FEW AND FAR BETWEEN

by

Dick Barnes

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for Pat

Ruby, my dear —
like the red flush in the east
when morning is near
after deep purple fades
and glory is about to appear
in early gold on tip of peak
at sunup, Ruby, my dear

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Introduction

Wherever I open this book, whatever line my eye may light on, I am immediately drawn into Dick Barnes' world. It is of course a world made of language, like anyone's poetry. But it is also a humane and coherent world made of experience, of long and serious thought, of profound feeling, and, always, of the wakeful and generous consciousness of a particular soul, whose song can be heard in every line. That is *not* like anyone's poetry—hardly anyone's. A current flows through it from poem to poem and makes itself felt as much in the syllable as in the design of the whole. It is something that cannot be faked. In the second poem of the book, about a hawk that has been accidentally caught in a trap and brought home by the trapper to be fed and healed, Barnes writes:

> There in his basement, in a hutch built for rabbits,
> it glared at us with its unfathomable eyes,
>
> accepted the dead meat he brought it, even hamburger,
> unquenched. That wildness
>
> is what we can know of dignity.
> We aspire to it ourselves but seldom—
>
> seldom. Nailed to the tree
> Jesus must have been as still as that,
>
> as wild. And I'd say
> that was the right way to be, there.

This is fairly characteristic of this poet's diction, moving easily from *hamburger* to *dignity*, accurate and convincing in every word: nothing for show. (Try to cut a word, or add one, or change one.) When I come to "but seldom," I wonder for a second if the rhetoric is not pitched just a touch too high—but no, that second "seldom" disabuses me immediately. It shifts the grammar slightly—"but" doesn't mean quite what I thought it meant,—and the timing of that repetition across the couplet break makes my pulse jump: it is like an arrow striking home. And who would have expected to find Jesus in this poem, and so justly, such a "sudden rightness." The cadence is equally characteristic, sure-footed, full of little surprises, perfectly adjusted to the flow of thought and feeling. These

poems are all in free verse (more or less "free"), the most difficult kind of verse to write, and utterly unteachable. Every line gives pleasure to the ear and to the organs of speech. Metrical phrases and lines appear, sometimes a lot, sometimes a little, but naturally and subtly, like the rhymes, which are often internal, sometimes assonantal, almost always occasional, but used with telling effect:

> . . . pyracantha berries neither green nor red,
> the yellow poplar still mainly green, the green
> of a gingko dimmed, that will change to bright yellow
> quick as a traffic light, sycamore, ash, persimmon, peach,
> summercanopied yet but with fringes fallen at their feet

My impulse is just to point to poem after poem. The title poem, "Few and Far Between," or "Clearing the Way," with their beautiful place names, Miltonic in their sonority but utterly American, and like honey on the tongue:

> through Essex and Cadiz Summit, great tamarisked Chambless,
> Ludlow for breakfast with the humorous Chinaman, Lee,
>
> Newberry Springs, Daggett and Elephant Butte, Nebo hidden by
> wire,
> on home over the hill to Barstow on the good road.

Or "Dusk Was Falling," Frostian in its sympathy and diffidence, or "Every Man His Own Cross"—a painful poem, but the pain lifted (in Frost's phrase) "to a higher plane of regard."

Or look at "Example and Admonition"—one sometimes sees this kind of completeness and authority in really good metrical verse; in this mode, where one is absolutely on his own, it is a small miracle. Dick Barnes earned the right to work in this mode by mastering the old craft, which rewarded him by refining what must have been a naturally good ear until it was a marvelous one. Not many have it. Listen to the verse of "A Word Like Fire," (for me, one of the most moving devotional poems written by an American in this century). The laws of verse are not immutable, any more than the laws of our country, but like them they are rooted in long tradition and precedent, and only a true poet can change them. But nowadays poets drop in and out of meter at will, or more likely by accident, not recognizing the measure; but ignorance of the law is no excuse. Off with their feet. Barnes mixes free and metrical too, but he

always knows exactly what he is doing. In "A Word Like Fire" nearly half of the 28 lines are pentameters—the two cadences move in and out like silk. I see that I keep coming back to the sound of his lines. It is "pure technique," yes, but it goes beyond that. His heart is pure, he tells us in one poem, and it is—we trust this voice because the rhythm doesn't falter, the words ring true, have the unmistakable sound of truth.

