THE PLAIN TALK OF THE DEAD

LAWRENCE R. SMITH

MONTPARNASSE EDITIONS
THE PLAIN TALK OF THE DEAD
Acknowledgements


Copyright © Lawrence R. Smith, 1988
All rights reserved

ISBN 0-9619835-0-7

The Montparnasse Editions poetry series is partially sponsored by the Euryalus Foundation of Siracusa and New York.
Ask the former generations
and find out what their fathers learned,
for we were born only yesterday and know nothing,
and our days on earth are but a shadow.
Will they not instruct you and tell you?
Will they not bring forth words from their understanding?

—Job

I chew on feathers,
it’s almost knowledge . . .

—Antonio Porta
CONTENTS

I
GHOST DANCE

Roxy Takahashi 1
Exchange 6
The Fall of Tenochtitlán 8
He Just Wanted to Live in California 10
Legerdemain 11
Iron and Air 12
Broken Lines 13
Aaron Weiss in the Museum of Modern Art 14
The Dream Can Never Remember 16
Red Cranes Cursing 17
The Jar Phallus Coffin 19
Sleeping With Pele 20

II
WE MIGHT INVENT ANOTHER

We Might Invent Another 23
Manifesto 33
The Color of History 36
Memorial Day, 1986 39
Footnotes 41
III
NOT SNOW BUT MANNA
SETTLING ON LOST CITIES

Wild Laurel 47
Fabricating Neighbors 48
Metaphysical Detective 49
Morning, After Suffocating Sleep 50
Ancient Bride 51
Letter From Mountain Rest 52
Leaker 53
Gertrude Stein Never Left Oakland 54
Bakersfield 55
A Brief Essay on Action 56
Charlie Parker and the Dog 58
The Reinvention of Gardens 60
Breakfast in the Wilderness 61
Mudang 63
Archive: 1968 64
We Should Trust Ourselves 67

IV
JOURNEY TO THE WEST

Back Roads 70
The Bee 72
Honolulu Night Cruise 79
Watching the Rock 82
The Oyster Monkey Cantos 84
Contributors 93
I

GHOST DANCE
Roxy Takahashi

Watching Roxy

Roxanne Takahashi wiggles in sweat on her desk chair. Island Finance is air-conditioned, but skin against plastic—

and now the mole near the right hand corner of her mouth.

Menthol cigarettes in a pile of ashes, their dust on the front of her citron dress.

Lunch with the office girls.

Gray lady pushing a cart of bentos.

Roxanne’s glossy lips and bad skin under rosy chalk—

three years out of McKinley High.

Dry crack seed after lunch.

Joyce brought it in,

but one piece of sweet wet mango seed sticks in her teeth. Mango hair.

Pete

I could take Roxy to Spats for disco or movies and ice cream, frozen yogurt after and she’s good for it, you know. “Go fa broke.”

Actually what gets to me is the way her leg slips up from a fine small ankle

smooth muscle and meat up the outside

into a real piece of cake that thigh and butt tight and sticking out
just asking for it.
But I don’t believe what Tommy said:
“Honey in your mouth.” Anyway, we’ll see.

*Mama Takahashi*

If Roxy hadda gone to Punahou
she’d be in L. A. right now with maybe
a doctor or dentist husband
and a kid or two at least.
She owes me some things for
my old age and the hard years
before she came:
  damn hakujins in ’42,
  crazy haoles, FBI and that junk.
Theyda killed us if they could,
and now Roxy running with haoles.
No good from that girl.
At least until Tommy come along.
Good boy that Tommy.
Come from a good family. Yamada.

*My Dream of Roxy*

Stained teeth, nicotine etchings,
wings of black hair sweep over her ears.
“Roxy, that boy lolo. Crazy haole, you know.”
  Slams steel drawers, typewriter keys.
  Smoke and diet soda
  catch in Roxy’s throat.
  Gall rises. Rubs her stomach.
In the women’s room she waits
in a stall for the itch to pass.
Mango hair. Sweet nectar
sticks to your teeth.
**Pete’s Dream**

Wears a skirt of ti leaves:
green with a splash of orange
or yellow through the heart.
Runs through cane fields,
burning sweet smoke on every side
and men with knives, maybe more.
  On the red earth a samurai sword
  with pearl inlay and writing
  he can’t read. Picks it up,
  slashes the lunging man
  from shoulder to hip,
  then another and another.
Runs again, barefoot through the cane.
Smoke and bloody feet, featureless
brown faces. “Hey, I know these guys.
Shit, I’ll bet it’s kill haole day.
Listen! I ain’t no real haole!
Crazy mothers, leave me alone!”
Runs barefoot through cane and smoke.

**Mama Takahashi’s Dream**

Where’s that Roxy? Somebody
gone and left me right out here
in the middle of Waialae
and no clothes on me. And my chi-chi
are gone, and my hair and holes.
I’m at Jody’s Hairdress
and got nothing on my body.
Naked to the bone.
Falling in this hole and dirt coming
up to my neck. Where’s that Roxy?
Where’s that girl when I need her?
All these hairy monkeys
throwing garbage. Laughing at me. 
So much hair I can’t see their eyes.

Roxanne’s Dream

Step out of the shower and past
the sink where the razor
sits in a puddle of scum.
“No shave for these legs. I’m clean
as a whistle. No. There’s some
on my shin and thigh and . . .”
Hair grows
light brown hair
almost orange
the color of mango
meat, mango hair. Vaginal
hair grows longer
curly
crawls up abdomen, stomach,
stretches into mango feathers,
overlapping feathers and down.
“Oh God, no. Get it off! Damn!”
Scrapes skin and feathers: razor
fury blood, but more and more
feathers. Falls on her back,
squirms on the tile panting,
spreads her legs
opens
her wings
lifts up and out
the window, crotch legs feet toes
and lifts to kiss the air:
mauka showers in the evening.
A plane taking off for the mainland
(“Mama inside go to L. A. forever”)
and Dad on an incoming plane,
cruising low over the surf
off Diamond Head. Looking younger
than when he died in ’72
and smiling.
   Lifts as the jets come and go
   on another schedule,
   and lifts into a circle
   which goes neither east nor west.
Circles circles circles as the air sucks
(“Suck deep into my body”).
Exchange

They picked out her eyes, crystal by crystal, and flew to a tall elm. Their nest, I suppose. Young birds all throat and stone blind.

I drove the highway back and forth in the light of my windshield burning until 4 A.M. Our last evening: she was only a few shreds of dress and a luminescent eyelash. Details.

Thirteen hours in a rain of dust, dull moon rocks crushed and spread across the tops of low clouds that sit on you like this for thirteen days. Crossing to the side where a crow pecks the curb, a beer can pop top, not the ring I'd seen, the one I gave to her and they took away.

Nail by nail and knuckle by knuckle they wrenched her apart, a long rubber glove from a sweaty hand.

We knew the signs: comets with three tails, sunsets that lasted till midnight, an odor of sassafras near the streetlamp. And thirteen marigolds blossoming from one stem. We said goodbye the day before our parting started. Never spoke of it while she still had lips, nor needed to afterwards. Reassembled
would I know her? Which tree, telephone pole, which eave or hand—
and hands, lips, eyes in a brighter or a dimmer shade, slightly modified.

*        *        *

I admire the summer gray of your eyes,
and the flecks of green and gold around their darkest centers—the length of your nails and hands, the freshness of the fingertips you run down my thigh. You think I haven’t noticed them growing night by night, hearing taps at the window, low whistles from the bottom of your throat.
**The Fall of Tenochtitlán**

Hovers over sidewalk, wishbone legs riding air, straw ranch hat snug on the back of his head. Square lips, nose, lower jaw navigate from one end of town to the other, so Doc shows up in two places at once: Soto’s Market and the Chevron, Camozzi’s Saloon and J.J.’s (where a dozen slender boys shoot electric creatures).

In the Golden Age of Hollywood Doc nursed Hearst’s menagerie: camels, giraffe, water buffalo and gazelle, kangaroo and ostrich. In the saddle he rolls a smoke with one hand, licks it shut, watches a herd of brown parched hills graze the afternoon, turn orange and rose as the sun drops off the boss’ pier. The Mad Prince sits in his castle, waits for spoils from Havana, Manila, the museums of Europe: clever Byzantine pirate with a weakness for gold leaf. Doc stokes the live oak fire in his master’s fireplace, brought stone by stone from some nightmare on the Rhine.

Now the Cambria townies wonder how old Doc is, and what he is: part Indian, part Mexican? Montezuma without his web of gold thread and eagle plumes.
Old Hearst left him no pension,  
so he’ll mow down the weeds on your lot 
for fifty bucks, too ornery to choke 
on deadly fumes from the rented machine. 
He only clears thirty.

