drawn toward the closing vortex... 
a creamy pool... forbidden seas. I love 
to sail forbidden seas and land on barbarous coasts.

At the nadir. Sequid vuestro jefe... 
Call me Ixion. Who ain't a slave 
at that vital centre?

Black bubble upward burst the blues.

No coffin saves me. Buoy: 
The black bubble blues 
The black bubble blues

Call me Babo 
Call me Babo

III. Nommo

The names of Jefferson's slaves—
osteoarthritis 
deep down in his bones...
truth as The Scrimshander's scrimshaw:

"... all men are created equal ..."

to the bone, to the bone.

Dusky Sallie? "Ain't nothin' but meat on the bone ..." To the bone.

The Father Of Our Country was impotent with his own.

Black wails. White sperm.

Jefferson: "I tremble for my country when I remember God is just!"

Common Names

IV. The sign reads:

Parting Ways Cemetery, Plymouth, Mass.

Here Lie The Graves of Four Negro Slaves —
Quamany — Prince — Plato — Cato —
These men fought in The Revolutionary War
and were freed at its close.
The cemetery is located in the original 94 acre lot
deeded to them by the government
when they were given their freedom.

Manumission: Death The Great Emancipator.

Remnants of an ancient dwelling's foundation,
half a field away, an archeological dig — strings, stakes,
excavate the old Colony Of New Guinea.

... camp ground.

A twinned trunked oak sucks, seeks downward.
Roots. The vines here are potted in
five skulls think
blackberries. To eat one is to chew on a dream,
to swallow the sweet thought of hope. The berries
are succulent ball shot, tears that flowed
upward from underground,
blood bearings from a subway train:

Quamany, Prince Goodwin, Plato Turner, Cato Howe.
Jefferson, Washington, Franklin:
The American Pantheon —
two slave holders and an inventive lecher
from places named after brotherly love and
virginity. The womb-shaped Sound Of Philadelphia
was cracked by hypocrisy: the tolled alloy
of our mettle.

Quamany, Prince, Plato, Cato.

So you fought. We be fighters.

Did you ever see Plymouth Rock? It boogys
now, from the beat of a death rattle —
"I tremble . . . when I remember God . . ."

Plymouth Rock, America’s specious touchstone.

The footstep turned to gold —
"... follow the yellow brick road."
Hikers hitched Pocahontas, Malintzin, Maimiti and
the girls of Guinea —
other men’s mothers, sisters, wives and daughters.
*Yankee Doodle went to town riding on a pony...*

Washington’s monument is not monolithic,
is really a corkscrew, the sheepherder’s spirocyte.
Franklin’s diplomacy.

Spirals. The vine winds
down day dreams,
rain drops. Filter through summer leaves bathe the berries.
Fall. Will come with trees
of fire. America will flame with Fall.
Fire — the alchemist’s purifier.

The Melting Pot is made
of the tolled alloy of American mettle
and myth is made with pestle and mortar.

That is why Yankee Doodle tries to yodel
the blues —
"Oh say can you see, by the dawn’s
early light . . ."

Jefferson’s jitters, a death rattle:
"... all men are created equal . . . Oh Sallie, hold me!
I tremble for my country when I remember God is just."

Quamany, Prince, Plato, Cato.
Soldiers of Fortune. Freedom, the inalienable right, was fought for — we be fighters.

So you fought. For what? To help make independent a system set to enslave your sons and their sisters for another century.

You meant well. Were trying to survive. Believed in, hoped for, the self-evident truths. Had good intentions line the yellow brick road.

You could not vote but you fought. We be fighters.

Two hundred years. Today Black people are picking berries for big business, in a bog, not far from here. Bushels of blackness. Quarts of tears.

Massachusetts did not even want to give you this sign, this cemetery, had to be fought for, beside a road that is now backed up with brick-yellow school buses. We be fighters.

The wind weaves my cigarette smoke, a ghost vine. The wind is a wreath of words: "... all men are created equal..."

The wind ... four rusty muskets ... five graves ...

This visit was only as long as two cigarettes. Both snuffed butts stained with dream is scrimshaw on your bones.

1976 and we be fighters. 1976 and we are still here. 1976 and we have a new dance called The Macaroni.

Oh dem golden slippers
V. Soul Food

_Son, _she said,

_on days_
_when the ice box_
_is empty._

_prayer_
_is knee bone_
_soup._

Everett Hoagland    New Bedford, Massachusetts

FINDING A HOME

I

July Fire Spiders

Unterrified of
magnesium, joy's cartwheelings
burned like comets.

_Splinters from Eden—_
_Storm-chiseled Boats_

New earth.
Thousands of new steps.

II

House Raising

Houses are raised so
nature's teeth can't bite us.
Re-circling snakes
move sin to the edge of grass.

Confidence stomps hard: nails down
each country corner.
Joy calls: earn America's
title: Land Owner.

Bears are part of nature's teeth.
Land breakers fight them.

To bears, men are chaff.

We have dreamed of bearing it.
Culture's growing things
are houses white like good teeth.

Mouths Fall Open at Open Spaces between Teeth

Folks move West on the two trails:
"Till something is ours, ever,"
and "Nothing is ours, ever."

III

Covered Wagon Crossing

Indian son, see the thin smoke
of those
who built fire pits they will leave behind.

Smoke means a circling — wagons.
Rewinding.

When you can see white clay,
their wagon train is rumbling the plains.
When you can see the green insects,
the train becomes ships — canvases flapping.

Who would know by what spirit
to stop it.

Bodies Hidden in Cloth

Even their shadows do not reflect
our slow-moving limbs.

The feathers' lights — in our basket — sleep.
The arrow that flies can stop
continual movement.
The fathers talk. They dance. Each bending his knees. They move their palms toward ancient bows.

**Moving Closer**

They descend the stone elbow; they want its arm to rise, push, widening their dreams.

Light is first hurled forth in Indian land. Sky folds. It begins running grey, red, orange. White.

... 

If morality could drum on its sky.

... 

What is this human thing that flinches.

**Finding the Way**

A widowhood tree — odor of ripe red flowers; a silken web blowing thin, like a faded vine. Found: the river route. Where gods walk off into wind, leave a pale sky.

**IV**

**The Stars and Stripes of Scope and Time**


13 stripes, first horizons, become stretchers in uneven balance. Hear drums, flutes. See the fine grass fires! A strong wind blows.
Man has a little geography
and a little time.

V

In n e r    C i t y

Merely an image curled up on top, with its hiding-place in its face.

But its Census Bureau reads like an underground paper:
Black youths have seventy or eighty percent unemployment rate. Should we notice?

Equal are they who are re-membered for rights.

The game, Hide and Seek, can be played on the streets for our Bicentennial.

VI

T h e   P a c i f i c   1 9 7 6

A stormy sky and flashes of gold in the West.
Fishermen drag their big fish by the gills. People feel the sea sphincters,
find shells with the rasp of wind.

Americans finger no single ocean. Many dream maps, drive
a wind wagon across endless skies.

VII

T h e   C o m m o n   S e a   G u l l ,   u n d e r   t h e   L i g h t   o f   t h e   S k y

Gull’s fury for lessened space is fear of storm, of strangers approaching.
Gull moves into slow time spun-off of flapping.

Quiet with trust, a collective of sea gulls seems to be a home.
Close your eyes. Think: a feather.
Floating down or
blowing on sand.
Think: a wing. Control began.
A wing flies its decisions.

The sea gull’s body
hinges to this wing
which must be broken to
stop. I place my foot
on the dead gull’s body and
pull off its wing, detach
translucent bones,
the wing powerful and still.
Mute touch of volume of strength,
probing feathers, expansion.

Elaine Dallman  Palo Alto, California

J U N G L E  P L U M S : a poem in five parts

I. ANOTHER RETROSPECT
(for Paul Lawrence Dunbar)

Isn’t it planted?
the bough i mean –
doesn’t it just always
stay there stretched
like the crucified
guilty of a sin it can’t
remember/and when the
bird lands here is it
caught or resting/how
do they say to each
other who am i/and
what are you?

II. (for Phyllis Wheatley ’76)

There is ice on the passage
There are people with claim
checks belonging to you/there is
not enough time in the hour
i've brought you a message
that will help you know my-
Self: i am a stealer of time
a space maker
a glide into abstraction
the coming thru dream

if you cannot talk i cannot
 teach you if you see the
birds fly north it is warning
not to follow them if you
are cold and unsatisfied by
sugar i have a fire that sweetens

i am the cliché that all
Life promises — the bargain
& the adequate scheme
the unrealized objective
rehearsed words of caution

if the gods would let me i
would leave this earth & take
my Soul with me/and because
i know the Slave's Life
i need never come again.

III. IN A ROOM WITH A STOOL
(for Angolan Warriors)

The beat is long
The bows do not need to
flourish there is no
one to clap while you
watch the dead eyes
seeking appreciation

they are coming to
the death-hole in
carloads/they are
not ashamed some
speed through light
to get here some
bring wine/some would
rather drink to a higher
blood

none of this is fiction
none of this is phraseology
of a Life that couldn't
possibly touch/all that
you see is lettered dust
transcribed by heroes who
lived with their hearts
turned on

but it is best not to
recount their battle
or attest to their loss
it only makes them hope
for their might to return
again

but even with transfusion
the function of their vision
does not allow them to be
useful men. in the
memory they will be beautiful
and great — but now in
the same room with them
you hardly know they are
there

i smell Russia!
i smell America!

IV. AND THE WIFE MAY SAY TO THE HUSBAND . . .

Let’s play house
Let’s sleep
Let’s whisper when we lay
down/let’s count the
creaks that settle thinly
near the vein

the old habit has always
been a mistake — we should
of taken up the weed-root
& made that path/should
have ventured we might
have gained

& now look at the children!
how will theirs be better than
a fake game gleaming with
illusion/how can you tell
the aqueous not to be water
or preach to the fire that it
shouldn’t burn
Fuel is short
We are less illuminated & less
perceptive but we are gathered
at the open stove/and if we play
house the men must chop the wood!

V. EVERYTHING IS NOT ALL RIGHT

They are in a grouphood of level
opinion they are protesting the
causes that force them to fast

prices must come down
poison must be taken out of the food
your best dress cannot be substituted
for flare guns/the neck ties should be
strong enough to float you off the
ledge

we the people is shouting i am
composed in a voice that must not
speak we are sinned against &
praying that Salvation will cause
us not to care

our circumstance is the vast legacy
of slavehood’s dominion/passion bound
to tending beasts/the spirit deferred
& chanting out the backwards words —
we are turned around & impossible
to see

we are ladened with drums & bangles
that bump/at last we know how to eat
with our fingers we fly without
getting sick we know the cost
of blood too thick to ooze

if someone writes us a letter
none of us can read it/the over-
size egos have shattered the group-
hood/the runners cut their feet/the
frightened lean against the wall
leveled to a single opinion. it is
agreed we have witnessed some defeat.