Barnes has many other virtues. His range of interest and subject matter is very wide. I love his poems about the natural world, which he sees with clarity, gratitude, and reverence, but without intrusion. Unlike most poets, he isn't concerned in the least with what we think of him: what he is concerned with is his subject and the art of getting it right—in this, he is like Hardy, and Herbert. And he also does what Confucius thought poets should do, among other things: teach us the names of the plants and animals, and instil respect and reverence for the natural order. Even the phrase "natural world" isn't quite right; as in the Chinese poets, as in his poem about *The Return of the Native*, it is the world of sentient beings, including us. And more than that—the clouds and rocks and rivers are equally a part of it, and they seem sentient too. Not a Peaceable Kingdom, to be sure—just the world, beautiful and cruel. Of course, he sees clearly that unlike other animals we seem not to know how to live in this world very well. Like Frost, he looks at our urban civilization with the canny eye of a countryman and tells us things we might never think of by ourselves, or not in that way, but immediately recognize as true. Gentle rebukes to our blindness and ignorance. Little tales of the ignored, the humble and enduring.

A lot of his poems are about work. Other poets think they know what work is; Barnes really does know, he has been there. He comes from people who worked very hard all their lives, he himself works hard, loves work, and sees its beauty and dignity as well as its tedium without sentimentality or special pleading or humorless resentment. And when he writes about the oppressed and the outcast, it is with passion and understanding, but utterly without self-righteousness; he is not using them for his spiritual pleasure or for cheap vatic thrills or for basking in his own virtue. The poems don't require that you do anything; there is nothing you *can* do but mourn. Call them political poems if you like, but they go far beyond politics. Read his elegy for "Willie Boy." Is there a more searing poem about the misery and tragic fate of an American Indian? If there is, I haven't seen it, though there are many Indian poets and many white ones who have taken Indians for their subject. I can scarcely bear to read it, it is so beautiful and so merciless. The mercy is in the mercilessness. It makes

me think of a little thing called "On a Painting by David Hockney" which ends:

> ". . . There it is
> exactly, my cunt of a life."
> In case you thought it was so easy being
> a Beverly Hills housewife.

Plain American "that cats and dogs can understand," so natural that you might not notice the elegance of the lines (which end with something rather like ballad measure), or the rhyme on that last unaccented syllable that lifts it almost to an accent (as Hardy does with "Stonehenge," the last word of "Channel Firing"). All of this lifts the sorrow and sympathy to the pitch of silence and assent—to a higher plane of regard.

There are many sad poems; how could there not be, in this fallen world, the way we live? There is "Thin Ice," a little parable that gets all "the woe that is in marriage" without ever saying a mumbling word about it. And "Being Up There During the World War"—a kind of vers libre sonnet. And an even better sonnet, "Big Ed," a tough-minded elegy for which the word "sad" is not nearly adequate; it's also sort of funny, and praiseful, defiantly so. Barnes can be hilarious, as in "A Cooking Fire" and "Shoot Out." Who else would think to bring together Niels Bohr and Western movies and make a religious poem out of it, one so oblique you don't realize that your head has just been cut off? Many of his poems are religious poems, but like this one, not so you'd notice; not till you stopped laughing.

Barnes has qualities we have stopped demanding of our poets—a keenly observant eye, considerable learning (though worn lightly, without ostentation), good humor as well as wit, a deep knowledge of life that, even at its bitterest, has not at all diminished a childlike capacity for wonder at it, and the willingness to tell the truth as he sees it, wherever it may lead. And it never occurs to a reader to ask, Why was this poem written?—it was necessary, obviously. And *we* needed it. In one poem, he says, "Wisdom is wisdom,/help is help. Didn't you know that?" True enough, but sometimes wisdom *is* help. Poetry too is sometimes a great help, when it's as good as this.