A cherubic punk leans against the bar  
in Camozzi’s Saloon, says  
“Hey Doc, getting any pussy lately?”  
And he starts, growls “None a yer bizness.”  
Next time he’ll bring his Latin lady.
He Just Wanted to Live in California

Phil made booze from yeast and orange juice
in the Illinois pen. Harboring
a fugitive—bad rap and two years
watching snow stubble corn fields.
Corn tassel hair, red beard and bandanna:
wash dishes, blacktop driveways,
roughneck on Bakersfield oil rigs
where the tall Mojave burns out anger and desire.
Whispers his dream to a Mexican whore
as she cradles his lurch, muttering “loco, loco.”

An oil-covered grebe flaps wings and falls,
waddles through scummy surf, then falls again.
Oil becomes sky in his dream of flight:
a beak poked into final suffocation.

Slams clamp on another
length of drill, whirring chain,
thumbs caught in the mesh, pinfeathers
pulled from wings, a puddle of blood
down the suckhole, toking on a joint
to draw out pain, waddling, waiting to hit gold
as sky waits for something to hit.

Along the Santa Barbara coast
steel spiders crouch over the water.
Angry flames rise from their backs.
Legerdemain

for D.W.

The viper dangling over your bed
is a knife. It sharpens its teeth
above your skin
as pores breathe in morning sleep.
Steel implements appear, gleam,
then test themselves lightly
on your shoulder, arm and cheek.
Each incision bursts into bloom,
marking the limits of the garden.

A knife-thrower defines your shape
on the tilting backboard.
Each thunk nudges skin blossoms
until you explode into a flaming sword.
Jack swallows the sword and disappears.
You part the curtain as yourself,
show the audience a mangled box.
(The boxcar with the magician
won’t show up in L. A. for two weeks.)
From the pearl hilt of the nearest sword
you pull a bouquet of paper carnations.
Iron and Air

He rose slowly through his skin
and from a distance of yards
watched his empty body
being squeezed and sucked
by the iron lung.

Polio at thirteen, a year
before Salk, morphine at 22,
flight at the moment
of bodily death—hovering there,
high in an upper corner.

The orderly who made love
to lonely non-contagious women
husbands wouldn’t touch
passed in the hall. Floating eyes
saw fire die in the pores of his skin.

3 alternatives dance before the spirit:
hospital death, sucking welfare checks;
or feathering into a golden bird
to perch on the tallest eucalyptus
in the grove at the peak of the canyon;

or bursting into a tongue of newborn fire
to lick Nurse Casey’s breasts
as she holds them close to your face,
sucking in air and blowing it out
to the rhythm of an iron piston below.
Broken Lines

The palmist in Korea
refused to read her broken lines.
Now Soon stands in the middle of her life,
in the middle of her hand,
watching lines fly away
in all the directions a compass can tell.
Some are unsure as the lines of quail
who explore under pines at dawn,
who feed on delicate seeds
and their own unconscious grace.
Other lines fly determined and greedy
as the pelicans who cruise over waves
in different lines, warplane formations,
diving into the water at full speed
and somehow never breaking their necks.

Knowing that broken lines are still lines,
Soon has learned to survive.
She tells me the story of how
in a storm off Morro Bay
she saw the smokestack lights of PG&E,
a red beacon, and knew she was saved.

Soon culls the seed of her new life
from coal smoke and tar;
she reads her fortune
on the stained hand of the world.
Aaron Weiss in the Museum of Modern Art

Aaron Weiss walking
toward the subway stairs:
shifting winds rattle plastic
on newspaper racks.
He sits in the overlit car,
losing a year of his life
at every stop.

Aaron Weiss as a small boy
or an old man:
he watches them work
behind tattered plywood,
excavating surfaces.

Aaron Weiss in the men’s room
of a coffee shop:
he chokes on sulfuric fumes,
layering the wooden seat
with strips of paper.

Small arcs of hair
glow over his knuckles.
Near cup and fingers
a pack of matches,
cover torn off
and sent to a school
in Reading, Pennsylvania.

Aaron in the Park
at the Zoo
anywhere he wants to be.
But when he moves
from place to place
no lines are crossed;
crusts and skins
are never broken.

Small bones lie at the edge
of the sidewalk.
A cellophane wrapper
blows against his leg
as he descends.
The Dream Can Never Remember

At his desk through an age of storms:
refuses to talk, water flowers, unhinge
children for their own moonlight escapes.
She looks into his dull smoky mirrors
and sees that her own are the same.
She wonders how the garbage can lid
slips off on its own
every Thursday night,
moves six feet and inverts;
the footfalls and moaning sounds
tear at the window
as curtains lift their fiery hems.

The house waits for midnight, shifts
in its footings, settles joists and beams.
She wonders who sits at the desk downstairs
and what creature prowls the back door.

Wife and mother, she rides the dragon
each night, speaks in flame and sapphire,
runs unscarred with jade panthers
through flesh-tearing brush.

They show their teeth, but never speak.
They fly, but they fly alone.
Red Cranes Cursing

Father-in-law who called me
*bok chit chit*, white dead thing:
when you died you returned
as a white feathered bird
to eye the girl child who came after.

Flying to stone sills in upper stories
across oceans, over highways,
through the blizzards of the Midwest,
you kept vigil over us, the lost children.
Unlooking eye of pigeon or seagull
fixed in a window’s porcelain frame of sky,
hairline cracks tell the stories of our lives.

When you hugged that same child,
now grown, on her way to school,
she thought you were a kind stranger
in a flannel shirt. You disappeared,
she said, just as your arms
squeezed around her.

Chinese scholar with fine bones
and tall forehead, you saw China
only as a GI, you excelled
in the calligraphy of a crossword,
you tuned your life with a heavy wrench
delicately, to turn finger by finger
stitch by stitch into the phoenix,
red silk smuggled in black mushrooms
pungent with the earth, sky
flesh and blood you ate and choked on.

In the ambulance your eyelashes
still fluttered, telling us you lived.
The flutter from noon to midnight,  
the shift on land and in the sea  
as the dragon prepares to take flight.  
I stop my ears but you still call me  
bok kuei: white demon, white ghost.
The Jar Phallus Coffin

I shed night scales, dissolving down. Breath plumes into wind snakes that coil around bare sticks at the base of a thorn.

The evidence is colorless. Bird flying beast chases seizes caresses the small night things beak and talon. Did I love or kill?

Coming back to search the inside of my teeth with narrow tongue for a taste of the hair blood or fire that blossomed on the far side.

My wife sleeps in our bedroom. Water drips in the kitchen as I creep back into tangling sheets with her and our new lives each morning.
Sleeping With Pele

Met Pele at Ron’s Poi Bowl
on Kekaulike St. Sphere bent ovoid,
tea leaf eggs, light green jade of Burma
veined with gold and volcanoes
of immortal flesh, not the stuff
that warped Grandpa’s face to hard
rubber blisters, rolling on
taro plantation dirt, losing
feet and hands on Molokai
in sand hair rotten palm fronds
shaped into a hut.

Broken gathering birds’ eggs, bird’s nest
in the early mist, lowered by ropes
down cliffs where even the mongoose
can’t reach. Crystalline cliffs.
Jade boat through a river of fire.

Pele’s hair, rain angling into craters
and rising steam in thick curls.
Pokey weed between toes and under feet
with splayed babies, walking
mulberries into the sidewalk
that rides the bridge over Nuuanu stream.
Scraps of mildewed tatami in the bushes.
Somewhere makai the swollen stream
rams a sewer. Broken translucent eggs.

No one in Ron’s place was looking
when Pele turned to him and smiled,
showed sharp teeth and no tongue,
hot breath and no voice. Squat ohia
push ruined gray up through lava
and cinders. Pele loves her leper children.
Passes him a note: “Come 217 Mililani
11:00 and bring ohia branch
for safe passage.” Kisses her hand
and tastes fiery steel of hair.
Jade dust. Fine cracks in the shell.