Fatisha New York, New York
the penny

there is a penny stuck in the tar at hall’s corner. the one
i didn’t pick up because i didn’t want to bend over. the weight
of the groceries in my knapsack too heavy. and the pickles.
and the gallon of milk stretching my arm out of the socket.
then all the way home thinking how great it was to live in
america where you could pass up a penny while remembering the
refugees carrying loads much larger than mine down these wind­
ing pine needled paths next to orange mushroom forests. and the
whole business made my heart thump. stick even. in one spot.
thought i’d keel over. a stroke. or god’s strike. the same
really! but the penny stayed for cars to roll over it. another
ten years before the highway department came along. then the
copper melting. the face of lincoln looking like sunny shit.
a small egg. and no one even seeing the date. 1946. or caring
that some kid dropped that penny in the road running to the
5&10 to buy a tootsie pop. and how she went home tired. and
crying. that penny rolling and rolling out into traffic where
she couldn’t set foot. and me. four. maybe fourteen years later
seeing the face of abraham staring up at me. but too loaded down
with groceries to stop. too grown up now to stoop. and thinking
my girl self wanted that penny for bubble gum. thinking jeezus!
i’ll go back there later tonight and get that thing. i’ll sleep
better. and not worry so much about the refugees. maybe this
country isn’t what i thought it was anyhow if people can leave
pennies laying around in the streets.

Terry Kennedy       Duxbury, Massachusetts

THE BELL

Always we praise whatever’s praisable
with imperfections
understood in the overtones.

When we say we’re free
we mean more or less —
always too much less, probably.

When we say our country’s great
we mean — as others have said about theirs —
such as it is, based on us.
Us — each of whom
by all he himself has chosen
stands not as tall as he’d like to stand.

In every vibration of glory
an undercurrent of shame;
beneath every simple truth, a complication.

Governing men have lied,
so have I, so have you, lied,
among many other things.

Our greed and fraud are broadcast.
Jefferson thinks it’ll all work out;
John Adams has doubts.

The iron tongue of that bell
will ring and bong and clang and sing
a complicated song.

Its physical tone shall sound pure,
like the communication of angels;
but we’ll know (won’t we?)

what’s going on, who’s pulling
together on the rope underneath:
a man, a woman: both,
among other things, Americans.

R. P. Dickey Tucson, Arizona

ENCORE

There are silences — so awful — nobody survives
the winter night past twelve, when
the skeleton of a windgust retorques a tenement
& all that once stood upright gets juiced
knowing it’s time again to depart, you know,
with the music & the Lower East Side of Manhattan
resists the cold with so many bodies, trembling
in the dialect of its downfall.
Here I am talking my goddamned head off.
Saying: once I was a man, screw it all.
Saying: there went the Sixties, wild hearts of my generation!
Saying: there went my tribe! there went the Revolution!

I speak of the jazz poets, not the leaders or the machos,
I mean those who didn’t write about it,
who talked all day & all night
at the riots & the rallies,
but who didn’t nail it down,
who ate death for a decade & went out with it,
their lives laid down on the line
between this silence & that wind of the Americas
drunks & junkies call The Hawk.

Allen Planz
East Hampton, New York

REPATRIATION

A Viet Nam war veteran attempted suicide today,
threatening to jump from a tower high on Golden
Gate Bridge. He relented when his girlfriend promised
not to go through with a planned abortion.

— UPI

The deep blue curve
of the bay hung
below my feet
waiting for me
to slip, to shoot down,
a pin point in the sea.

I’ve killed other men
across the sea, seen
that point of light
vanish from their eyes.
Babies dead in the ditch.
Testicles stuffed in the mouth

of our dead, heads on stakes.
My body pushed inside
the body of yellow women
but they threw it out,
sponged, douched, died.
A sperm head smaller
than a pin swims
in the dark bay, stays
warm in it. Gooks
want us dead, want
to throw us out to die,
to cut us off.

But I will live
in her, in the egg-point
that will grow like starfish
that swim in the sea
far below my feet
curving toward Asia.

Ken Lauter
Chesterfield, Missouri

ORDINANCE ON ENROLLMENT

The group in process of being formed
will be something you have always wanted
to be a part of but never, heretofore,
imagined possible. Its composition
will be strictly regulated:
only those who qualify will be admitted.
All others will be rejected.
Those of you who believe
you may have the necessary attributes
for entry into this group
may pick up an application in our office.
Answer the questions as honestly
as you can. Good marks also given
for imagination and resourcefulness.
This group, as it is shaping up,
promises to become a compelling force
in our society.
If you fail
to get into this group
another, larger group is also being formed
for rejects from the first one.
The second group will in no way
be inferior to the first. It too
has standards; they are high.
In order for your application
to permit entry into the second group
check the proper place.

In case the second group is filled
before your application can be processed,
or your qualifications fall short,
do not be despondent. Our plans include
the formation of a third group.
All applicants who have failed
to make it into the first or second groups
will automatically qualify for the third.
This is not to imply that standards
for this section are not high.
They are different.

We welcome you now
to the group for which you will ultimately
qualify. Whichever it is
we know you will have a creative
and enriching experience.

Naomi Lazard          New York, New York

PILGRIM PUMPKIN

25¢
Connecticut Field
(Cucurbita Pepo)

said the Northrop King display
in the University Bookstore that when I
was in school was the money-back co-op

Grow Pumpkins like the Pilgrims Did
Plant a Little History
in Your Own Back Yard

A pumpkin different, you think, from
all others, some purer
strain, direct descendant from the May­
flower, but no!
The pumpkin has been around longer than you think. At least 7,000 years. Archeologists have found pieces of pumpkin stem seeds and rind in the ancient ruins of the Cliff Dwellers and Basket Weavers in the southwestern United States.

That other pumpkin we picked from the middle of our own lot the morning our house moved in.

That pumpkin had a history too: seed a single survivor of tilling, vacant lot weeds once the garden of Robert Keefe who built for his mother-in-law the house next door whose plans were drawn for his own who planted the apple tree I built my daughter’s sandbox under over the spot where later I learned the old lady’s heart stopped

whose widow who sold us this lot now lives next door alone

That pumpkin whose seeds we saved for next year’s garden coming from not just one but thousands of previous pumpkins

Which certainly qualifies the pumpkin as a true native American

Chromosomes linked like arrows: arm in arm in arm: truths innocent of good as of harm of words of pride of a nation a father, a mother

My daughter, Hallowe’en Sunday child chanting

“My great great
great great grand-
mother was
an Indian
woo-woo-woo-woo-woo”
The child I was in grade school boasting “I

am one-hundred per-cent
German”

because everyone else was already
melted in the pot
my name was Ingrid which made me
special, my father
Chilean (but German)
my mother from Michigan (German)

The child not knowing Germany had
just lost another war, not knowing
what war was
that her parents refused
to teach her German for fear of what people would think

Her father refusing to fight, his heart
tolling in her like a bell, a copihue
blood-red Chilean
national flower growing high
on its vine, the song
she — barely a woman — learned, tracing
backwards steps he took away forever, the song
she learned to play
on his brother’s borrowed guitar

“aqui mismo te dejo
hecho un copihue mi corazón”

The child the woman
she was trying
to keep alive in Villa Alemana, calling
through every market for
a pumpkin
“calabaza, calabaza”

the word the dictionary said
“calabaza”

not gourd
“calabaza”

not squash
Pumpkin, there!

“¡Ay!
iCidracyote!”

83
Pumpkin
meat solid
to the core

I
the child the woman
my small college sent to bear goodwill
and understanding, bearing the need
to explain away Goldwater, Johnson, Viet
Nam beginning, to mourn a Kennedy I barely knew

Mississippi Summer
How any grown nation could hate
so much

Explaining instead a pumpkin hollowed out
for Hallowe’en, a Jack-O-Lantern
that after so much effort must
be good for something

Myth I invent
because a myth is needed

Procession of cousins behind a grinning pumpkin face
we carry like the Child of God, Mexican children’s
 candles winding through dark streets
The Legend of Sleepy Hollow

"lo mismo cómo hacemos
 en los Estados Unidos"

I
being borne next morning to graves
of grandmother, grandfather, everyone
in town with flowers/buying, flowers/selling, All
Saints’ Day mass pilgrimage in which my own
grows silent as a seed

Nothing
is that simple any more.

Consider this:  Pumpkin vines may be
trained to climb a trellis or fence. This takes
less space and can
give an exceedingly
handsome effect. The
fruit will hang safely.
That pumpkin we saved from the new
foundation of our house

Pumpkin whose seeds saved for next year’s garden grew
their vines between a dozen other vines, a summer-
fall-winter-squash harvest
grew

Other seeds
whose genes like the souls of pollen
bees run
together like paint:

next year’s indefinite orange and green:

Turban/pumpkin
Danish/pumpkin, Yellow Crookneck/
pumpkin, Butternut, Zucchini, Patty-
pan/pumpkin

The soul of my own politics simple
as it always has been:

"My Country, 'Tis of Thee"

"Chile, Chile lindo
Cómo te querré"

Ingrid Wendt       Eugene, Oregon

the dream realized

*

when this moment gone
you will share its sight
with me hear its
meaning in words no
longer mine on loan
and you will
see it through my eyes
if the world survive
and know my name in exile
exile as your own.

for roy who prepared in his own way

*

the waters don't sing in that land
they run sly and silent deep in the ground

the summerhouse rainey the mother of the blues

for joe

They think our speech is
music that the blues
a dead tongue they just
now mastered but don't
really need to know.
But Ma not music;
she memory — for
him. The face in his
eyes not my own but
some remembered black's
and yeah. We hear us
in Ma's voice but he
hear his own life too.

*

north county

for inez rosaura and ed

*

The freeway is a river
of light rounding the base of
Mt. Soledad, its distant
drone a part of the night. I've
watched in the darkness as the
river dimmed to the fitful
passing of solitary
cars and heard the coyotes
in the canyon crying their
survival to the strange land.
I booted up one day, walked out across the mesa that fronts along my place till the land was a shallow cup around me and the houses were lost in the distance on its rim. The plants were the only life I saw — muted greens dry browns bursts of loud purple and lighter blues, brilliant in the spring light; something rustled the undergrowth; a jet murmured in the softly clabbered sky.

The Indian dead are here buried beneath Spanish place names and the cities of the pioneers and the droning silence is witness to what each has claimed, what each owned. My father's grave is here some where his tale lost like that jet in clabber his children scattered along the river voices singing to the night.

* 

the dream realized

* 

and pink with pleasure
smile self into self
one and now say my
name say my name and
smile friend and in that
name be home. home. words
from other lives held
now in smiles and dark
with pleasure i smile
your self in my self
one and more sealed in
friend sealed in home signed
in joy darkened skin

for bob elliott
1/16/76

Shirley Williams     San Diego, California
CROSSING THE DELAWARE

Seen from the bridges that measure the span of the water, that measure the depth of the gray air south toward Trenton, the Delaware never fails to obey; it’s always tame. If it moves at all, it hovers like finely crumpled aluminum foil in the sun. But approach it on its level, and you discover that the way to a river is swamp, wet brambles, uprooted trees, a madhouse you’d never have guessed suspended so high and far in time; it looked simple from the air.