What amazes me is that a man can write as well as Dick Barnes does and not be renowned for it. As Bum Philips once said of one of his players, he may not be in a class by himself, but it wouldn't take long to call the roll.

I spoke earlier of gratitude and reverence; let me end with that. It seems to me that those are not notes struck very often in contemporary poetry,

and we are the poorer for it. We hear much more grievance than grief, more anger and cynicism than praise, more self-aggrandizement than humility and acceptance. (Margaret Fuller said, "I accept the universe," and Emerson—or was it Carlyle?—said, "She'd better.") This is how Auden put it, addressing his five senses:

> I could (which you cannot)
> Find reasons fast enough
> To face the sky and roar
> In anger and despair
> At what is going on,
> Demanding that it name
> Whoever is to blame:
> The sky would only wait
> Till all my breath was gone
> And then reiterate
> As if I wasn't there
> That singular command
> I do not understand,
> *Bless what there is for being,*
> Which has to be obeyed, for
> What else am I made for,
> Agreeing or disagreeing?

This book ends with a poem called "Bagdad Chase Road in July," and the poem ends with these lines:

> Thank you, rain, for flavoring our jaunt
> with a hint of danger, and for the splashy mist
> when you lashed the desert hills to show
> what you can do when you mean business.
> Thank you, other twolegged bare featherless creature,
> for sharing the jagged horizon of my life.
> Thank you, rainbow over the East Mojave
> low to the ground so early in the afternoon:
> thank you for being here with us.

Yes, thank you. And thank you, Mr. Barnes.

Robert Mezey
Claremont, CA
October, 1994

I: Up Home Where I Come From

A Winter Day Before the War

Hidden a week in blizzard, the sun
came out and glittered on snow; the sky
was indigo. We went out to visit, Mother on snowshoes,
a few of us kids on skis, when the air was so sweet
it made you happy to breathe. We talked with two ladies
on their stoop where icicles shone and dripped
and went around Nellie Smith's gift shop to see
an icicle a foot thick on the north side of the house.
Nobody said that day was marvelous, but it must have been
if it can stand out that clear in the mind, and bright
when so many other days are either forgotten
or marked by something that happened.
A day like that: well, who knows. Maybe any day.

Up Home Where I Come From

Roy Smith ran traps for fur
but a hawk got caught in one of them

spreading its wings, there in the trap
turning its sharp beak toward him

as he came to get it out, its glaring eyes so deep
they seemed to open onto another world in there

and steady: thus the hawk in times past
came to be an image of aristocracy.

One leg hung by a tendon; with his sharp pocketknife
Roy cut it off and left it lay

but brought the hawk home
to feed it til it got well.

There in his basement, in a hutch built for rabbits,
it glared at us with its unfathomable eyes,

accepted the dead meat he brought it, even hamburger,
unquenched. That wildness

is what we can know of dignity.
We aspire to it ourselves but seldom —

seldom. Nailed to the tree
Jesus must have been as still as that,

as wild. And I'd say
that was the right way to be, there.

Later it got well and he let it go,
our hearts leapt up when we saw it

living somehow in the wild with its one leg:
in its life we felt forgiven.

Probably it learned to pin its prey to the ground
and eat there, running that risk.

Risen, that was one thing Jesus did too:
showed he was alive and could still eat.

Every Man His Own Cross

My father wept aloud in the night. My mother
tried to comfort him, but couldn't. O,

the world would have to be intricately cruel
to make him cry like that, cruel in its need

and he alone, unable in the face of it, and don't think
there was anything he could do he hadn't tried:

you'd never find a more unsparing man than he.
"And what about the boy?" he cried out, meaning me:

I was listening dismayed in my bed. I
was a coward, and lazy, and no help, he said.