The siren on the hill goes off
once a month. Only Pele knows why.
II

WE MIGHT INVENT ANOTHER
We Might Invent Another

I

He suspected that he was invisible again. It wasn’t so much the feel of the wind. It was the way that woman in the blue hat (the one with the ostrich plume) looked at him. The kinky smile on her face was the tip off. Women never looked at him like that. After all, he only shaved every third day or so. He spun around and saw the cutaway girdle on the limbless mannequin. Just as he’d thought—right through him. Invisibility sneaks up on you sometimes. You seldom discover it until you go to the supermarket or department store. Especially when you’ve covered all your mirrors at home. But when you’ve been doing a lot of night-flying (and he had been lately) these things happen. He figured if bats could put up with it, so could he.
The other day I called up a friend, my closest neighbor, the one who lives in the nice white ranch with green and white awnings that appear when the tulips are done. “Wanted you to know that I’ve got a semi-automatic rifle here and two clips of ammunition,” I said. “I’m going to fire them off in random sequence in the direction of your house. Just thought I’d let you know.” His lights went out, his shades dropped, and the house waited. I fired my two clips off, noting an occasional chirp of glass and the different notes of percussion and acceptance. Then I ran like hell over there to watch the last bullets land. I half expected to find my old pal smiling in a mutilated heap, but he had disappeared and taken all the sounds with him. As I watched the holes appear on his living room wall, in a fascinating succession of patterns, I had to provide my own “whump” noises. Acceptance, I suppose. A lesson in relativity.
III

Today I am small. Tomorrow, on the other hand, I may be large. It all depends on how I set the projector there on the desk. For instance, let’s say I choose to be large tomorrow, or more precisely, fat, since all those internal images would blow me up like a loose suit ballooning in an updraft. Or consider this possibility: I could be the whole damn room, my epidermis pressed smack up against the walls, floor, and ceiling. Of course, if you walked in on a day like that, I’d look like a mural of human entrails. You probably wouldn’t recognize me. But then again, you might.
IV

It was a plain brown picnic table. Not the kind of thing you’d expect in a French restaurant. But who knows? Maybe the cuisine was Burgundian. Rough, splintering, well-used and tacky. Had the clientele carved in all these Kilroys, XX +YYs, covert and overt obscenities? In the middle of a veal cordon bleu, perhaps. The homey atmosphere didn’t disconcert me until I noticed the striking resemblance the waitress had to my mother. Gray. She brought the golden plates. They were elegant and there were three of them. (But only two in my party.) Embarrassment, as you might imagine. Before I could call it to her attention, she brushed by the table, palmed one golden plate, and shuffled through the kitchen doors.
I don’t see how I could get to this before Friday, at the earliest. What with the hippopotamus in the lake, chugging along the bottom in the grass and mud—only showing her nostrils once every two or three minutes. Things like this take time, you know. It’s these federal regulations. And we might even have to send to New York or L. A. for parts. When you go for something exotic like this, you’ve got to expect some hassles. I’ll bet you didn’t even notice the moon when you stepped out your door this morning. Check it tomorrow—you’ll find it slightly less than full. Full moon in the morning and I’ve got to figure on losing at least a half a day’s work in the shop. You guys on the outside think this job is so damned easy. I wish you’d walk in my shoes for a week. For instance, see that fella over there, the guy with one arm? I’ve got to pay him time and a half just to come out even.
VI

It’s these no good plastic railroad ties. They keep turning them out like footballs, pizzas, or hulahoops. And here I can’t even get to the phone, except on my break between 3:15 and 3:25. Phone booth, I should say, with scribbled filth on the walls and a dirty floor, gum and urine. The wooden decoys swimming in the lake—that’s another story entirely. You’d think we’d had enough of that, learned our lesson. But every morning you wake up, pick up the paper, your morning coffee, etc.—and there it is again: “Decoys found floating near the amusement park.” I’ve pretty much given up. I used to vote and keep abreast of world affairs, but now it’s all a body can do to keep going from day to day. If it gets much worse, I’m going to have to ask them to change my shift.
A steady diet of tennis balls has its advantages and disadvantages. Once you get by the thirst factor, which is compounded by the fact that you have to limit water intake to prevent swelling, you’ve won half the battle. Turnips make a nice side dish, but only in season. R months, I believe. Taking out those stitches, one by one, is the part they always forget to tell you about. I had 105 and, believe me, I counted straight up the wall before they were through. Faulty batch of nitrous oxide. And huge footprints everywhere. It could have been the ice storm and the resultant loss of electricity, but I have my own ideas. Sometimes nurses and patients can change places in a case like that. At any rate, it’s always wise to consult your physician if the symptoms persist.
I started my compost pile of words last Spring. At first it was mostly the idea of recycling or conservation. If I could grind up old orange peels, onion skins and apple cores, I figured why not words? There was some indecision as to whether the words should be composted with the peels, skins and cores, or separately. Finally I said what the hell, it’s too much of a bother to have two piles, and sometimes it’s hard to tell the difference between say a moldy piece of broccoli and a cast off word. For instance, take “clarification.” I tossed it on the heap last July, but kept an eye on it to see if it would break down into useful elements again. Like nitrogen. I figured the pieces would link up with other pieces to form new organic compounds—but they didn’t. But then I said what the hell’s wrong with “clar,” or “tion”? In fact, “tion” is a favorite of mine now, just by itself. Not that I’m against synthesis. Did I ever tell you how I put together a tree out of spare parts?
There is always the possibility of the erotic, although that usually remains a possibility. Twelve telephone books stacked on the chair. Old Christmas ornaments hanging from the chandelier. Dental mirrors arranged on the coffee table. She had to scratch carefully, because the skin was barely holding. A particularly violent sneeze and you might drop a limb or two. And that simply wouldn’t do with the leather shop closed. There’s not a thing open in this town after 5:00 on Sunday. Hollow leg leaning against the fireplace, soft music, golden-bound first editions: stacking them in various positions or arranging them end to end. When he began to rub them on the lambskin throw, she went out for more sherry. Lubrication. She did that two or three times. Several months later, thinking back on that evening, she wondered whether the whole thing was worth it. After all, Dante never actually spoke to Beatrice.
My wife and I were taking our evening stroll, heading toward those apartments the locals call the rabbit hutch. We were about to cross these abandoned tracks: thoughts of night freights and California. You know, romantic. So she reached for the crook of my arm. But when we turned to look for the sunset, what we saw instead was the eagle. It was a big one, say 50 feet or so from pinfeather to pinfeather. There it was, looking more like a pterodactyl: gliding in place, riding the wind. Then it settled feather by feather to the ground, wings still spread, horny clawed feet still extended and poised. He eyed our girl child, who was playing right over there, on the other side of the tracks. She laughed when she saw the creature. Then she ran a bit, peeked back, then ran a bit more. You know, hide and seek. Three hops and the bird covered the distance. My wife and I screamed to the child who had never listened. Then up they went without a sound. Banking left, they rode the sunset west. That was 10 years ago. Right on this very spot. And fantasy be damned, I want my daughter back!
Manifesto

1

The Mr. Burger: two meat patties
lettuce tomato onion
catsup and mayonnaise.

2

A regular burger can be ordered
with no lettuce, with the real meat
of car accidents, muggings,
butcher knives in family disputes.
Existential burgers are no longer served
at Mr. Burger.

3

The teriburger: a patty marinated
in sweetened soy sauce and fried
as a city block explodes into objects:
blind paper sacks, parked cars, bent
straws, dried brown palm fronds,
hibiscus and broken bottles.

4

The Mr. Burger with cheese:
all of the above, with vegetables
any man would want—or woman—
hair knuckles shells raw fish,
sushi at a downtown bar.
Melting curbstones wait
for the number 6 bus.

Mr. Burger speaks with many voices.
If Mr. Burger spoke with only one,
there would be no customers.
You can’t sell the same burger twice,
and people don’t come back for spoiled meat.

Have been discontinued
for the month of September.

Most people don’t buy burgers,
french fries, cokes or milk shakes.
They wait for the rain to stop
under the eave by the ordering window.
Then they go back to the bench
and wait for the bus.
Under the eave they notice the rack
of torn classified tabloids.
The papers are free but no one takes them.
They don’t contain doctrines or interesting ideas;
they have only words and objects for sale.
When you eat a Mr. Burger
you eat a burger: no more, no less.
There is no inner burger.
Its contents are two meat patties
lettuce tomato onion
catsup and mayonnaise.

The Mr. Burger patty may contain
what the Honolulu Health Dept.
would call “foreign matter.”
For instance, politics and social disturbances.
But have you ever heard of beef
that didn’t come from a steer or cow?

There will be other styles of Mr. Burger
when the owner invents them.
The Color of History

Lathe shriek, steel sliver flicked
arm’s length to pierce an eye
as Buñuel takes coffee and churros
half a world, half a century away.
Even gun bluing can’t stop rust
in steel, the precise corruption
at the center of terror’s rose,
sudden fractures in the heart
or rain on the night of a sickle moon.

Tropical birds, industrial accidents
strung together pole to pole, line
crossing telegraph line, while
obsolete eagles flap through smoke
above the heads of hipsters and cowboys,
splinter a saloon mirror, bottles
lined before it as the Schlitz globe falls
and the fight over an Okie girl drifts
through shivered glass past jukebox
onto the street. 2:00 A.M.
“This one’s history. Last call on six packs.
Grab your broad and hit the door.”

The Soho studio twilight trembled
cigarettes between fingers.
“I would like to tell you, Maurice,
what I saw in that cafè, listening
to Matisse and Picasso talk about
wet pussy, the colors, shapes
and sizes of nipples, how each
felt in the mouth. And their jokes
about Gauguin. All these years of looking
back, raking Parisian cinders,
I have found that moment
continuously impossible.”
Telegraph lines in the Amazon synchronize their disuse with pink dolphins nosing among rotten tree boles. Parrot fish, spines of scorpion fish, fountain pen plumage loaded for the swimmer’s veins and obstructions at the heart. Aborigines taught Australians how to crawl, decided not to let those sharkbait suckers drown.