The edge of the Delaware still gets me uneasy. Its breath is rank. It’s sheer: one step, then moving wilderness, the absolute river’s cold dominion, a treacherous sweep that doesn’t make a sound. But out in the Delaware’s main drag where I’ve steered canoes, it’s not so quiet, the water makes a fierce rustle, the water is rugged, its shapes had better claim most of your attention. You’re always bewildered out there, you fend at the shiny muscles and break off bits of fire that leap at your eyes, the weather is always changing too fast, it’s always bad news, it’s always cold, it was never easy to cross the Delaware.

It will never be easy. But every day as we shove off one bank and into the morning, kiss the children and load the truck, we set out the same same dreamy expression that Washington wore. Craning our necks just like General Washington crossing the Delaware we stand up in the boat when we shouldn’t, and nothing happens as we search the rising shore for the field where the birds know us, where the notches we cut in the bank will give us a boost, where we remember the smell, where all that we’ve claimed is ready like old gloves we’d almost forgotten.

Jonathan Holden    Columbia, Missouri

88
THE BLIND TILLER LOOKS BACK

The blind tiller, whipping nuts and bolts, plowed
Through a darken womb, damp and fertile,
Where last he saw asses that brayed with a chug of smoke.
He did not burrow — being no man’s mole — he raked his way
Out flesh confines to stone fences.
In the end, therefore, he was stopped as dead as any denizen
Of Worm’s cornmeal dreams.
With rake, now claws, he raked up roots of mountains.
Making some himself; let no man-mole
Miss the landscape of a Garden:
Wolfsbane and cat’s bowels peeking beneath rose petals.

The tiller added field to field, piling still more
Stone fences, for he could see at commencement
Dawn’s arrangement.
But as sight dimmed, old boundaries set by eons
Were rolled closer not farther;
Gentlemen proud in riding crops and steeds
Refused to bound in pursuit of foxes across such terrain.
And as he added to furrowed fields new grass, new graze,
New maize for hungry hogs and cornmeal dreams of worms,
The ground reverbed no more with pounding hooves
Of two-year-olds.

The blind tiller tills still,
Adding field to field.
Though by the sun’s setting,
New fields done,
He cannot see
Through dusk and sweat
And smoke of silos belching black
toward that which he would not have
thought to look for, what is not
there now:
the dawn
And none will describe it.

Joseph M. Bush    Ann Arbor, Michigan
LEAVING THE OLD DOMINION

(Staunton, Virginia. 1975)

On the bus at last
we settle down, floating
sideways from the curb,
swimming above the sidewalks
on the dark. At the corner
I strain to see the signs.
A colonial's empty house
leans in the current
like a galleon.

At the foot of the hill
streetlamps swirl
at the window, very
near your face. Softly
we drop through the concrete,
drifting into the granite
veins far beneath the town.

Above his clocks
the face of the driver
takes on a moony glow.
For several blocks
no one has gotten on or off.

Some time before reaching
the continental shelf
we slip silently under
a churchyard. Skulls
bob in our wake. There are
no waves here, no star.

Below the last cornfield
the roots of every shock
stream after us. The feeling
is very strong now that we
will break through to some
more united state. The ocean
can not be far away.

Jay Dean Divine      St. Louis, Missouri
He took me down into the pit with him
Once, my old man, who started at nine by
Picking usable pieces out of the slag heaps.
Only slowly, over time, was it borne in on me
That miners are soldiers of sorts
Compelled to wring their bread from danger.
I remember the ominous daytime knocks on the door
And the foreman standing there in the
Doomsday light, saying, "Your father got
Hurt. You better come."

He always got
Well again. He had a hard head and a
Hard hat with a carbide
Lamp that would provide
A bright flame.

I used to picture him
Down in the pit with his personal beam
Fixed far ahead, and always ran to meet him
Coming at night with his dinner bucket
Up the path, his eyes amazing in a
Mask of coal dust, his denim diamondy.
I bent to scrub the grimy back he slumped
Arms forward in the iron tub.

But nothing we did, no word, would spare
Him dropping out of the light and air
Again tomorrow, or me, with life to earn,
Me taking in the daytime dark my turn.

So, letting on my duty was my fate,
I schemed till I grew up. It took a long
Time, a long time, till the right freight
Rumbled by, and I hopped it and,
Just as the darkness yawned for me
To spell the old man down in it,
I got the hell out of there.

He took it very well, my breaking, very
Well. He wrote he hoped I would.

Ernest Kroll                 Washington, D. C.
A man is running across Wyoming.  
Away out on the high plains, nothing around him but the wind and sky,  
a man runs along the paved shoulder  
of the great Interstate crossing Wyoming from west to east.  
Cars pass him, the faces of children  
stare out of rear windows.  
And trucks pull by, the drivers high above the road  
watch him run a long way ahead  
as they approach and go on.

Garrison is running across Wyoming.  
He has always run.  He ran in military school  
and in the Army's summer camps.  
"They wanted us to get up at 5:30 a.m.  
So at 5 I'd be up doing laps. They couldn't believe it."  
He went to college on a scholarship for track.  
"I was good, but I wasn't that good.  
I never could get into competition. I'd place,  
but I think I only won in a meet once or twice.  
I just liked to run. We'd have a good time,  
me and a few others. I remember one relay  
where the first guy on our team was great,  
the second guy was good,  
than they gave the baton to me.  
I ran full out, but I lost most of the lead we had.  
So when I passed to my friend  
he could see we weren't going to win:  
he was even slower on that distance than I was.  
So he ran one lap  
then ran out of the stadium  
into the dressing room  
and was sitting outside having showered and changed  
when the coach caught up to him.  
The coach didn't know what to do.  
He'd never seen anybody run right out of a race."

Now Garrison strides down a long slope in the afternoon sun,  
his T-shirt plastered to his back, above the pavement,  
face contorted with the strain.

"At college," he says,  
"I used to run down from the jock dorm  
about a mile to a little amusement park  
where they had this miniature train.  
There was a cinder track that paralleled the train tracks  
so I'd run on that. Pretty soon  
a train would come up behind
and I'd put on a burst of speed
to see if I could beat it.
The guy at the controls of the little engine
would open the throttle
nuh nuh nuh-nuh nuhnuhnuh and I'd tear along
trying to do better. People on board
would shout and wave
but I had to leap a couple of ditches
and anyway by the time I ever got to the park
I'd already run a ways so I wasn't exactly fresh.

"One day, though, I got into strip
and drove my car down to the place.
I got out and hid in the bushes
on the further side of the worst ditch.
When the train came around the corner
I leaped out and yelled in the driver's ear
Let's go and took off up the track.
He opened her up nuh nuh nuh-nuh nuhnuhnuh
and took off after me, the people
screaming and cheering as he drew closer.
They thought they were helping win the race
but actually they were just sitting there yelling
and he would have done better if they weren't aboard.
Anyway, that time we were neck and neck
when we got around to the ditch again."

His feet, in Wyoming,
pull the asphalt behind him, stroke after stroke,
breath hauled in and pushed out with his long legs;
eyes blue under the blue sky.

He went to graduate school
in ROTC, studying education. He listened
to what people said about the War
and asked the Army about it
so they let him go. He asked his professors
about their work, too,
taking his hound Ralph into classes
and offices, using the dog as a point of reference
in discussing teaching techniques.
He was living then at the edge of town
in a tiny cabin, and running
miles along country roads
and laps around a tree-lined oval
in front of the university Administration Building.

Until he quit, got a job working demolition,
then in the southern part of the state
went logging. "The only thing political down there,"
he says, "was the Birch Society meetings. 
So I'd go along. Mostly it was a good place 
to talk about hunting and trade guns and all that. 
I'd refuse to take the oath of allegiance 
to start the meeting. Freak 'em out. 
Told them I was a Commie. Then we'd talk about dogs 
and rifles. I kept winning most of the turkey 
shoots they had down there, with my old single-shot. 
They didn't know what to make of it. I figured 
one crazy Commie at a Birch meeting 
is better than a dozen films sent out from California.

"I remember one time I was over 
talking guns with Billy Hankin. 
I saw he had a couple of bumper stickers 
on the back of his pick-up: 
**Support Your Right To Bear Arms** and 
**Support Your Local Police.** 'Billy,' I said to him, 
'you know if they pass a law outlawing guns 
it isn't the Communists 
who are going to come by to pick up your rifles. 
It'll be Sheriff MacLeod.' Next time I saw the truck 
the bumper sticker about the police was torn off."

He had enough education credits 
to teach remedial subjects in the winters 
and he logged, summers. He married 
and got his teaching certificate finally, 
had a daughter and hurt his back in the woods 
so it had to be operated on. 
Then his wife left him, and he came apart, 
driving west to San Francisco non-stop 
in his old jeep, and north into Canada 
to a rural teaching job some friends got him. 
There, too, he ran 
and sat in the bar mourning his marriage 
while the jukebox sang *you can't hide yer cheatin' eyes* and he quit in January 
and moved further north 
to work as a counsellor on a ranch for delinquent boys. 
"The kids could go to jail or to the ranch," he says. 
"They were some mean little monsters. 
A couple of them had been found guilty 
of setting cars on fire. Shortly after they got to the ranch 
they took off. We got the RCMP after them 
and they were picked up in Hazelton. 
The Mountie puts them into the back of his car 
but one of them got the door open somehow 
and zips away up the street. So the cop, 
who isn't too bright, leaves one kid in the car
while he runs after the other.
By the time he gets back with the first kid,
sure enough, the other one had the cop car nicely ablaze.

"These kids are real puzzle-factory inmates,
penguins, that's what I call them. One night
a bunch of them got into a fight in the meal hall,
squirting ketchup at each other
and throwing bread around and everything.
I was supposed to be on duty, so I went in there
and didn't pay any attention to them
but began kicking over tables, smashing plates and cups,
tipping over chairs. Just went insane.
I looked up after a minute
and saw all the kids huddled into a corner
watching me. 'Now clean this up
and your mess too,' I said
and walked out, and they went to work
and got everything tidy. I just showed them
what it's like when an adult goes nutty.
No good yelling at them or threatening them.
They've had plenty of that.
If a penguin comes at me to hit me
sometimes I'll just wrap my arms around him
so he can't move his
and pick him up and dance with him. He gets really angry,
but then he calms down and nobody gets hurt."

Now Garrison is travelling back to Colorado
for a long-delayed compensation hearing about his back.
"I never can do what I want to, Tom," he says
as we drive. "I got out of teaching because
I like to work with my hands.
I have to stay in shape, I have to:
any job I've been on I want to work full out.
But most jobs, you're letting everybody else down
if you work too hard. I like the outdoor stuff at the ranch
but the place is crazy, it's really a jail,
the kids don't want to be there. And there's no women.
I go into town and meet somebody
and fall in love and make a fool of myself.
I don't want to do that. I want to be better to women.
But I don't know how."