He put me on his list of failures, or of the cruel things
the world had done to him, that night. And I agreed.

Looking back now, I think he saw me in his place, unspared,
unworthy, doomed to defeat like him no matter how eagerly

and angrily, or even how patiently, and for how long a time
I would try. Like him. And he was right.

There'd be more to say, there will be, but I
would just as soon start from that. I do, still, agree.

Audacity

Joe Henk could use two powder wedges at once — black powder
to blast great discs sawn from a log into smaller chunks.

He'd look around and dodge what flew when the one went off,
finish driving the other, light it, go find the first one, hot,

fill it with powder, cut fuse, drive it, dodge, and so on —
the timing — there seems to be

an everyday audacity to life.
O, anybody's. Life.

Trolling: The Truth by Touch

"If it's a trout, you'll know it.
If you only think it is, it isn't,"
said my father: his delicate foot felt through the lake
holding the butt of his rod as he rowed,
slowly, without any splash, and just at the speed
to flop the spinners over luringly, down there:
trolling over to where we chummed up for the day.
Meat fishermen then and proud of it, or say
we wouldn't have done it just for fun. But
it was fun? Or was it? We didn't have to know
if it was any fun or not. Or cold,
or boring all day keeping the boat dead silent —
still fishing and I do mean still —
and the day it snowed, in the middle of May,
it was hard to numb salmon eggs onto the hook
but the fish were really biting, that day. Myself —

well — not knowing for sure once I towed a trout
clear over from Orchard Bay to Movie Point.
All his frantic struggle to escape that pain in the mouth
could have been just the line tugging at lakeweed
time after time. He felt like a weed clump when I reeled in
the sluggish weight of him, gill flattened, drowned maybe,
and I was wrong again (but I had the fish)

and in spite of being that kind of son,
with that kind of father, I know:
some things you only think are so, are so.

Howard M. Hill, M.D., *An Historical Review of the Status of the Game and Fur-Bearing Mammals of the San Bernadino Valley and Mountains*

Here where the silly antelope outran its life
and the grizzly who had no enemies was impaled on its own ferocity

the coyote crow scrub jay and skunk are doing all right
along with opossum starling parrot and the evertasty filaree.

Strangers adapt, some natives adapt to them.
They say there's no place anywhere now for grizzlies in California

but the black bear since '33, beaver since '45, keep quiet about it,
survive. The gray squirrel has come down from the mountain.

More fires, would be a help.

Clearing the Way

You could say it was work he did for wages
sixty hours without rest when my father
as a young man set out after a storm
to clear the road from Burnt Mill to Fawnskin
in the big new rotary plow, the SnoGo.
That was back half a century now,
a hundred and ninety horsepower engine
doesn't seem so big but it was then:
a Climax Marine, straight six,
and each piston the size of your head.
Compared to what we have today
the whole machine would seem ungainly
and small; and it took more from the men.
He had a swamper, who didn't drive
but wiped the windshield by hand, got out
in the storm to help fit new shear pins
when they broke, and greased his share
of the hundred and sixty points they had to grease
every time they came to a station; there
they'd eat something, too, because
they didn't carry food in the cab. Work!
My dad bundled close to the windshield to see
through a small hole he cleared on the inside
and at night they had what seemed strong lights
to pick out the orange poles sticking up
so as to mark where the road was, under drifts
along Shovel Hill and past Heaps Peak.
The backscratcher clawed down the snow,
the augurs moved it into a fan, that blew
it up in the air, a great plume of white
that fell somewhere far from the road;
they roared on eastward along the Rim of the World.
Then the blizzard came on again, and filled in
the road behind them with winddriven, drifted snow.
See the great blizzard sweeping over the mountains,
snow falling slantwise or nearly level, and somewhere in it
that other little jet of snow blown upward like a spout
as they kept on ahead clearing the part of the road where they were.