After Dreyfus, when the French choked on Maginot steel, and Hitler’s boys made Moroccan regulars dance at gunpoint, smile for newsreels with their forests of spiked salutes, the French made up for it all by delivering Jews to splintering boxcars. The boys are in the Amazon now, poisoning Indians with their strange guttural Portuguese, and the only French are Jacques Cousteau and his band. In the mining camp, coffee and chicory, beans and pancetta: the skillet explodes, nails eggs to trees. Rich men through the eye of a needle, a needle through one eye after another, sewing humankind together into telegraph wire, the nexus of our global village. Back in France Picasso refuses to collaborate.

When a nurse wants to draw my blood, right arm or left, the vein pops out like a hard-on. But I don’t love needles, little
steel deaths poking the mainline,  
telegraphing Mother in the jungle,  
little girls with pigtails, hookers  
in the holding tank, sharks cruising  
under the pier after dark.

Bobby Volare squirts snake juice,  
lowers his hat brim and framing 
hammer, spits out the tale of his habit.  
“Once in this Fresno shooting gallery  
a black guy jumped on my chest  
to start me up again. I was stone cold  
dead on that shit, but he saved  
my ass. Still hate niggers, though.”  
Plastic tubes, pig iron, spikes.  
With the jawbone of an ass  
and a broken bottle, the King  
of Spades and Sally crawl the bed,  
over edge, down on floor, out into  
the hall and their fertile sunrise  
where motors hum under humming  
wires, needles point true North,  
leaving glass and magnetized steel  
slivers under our skins, crusting over,  
tender to the touch, ready to shoot.
Memorial Day, 1986

Men are jogging by secret Edsels.
The confirmatory cheers of barley have been squandered.
Six microbiologists remain seated
as desultory seas wash
the wealth of Switzerland over their ears.

Now there is time for plain talk.
So let the tongue blossom on the mountainside.
Let the bees of the field gather in consensus over the dead rat.
Let hymns of desperation rain over the streets of downtown Dubuque.
Only the miners beneath the valley have communed with death,
so let us not speak in false harmonies
of electric wires inside flesh
or the linings of our throats will rise up
in righteousness and seize our tongues.

The ancestors have been talking now
for more than a hundred years.
When they speak rain turns to one side,
ducks, then follows the empty road
beneath the river
to neither darkness nor light.

I believe what I hear in the dumpster’s whine
of Grand Island, Nebraska; the squalid belch of refinery flames
above Richmond, California; the empty halls and ominous chants
of Alcatraz; the articulate murmurs of Arkansas com;
the numberless dead births of Newark and Muskogee;
that the ghost dance will finish
when he falls to the White House marble floor
and his glass eyes roll through corridors
through open doors and fly through the iron
of his gates past monuments to justice
straight to the sacred mountains.
Then his mouth spills the chowder of our lives
in little pieces, until the flow runs clear
and the spring remains forever clear
in those marble ruins.

Men will jog and find means to open gardenia cafés,
narcotic confusion in the still air of our cities.
We shall wait in the watchful domain of the North
until the plain talk of the dead
is spoken on the evening news.
Footnotes

23. The caves were originally published in 1902. In a niche of cave 133 the excavation team discovered famed sinologist Sir Reginald Worthington. He first appeared to adhere to the surface, indistinguishable from a *bas relief* of the teachings of the Lotus Sutra. Kuan Yin on the Morning Waters. In the second printing Sir Reginald had completely disappeared. Subsequent research on the Worthington heraldic coat of arms has revealed remarkable correspondences to Shang motifs (*fang-i* type) on bronze ritual vessels. Percival Harris has suggested an explanation based on irregular Lap migratory patterns, but this is not generally accepted. It has been pointed out that Tunhuang is, in fact, hundreds of miles from Hangchow.
18. According to a long established tradition, so firmly rooted that in default of clear documentary evidence to the contrary it is difficult to reject, Robespierre refused to wear clothes during the Summer he spent with Jean-Jacques Rousseau at the Hermitage. The sans-culottes, of course, wore everything from bed ticking to hopsack, and then there were the occasional flourishes of nudity: the Feast of the Supreme Being (pp.128-35) and the two manifestations, one at the Tuileries and the other at the Champs de Mars. But the interchanges which transpired between the philosopher and the Incorruptible One must have extended beyond habiliments or the lack thereof. Certainly the Committees, the Jacobin Club, and perhaps even the dictatorship were discussed. There are notebooks dated during that period in a hand which is similar to Robespierre’s but which is different in significant ways. Most authorities have dismissed them as forgeries, but this Summer was such a step out of the ordinary for the champion of Public Safety that some doubt remains. In one notebook there is a discourse on physics and human chemistry, questioning whether blood and its airy vapors would sublime and rise, and earthly merde descend as heretofore, or whether the process would reverse itself now that history had finally begun. Needless to say, Robespierre always deferred to Rousseau’s knowledge of the calculus. There is also much in the notebooks concerning inner light and social obligation. A song on the ascent of horse leavings was inscribed; it was to be sung to the air of the “Marseillaise.” Every day in the New France brought amazing births and strange endings.
4. When evaluating Egyptian monumental sculpture of the New Kingdom, first consideration must be given to the fact that, along with concerns for the crocodile and desert asp and to a more extensive degree than previously seen in burial edifices, it formed an integral part of the total orgiastic socio-cultural vision, and furthermore affected daily sexual behavior throughout the social spectrum in the most specific ways. Often men would forget they were married and dancing girls would be forced to dance with each other. Stone was mated with stone and cut in such a precise manner that no unsightly cracks could be seen, all in accordance with the menses or phases of the moon. The female nature of the Nile cannot be overstressed. Technical and artistic expertise were remarkably advanced during this period. For instance, statues of Isis or even tomb paintings of ladies in waiting invariably depict those characteristic feminine swellings behind the *ilia* and above the buttocks. Love bumps.
14. Under “fair trade” laws manufacturers may demand that unscrupulous customers submit to various tests. The well-known “bait and hook” test requires skin penetration without blenching. An interesting variation on the usual barb through the web of the hand is two wooden pegs lodged in the breast flesh just above the nipples. Both male and female customers are eligible. These pegs are connected, in turn, to lines by which the customer is twirled around a light pole at the center of the parking lot. The participation of State Bureau representatives is suggested but not required. Of course, “loss limitation” necessitates payment in full for test failures, although items over $100 are excluded by statute from this provision. Overcharges are refundable every third Thursday.
12. Many American and German texts have insisted that the U.S. move from radio to television was Promethean. Consider the A.R. Jenkins article (*The American Psychoanalyst*, Winter, 1958), where it is argued that Ed Sullivan represents the fire-bringer and encompasses as well the stone god origins of Prometheus. Clearly Ed Sullivan is a stone deity, but it is equally clear that his affinity is with the ancient Cretan stone god (later to be called Zeus on the Greek mainland), not with Prometheus. How else could we explain the semi-conscious praedipal fantasy which can be seen again and again in Sullivan audiences? It is hardly necessary to point out the parricidal rage and oral frustration that have been well-documented elsewhere. If it were not for his irrationalism, dualism, and pessimism, unsuited to the American experience, Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* (New York, 1950) might prove to be particularly helpful here, Reisman and Fromm notwithstanding. Witness the Sullivan show of August 22, 1957, where a large russet horse was led on stage in the final moments of the broadcast.
III

NOT SNOW BUT MANNA
SETTLING ON LOST CITIES
Wild Laurel

Under the olive tree this pig
roots grass, dirt, fallen fruit:
snouts uncured marbles in shade,
takes what it needs.

This pig makes desert moves
through its mouth, travels with dead
snakes down the rope of its gut
into the cavern of sense
and motion. Dreams stay
outside, sleep in upper branches.

The moon before it falls:
pomegranate mark on its side.
Green and wrinkled glass tumbler,  
barnsiding propped against the tv,  
the pleasure of a brick wall, moonlight  
around the edges of a drawn curtain,  
the cry of a sperm whale, roller skates,  
lips twisted through a window screen,  
stained ceiling and carpet, acid rain, gestures  
to frustrate the stillness of air, good company,  
comfortable creatures crossing red lines  
where signs appear in unknown languages.  
Scorpio rises, explaining the need for trust.  
When I sneeze, small feet run to my side;  
when I reach for fingers, scattering laughter.
Metaphysical Detective

Iron bars reach across the window at the top of the stairs.
“Fire moves upward quickly.”
“And smoke,” she says; a thigh stirs as silk cords dangle to the floor; holds one slipper to her chin.

Seen through the crystal tulip rises slightly, flame plumage at the neck, gills part for a moment to breathe the atoms between us, seeds of our transparent fire seen through the claw of the tulip.

“It seems unfortunate, in a world without water.” Upstairs the sound of birds flying in and out between the bars: a claw scratch, the brush of a pinfeather against frost hard glass.

“Near morning, I’d guess,” she says. Rising, a razor on a table to draw across the crystal of an eye looking up the stairs, toward iron, sky on fire, birds dashing into night.
Morning, After Suffocating Sleep

Every morning’s shave leaves a sink full of guts. Evening and ashes settle into dust: scorched satin pillows in the smoldering bed. Hair and feathers choke the drain.