His fingers reach up to twist
the thin blond hair above his forehead.
"Tom, who needs us? I mean
I think maybe this is the first time
people like us have been really useless.
What can we work at, give it everything,
that isn't hurting somebody else
or adding to the sick way things are going?
What are we good for? Sometimes I honestly wish
I'd gone and fought in the War."

At a rest-stop, he says he wants to stretch,
cramped from riding in the small car.
He changes into strip and starts east down the freeway
while I finish some lunch, check the oil
and drive out after him.
A speck in the distance, Garrison runs
at the edge of the highway
breathing the exhausts in the hot day:
running across Wyoming, running towards Rawlins,
running towards Jerusalem.

Tom Wayman           Windsor, Ontario, Canada
Earth Mother Giving Birth to Faith, Hope, and Charity
Etching by Sandra MacDiarmid
CELEBRATIONS

BLUEGRASS & COUNTRY MADRIGALS

I. 
Ours,
the hard-
scrabble land.
Out of the bones of mules

sometimes the green corn
grew, too late. Over-wet, or stony, or dry,
always there were fields
we could not negotiate —

until the mills opened up
new vistas, and we swarmed;
tuning the night's radio
for our lost

and irregular theme.

II. 
Listen!
Whenever a straw-and-wind fiddle
bends, bow to breast
in the deep fields of night,

a music begins —
a system of vibrating strings
that shakes the ruined valleys and hills
asleep under concrete or slag;

shakes awake
a diminishing vision
we only gather, like dew or kindling,
out of the windows of Greyhounds

or houses we left, as we pass.
III. Pressed by this wind, the guitar
(the poet’s guitar
of rain)
descends in coded note-drops
through awnings and roofs of a city
until we also wake, children
bewitched under sheets of tin
to hear such music fall
freely, piercing the walls of our high-rise
down to that remnant of land.
we hold buried, somewhere
beneath the sub-floor
under our realized dreams.

IV. And drowning this echo, the rain,
a broken voice
takes hold.
Our roused heart, like a maverick banjo,
sloughs up the mined-out steepsides
braying (as if we still climbed
a wilderness)
until, near the top, we look down
at our future, almost behind us
and relayed
in this system of strings — mere viscera
stretched and strummed
tight as our squandered soul,
on its frame.

V. Curtains
of rags
at the windows; rags
on the table
and doors; rags
into cracks
for the chinking; and rags
into rugs
for the floors;
hot mustard-pack rags
for the dying
of croup or flu or cold —
and yet, in the evenings, we sang:
the clear chorus of those open spaces
imbuing us, making us love them
no matter how far we remain.

VI. Surrounded by fresh, laundered linen
in our new rooms that are vaulted
like heaven, sometimes we wait
the thesis of displaced seed

or tuber: and in the darkness we hear
a gentle sound, yet intricate as math
far-fetched, fetched far and homeward
for us (who have paid our dues in the fields

gathering cotton, or wheat, or dust;
and no one ever to tell us
which are the roots that grow
or may blossom again) —

Listen!

Bennie Lee Sinclair  Cleveland, South Carolina

LOVE SONGS TO A SIXTY-ONE YEAR OLD

1. Light touched the lake
where you knelt once
delicate, in the brush
with your first lover
(she kissed you on the mouth)
the sound of water in the bushes,
the dark scent of the lavendar trees,
your heart rolled open there,
you and she against each other
on your knees.

2. The stem of a red rose lay in the Spanish garden
when I dreamt you and I were lovers.
Stalks of corn spoke from the foliage
when I envisioned your profile in the shadows.
You were waiting,
and I dreamt your bed was violet in the moonlight.

There were other dreams before this:
rain steaming the windowpane . . .
a blur of lilac in the mist . . .
and you, your lovely forehead shaded,
stood where the bushes grew dark and green.

The dove that coos in the still night
told me the secret of your heart.

3. In the night
a sound taps the window
like rain
gently penetrating the darkness,
like a breeze
slipping in past the curtain,
like seeds
on their silent flight.
It is the young animal inside me
hunting for you
carrying (in my hands) leaves as they fall
trailing the worn frame of your dream behind me.

The breeze cleans sand from the bench
where you sit at dusk watching the sea,
your soft gray hair blown back by the wind
your dark profile turned towards the waves.

There is pale rose light across your forehead.
You are a monument glistening in the damp shadows.
Your teeth shine as nightfall covers the horizon.

4. And birds sang in the darkness
as you lay in my arms
on sheets pale yellow in the moonlight.

Your hands reached for mine
as white wings shook your knees
and your breath warmed the pillowcase
where I rested my face, after.

You said, "It's never been that easy."
You who are the depth miners dig for,
the damp gold circle beneath the surface,
the dark where stars come out and shine.
You were perfect curled beside me
like the warm ribbon of mist
broken by waves.
You brought on the surging forth
the water rising to a curl
and the softness after
of the tide riding smoothly to shore.

Your hands stayed
your wet wrists against mine.
Birds in the dark were silent
as you lay in my arms.

5. dear dark Joan
you knew that night meant
I would lie in your arms
and sleep against you
dreaming of bats whose white wings
would flutter, holy and terrible,
until I woke with you
stroking my damp forehead.

dark lovely Joan
you touched my fingers
you lapped the tender miles inside
you rode like a frivolous princess
you cast your scarf into the wind
you lay beside me after, your 61 years
spread over us like a sheet.

deeep sweet Joan
when the phone rang
you leaned across me,
when the water boiled
you sprang from the bed,
when you slept
you were tight inside your knot.
And I was the prince
who came to free you
who came to cut you loose,
your gray hair across the pillow
your heart beat like a drum
against my chest.

Marla Burns
San Rafael, California
MARILYN MONROE AMONG THE MISFITS

I am not prepared
to live in the mountains,
nor as a star,

but I have ridden
through their desert passes
in the patterns of half-light

after her wild flesh,
my view jolting
with every arch of her back.

Up there I love her
and cannot imagine her here
stalled with me in the dark.

The distant mauves
of the Sierras swell
and fold mirage-like

from the flats of Nevada,
but however vulnerable,
they are never really ours;

so I play to lose myself,
and she longs to become
as subtle as a shadow.

I dream of striding
across the screen
squinting from under a stetson,

but as the sun shimmers
off her flanks,
I remain saddled,

awed each time I go after her
that in every feature
she is as young as ever.

Yet I cannot forget her death
and then my own dying,
and I begin to ride above myself

again, into the mustang dawn
into the happy ending
that seems a misfortune.

Gar Bethel Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
BETWEEN MOTHER AND ME

"Between Sylvia and me there existed as between my own mother and me— a sort of psychic osmosis which at times was very wonderful and comforting; at other times an unwelcome invasion of privacy."

— Aurelia Schober Plath

I have lost a lot of it but
in my dream my cat is covered with barnacles.
I keep picking them off and underneath
is almost worse than the sight of him clawing
the growths. I go in and out
of trying to tear them off.
The dream has something to do with you.
You are in your big, black, soft coat.
You are smiling through your red lips.
Your eyes are bright behind your glasses.
You fold me in your rich folds. I huddle
against you. Your fingers are damp curling the hairs
along my neck. I think this
as I watch you from across the room. We have hardly spoken
this evening, we have danced around each other.
But you have been smiling at me through your lips.
The thought of being naked and floating inside you
is like the cat dream and the barnacles and the rawness
underneath.

It was a few months ago I told you I loved you.
It was the first time I can remember anyone in our house
saying I love you. I told you again and every time
I saw you. One day, you hugged me more than holding me
away, you said, I love you too.

There is something I am feeling for you that does
not have to do with loving you. I have only a glimmer
but what it is makes me afraid.
I am afraid you will huddle against me,
that you will be soft against me,
and I will rise up, all this anger
will rise up, and my words will come:

You should never use certain words
I told my high school friends, later, my husband,
there are some words which eat so deeply
they should never be spoken,
what are some, a friend said, my husband just nodded, he believed
in pockets and casings,
and that much should never be said. I said
I cannot say them
but they are words I have heard in the back
of my head, in rooms dimly in the dark, as I woke
from sleep, words and parts of words —

I have heard such words.

When I was twelve, we took the stroller and my baby brother
and walked, our breath steaming the cold past the oaks
that were finally turning colors. There was a pair
of dead birds in the gutter, bee-beed, my mother said, by
boys. We walked past the school and the fields and
the apartment buildings; the baby lay to one side
in the stroller, sleeping. We went down the path
with eucalyptus trees on either side, the wind tearing.
We were going to get a dress, mother said, a pretty
dress for me. We looked and looked in the stores. I
don’t remember who first saw the lavender dress we kept
going back to, it didn’t fit, my breasts were barely
buds, spaghetti straps and a satin skirt
that cost too much, let’s buy it, mother said, opening a
secret compartment in her wallet, pulling out what she
called her mad money. Don’t tell your father. I was
shaking, oh, mother, let’s buy another. No arguing,
she said, this will be perfect. Before we returned
home, we stopped at the liquor store, she bought four
bottles of Fleishman’s, packed them in the stroller,
and we drove home. It was a vague feeling and I could
not pin it, but I knew with a child’s sense I had something
to do with the sea that was rising outside my bedroom
door, my father’s voice trembling the house,
my father entered my room, pulled me by one arm,
twisted, his face in my face he stung, he stung,
he stung from me what mother had done with the whiskey —
I remember her face, all cockeyed, her mouth where
her cheek should be, she was rocking back and forth as he
broke the bottles in the bathroom sink, she was looking at me,
she kept looking at me.

Even now I am afraid of a certain quiet when I enter
the house, and I study you, at the sink, peeling your
potatoes, I study how fast and how rhythmically
the peels hit the sink. I remember how you kept
the same hair pins in your head a week, you wore
the same unbecoming dress. I am so afraid of the silence
between us, you walk about the room, scratching yourself,
your face emptying its features, you are afraid of pain,
you stuff oil of cloves inside the holes in your teeth.
You are fat and invisible in turns.
I am afraid of the silence

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and that I am not your quiet, good girl.  
We have never spoken of the lavender dress or how  
that evening, you meandered through the house, and oh,  
how small I felt in my room, crying, not loud enough  
for you to hear, you might come in, loud enough, you  
might come in.  