Was it work then? Because a road like that
will be covered with snow again some time
no matter how well you clear it, or else
melt clear by itself if you wait for summer;
that's all the work we have, in a little area
we can influence between what won't happen,
ever, and what would surely happen anyway.
They plowed straight through Running Springs,
serviced the truck at Dry Creek, and kept on
past Deer Lick Meadows, the Emerald Inn
where McGlinchy gave them some Irish whiskey
(snowed in there with his pet coon, Oscar),
on past Arrowbear and the Green Valley turnoff,
day and night; Snow Valley and Lake View Point
where they serviced again and went on around
the Arctic Circle, down to the dam at Big Bear
and then along the north shore of the lake
to Fawnskin where they filled up with gasoline
carried over from Pine Knot, three drums
by dog sled across the ice, and then,
since the road had closed in behind them,
they headed back. Sixty hours of that,
the blizzard gave out before they did, that time.
They just kept on plowing in the dark and the sunshine
until when they got to Running Springs
they found the road open ahead of them,
people out playing in the snow, making snowmen,
somebody towing a skier behind a pickup.
They decided to knock off work then, and rest.

Being Up There During the World War

When the attack bomber hit Keller Peak in the storm
it was my dad and his crew that took toboggans up to it
in the snow, on what he called a one-to-one slope (45 degrees):
that may not sound so steep, but when you're there it is.

Ira Vincent got sick, the bodies were so scattered.
The men gathered the parts at a guess which went with which
except for the bombardier, folded over the Norden bombsight.
They took it down still wrapped that way, it was so secret.

The deputy sheriffs kept warm in the hut by the ski lift
halfway across the mountain from where the plane hit.
They were the ones the paper said went up for the bodies.
Well, they did come up to our world from the valley where they lived.

We read that story, and other things the paper said had happened
the same way as usual. It didn't mention granite.

Learning Death

for Bert Meyers

You take a rattlesnake or a bat, they're
quick. I knew a boy who thought
he was a terrific shot when he'd hit one
but I think they'd go after the bullet and hit it.

Nights outside his cabin in the pine quiet dark
with a flashlight beam to bring the bats
or the bugs the bats were after: that summer
the gnats and mosquitos got fierce

and the time beside the trail backed up to rocks
I thought I saw the snake strike:
trying to protect himself that way, without any
legs or arms: then had no head either.

I remember a cracker looking at
one of Ray Folsom's blacksnakes:
he told his son, "They're poisonous, I know,
I killed hundreds of them back home"

but I'd say the cracker was the poisonous one,
if that was the way he had to find out:
poisonous in his mind. He saw a killer
but didn't know it was him

and while it's true that bats have rabies sometimes
I never saw one tangled in anyone's hair
nor had any trouble at all with bats:
thousands of them flying past my face when I went in a cave.

That boy, who thought he had the skill
to keep rabies away, to keep all snakebite from happening,
to keep death far away — he went on and made money
but it didn't help him: he fended off his life

and he still doesn't know how death is
like food flying, or like bad news, and how sometimes
the quick and the brave are the first to get it
while the rest of us, skillful or wary or slow,

take our share of it with us wherever we go
until one day, swerving or lunging the best we can
we'll catch up with something twisting along hot and straight
before we know, and that'll be it.

No fear, no blame any more, just it: as if

a rope of dust twisted a certain way
traveled on end for miles over the hills one day
then came untwisted, frayed finally into a breeze
from the west, and settled down over another part of the desert.