Sunshine curdles along the kitchen sill. The refrigerator grumbles until a light beam shrieks through the air, nails her hand to a cabinet, knifepoint through knuckle.

This music goes on until 8:00. Knowledge of this or that day, spurious tomorrow, flies from treetop to treetop, refuses the stale suet of the feeder.

He violates the doorspace with heaviness, shirt and tie, a belief in inevitability; a coffee cup, a chipped plate, radioactive isotopes under her feet, she turns her back.
Ancient Bride

Legs in motion, cut off cleanly at the knee, which is the result of time. Parking meters gobble your coins and still insist on your death. Lifting the young girl’s skirt, he can ride her back into the past, the future, the sunshine; as each wave hits the rock, fifteen others sink back into weed and submerged spasms.

Splinters of the wine glass she threw lurk in the carpet waiting for heel and toe, a threatening note, tears preserved in a vial from the pyramids, an accumulation of sand.

She hit him on the neck and squealed in the excited cadence of a young girl, a fiancee with long black hair, teeth that once had an edge in the vulvic blossoms of another time, a place that has moved from stone to dream.
Letter From Mountain Rest

The bare bulb is a spinning cross
when I squint, a nova without glasses.
Vision lies broken at my feet;
her sister above me
lights up a necropolis of gnats and flies.

Needle and waxed thread
sew up fingers
to draw the hand into a cup.
I hold it out for wind and water.

Shuffling light across a rusty sidewalk.
Psoriatic onion skins collect in net bags,
later to be stored beneath basement stairs
where rats rustle them
into autumnal dance, the feast
of loss and gathering.
Food and drink will be offered
to the ancestral gods
before every meal.

On the other side of the mountain
horned beasts pace on the desert hardpan,
ignore the explosive vacuum of canyon,
endless flats, our imitative craters of the moon.

Tweed diagonals, the scumble of stucco
next to louvered glass, rice water skin
holds the form of this scene in a bubble.
The hurricane lamp goes out; airlessness
trips on the carpet, sprawls breathless
across the floor and never moves again.
Leaker

groundhog near the hedgepost, pipe beneath a parking lot full of apple crates, 22 birds low the level, fingers twisting one from the tion of giants, buses stopping at every tree not wanting to know the source of those drop id to build tissue around the hips, transfer al or try to manage on less than that, she’d nothing, absolutely nothing to do with camel the trail of chemicals which led to a church bility less than that, zero in fact, or less
Gertrude Stein Never Left Oakland

Birds hang beneath the bridge, watch steamers draw blood, reopen the channel’s wound. Immune to shifts and jolts, mudflats stretch beside her in sculptures, junk wood and scrap iron Kama Sutra licking on her hips. Waves take time to finger the burrows of crabs and sea lice riddling her splayed out legs.

Fair, the kind of World’s Fair on Treasure Island made so three succeeding wars spawned parties where the lace you found was made in such a way that sailors grazed Yerba Buena, went to town, caught Miles at the Hawk, cruised Fillmore alleys and Finocchio’s, learned that Oakland eats her angel children too.

Is the water in Paris burning as it does here, near freighters loading napalm, shipyards in Alameda? Fog sings you into a sleep of second sight, ignites the oil slick of miles you thought you’d traveled.
Bakersfield

Birds can’t fly in Bakersfield.
The heat and stone blue sky
hold them down so close to the ground—
and high tension wires, wandering Basques
the length of 99, dirt farms, the earthquake
of ’52, road stands, the Santa Fe tracks,
cotton, smog settling in from the North as
Chinese still flee the ruins of ’06,
low riders at the mall have so filled
the valley with objects and ideas—there is
no space to fly in, nor rest within the trees.

Dead palm fronds cling to trunks;
crippled hands knuckle under.
Heat rises, you say, but this heat
sucks you down into dust
and brown mountains, ambling away,
holding their distance, the plunge
of desiccated birds into scorching noon
as they think of coastal fog, mother ocean
and their cousins the gulls
who rob golden scales
forged from the heat and stone blue sky.
A Brief Essay on Action

Any tree needs water, minerals, my expectation of its blossoming. Stepping forward, the discourse on lilacs—when I wandered as a child through Lilac Park in Rochester, N.Y. only occasionally in Spring (as my father had acute hay fever and most of the day lay rigid on the couch, hanky over his face) I rehearsed the baritone of my future, the age of 33 being still some years away—not forgetting elms and chestnuts, which each choose one season of prominence, as do most plants, animals, and gods (e.g. mistletoe in Winter, Loki and Baldur). Gardens make little sense in Summer, caught in the middle like that, a family quarrel, Proserpina gathering chrysanthemums. I wanted her to know just how I felt: petals of fiery hair, flared nostrils, the garage door swinging up, and even the unsmoked Luckies hidden in my desk. It was no use back at home with Mother and Father in the other room planning all my previous catastrophes. And no sound at all from our dog who had died on the highway some years before. My brother Gary believed lost coins (as well as nails, buttons and marbles) would reappear in our fleshy rows of watermelon and pumpkin. He recalled his alligator life
earlier this incarnation.
There were lilacs forgotten and green
in their nakedness most of the year
at garden edge, while vegetables
sprouted, grew full and decayed
just where we had left them
in the midst of their well-planned cities.
Action came slowly in those days,
as Jehovah’s Witnesses predicted
the apocalypse which had already arrived
almost everywhere else—precise
junctures, fragments of the moment.
Financing the struggle was also hard,
but we kept growing pumpkins.
After all, we did succeed. We have succeeded.
My father stressed his faith in building
character, responsibility, an appreciation
for values and women with good thighs.
Our program began at the end of April.
And impossible, inevitable as it was,
I have always acted in our best interest.
Charlie Parker and the Dog

You talk about Indians and high yellow: 
man, she did that long black hair 
with chopsticks, 
and had some trouble back in ’43. 
But she was singing, 
singing that hair from Chicago to Detroit. 
Some windy nights 
across my brass bed 
when it floated from Chicago to Detroit.

And don’t you know, don’t you know 
sweet axe goes right down 
to the rooted bone, T-bone, 
and when it runs it just goes ahead and flies, 
then slows to spiraled turnings, 
tightens up my mainspring 
like you do, Honey, 
when you shake those bones in time. 
Slide your spine into another tempo, 
Monk’s own crazy time. 
Singing on the bed through smoke and rain.

That forest of yours got so much bush 
the axe just can’t push through: rawhide thongs 
from every tree, dried meat and squash 
cut down through skin, fat, flesh and bone. 
We’re calling the tribes together: 
women by the river, dancing in the fire, 
playing through the night of smoke and rain.

Dog on the stoop with his jive five spots, 
you know he ain’t never gonna be there 
with his bebop rhythm ‘n’ blues. 
But there’s the dog, holding both wind and rain, 
chewing his conjure bone, and playing it right,
because dog said “We gonna take the music back.”
He said, “The dead folks is dancing in the street.”
And the street can hold them all.
The Reinvention of Gardens

The texture of a dying toad is fear: bumps and terse convolutions vibrate, heave with the heart— the toad wears his brain on his skin.

There in the imaginary garden he guards the sacred carbuncle; it remains lodged in his forehead until the final moment.

He knows you will seize it and turn away, run leaping through the fountains of the moon, but then as you watch it will melt like fairy gold to blood, creep up your arm and enter the holy chambers through your eyes.

He knows a wart will form there between your brows, a carbuncle as red as the eyes of your ancestors.
Breakfast in the Wilderness

An eagle among teacups,  
blood rivers flow down chipped veneer,  
two wings over the feet  
two sprout from the shoulders  
and one in the afternoon.  
The scar on his left cheek  
made him sit  
in an odd position,  
twenty times more powerful  
than a bird in flight  
among rocks above sea lions.

I told her again, and turned  
to the open icebox—a shriek  
and a clap of thunder, shit on the beef,  
in the milk. The fruits are unclean.  
Forty more days  
on dried dates and wild berries.  
And birds, birds, hawks and birds  
bring breadcrumbs  
over the mountains, one by one.  
Beaks full of water, dew gathered  
from the pockets in desert bushes  
only birds and lizards know.

One morning I’ll be lean enough  
to smash this crockery  
and splinter the table  
I built as a child,  
apprentice to a hard father.  
I’ll rise slowly,  
feet held breathlessly still,  
ankle to ankle, my arms at my sides:  
look down the mountains row by row.
Then I will speak unsheathed words
and watch them dive
into circling eagles below.
Mudang

The worst always happens
when you appraise destiny,
discuss the amount of last year’s rain,
stand on the perch of our times.
Flying home in pieces, each chunk
generates limbs and feathers
in random combinations:
a thousand new races burned
by the sun in mid-air.
Snowflakes dying on the grass.

About as much family resemblance
as an elephant, peacock and polar bear.
Trinities like these in golden cages.
Burning or boring a hole
through the center of the hand.
Instructions from the East.