Georgette Cerrutti  San Rafael, California

don’t invite me to los angeles  
my family all died there

don’t invite me to los angeles  
my family all died there  
gramma was the first to go  
down that long path of concrete  
sidewalks  carpeted hallways  
tiled walkways  handprinted  
boulevards and asphalt asphalt asphalt

whose fault?  no one’s  
gramma just came into the kitchen  
and stood where sun filtered past  
dust on rusty screens and warmed  
itself on the brown-haired girl  
who stood beside the turkey  
gramma just came in and tried  
to tell her how to clean  
the turkey  it was thanksgiving but she couldn’t  
get the words out

stuffed with words  
she couldn’t say  
and that wasn’t like gramma  
so the girl became alarmed  
and helped her lie down not thinking  
she would die even if she was  
eighty-five  why gramma  
had always been  
there  
but she died  
two days later  one day after
the girl had gone
back to school

but uncle had been there
to care for gramma the grand
old lady who turned her face
to the wall and sent her son
out
so he wouldn't see
her pass on down the hall
of wooden boards painted
and repainted brown and brown

they wouldn't allow the girl to go
to the funeral not good for children
even at seventeen death was forbidden
so the girl was denied
the ritual of mourning
perhaps best for they
had not loved each other
lately only from a distance
with fights between their spaces
she didn't go back to the house
for a long time years

but auntie was there
the house in order neat
repaired and gramma's room
emptied of the boxes forty
years of saving boxes boxes
of all the family scraps
of cloth of clothes of books
of beads of cards of candy
(the hard kind you suck
gramma's teeth were gone)
of pictures of papers
of faces saved and sorted
stacked and stored in boxes
until there was only an aisle
to walk between in gramma's
room difficult now to conceive
the clutter now swept clean by auntie

orderly auntie and the girl would visit
from college in summers
from marriage in motherhood
bringing the babies the newborns
to auntie the new extensions
of family to auntie to uncle
uncle came too the uncle who
like gramma saved and sorted
stacked and stowed all
manner of things of beautiful things
of lamp shades from china and
things of such beauty found
in second hand hand-me-down stores
full of junk valued so

a trailer of junk went along
when he left a garage full of junk
stayed behind the house in los angeles
with grass growing between the broken concrete
tracks that led to the shed full of boxes
and crates left when uncle left went away
gypsy-like went away from L.A.
just picked up and left
it'll kill you he said the smog

dreaming of blue lakes and the cool green
trees of his childhood
but auntie remained until the end
which came for her shortly
after the cats died the cats
she had loved one by one
both at once and very much
until they died and auntie called
the brown haired girl on thursday
and cried about them and the girl
went over sunday to find her
in the black of night

radio on screen door hooked
soft lights blurred behind
the faded yellow shades no answer
no answer no auntie but auntie never
left the house at night
only mornings to catch
the downtown bus to work to type
she gave up driving long ago
and writing too except a rare whim
now and then of science fiction
oh no she's there

she was
and the girl knew it
even before even on thursday
but the kids were sick
she knew it when the cats died
after being auntie's roommates
for twelve years the girl knew it
like she didn't know it when
her gramma died auntie went
leaving the radio on and one
empty bottle of pills no note
no good-byes no fault as she went
down the long road of asphalt

they took auntie away
in a plastic bag she'd been dead
too long the girl had peeked
through the door jamb ajar
soft light sliced open calling
auntie the radio's on are you
there seeing her auntie's blue
fingernails she knew then
that she was

the coffin was
closed the girl and her mother
and auntie's old friend were
there the girl placed a large wreath
of roses over the black box before
it went in the ground auntie's life
was like that red roses on black boxes
and never show death to children
but the girl had known
had seen her own path of squares
laid out even before auntie
she had been in-
to the caverns of L.A.
ending a life begun
in love with a mate of abortive
deeds she remembered that
at auntie's grave the black
blank windows with chipped gold
letters on beverly boulevard
kicking the papers out of the way
as she walked down the sidewalk
knowing she could make it through
she was modern it was her choice
and it would have been better if
he had given her a gown
before she lay down on the table

it's over dead of non birth
as the roses lie on the coffin
but you can’t cry for auntie
mother does that and the house
where there was always someone
until now empty no one until
the girl’s sister moves
in for a few years
with her six kids and crazy husband
until they too fall apart like the plumbing
the windows the walls the sidewalk
with the one wide step at the bottom
the one the girl used
to sit on when she watched
the passing traffic looking
for her mother’s car the old blue
chevy age twelve age ten age two
age ageless that house
arched porch palm tree brown dirt
and the little yellow ledge that edge
that made a perfect place to sit
to watch the city lights invade
the sunset and the twilight blue and then

when uncle is too old to pay
long distance taxes water bills and keep
the house together the sister moves
out the IRS department of
health declare it unfit for habitation and require it
demolished knocked down raked up vanished

while the girl wondered if the lilies
of the valley still grew
under the space where her bedroom
window used to be when she was fourteen
and the smell of the freshly watered
loquat tree sank into her dreams
of blue lilies of the valley lilies
in the city of angels the city of death
don’t invite me to los angeles

Karla Margaret Sausalito, California
COAL TOWN CAVES

Milt laden sun  
As the floss that burnt  
Summer’s eve descends and stands  
Light smitten  
Reflections glowering, loosed  
And gleaned  
The boys return  
Black and coaled  
Sweat smelling  
A fetid smell  
Their caps pulled down  
On stalactite eyes  
Diamond’d from the crush

They are young  
Unblushed, grown strong  
As slate  
Chalk grey and taciturn  
They wait  
Besotted in sundown of dusky eaves  
For this they wait  
Someday to sleep  
Stoooped black as nubs  
In crushing caves  
Crystal bones  
Miles from sea

              Tence Stovall Wolfe  Miami, Florida

JOURNEY: THE INTERIOR LANDSCAPE

I. The Searching

I will go out at midnight  
I will be on time  
I have waited for day to pass  
The kingdom of clouds.  Be patient:  
Even wise men stumble for years  
Towards a sinking star.

I am alone as the wind  
Walking towards the moon
Looking under streetlamps
For the smell of love.
I don't know who I am.
Maybe I should wear a hat.
My search for love:
Stool. Handle Carefully.
Wash your hands before
Returning to work.

I have called the wrong numbers.
I have purchased packages of mistakes.
Blindfolded and childish, love
Searches with groping hands
To stick an arrow
In the ass of a donkey.

I have come home alone,
With a dollar in my pocket
And empty arms. I have watched
Success walk past me,
Clicking her high heels.

I have tried to hold my life together
With silly putty. I am polluted from birth,
Infected for a lifetime,
A corner of a page torn out.
I have made no footnotes in history,
Manufactured no Ph.D.'s.

Spread sand upon the floor.
Give me back my calendar
I am no longer in love with time.
I know now I will die of old age, in prison.
Sing me a funeral march,
Chant the basest line of melody:

Swing Low, Sweet Chariot
When are you going to come to me,
Carry the junk of my body away.
Day is done, gone the sun,
Gone from the fields, forever.
Wave the white flag. Surrender.

II. The Dream

Somewhere in the middle of the night
Relentlessly, I grow older.
Gray hairs give no mercy,  
No hope of reprieve.

I have stepped on cracks,  
I have broken the devil's dishes.  
I have gone to my bed with a doomed dream:  
In the ultimate nightmare  
People have found out about me.

I put on a costume.  
I become a clown or a lady.  
I walk onto center stage into spotlights  
With a halo for my head.  
No one in the audience  
Sits comfortably.

I recite my lines. Remember  
Anything I say can be used against me:  
I'm an alcoholic.  
I'm a drug addict.  
I'm a sex maniac.  
I'd like to kill.  
I try to tell the truth.  
I am really queer.  
Now, to thunderous applause, I abuse myself.  
I spread the truth for the first time.  
I take nothing back.

Critic rush to wrap me in dirty verbs,  
Tag me with their nouns,  
Send me home without supper.  
But I'll get even  
Even though I'm odd.

Audience, I have this advice:  
Learn to listen for the lies, and always  
Stay in sight of the exit.

III. The Detour

The traffic report is ominous . . .  
Disabled vehicles . . . tractor trailer  
Jackknifed into a ramp.

Blood is taking over.  
Only blood will satisfy my stomach.  
I have changed directions, towards murder,  
Towards the squandering  
Of the animal snarl within me.
Fly, dark as the night black sky,
To the beautiful victim
Waiting behind closed shutters.
You have seen him today, in the park,
Smiling behind his huge pitcher of beer.

IV. Destination

The trees begin to turn towards the sun
Each leaf overflowing with full
Handfuls of light. And the wind
Carries the first day of a new season
Announcing the weather and barometer
Steady, with green climbing above,
On green.

In my apartment, my house
Of prayer, I ask for bread,
For the good litany, the invocation
And response of praise.
How to wind up life for a profit,
So it runs again with golden hands, so
My stock flies higher
Than Dow Jones Industrials and Utilities.
Higher than the wind.

The sun and coffee
Shine on my breakfast.
I learn the slow secret of my lines
And run away from prose.

The trees pray for me
As I walk on their street, whistling
And the air
Breathes again and again
Like strong fists of leaves
Clutching the empty spaces.

Oh my lungs!
Fill up as often as you can!
Surprise! Surprise!
I've discovered the world again!

Let me give
Money to blind people
Make music in the tin
Cups of their hands.
I love you with the dark glasses,
The pencils.
Listen to me. I have seen
How to squeeze the hard shell of life
Like a starfish, and I know
I will see love in one piece,
Whole and Smiling.

V. Arrival

O final love
My blue preparation for death
You know the answers.
You have raised your hand.
Tell me about years, and directions.
Give me my name.

Make my breathing come
Close to your breathing,
Remove the cotton separating us.
Smell the worlds
Of incense and myrrh.

_Holy, Holy, Holy,_

I will go to church and sin for you.
I will write the most obscene lines:
That love waits above my lips
Like the Eucharist, like the
Most Holy Smile of God After Orgasm.

P.S. The last line was written for you.
    It indicates supreme success.

Frank McQuilkin Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

DREAMING THE OREGON TRAIL

Mother-of-pearl fires from the parapets
and walls gem light down
on the river, from farm
to farm. Opal
inset mosaic like Mr. Gatling's
gun scatters the last light.
From this elevation, through a cleft
in the ridge it might have been
conifers only: it was the Holy City.
We had dust enough on our faces.

Beholding the valley a woman
declares Minneapolis. I remember
my instructions, the crushed leaf
of paper sweated through: Take all
the seeds and little trees
and place them on the ground – everything
will appear maidenly.

An old man is crying Salzburg,
Salzburg! others, Cincinnati! Buffalo!
pronouncing the names of places
where they were born, where they knew
a woman, where they were promised.

We halt
under blue spruce boughs
down the slope.
Since Snake River
I have watched the backbone curve
under the shift of a girl named Eliza.
The wren proceeds us
with a tiny bell in her throat.

John C. Witte       Eugene, Oregon

BLESSING IN DEEP DISGUISE

GOODNIGHT JONQUIL, GOODNIGHT UNION
An American Suite (in a woman's voice)

In one of the early American primers there was a picture
of a big old tired plough-horse standing patiently in the
middle of a pasture, with a complete menagerie of little
colts, lambs, kids, hens, and puppies all chasing, fighting,
and bunting each other in a circle around him. The picture
was supposed to teach such truths as these: "The lamb can
play." "The hen can run." "The dog can jump." And underneath in
bold-faced pica was the legend, "The horse is kind, but he
is old and slow."

(Pleasures and Palaces, Frances & Gertrude Warner, 1933)
PRELUDE

Self-control is a fever. Mine’s falling. Mid-age.
Big old plough-horse: Hen can run, dog jump, lamb plays, forever.

You pause, in the Primer,
A blessing in deep disguise, among the fog & the lilies.

Self-centeredness is praise.
Amid the bluetail flies, the Delaware’s fires reflect in your eyes.