Dusk was Falling

As dusk was falling I came to a cabin:
yellow lamplight fell from its windows
onto the bluewhite snow, and inside
were hospitable people, a man and wife
who invited me "Come in and get warm."
Fire in a woodstove, a kerosene lamp,
shelves of books, that cabin odor —
O, and coffee left over, that I took
in a rustic comfortable rocking chair,
hardwood branches bent to shape
with the bark still on them, and shellacked.
They were on vacation, but as we talked
they let me feel what weight life had
for them, and they felt mine.
Their son had disappeared, they didn't know why;
he started home from college in his car
and was never heard from. It was the Lord's way,
they thought, but couldn't understand. Would I pray
for them, and for their son? I said
I'd pray the best I could for us all,
and lingered there for a while, cherished
in their cabin, a son to their need,
while outside night came on and it got colder.
I had my own journey to go, and it
wasn't getting any shorter;
I believe I stayed about long enough,
so they were glad to see me go
and the cabin warmth hadn't got in me
so deep a few quick shivers
wouldn't shake it away, in the cold.
There wasn't a moon, but the stars were close
and the snow gave back their light;
I could see my breath in the still air,
like a little friend, that I'd leave behind,
again, and again, and again.

Example and Admonition

My father's admonition: when given
a choice, choose the path that
leads uphill, always,

so up we went, but all led down soon after:
our destination Deep Creek, where water had gathered
by taking every downhill opportunity.

We thought of that when the higher path turned down,
but no one mentioned it then, nor ever, in fact, til now.
Two lessons: and though sometimes I feel clever,

and have read the Chou I book all about that water,
I've not forsaken either one. If there be something in a man
that flows uphill, he has to go with it

whatever sweat or humiliation may attend his going.
Done patiently, this is called "matching heaven with heaven."
Otherwise, just strife.

Dream From Last Summer: The Holy Ghost

I didn't know what I was supposed to do,
my act, but I was pretty sure I could do it.

In the back room where it was supposed to be
a deep clear river flowed swiftly:

trout shadow on yellow stone
deep there under water shaped by the same stones

the very trout
invisible in speckled light

II: Few and Far Between

White

A California poppy said, on the Mojave,
You'd be surprised how pleasant it is
to be little like this, and white:
we like it (and have no choice).

Few and Far Between

If only we could forgive ourselves, and didn't
have to have somebody else forgive us —

Where I came from everybody could see anyone coming,
even storms: and out there the etiquette

was not to say right off what you came for when you did
or ask anybody why, if they came where you were

in all space, and time; it made for a kind
of trust, or — well, it was like trust.

I remember some of those storms, how the dust
would kick up before them in the wild wind, and behind it

the blueblack cloud piled high white on top
with lightning flaring inside, and maybe only a few miles wide,

coming over the desert sort of slow and grand:
you could have got out of the way if you wanted to

but nobody did; as I said, seldom enough is welcome.
Didn't I say that? One night when mother was away

my dad and I followed a storm clear down
to Needles in the state car. His job

was to take care of the highway, so it was work, sort of,
for us to ride along behind that cloud we could see by its own light

through the wild fragrance the desert has after a rain
in the lone car on the road that night, to keep track

of the damage it did. He showed me a place near Essex
where a flash flood had ripped out three hundred feet of roadbed

two years before, where it hadn't rained
in fifty years before that. The foreman said so,

Billy Nielson, and he'd been there fifty years
without seeing the ground wet.

My dad and I stopped on the grade below Goffs
and watched the storm go on out of his territory

across the river into Arizona
where the sky was getting gray,

and turned for home as the sun rose behind us
back across the clean desert in slant light

that lit the smoke trees in washes that were churned smooth
where the water went, and sharpened along the edges

through Essex and Cadiz Summit, great tamarisked Chambless,
Ludlow for breakfast with the humorous Chinaman, Lee,

Newberry Springs, Daggett and Elephant Butte, Nebo hidden by wire,
on home over the hill to Barstow on the good road.

On Old Highway 66

Along the way, signs
naming what city folks think is out here:
sage brush, sand dunes: failed businesses

farther on, new lakes
a green golf course
homes with an armed guard

but just beyond that, where the road
swerves up away from the river
between Hodge and Lenwood

where there's "nothing":
bright flowers tiny as birdshot
open trembling to the sky

tortoise holes under the greasewood
hard white clay

A Cooking Fire

Monumentally, the
air: a robin flew . . . a *raven*,
flew over

carrying something in her beak, flying far, far:
this desert is inhabited, if thinly.