If I knew how to prepare
for the knock on the door,
or who he’d be, bridegroom or beggar,
I’d stop gathering
small pieces of rag, string,
old feathers and down, dried
sinews and vocal cords
from ancestral dances and songs.
And even though I know it’s there,
just beyond the peripheral wall,
I’d stop looking for the crack
in the air, the open door.
I’d let the world fly through.
Archive: 1968

Sliding over slack skin below the hip
the scalpel point leaves a fine red line:
incisions, triangular patches,
square translucent sheet
for an area near the heart.
Prophylactic gloves mate tissues,
build secret pockets, make shapes
like breasts and nipples.
Rouge and lipstick. Perfume.

*

Hangared bird, dusty white feathers
out of kilter now, folded wrong.
Happy bird munching C-rations,
flies, and sunflower seed,
reading government reports
on the dangers of flying.
He breathes slowly, barely moving
the pallid dust on the floor.
A deep breath in this ammonia
might singe his lungs, bring tears.
Doors are snug; bolts are rusting
in the hinges they hold down.

*

The foot shakes and jumps,
slamming a metal footrest,
turning the whole chair to one side.
Grabs the knee and wrestles the spasm,
hits the thigh, brainpulses
that haven’t the sense to stop
when the need is gone. Behind the chair
a pusher holds rubber grips.
He doesn’t see or listen. There is stubble on his head and around the chin. At night he runs through soggy fields; fireblossoms light his way.
Announcements. Withdrawal.

*

A cough behind the door. Hors d’oeuvres. Trimmed bread edges dry and diced egg grays in descending sun.
Chilled bottles warm, hold their corks. Tablecloths relax to lankness.
Puffs of air rustle the lace that arches over a well-turned man and woman on top of the utmost layer.
His hair is blond, hers is long and black. Two angels wait in the garden by the fountain’s still water.

*

Nose, closed eyelids, lips, ears change places on the sleeping face.
Thick hairs stab into the pillow. Nothing fits. Under the sheets you might find a body of straw, toes tied together, legs bowed to a V.
Shredded paper stuffs the mattress, acrylic ticking and no stripes.
Such a man’s children might dance like gleaming steel, suck sweetness from neon signs.

*
Sounds rise from the furnace.  
Bearings wear unevenly for months and years or roll along smoothly until the day a flaw, a slight distinction, blockage . . .  
Bearings grind to red heat, the sound catches you in sleep . . .  
Birds in the furnace, screaming.

* 

Archivists pack away sheaves of paper curiously scorched at the edges. They wear rubber gloves to prevent tiny cuts in the web of the hand, passageways for spores that sleep and dream until the taste of blood, then lash into life, strike deep into the handler’s heart with a flash of venom like a snake. The chosen one screams, speaks strange words and agonies, but he does not die.
We Should Trust Ourselves

It’s getting dark again, and
the light bulbs all have popped
because they can’t burn steadily
for 50 years
as Ripley once claimed in “Believe It or Not”
for a bulb that expired in 1937.

I like the feel of electricity too,
but I don’t stick forks in open sockets
or paint with my penis
or light up market streets in Saigon
(nor do I ever plan to
even now, in a gesture
of penance to the citizens
of Ho Chi Minh City)
with a gasoline torch
and my thin blond hair as the wick.

Enough of what I intend to avoid.
If you’ve been following me,
you can guess that it’s time
to get back into the mine.

Never mind coal dust
and methane
the canary still sings
and we’re digging deeper
past fossils and buried heat,
water blind fish, sulphur cones.

You can’t see my skin anymore
or your own.
Squeeze my arm and I’ll take a pinch
on yours—it’s nice in the dark.
Twelve positions on the sheet.

Jupiter in the house of Mars
with Scorpio and Venus conjunctive—
this is the age they have seen:
green fingers push husks out of earth
stems and legs fling seeds into air
a weed-bearded mouth breathes cool water
up through the mountains to exit as fire;
and the heart of the world is fed from those peaks,
not snow but manna settling on lost cities.

I can feel us leaving the mine now—rising.
I can feel the orange of tomorrow’s sunrise.
I can guess at the sound of our names
spoken across the morning waters.
I can taste the fur you’ve tied to your arm.

*   *   *

When they wanted to choose a king
in the realm of luminous darkness,
they looked for a rich man with a
beautiful wife who spoke French.
Then they killed him, but permitted his wife
and the two brave children to live,
reminding them how hard it is
to believe when there is no other light.

We are still in the cities of Urmuz,
drawing the map that will show us
where we are. The map is in the mine.
The map is wherever you’re reading; maybe
this time we should trust ourselves.
IV

JOURNEY TO THE WEST
Back Roads

On a B-class gravel road
in a land I hardly know,
narrowing to a dusty gash
cut surveyor straight
through giant wheat gold,
hedge high and tickling
the car on either side,
I saw us zippered in
before and behind
by that wind laughing gold,
and no turnaround.

A white house at the end:
vine arbors, morning glories
on the picket fence,
light and sound singing life
crowded lush to the foundations
and up the walls.

It stood there
crisp in the afternoon,
like the picture
in my first grade reader
of the house that framed
old Farmer Jones
and his plump gray wife,
he with his hay fork,
she with her wire-rimmed glasses
and candy giving smile.

And here they are!
Stepping off the porch,
coming pat like somebody’s
third act, welcoming,
throwing me those candy smiles,
and Grandfather Jones
showing me the place
with a sweeping wave
of his bared brown arm.

Then I saw
the cat-sized, rat looking animals,
short bristling hair
with plum brown bulging eyes,
and the purple backwards birds,
and the octopod snakes,
all teeming gentle
around green crushed fences.

“But they’re all mutants!” I said.
Farmer Jones smiled to the horizon,
more serious now,
yet still wise and warm:
“Yes, my son, and you also.
But you will fly.”
The Bee

Coming home from the plant,
just turned the corner of Maple and 6th
when I ran into her.
Didn’t touch her—know what
I mean—but ran into her
there in front of the Payless drugstore.
How can I tell you what she looked like?
Gorgeous top to bottom, with these
real tight fancy clothes. Real tight.
Black turtleneck sweater
and stacked like something else.
Bright yellow pants, jeans
or something like that, but so tight
I don’t know how she got them on.
She looked like she was in trouble,
street map all unfolded
and not knowing where to go.
So I put down my lunch pail
and say, “Here, let me help you.
I know this town pretty good.”
Then she looks up from the map
and I see the front of her face
for the first time, not just side view.
Well, she had these funny eyes,
I mean beautiful but funny—
didn’t look straight at you
and kind of far apart, just not right.
Did I tell you she had black hair?
Just like Carla’s when I first met her.
Dark, dark hair, and her eyes were too.
I never got to the map
after she looked me in the eye,
but everything got fuzzy
and I heard this buzz in my head.
Just like the time
I got kicked in the teeth
in a high school football game.
And I hear this voice—far away—
saying “I don’t live here. I’m looking
for somebody.” But she says this
like what she’s saying
is not exactly what she means.
Anyway, I must have said something
because she left
and I headed for home again.
I got halfway down the block
before I saw that I’d left
my lunch pail on the sidewalk.
Went back and got it, then went home.
Boy was I dizzy, almost like being drunk.
Carla looked at me funny all night.
She even smelled my breath—
thought I’d stopped off with the boys.
And it was just like a hangover next day,
ext couple of days for that matter.
Headache, funny feeling in the gut.
And Carla was real grouchy. She knew
something was up, but didn’t say much.

Exactly one week later—Tuesday again—
I see her on the corner of 4th Street
and Oak, a block from the apartment.
And she’s looking right at me.
I thought Jeez, what if Carla
sees me talking to her? If she’s going
to the cleaners, butchers or something.
I didn’t even walk over this time,
just stayed where I was, and she came to me.
Starts talking and leaning right into my face.
Holy smokes, I get a whiff of perfume
that almost knocks me out, sweet
and heavy, the kind that makes you feel
like you can’t breathe so good.
Here it goes, dizzy and weak again.
I mean I’m no wimpy guy, but anybody—even a broad—could’ve knocked me over.
She was talking funny stuff too,
about flowers and workers
and who the chosen ones were going to be.
I get real nervous about now.
Not only is she weird, but somebody’s
going to see me and tell Carla for sure.
God, I’m going to be in bad trouble.
But she keeps talking, crazier and crazier.
Next thing I know she’s gone
and I know that something’s wrong.
I look at my watch and it’s 6:00.
I must have stood there half an hour
and not even known. Boy, some trouble.
Then I look down and see
my lunch pail on the sidewalk,
and when I pick it up, it jingles.
Opened the lid and looked inside—
the thermos was busted to smithereens.
Must’ve dropped it standing there.
Must’ve slipped right out of my hand.
When I come through the door
Carla’s already shouting and hollering.
Man, she had my number. When she yelled
about stopping off with the boys again,
I didn’t want to push it,
because I’d be cooked even worse
if she figures out what really happened.
Vodka, she said, so she couldn’t smell it.
Screaming all night—couldn’t even watch tv.
Made me sleep on the couch.
But that was ok, because I didn’t
feel like doing anything anyway.
Know what I mean? Kind of numb all over.
Kind of sick, but kind of all right
at the same time. All week like that.