You’ve been whipped, you’ve been shipped, branded these days.
But you’ve leapt fences of fire & iron. You’ve licked

an apple-cider-wind.
You’ve struck a firm, fast spark in my mind.

You don’t burn in Oriental outline.
Sweet dreams, Jonquil, friend.

This day didn’t start like paradise,
this day didn’t start on the mend. But it ends.

Perception
needs respite, like an Army.

Even the most quiet rage
climbs.

The sky’s white as a nunnery
or the glint in the eye of a madperson.

Yellow narcissus, burning river,
old whore, jonquil my prize

sleep soft, old nation,
marble-stone, horse leaping bars of asylum:

Sleep, my eyes. Ride close the flaming ridge
of Paradise.

I. NO FALCON WINGS HOME, PROMISED LAND

No falcon wings back to me. Quaker-plain I stand.
No frost-flowers on the pane
but a sky of firebrick, long in the kiln.
I dream of Revere's silver, lighting a matchflame:
but in my hand hold no lantern shining
"Two if by sea, one if by land." Can't tell my enemy, so no warning.

Landless, a common lady
without Harriet Tubman's ferocity:
yet with a certain steadiness of vision, burning constantly.

If color is an injection
I sit
waiting for the surgeon

waiting by the white window
for the bright gown, silver-as-faucets
to darken the dooryard.

Wait for the shot
to turn the town's river
iron, from bland. Hartford-Smoke & Federal-Drab our town.

Wait to watch elms flame
jonquil
with autumn, a watercolor prism.

***

My dog, "Patches,"
waves, black as ink, black as John Hancock's name
on the Declaration. My mutt, his tail a flag in the wind.

Slavespeech & slaveship at dusk wane
the horror of that locust-cloud
rolling in, our common shame, our blame, our blood-pigeon.

Grant & Lee & the oak-tree & the gallow-limb darken.
O my mongrel-land
O marginal-land, O stripmined sweetheart I have none

of Elizabeth Blackwell's
passion for medicine;
am no Betsy Ross with ardent design.

There are such precisionists as "crystallographers."
I swear that same blood-red, bone-bright flag
— after our fever — comes.

Grasses of Gettysburg blowing African harps over the dead.
Old Patches. I stare & stare at him, Man's best friend.
I steady his flag in my vision: gesso, oil-definite:
Before things grow inexact & change.
II. WHAT'S PAST IS PROLOGUE

Take back your gentian,
doorway.
Dim but swiftly

flags flown
above the bars
of my body die. The Civil-War-Torn South, I.

I form relief-lands,
hoist battlecries.
What's past is prologue.

Waiting for surgery
(to have my head grafted back on my body)
I see — the small false-Dutch windmill opposite me

turn
brown, cream.
To contemplate collision with death is a precision correct as a Haarlem town.
New York gleams on the eyeball, Amsterdam Avenue's cobbled streets.
Until my "special light" comes, Underground Railways burnish

things, scrubbing shrubs
to bleached linen, or else bronze. Bringing me voyage.
Perfecting elms to spires of bronze.

_Somewhere on this earth
bush the perfect fire:
Comes my body's flawless twin._

III. BOY FIGHTING A BLIZZARD
on the pioneer plains
is blown across by diagonal-snow, as in an oil-painting.

A girl
fighting cancer
proceeds like the boy, under a rust-iron bell, toward hell:

wearing her red jacket
blown across by wild cells:
the way we took a brush, dipped in white paint:

As in the old primer, the very earth seemed pendent: we sprayed the painting with forefinger & thumb
to blizzard it: boy, bell, & parson. Eleven, twelve, see them delve, see death run.
IV. SEASON OF BLESSINGS IN DEEP DISGUISE

Too wise to be tender, too tender to be wise, we pause:
Our mountains mist, like geese flying south
in a whited-over oil-painting. Graces camouflaged.

Misty, like bandages done by civil-war nurse,
Misted, like a white room seen thru tears
a sickroom of someone dying.

This will pass: this, too,
this season
of whitewashed blessings. In deep disguise, they go

rabbiteyes
thru snow. Bloody as a scarlet marble.
They go, Redcoats. Or Union men.

Don't shoot till you spy the white of their eyes.
But all I see, with scarlet sunrise,
is the red: too tired to be lowly, or wise.

V. LOCUSTS (The Pioneer Family)

"Three years'll pass quicker'n a wink"
& it'll be ours
the promised land.

But Locusts come
blacking sky like an old-masters oil-painting.
Sure as Grant took Richmond, the scar-fire reached the mind:

Just as the belltowers went out of light
into blackness & silence
the hour was told.

Now the griefs unfold, black as crows
black as bonnets, as funeral clothes;
red as the fire which the Preacher sermonized

White as cream, hopes bow down, one by one.
Till the flooded sky finally is flame.
The tall ships turn back.

Sailors, while you're praying on aquamarine
against evil omen:
on what shall I pray, to purge us of this visitor: water-bones,
this Lady, acid-spirit; fire-tongue?
VI. SAILOR, I CANNOT TELL THE TALL SHIPS BY NAME
that spelled
Despair, Hope, Fame, Ambition.

Sun
(that holdup-woman in yellow sweater)
flames, to light the gashed silk sky. Her laughter

a series of quail
mending:
Civil-War-Torn South; warming the iced winter, Valley Forge

laughter in her bosom.
While lemon-light falls in the window on
no girl, but a woman, sewing stars & stripes

in
a flag's skeleton.
No prima donna, no beauty, but rawboned.

O girl back home, applepits are in your hair
your breast
your skin fair as a negative to be developed.

But I see things, all pale. Not yet teak-oiled:
I wait for my color-injection.
Goodnight, Jonquil. The frozen window-frame houses a crocusbulb

of white flame
& a flower floating in a bowl; it has no name. Like you, Jonquil
it's my harbor: my home.

This infant-sad
nunnery-none, nursery-green land.

VII. HUSHABY
don't you cry
go to sleepy little baby.

Moonlight
pours in on my knife
oils it. You sleep behind me, with

all the ponies.
While I milk, smoothly, the white gal's baby
to save her albino body.
My milk bright as a tumor,
the scalded moon, the milky way
this whole mad-dog country

torn down center like a crinoline-gown
sleep, small as yet
chocolate-lady, fever-eye.

VIII. FREE: GRACE

In primal colors
the rooster crows on his dunghill.
Goodnight, Paul Bunyan, Johnny Appleseed, Tom Paine.

Heads bowed, you think you’re free but you’re imprisoned:
syrup for motion-sickness turns you
all blue, frostbitten.

The dry hours house you.
The sun’s flame
scorches walls.

Cracking slats of midnight-stairs,
you return,
redolent with passion.

You didn’t belong to this land
till you came. Now you’ve come,
but feel strange,

alien in your breathing.
So you get to the topmost stair.
Lavish of light, you flick it off there. Blackness

You seek OUT, of this turning; to sleep deeply.
But take too many sleeping-draughts; you hallucinate. Or die.
No controlled flame, no four sides of glass housing this:

*it bends you all ways. A forestfire rages in a lantern:
flames in your hand.*

*Goodnight Jonquil, my bastard, my mid-age mellow vision.*

Lynn Strongin         Albuquerque, New Mexico
March, 1976
MASSACHUSETTS FANTASY:
THE DOBERMAN IN THE DUNE BUGGY

beside her

in her blue candy apple her linear accelerator her dune blur a dog
it is moon in the morning on the beach forty the needle sways on by
seventy-five moon oh one oh two stroking the damp slope’s cheek
hitting a hundred and twenty towing the lengthening scars
moonmoonmoon

oh three and really laughing now her throat is a laugh catapult sling
silent hail
fire eating a hill miles away chews noiselessly her ejected laughs
as without decibel as these flames she guns it the growing light is noisier

I think what she is laughing is scarab systems by the lovely mouthful —
the planetoids dehisce mute jamborees: dung beetles! rose chafers!
tumblebugs!
I think her thin passenger might later sew a few to her jeans.

Or does she floor it moonlit only, Levi’s-less, yes,
and everything-else-less, too, her surfaces piston-smooth?
Maybe I am the beaming of an accidentally-on

five-year flashlight after all: for the two seem alone
and I seem along. And maybe it is not a gentle hill’s
vegetable life up in orange this time, but honor, or the paper-

work for a new national park. One certainty: the Egyptians adored,
officially anyway, the scarab. They beheld it rolling little balls of dung
and thought day, saw the sun pushed across heaven, warming all loins
below the
tropopause. Americans adore the car. We feel it rolling our used selves
not through no spacetime but rather all receding lovespace, tame love-
musics caged in our radios for company: thirsty Chihuahuas
on Concordes end-

lessly aloft, destination I am you. She’ll be taxiing round the sand dune
if she comes. 90° skid she cooly executes invents,
will kick up, flowers, forests, heat unbelievable, cities and song.

in the blood of one home from work she is the long dream
we are her Red River Valley she flows to the beat
of the stresses on bridges and birds her unusual laugh
she may wish into domes for favored travelers to sleep in

love is a pressure is the ball of a foot on the gas
four paws on a seat the mask of a match scraped off
photons mobbing the pupils the smokejumper’s bruises
is the breath of these flames this hair neither short nor always clean

I am no flashlight

Terrill Shepard Soules  Atlanta, Georgia
BICENTENNIAL WINTER

The only revolution is among the oaks
here in the woods;
their mutinous leaves
refuse to fall, despite
the laws of season
and of gravity.
Red-coated cardinals hide
among those leaves.
Red bird, cold weather
the farmers say.
Know us by our myths.
I think of the mutinous
Puritans who taught us
that all things break.
We have forgotten that,
disenchanted;
amazed as children told
for the first time
how they were conceived.
Still the mind moves
continually west, following
paths beaten by the sun
risking ambush
and early darkness.
On Sundays, driving
past frontiers
lit by milkweed
let us find what wilderness
is left. Deep in the woods
it's possible to see the cruelties
between fox and rabbit
and their mutual beauty;
to study the creeks:
how the citizenry of small stones
is washed in waters that run
to the Potomac,
still clear in places,
in places muddy.
Today the river's a frozen slate,
a tabula rasa. It tempts us
as it did two hundred winters ago
to dare the dangerous
freedom
of the skater.

Linda Pastan
Potomac, Maryland
LIGHT IN NEWARK

Had Monet lived in Newark,
would he have seen the same light
that he saw at Giverny, where
the pink roses hang over water,
lilies float on it,
clouds in it?

Points of color are light
at a distance, and then close up,
tiny pin dancers.
We saw a Signac at tea time, "Yes,"
we said, "that's the tower at Dinard
where the guide locked us in."

We saw, we saw, but the light
was just light.
We came to Newark
and saw more light.
"Where is it happening now?
Let's go there."
We went to the movies in Newark.

Les yeux et le main,
the hand and the eyes are together
& someone lives here,
Williams? Imamu Amiri Baraka?
Anyway the downtown is all blown up —
walls hang open,
windows are made of boards.

Higher than the hand can reach
are gargoyles,
profiles with each lip
bulging like its nose,
spray painted on gray brick walls.