She said, I don't care
what you feel
every syllable was true

the saint with trembling hands accepted
from aloft
provision

(from below it looks like destiny, you were
. . . *he,* was . . .
right about that):

worlds against worlds, ready to break through
as I said before or tried to
the lure — bait — tabu — I tell you

the immaterial is real in exactly the same way
the material
exerts

monumentally,
the
air.

To offer city folks another quis ipsos self, another place,
then denature it for their old self sake: a lake, green golfing
custodiet custodios: that vileness can keep us sane.

For example, an armed guard —
you can fire him if he fucks your daughter
if she likes him well enough she can go with him when you fire him
they both ride away together in his dune buggy
you'll have another armed guard then and no daughter
the next one may steal your Lincoln, and so on,
the last murder you in your bed out of sheer . . .

from sheer what, from philosophical motives
he read in a paperback from the rummage sale
your wife worked so hard on to help the Navajos —
the last that is from your point of view, after that
you won't have any armed guard either it will serve you right.
Everything redistributed gradually, the water, the money, the metals;
I too take part in this redistribution which
seen from below is continuous.

On a flat rock
stack the dead growth
from beneath a greasewood bush.
The bright air
shimmers, but in that light
the flame is transparent.
Grey wood, white ash, clean:

"A good fire: no smoke."

Willie Boy

If you were a young Paiute in 1905, and got arrested
for drunken disturbance of the Anglo peace
and the sheriff took your picture in the county jail,
you'd look okay — you'd look about the way Willie Boy did,
inward during adversity, solitary, brave enough;
but if I were a young Paiute in 1909, and wished somehow
to alleviate solitude, and tried to become intelligible,
got a white shirt with sleeve garters, a necktie
with polkadots, a pretty good hat, and even a fountain pen,
then went to a photographer in Banning and paid him
to take my picture, I'd have that blank mad hopeless look,
an expression you see now and then on an outlaw horse,
fierce but drawn back, my eyes the wrong side out.
It's the look of a man who knows nobody sees things his way,
whatever wavering way that might be — knows, and can't say.
Come down the dry side of the mountain, you get into juniper and piñon
pine
then at a certain elevation you see a lone greasewood or Joshua
among the granite boulders — what is there to say about that.
Maybe it was a woman made him feel that way — not that she willed it
but it was his reaction. Let him go, then, let him kill to get her
then kill her too when she can't keep pace in flight over the desert;
hounded down let him shoot three horses from under the posse
but hit one of the men, a white man, in dismay —
that won't make him intelligible. Back in town
the reporters interpreted him to their own community,
"the Beau Brummel of the Indian colony," a suitor
"whose ardor fanned by opposition always disappeared
when conquest was complete" — smug ignorance
to which everything is equally falsely intelligible —
when the blowflies had beat them to it and got it right.
Let the fire have the last word, smoke, stink and light.
Let the metal parts of his suspenders mark the place
fifty years with their name, SHIPLEY or is it SHIRLEY PRESIDENT.
Let the granite boulders keep quiet, as if it didn't make any difference.

Helendale: Waiting by the Mojave River

Beeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee:

A night wreck out on the highway
left one driver crushed unconscious against the horn,

so: an alfalfa farmer got up
and set fire to his barn, as a beacon, for angels.

He'd been listening, as he lay there, for Gabriel,
and thought that horn was his trumpet blowing the Second Coming

all the rest of that night.
Toward morning the barn went out.

Crews came and carried off the wrecked cars,
the hurt and the done for; at sunup

there was only the black smudge of rubber
on the red pavement, charred beams of the barn,

the hulk of a tractor he'd left parked
inside. Red eyed with spent feelings, that farmer,

being up already, went on about his business:
he worked on a fence, and let in the irrigation

still listening just the same. And his one mistake —
or I'd have to say his other mistake — was

he told the insurance agent how it happened,
was laughed at, got angry, had to quit

the Kiwanis Club after a fight, and he felt lonely
until he thought: "Well:

I reckon if Noah could take it, so can I."