All day Monday I was worried about Tuesday.
What if it happened again? I knew it would. What the hell could I do?
On Tuesday I even went home
a different way. Afraid of Carla,
I mean, not so much of the girl.
But I never met one like her before.
She was gorgeous, but too . . . something,
I’m not sure how to say it.
Anyway, I’m going home again
and there she is—right on my corner!
Holy Mother of God, I say to myself,
Carla’s going to see her this time for sure.
Two more steps down the street
and she’s going to see both of us
from the kitchen window.
Then I kind of lost control,
kept walking up to her
even when I tried to stop.
I knew it was bad. Big trouble.
She doesn’t say a word, just looks at me
and smiles and I feel myself
bending over, leaning into her.
The more I look into her eyes, the more I lean.
It was like falling into a manhole.
I saw her lips getting ready to kiss me.
Boy was I scared—right there on my corner!
Everybody’d see us. Carla was going to kill me.
Her mouth was funny—a soft little circle—
when I finally touched her. Oh God,
I didn’t know what was happening.
She was sucking and sucking on my mouth
and it felt so good. She was sucking
so hard I could feel my guts
lifting up inside me. Light and airy—
amost like I could fly away.
I think I did fly for a second, swear to God.
When I woke up it was dark. Past eight.
I waited awhile and tried to think up
and excuse, but couldn’t. No use.
Man, I was ready for all hell
and that’s what I got. Pots, pans, dishes
and Carla ripped up all my sports magazines.
She said she knew what I was up to,
and I didn’t say too much back.
She said she’d kill me
if she caught me, and I knew she would.
I got sicker and sicker all that week.
Couldn’t sleep at all, or if I’d doze
off a bit her face’d be there and that mouth
and I’d wake up like an electric shock
with my hair all on end,
heart pounding out of my chest.

Monday the next week I called in sick.
Carla was at me all day—made me go in
Tuesday, and I knew it was a mistake.
I should’ve stayed home for sure.
I came straight home from the plant,
even punched out a half hour early,
and I thought I’d made it.
Looked up at the window and saw Carla.
I even waved, but then—Bam! —out of nowhere,
 it was her. Must’ve been in the alley.
Oh my God, she was right there on my street!
I look up and see Carla. Too late,
she’s seen me and the girl.
And then it starts happening—
I can’t move at all, not even my head.
Only I can feel Carla watching us
and all the neighbors stopping on the street.
I was cold sweating almost to death. Then the girl starts wiggling around in a crazy dance and her clothes split right down the middle and peel off. Standing naked right there in the street. Two beautiful tits, with funny sharp nipples, and all the way down it was beautiful, but things kept on happening. It was even faster than I can tell you. She puts her arms around me and squeezes but then here come a bunch more arms and legs around me, squeezing, squeezing, and her tits sticking into my chest, legs and arms wrapping my whole body. Then a godawful pain in my crotch. Wanted to yell and scream, but I couldn’t. All the screams blew up inside me and trickled out like warm water. She laid me there on the sidewalk, right in the middle of the crowd, and then she was gone. I knew Carla was waiting for me. When I came through the door she was coming at me, screaming with a butcher knife in her hand. I shouted for her to stop and tried to jump out of the way but she got me in the leg and the knife stuck there in my thigh. I wanted to grab it out so she couldn’t finish me off, but I didn’t have nothing left and slipped down on the floor. I kept saying “Please, please, you don’t understand. Carla, it was a dream! A dream!” “What do you mean it was a dream?” she said.
“It was a dream of you when you were young, but now, believe me, it’s only death.”
Honolulu Night Cruise

One hundred yards of mist:
the McCully St. bridge trapped
as it steps over the Ala Wai canal.
Machines, black canvas float on the barge,
send down taut ridged tubes
to penetrate the water.
She wore her heart-shaped abdomen
in blue jeans, and my hand.
Over the railings come ashes
of gubernatorial announcements,
flutter to the water, sink
into sea mucus algae crabs.
Honolulu nights under the dredge.

Wild dog and mongoose on the edge
of the airport dump, cannery,
their tongues cut out, torn
from throats, fried with hot peppers,
howling in the night. Raspining voices.

*

Movements in the dirt around Palolo.
Night calls from spirit warriors.
Moon women: damp cloth around
thighs and hips. At night polyester
tank tops, body stockings lift up
and are gone, disappear from the road
into bamboo sounds of frogs,
undrained as their night dark hair.

*

The dead volcano swallows light.
In a city of precise greens, blues,
yellows, it stands at night for darkness.
An armory inside the rim prepares
for tomorrow’s tsunami, possible
dead swimmers at Kuhio beach, up the streets
and in lower stories. The same night
holds helicopters offshore—dancing
over catamarans, tourists in dinner boats—
sweeping the reef with searchlights.
Rubber slippers along sidewalks,
thongs pulled through split pads,
winos by cages at the surfboard
rental concession.

*

Mouth nibbling, biting, groaning
as night humidity sweats darkness.
Hair again and again, moist and in motion.
Eyes caught in the thrashing rhythm
of daytime pile-drivers, now silent
as the moon pushes sand
under block-long plywood barricades.
Diesel machines, smooth and sturdy
shoulders, round hard purposeful breasts:
“Slice the ends off the chit gua,
rub off the hair, gut it, then mix
the soft insides with ground pork,
corn starch, shee yow and may jing.
Stuff it and steam several hours.”
Bleeding gently at the hips, glass splinters
high on the wall, in her bed, inside
a steaming gash.

*

Two scoops of rice, kim chee
and the daily special. The rich sea
smell of garbage rotting in alley bins.
Mist on Tantalus, concentric rainbows,
elusive gateways, birds and buses
looking for the right one-way street.
Light planes from Maui cut straight
paths over St. Louis Heights:
golden pilots, cargoes.
Ordinary objects arrange themselves
into a clock
that loses ten minutes on the hour.

*

The throats of plumeria open wider at night.
Groans and panting, rusting Volkswagens.
Dressing near the beach, back on tatami.
Soaked hair, dark as coconut oil,
moving up and down, washing in hard
and sucking back. Up through the concrete
rust, guava roots, ti, creepers.
Lying against a hill, kneeling on the lanai;
a blue flying saucer on top of Ala Moana
lifts with moon clouds, then flies west.
Watching the Rock

Summer, alien chemistry,
short brown mountains pose as dead volcanoes.
“Lead me to the rock
that is higher than I am.”
Dust rides the slopes of Diamond Head
to Queen Kapiolani’s park; powdered crust
creates the island, its foundations, conjures
ti leaves, bananas, orchids, hibiscus, breadfruit,
avocado and plumeria from Pele’s fiery crotch.
Coral reefs with their towers of death
build themselves more slowly, but once you’ve
got the formula you can no longer work.
For instance, the invention of electricity
in the Islands and the song they composed
to celebrate new light: sandalwood incense
and Buddhists chanting in the mountains.
Then the endangered birds you never see;
at the Honolulu Zoo there are only empty
cages, plastic pictures and explanations.
The trees explode in star fruit and gold showers, but sound has traveled elsewhere
with its feathers and iridescent screams.
Pacific storms sweep over the island, unfold
sheltering wings of mercy and truth
that slip down mountains into sewers and canals.
But one December day the radar shack boys
read the clutter on their screens as a flock of gulls.
They were heavy-bellied gulls, and when
they’d finished, the incense of Oahu’s sacred
and profane rose up to the face of heaven
in columns of smoke and fire.

“We must learn to sing praise and perform vows
as we watch the rock turn green.”
History books with colored illustrations: ceremonies on Diamond Head. But this boy’s clothmaker father beat him there by the log before he broke free. Runs up the slope where it’s Kalakaua now, runs up to find the tabernacle. Contrails leave unreadable figures in the sky, fool’s gold cuts into his feet. But he has been given the gift of future sight, this sudden landscape, so the boy will build the city in a memory chant:
“I have a story to tell you in which I will list the names of all the gods. . .”
The Oyster Monkey Cantos

I

The oyster monkey lived in a town called Windber, Pennsylvania. He made bones from coal, or sometimes finessed the middleman and pressed bones from grass, leaves and the trunks of trees. He wanted the tree of bones inside the flesh to live for centuries, so it could ignite the darkness that runs with blood, instruct the heart to sing beneath the mysteries of light. He cut the bone into coral branches, spelling out the names of all the saints. Like Capuchin monks he made his inner frame a jewel, crypt into cathedral. But the monkey had not fallen in love with death; it was his secret dream to unite the kingdoms of Heaven and Earth. And there below, in the sunless cavern, the mine still burned and the cancer’s dark fire spread beneath the town that caved chunk by chunk into Hell.