Gigantic white canvases
hang in the galleries — Occasionally
a metal sculptor
welds together a few pieces
of old building to exhibit.

In a studio above a drugstore
floorboards creak under dancers
in their practice clothes
their breathing
interferes with the phonograph music
but a tiny voice sings
"Beyond the sunset the light shines through"
and the sun flows into the window
over the pale floorboards.

Judith Richardson     Woods Hole, Massachusetts

INSIDE DOPE

The inside dope is shot through the mind’s eye.
It is found on the corner of the black, blacker,
blackest city street. It comes at you like
hot asphalt steaming the cold, cold night.
No one whispers in metropolis. Twin lions roar.
So you roar back. I am an elephant, the horn of life.
Think of me as a mountain rolling onto the
sea of augur light. To pierce the pounding
organ you must rage as a man possessed;
possessed by the i’vealreadykissthedevil’sass;
splash, into the depths of the murky pisswaterharbor.

When city you are still, dense silence absorbs me.
Wave after wave of heated city muse; music bathes my
porous body. I am merged in the spirit.
Sleeping fire breathing volcano. The manic devotion-
making the scene—that’s what kills and births the pulse.
Take the pulse. Your own. The sound feeds your
undernourished soul. Crossroads
of the universe’s intersecting city blocks;
cells of the bursting bud of a black, black rose.

There is nothing to do but lie in the gutter,
listening. I am an addict/addiction. I cannot die
without having been in the city. Its decay is the womb
of revolution.
In the depths of the underground
haven of prophetic drunks and mystic musicians
I am living that One’s dream. God is in the
city. He plays bass on the streets of the city.
I am surrounded with no place to go but my
birthplace. The inside dope is shot through
the mind’s eye.

Neil Kaku        San Francisco, California
DARK SO EARLY, DARK SO LONG

The dead injure me with attentions, and nothing can happen.

I have to admit it, I would be less than honest if I didn’t
Admit it, I have plans
before the mellowing year:
It’s always too early,
I realize that, no one’s ever quite ready, but neither
Is a man to be measured by his intentions:
the lordly avenues,
The chimes, the fileted hour. All desire is boneless:
the front

Of the mirror reflects your face, an expectation;
But if you turn the mirror over in your hand, its back
Reveals the back of your head. That’s where you are,
Friend, reader, echo, between expectation and surprise,
Where nothing happens.
My dead, your waking
Rocks me, waking.
What life was it
He was so devoted to? Every day his attendance was perfect,
But the files spill, the papers scatter;
Are his eyes still there under the pennies?
Do not

Mistake me. I have come
Here because I want
To come here. What I have
Lost compels me to

Come here. Someone
Has spirited away, all

Right, much. More.
It burns. Heat rises. Jack,

Be nimble, Jack,
Be quick, Jack,

You woeful shepherd, don’t you know once dead there’s no more
dying?
Pull yourself together, here’s Walker now, he comes to play.

Though the Red and Blue schedules him as a breather
He comes to shock 18,000 fans by ripping
The Red and Blue to pieces, playing the best game
At quarter seen on Franklin Field this Fall;

he's suited up,

He moves through the broken field like a butterfly,
Does a Jubal Early down the sideline
With a stolen pass, scoring, scoring:

such heights,

Such luminous edges —

no Penn team

Was ever outclassed more or beaten worse
Than the Red and Blue eleven yesterday.

Yesterday.

The very word,

death's feather in my cap.

And when the game

Ended, the seasons
Ended, the last reunion hale and golden ended, he comes home,

my home,

Crosses my threshold, gives up what poise
Had let him dance that string of pearls, not once, but Lord

these fifty years,

And I undress and dress and lay him down.

No more. My sorrow is not dead.

Do not mistake me.

I have come here because there is no other place.
Be quick, be spirited, for when it's done
It is not done.

Hey Fulsome! Hey Guts!
You see this brand-new, second-hand fly swatter?
It's for you, and I'm a dead-eye with it; stay back,
This ain't no graveyard, those wide birds circling
Prey, yes indeedy, they prey, not on carrion, no, but on a source,
A light, a cluster of vitality, radiant, wheeling them,
And I'm right here in the middle singing shoo-fly,
Go away from my doors, my thresholds, the places where we cross,
The bodies of my death my life.

It is not done until I say it's done.

Dabney Stuart Lexington, Virginia
THE LACROSSE GAME

Lacrosse was first played by Indian tribes, often in full regalia of feathers and paint, pitting themselves against others over thousands of miles of prairie, after nights of preparation and celebration. As far as we know, this was America’s first sport.

— Margaret Boyd, Sports Historian

It’s not a pleasant sight for a son
To see his father down
On hands and knees on a green field,
Circling the jagged edges of his breath
Where the poised tips of grass hold
His own feet like butterflies each day
Of his summer’s weightless winding down.

One minute I was green and hightime
Running with the boys, the wind unwinding
My haggard breath, layers of stored waistline
Dripping like candle wax. A high sun uncoiled
The doubt in my eyes behind the wire grid
Of my helmet. The marrow of my bones
Sounded the air like sprung feathers.
I was my son again somewhere
Above me in the bleacher seats
Watching my moves with my father’s eyes.

I ran holding a wooden stick
Widening to a webbed-net like an obsolete toy
Once carried by Onondaga Indians to snag
A ball made of rabbit skin
From the breath of the wind.
Where we play on Sunday for fun,
Indians north from Syracuse to Quebec
Once decided wives and land
On the basis of a man’s stamina,
The singular connection between toe and eye,
The lightning-like gathering of sinews
Round the bone stripping the wind
In deer-like strides
Through the high, thoughtless grass.

One minute I was low and notime,
Running without my legs, my breath bent double
With the canned air of office buildings.
History carried me as far back
As yesterday’s reams of memo pads
Mad with their own vernacular.
Secretaries seized my singular connection
And bore me away on a pencil.

One minute I was green and hightime
As I spliced the air with my strides,
My son was watching from a high place
His father with Indian eyes leading a pack
Of men pounding the plains, at thirty
Overweight, helmeted, a little absurd
Far from their suburban lawns,
Bearing down to reclaim some lost land
Between arteries where fat has thickened
The time it takes one blood vessel
To feed another and make a man whole.

One minute I was Indian and deer,
Wife-winner and master of my own land.
I was bird and bush, tree and leaf,
I cradled a ball in my thonged-webbing
Close as a wing. I was a movement
All my own making. I was happy to be.

One afternoon I learned to breathe again,
Once when three men cornered me
Behind the goal, pure instinct lowered me
Just so far, held me poised like a sapling . . .
Till my enemies slid from me
Like spring snow. Balanced on the delight
Of the wind I shed my mind.

One minute I was wind and deer,
The next minute my bones released me.
Pure momentum caught me coming and going,
Consumed on the edge of my own exuberance
Roaming as I did after a ball
With a lead center
As if it were my soul.

One minute I was wind and deer,
The next minute I was emptied
Of my breath, made human
By an enemy stick turned weapon which speared
Through the missing link in the helmet’s grid
To empty half my mouth of teeth,
Sprinkling the grass like kernels of corn.
Where I was once movement and whole,
Hightime and blowing seed,
I now crawl on my hands and knees
Like a dazed beast searching for his heart,
And count the pieces of teeth,
The trickle of blood on my gloved hand
As small pain to pay for my son
Seeing me at last with my father’s eyes,
Mortal, vulnerable, rising
From the shadow of his jagged breath
To his two feet, a Sunday Indian
Restored to the full measure of his Indian eyes.

William Joyce       Lewisburg, Pennsylvania

HER BICENTENNIAL SALUTE

At One-Hundred and Six Years,
All she recalls
Of the centennial celebration
Is the bark
In her father’s angered voice
When she asked for a silver dollar
To replace the one she’d dropped somewhere —
The scent of roasting nuts
Was too enticing to resist.
And how she’d up-chuckled the lot of ’em,
As she puts it,
Over the side of the wagon
On the rutted, dusty road
Back to the farm
Leaving the parade
And the cousins
She saw but once a year.

Chuckling now,
Plump with all the nuts
She could have wanted then,
Rich from the sale of land,
Flat on her back
Beneath stiff white sheets
In a private room
At the rest home she built
For her seven children
Who, one by one,
Got so feeble,
They needed a cozy place
To lay their weary bodies down,
As she puts it,
She watches me,
Great-granddaughter,
From the corner of her one good eye,
And asks,
"Will you be so kind,"
(Another vague chuckle)
"To give the babies,"
(My two daughters, four and six)
"Some pennies to buy
Peanuts at the parade?"

And I imagine the floods,
    tornados, fires, droughts,
    births, weddings, deaths,
    sunday suppers,
    lush September harvests
She'd witnessed;
The love-making she surely enjoyed;
The desperate prayers thrown up in a crisis;
The thousands of buckets of milk
    She urged from that legendary cow called Tess.

I imagine it all
Packed tight
Behind that wax-paper crinkled brow
And stroke her work-worn, bony hand.
I bless the brilliant God
Who grants us rest and
Recall of little things.
"Will you?" she asks,
Shaking loose reflection's veil.
"Of course," I stammer,
"I'll tell them it was your idea."
And measure strength
In a squeeze from the knotted hand.

Ellen Linscott Lieberman  Saratoga, California

DIALOG: A SESTINA

Here comes that migraine, otherwise known as the Muse
of Politics, whose Greek name I have forgotten.
More and more forced, more and more unpleasant
her entry, and always with the reminder that once
I summoned her, opened a window for her
to tear the tongue from my throat and replace it with fire.

"Yes, and instead of falling asleep at the fire,
tonight of all nights, you need me," mutters the Muse.
"America's having her birthday — look at her
pulling out of the closet all her forgotten
costumes of freedom and kindness that suited once
when serfs adored her and despots found her unpleasant!

"Who if not you," she cries, "will proclaim unpleasant
tidings? The hearts of your countrymen are on fire
with hate for the poorest, which they themselves were once;
abroad, leagued with murderer kings, they amuse
their mother goose skulls with imperial games; — forgotten,
America's pangs, when empire pounded her!"

Two aspirins give me courage; I answer her:
"Old Muse — old friend — if what I say is unpleasant,
forget me. It's touching, not to have been forgotten
by you, at least. The veins I set afire
long since ran cold, and mine await a Muse
of milder aspect than they welcomed once.

"Somehow the tidings that could rouse me once
from a young wife, the waiting lips of her,
no longer turn me. Soberly I muse
on shames as deep, days no less unpleasant:
Garrison mobbed, the Pequod tents on fire
— wickedness heaped on wickedness, forgotten.

"Find someone new; you cannot have forgotten
the way it happens: he'll welcome you at once;
his window gapes; already he's half fire;
his wife calls gently, but he sidetracks her;
and if she's jealous, things will grow unpleasant;
small wonder, being jilted for a Muse!

"Go tell him, Muse, America's forgotten
glories! Let his unpleasant rhymes that once
roared through my jaws, set her again afire!"

Aaron Kramer       Oakdale, New York
THE BAY ISLAND TREES

I. Cedarhurst

Do you remember the first time we came in sight of the great bay, the sea moving past our eyes into a far distance.

It was raw lightbreak, the waves steep and sharp, casting their spray and tracing their change across the sky. The bay was flawed with clouds, then scarred with flashing wings: the tides alive with northern life in a green rage at summer's end.

Now in the main of light, birds crest the scarped stone again: shag and cormorant throng the grey trees and tide.
The season turns through its change of birds: frostgull and grebe cross the shadowing clouds and petrel fall: the shallows slow — the air chars toward dayfall. Here at the year's weatherhead, their cry sounds on the sea as Winter signs our island now.

II. Storm at Stone Harbor

Let the stone hold your name another year:

I feared your eye's anger, your hands, but I still recall your last words thrown toward the wind, and lost there;
Your hands steady at the ship's wheel as you steered through the dark narrows, while the great line-squall darkened the bay
and rain and storm fell
all around
just as we reached harbor.
   Alone,
ungrieving now,
I watch our island
loom on the sea's wound
and know the dark stone
holds your name:
As I bear it forward
Across the year's storm.

III.  Bridal Growth

It is November, Joan,
and I will name for you
the green round of trees
joined in this island:
In a creed of old words
Late in the year's time.

Lining the hills lie grey ash,
bloodleaf, lacebark,
grey cloudtrees.

Inland, along the sky,
you will find white larch;
crimson wayfarer, arrow-wood,
white-rod; and dragon spruce.

Against the sea stands tamarack,
shagbark, white holly, poplar,
weeping birch, and great laurel groves.

The whole island reach
of growth stands joined — limb,
leaf, and core — against
the shake of frost, or break
of storm or heart:    The green
Wild blood of trees
Charged like ours in the shared earth.

IV.  An Open Heart

Your gift
will be
an open heart

136
your friend said
and I watch you now
grown past childhood
your eyes wide,
erect and lone
tall as a young evergreen.

V. Wych Tree at Cove Point

West of the low hills the watchtower
glows — and soon will lance its knife
of fire across the black sea. Your eyes
turn grave, and bring to mind the fierce
cry of rage you gave once at life’s edge
as the first light pierced your gaze.

And now I take as emblem of that day
a winged-elm branch, its forked stick held
fast in my hands — and sense its sudden start
against the flesh, lancing at all that lies
past sight.

Now the same tree is sheathed
in its self-fire of golden heartleaf:
Burning back at the dark season’s cold:
Burning toward the leaves’ green loss.

VI. Seafire: Rockhold Creek

The year’s last storm
had torn our island —
and now there was a new islet
East of the sea’s inlet:
bright with willow, laurel, bay
holly — a stance of green
against the early April air.

Then fire struck
by night, and all the next day
signs of flame
scarred the grey inlet.
Tongues of fire
lanced at searock
in the dawn air, blazing
their cast at the green
crest of leaf and dune.
The oargrass lifted scarlet
blades of flame; the embers
seared our watching eyes.

At day’s end
the tiderock lay black
as slag; the last of the fire
died against the sea.
Our gaze widened then
toward the waves' distance;
the sun's light
circled its hollow flame.
Charred clouds
crossed the night's edge
signed with the fire's scars.
   But below the seamounts,
under the fire's reach,
the new islet lay
locked fast
still to this island's
anchoring rock.

VII. Lone Point Light: October

All one early morning
white wings came flying,
turning across the bay:
and I watched a small child,
with bright dark eyes
tracing the pale birds' flight.
   On a greener day
I followed and saw
her fingers move,
tender among seedlings,
her eyes grave,
her hands dancing
among new leaves
and small berries.
   Then one October night
I saw her gaze
and gather in
the first light
of the Fall stars.
   At times I still
hear her voice
calling
and wonder
who would she be calling
across the long distances –
a child alone
with birds,
far stars,
and one green wish.
VIII. Arbor Vitae: A Testament

   It is late December and I
   am moved through the year's
dead time
and again am minded to take
clear stock
of what I've had, wanted, or ever worked for —
searching through them for whatever
I well might leave — and trying to bear
in mind all my father, and his, left
me.

   An eye
to follow the hard grain, the line
of naked larch, pine, scarlet thorn,
heartwood of the seasons:
   I leave them now
   the region trees.
   And beyond
sight of the leaves,
of stripped limbs,
my ear is turned
and bound to winter,
to fall spells, the round
of summer
green island
of all this land.
   The mark
and trace of all seasons
lined in the green
ungraven leaf.
Vein and branch
signed in the heart:
In whatever weather
The wood's heart holds.

   William J. Redding   Columbus, Ohio

WHALE SONGS

1. In the heart of a whale
   on the great plains I heard
the oaks groan like masts
and sheets of river ice
creak like sails
the water underneath
slow as a whale
moved east toward Sag Harbor, Nantucket

I signed on in mid-December
blinded by the gold of our days
we forgot the ropes
uncoiling
the decks slippery as sin

the breath of the first whales
took our breath away

2. they were not of the earth
but the moon's
children
blind as a tide they
rose and fell

of what use the mind in mid-ocean

3. when the whales sigh
somewhere an oak cracks under polar ice

the sea exhales its frost
in summer skies

when the whales smile
a quarter-moon rises

the shy elephants look up from
their watering places

4. the blue whale dissolves
like an Ad

the white whale sleeps
in my palm

outside the glass the rain
stops

5. those buried shapes
darker than our graves
how heavily they weighed upon the water

140
they seemed
forever to sink from the surface
then rose up like
the sea floor in need of a breath

uncovering the moon from the waves

6.  Was it whale skin on the water that carried us?
Whale breath on our mouths that I mistook for spray?
Our prows dug deep in their swells
their dark blood cleaved and curled back along the bow
falling into foam that hissed and spit
like surf relaxing into sand
They seemed
like separate oceans adrift in the sea
blowing their salt-sweetened spray

I climbed higher and higher in the rigging to forget
the kills
but how the ropes sang like thin ice when we
skated on the backs of whales

And then like men stabbing at their own rafts
we set the harpoons deep, whale-blood
flowing blacker than oil to light the lamps on shore.
The women smelling sweetly of whale crying out in
their sleep.

7.  How easily they died...

Harpoons sunk no deeper
than a flag
On the moon

8.  When the last whale sank from sight
the sea lay flat as the sky
our ships rode lower in the water
and we drifted toward the cities’ smoke
pulled by iron and false flags
our sails exhausted
we gave up like ghosts
the last
ghosts of wind
9.
O who will lie down
beside the dead whales

and dream of islands
that fathom the land

of snow falling skyward
to melt in the sun

whose breath is deeper
than the whales

whose eyes so sleepy
and awake

10.
O lord I am heavy as a ship
without love in mid-ocean

11.
the night we washed the sea with blood
the moon
rose in the southern cross

I stepped on the sea’s white face
like a man
forever on the surface

I struggled to drown

Clark McCann     North Hollywood, California
AFTERWORD

But where is what I started for, so long ago,
And why is it yet unfound?

Walt Whitman

The significance of a collection of poetry like this seems to me to go far beyond the individual merits of the separate poems. Given a poem, one tries to find its coherence or unity; given a collection of poems, one tries to discover some organizing form that makes the whole greater than the sum of the parts. In the case of this volume, the reader's problem turns out to be identical with that of the many and varied poets represented here. These poems are picked from thousands submitted in the same Bicentennial contest. If there is a unity in their diversity it may represent a unity that goes beyond the limits of a small sampling of poems. To read this book is to become concerned, as are the poets, with the larger questions of historical and cultural and poetic identity.

Behind the varied individual voices of separate poems and poets ("I was a movement/ All my own making") is an elusive sense of a possible collective identity:

We Traveled across the land.  ["The Last Days of Tamsen Donner"]

We are all driving across this long land.  ["Riding Westward"]

It is agreed/ we have witnessed some defeat.  ["Jungle Plums"]

We, too, disappear in mid stride.  ["Pony Prayer. . ."]

"Tom, who needs us?"  ["Garrison"]

(Italics supplied.)

The question of what unifies us is raised in various forms in poem after poem in the collection. It is a question without a clear answer, but I read through the collection with a growing sense that it may be the search itself that holds us, like the volume, in whatever collective unity we are capable of achieving.

The main artistic goal of many of these poems seems to be to find words and images adequate for saying how things are — and for asking how and why they got that way. They are often in style and manner rather comfortable poems, more interested in saying something directly or in sharing experience with us than in impressing us with poetic virtuosity. They assume some common axis of experience and language through which we can communicate, and confirm that assumption by themselves becoming something like that axis. These poets remind me of that resourceful handyman the French call a bricoleur, someone who works with his hands and uses at times rather devious means compared with those of a professional craftsman. The
art of *bricolage* makes do with the givens of experience, with what is at hand, finding new life in old pots, and interesting and original uses for familiar objects, words, places — even myths. And if this sounds snobbish, that is the opposite of what I mean, because the answer to Garrison’s question — “Who needs us?” — is that we all need him and his artistic equivalent. We have all “traveled across the land” like Tamsen Donner, “towards winter not towards spring.” Her journal poem, like Garrison’s running, is an example of what can make survival in unexpected and difficult circumstances possible. “They will invent me,” she anticipates, and therefore gives us — through our own invention — the needed figure of a winter poet whose ability to create and even celebrate is not prevented by the slow process of decline; a poet who knows how to make “the usual events of a usual life/ mythical and rare.”

The poets mostly agree that this is a big land with an increasingly big and complex history; a land that takes a lot of running and movement and time and energy even to begin to cover in a journey, a poem, or a life: “this vast space,/ This ancient emptiness, this chill.” The Indians are seen as running across the land before us, and disappearing “in mid stride.” Now we have taken their places and it is our own feelings of uselessness and of being on the point of disappearing in mid stride that form a bridge of empathy with them and with all those other too easily forgotten ancestors who are found or invented in these poems. The poets are all concerned with this land, and the awareness that it was there long before us and will cover us when we’re gone. They share a sense that the land is feminine, and therefore potentially mother, bride, daughter, temptress, or the literal and symbolic victim of rape by our most primitive fantasies and advanced technological excesses. “Harpoons sunk no deeper/ than a flag/ On the moon.”

Like the land, the past holds us together; but like the land it also poses its own set of problems that require a different kind of movement. “And scraping away/ I have been thinking. . . .” If some of these poets are runners, others are “scrapers,” bent not so much on do-it-yourself-home-improvement as on discovery of what lies back there underneath all the layers of shiny new paint that have become covered over in turn by the newest fashion. Underneath the paint they may find an old penny — or an older way of *seeing* a penny — a discovery which, small as it may seem, represents a great loss and generates self-recognition and guilt. They may find a Tamsen Donner still alive though buried under the snow, or many other forgotten ancestors whose loss has diminished us. In its original sense, “to invent” meant to come across or to find. For me these poems are inventive in the deepest and most important sense. I am glad that the San Jose Bicentennial Poetry Awards Competition has found them, and that the judges and editors are now sharing their findings with the rest of us.

Thomas A. Vogler  Santa Cruz, California