II

The oyster monkey once took a train to Atlantic City, tried his luck against the King of Heaven and lost. First he swam out to the Master of the Sea, ten miles or so off the Jersey coast and fifty fathoms straight down. He asked for help against the Heavenly
Father, but the green monarch over legions of fish, squid and the order of submersible dragons refused direct assistance, and instead offered old tanks and surplus howitzers: disfigured, rusty, choked with kelp. When the Master left his throne to call for his ministers of trade and war, the oyster monkey swiped the magic sword, snug in its jade-starred scabbard, and swam back to town. But the Lord of Chance had spies under the boardwalk and informers everywhere, so the hero was doomed. The sword was invincible but the oyster monkey was, after all, only one monkey.

Assaulting penthouse webs of steel and glass, 51st floor, he crossed the bridge between Heaven and Earth. Wires strung from above dangling the King’s golden totem: inverted key, nose buried in stone, and the white animal face smiling like a man. The oyster monkey lunged, screamed delight as he kicked through his martial dance, swallow’s flight along the garden path, then sudden pain as he dropped sword and scabbard, paws curling smoke, and the key burst into a hand of dazzling flame.

The King of Heaven bound the fallen monkey in adamantine chains, sacked him in burlap, directed his lieutenants to stuff the egregious rebel into the trunk of a Cadillac stretch, then down turnpike to half-constructed
cloverleaf; gnarled rebar, spikes, sleeves of wood, where he was poured and formed in the presence of wet cement.

Dawn came, broke through with the rumble into crack of concrete casings; the overpass shivered into eggshell. Out stepped the oyster monkey, looking for all the world like any one of us, except he had more hair, and beneath the hair his skin had turned pure gold. The first light of day hummed over his precious edges as he scampered down turnpike, raised level thumb in the sign of democracy, spoke the password primeval, smiled at passing cars. The oyster monkey learned there are times when even bad luck pays off.

III

The oyster monkey wears polished oyster shells around his neck so when he leaps and gestures beneath the flow of moon they shine and clack as air pours light over his hands and into the water’s dark still table as a sky of pure night and colliding stars collects in the horizon’s bowl.

The night clothes oyster monkey wears cling nervously to his skin; other sentient beings catch glimpses of his inner fire, watch vents of smoke emerge as square miles of flesh are abandoned by their inhabitant ticks and fleas.
Back in Pennsylvania the oyster monkey strolled up a mountainside to search for the dragon. He looked down the crestline ridge and saw the dragon’s spine weave through marsh, the low country of fog, streams and lazy grass where men have chosen to live. The oyster monkey looked up; he knew he would have chosen to ride the dragon forever: teeth, musical claws, eyes shallow and deep as the mountain god’s well, streamers of red, gold, and incredible luck, the monkeyskin dragonskin swallowing both sun and moon like pork-filled buns, sucking up and digesting the ancient explosion of light and dust.

But he returned to Earth. And on the way back saw hill people pay tribute to the dragon with an image of its bones: a ’53 Chevy with neither windows nor wheels, refrigerators gulping sky for water or snow, tires in piles, pieces of a bedframe, springs, a mattress half mulched into ground, an upturned harrow, now married to the hillside. The oyster monkey knew the dragon could be conjured, would rise, flesh out this crippled spine, breathe fire and steam to restore the forest, heal the slash mine bosses had torn through its side. But when the dragon returns vapor to flesh (those idle word clouds men
choose to ignore) and swishes his tail, then men must die. Forgotten worship will reach from their dreams, seize their throats, and prayer will finally come as pure as ancient rain.

V

The oyster monkey drove a protest loaded bus down to Washington D.C. (funky wheels, souped up with joy and painted green) to take on flunkies of the King of Heaven. This time he had more luck. They all sat in at the office of Senator Crunk, parlayed with the Hill’s chief theorist of new brain politics, arrived at formulas to raise Pentagon stone five feet off the ground—then let it drop. But success to the monkey was as alien as failure. He knew the Potomac’s depth, but forgot its name. Reaching through grids of lost memory the monkey tried to rebuild the City from a light-strewn cherry blossom storm, retrace plans that burned in 1812, blew across the land in a eulogy of ash.

VI

The oyster monkey’s favorite dish was oyster sauce chicken: deep-fried chunks of breast meat cooked in a wok with bamboo shoots, water chestnuts, green onion, chicken broth, oyster
sauce thickened with cornstarch and all resting on a bed of steamed spinach. The monkey insisted on this dish at the Festival of the Moon, along with steamed bread and red ginger for luck, and followed by moon cakes. But the Moon Festival came only once a year, and the oyster monkey was restless, so once each month when the full moon came round he ate the same meal (except for the cakes which are baked only once a year) at evening on his porch.

VII

Monkeys are destined to fall out of trees, off horses, dogs, sometimes right off this sailing blue world, and usually smack on their heads. No wonder memory so often fails them, making the same mistakes over and over again. After the fall they apply a balm: snake bones and herbs leached out in whiskey. Monkeys are bright, cunning, the smartest creatures in the world’s twelve year turning, the smartest on Earth, but sometimes too smart for their own survival. Monkeys have been known to be arrogant, but what a keen sense of justice they have. In the street they will lift the beggar from his knees. They live to hallowed age, but die far from the land of their birth and alone. Since the oyster monkey is the monkiest of monkeys, you can guess his fate, but he of course could not.
He went to a hermit to have his fortune
told: tea leaves and the lines on his paw.
The hermit said: “In the shadows of age
you will have prophetic power of speech.”
The embers of his bone tree glowed,
sugar burned, raced through blood and rose
like thunder through the monkey’s skin.
He made a triangle with his arms.

VIII

Nicky Cosmos was starting a theme park
in the reclaimed Florida everglades
south of Miami. He was soliciting help
and ideas from the most creative animals
in the Kingdom. He would fly them down
(all expenses paid) for a conference
and the usual parties, late nights
in the sun, hostesses and so on.
The oyster monkey hadn’t decided
whether or not to go. An unfinished
letter of reply sat in the carriage
of the monkey’s Smith-Corona:
“Dear Nicky,

The Chance you’re offering here
is in some ways too good to turn down . . .”

IX

Next on the monkey’s list was a trip
to San Diego: the Zoo, a journey
for endangered birds, to see them
and hear the extinction of their song.
Searching for that cage or the tunnel
in this absence of light, monkey
among children, balloons and informative signs, stopped before fence-mounted placard (PRESUMED EXTINCT) and there behind plastic a picture of himself—the sad red legend of disappearance. Torrents of fire spread up through stomach around heart to the halo of digits and limbs, and lastly to the everlasting fusion of his brain. Not even the Eight Immortals, with their invisible kung fu, could stand against non-being. But the oyster monkey refused despair, sat before his empty cage, assumed the Lotus and chanted out its sutra, filled universe with his measured breathing. The light between Heaven and Earth increased, fell open to his ears and the monkey heard birdsong, the clear reaching tones of teletype, computer language. It was ecstasy, laughter, an explosion of letters and signs.

X

The oyster monkey entered broken flowers, broken fields. He looked for someone to translate his story to legend, legend to myth, and myth to the things of this world: a blues singer, an improvising fool. He added coal fields, gold mines, dragons and word flight to his life. He sent a dove into the broken flowers, broken fields but it never returned. It joined boardwalks, tea leaves, concrete, moon cakes
and cathedrals of darkness. The oyster monkey entered broken flowers, broken fields to find the music of the search, but the ox had disappeared and the boy and all footprints in those broken fields of light. The doors closed then opened. But the oxherd could not stop to say that a fetus only grows to retell the story of its conception, that the whole tidal wave of mountains, fog, trash and blistered grass has been lost again, somewhere in the next valley, and beyond, stretched out to that gentle sunny plain where words can excavate themselves, then lie empty in the broken flowers, broken fields.
Contributors

About our lives—
what can we say?

We were born, then divorced.
We issued from darkness
through a rosepetal cleft
as cream cheese,
dried in the light,
hardened and cracked into the edges
of teeth, fingers and brain.
Now we talk endlessly
about writing.
LAWRENCE R. SMITH
THE PLAIN TALK OF THE DEAD

"Lawrence R. Smith, in The Plain Talk of the Dead, more than any poet I’ve read, sees and hears the presence of ancestors who are not only European but Japanese, Korean, Chinese, Pawnee, Mexican, African, Hawaiian. His surrealism is necessary, active, intelligent, and American. He opens his reader's eyes wide."

— Maxine Hong Kingston

"A book of wit, imagination and remarkable power . . ."

— George Hitchcock

"Smith observes the world with a multi-faceted eye, like an insect. He shows how narrow and mundane human vision can be. His poems start with the everyday world of Honolulu or Los Angeles or any real place — a hospital, a factory — and project those places into the realm of fantastic conclusions. No reader can escape the buzz of his eye . . ."

— Diane Wakoski

Lawrence R. Smith is the editor and translator of The New Italian Poetry: 1945 to the Present.

Cover painting:
En Rade (At the Crossroads), Max Ernst, 1955
Oil on canvas, (36.4 x 44.2cm)
By permission of The University of Michigan Museum of Art

ISBN 0-9619835-0-7