The Wisdom of the Pioneers

If a man would go out every morning
and lift up a bull calf, assiduously
lift it every day,
the day would come when he couldn't
lift it anymore, in spite of what they say.
Lord knows I've tried.

A Paraspective

We don't much notice what's quiet with us,
only what changes. But if We change

we do notice what's here, can even see
how far. A lizard told me this, changing

himself from high to low, low to high,
not very high, but high enough, for him.

If we change enough (and we will,
some day) we'll notice everything,

he said: and I believed him.

Bees in the Blossoms

An early bee amid eucalyptus blossoms
took on more nectar than she could carry:

not that it was so heavy, but so cold. Down
fell the bee, where others had fallen,

strewn plentifully over the dirt like petals
or like seeds. A breakfasting horny toad

wears a garland of stingers inside her lip,
she doesn't seem to mind. See how the bees

buzz their wings, to get warm, how they
clean themselves, all over, unload their nectar,

buzz again, to fly, no use, until
sunlight begins to warm them and some do fly.

The Providence Mountains

A man went out on a long run
over the desert. He had a song

to find water — a day's run from one spring
or coyote well to another, dry rock between —

he went out over the desert,
and something went out after him.

He didn't know what it wanted
and he didn't want to know, so

he always made a fire at night
and sang himself to sleep by its light

and he always went on in the morning
and sometimes he laughed out loud

out there all by himself — he acted
crazy sometimes but it didn't matter

he was out there all by himself.
Then one day he didn't find any water.

He knew the song, and the water was in the song,
but he still couldn't find it. Sometimes an earthquake will do that.

That was the night he didn't build a fire either, or sing,
and whatever was following him caught up.

They fought til morning in the dark,
or in the starlight, he didn't look, just fought,

and fought: at sunup he was alive,
he thought, and all by himself,

or so it seemed to him, no creature following,
no water, no fire, no crazy laughter, no song.

Fish Traps on the Low Desert

When the wind comes down between the mountains
it lifts up the water: fish riding the power of the air
go over the wall we made for them
and when the water goes down they can't get back.
This happened for a long time. Then the water went back.

(That is: The great river carries earth down from the mountains.
Arriving at the Gulf, the earth stops and lifts up the river.
Pretty soon the river falls from its bed
Over onto the low desert making a huge lake.
Arriving at the lake the earth carried by the river
stops, lifting it up. One cycle, one thousand years,
right down to 1906.)

A sea on the desert:
jade falling out of the sky:

the declination of the pole, the magnetic
variation: precession of the sky:

we have our own way of reading these things. When they change
we change the way we read.

Thousand Palms Oasis

The shape of the hills could have told you,
their shadow defining them

and wild palms along that fold of the earth
bunched in arroyos that cross it but over the miles

making a line: life
to mark the fault

A ghostly maiden sings at the springs by the ancient pathway
where cold water comes from a seam in the rock, falls,
spreads in a pool, then seeps quietly back into the earth:
a madman and a shaman only could hear her song,

Bill Dodge and Semu: where Wilhelm
proved up when he came back from war

where I crossed the spirit interdiction
safely because my heart, if troubled,

was pure, where I found welcome, am remembered,
do still remember

Alluvium: A Reply

Somewhere two rivers rush together at the foot of a scarp,
meander over a coastal plateau, then down a barranca

the rio caudal plunges into its deep estuary
and huge canyons under the sea. But here

on this nearly level delta wide as the eye can see
streams mingle and separate, some sweet, some brack

some sink under their own silt, are lost in the arrowweed
where a curve of current earlier carved the bank

some dwindle down sloughs under poplar or willow,
the heron's home, some into quicksand, and

nothing is turning out the way you thought it would be,
nothing.

III: A Word Like Fire

On Videotape: Planned Crash at Edwards

When the end came, as the plane hit,
the dummies seemed to come alive —
arrived at that extreme they acted
about the way you or I would have
there, or at some other sudden end
of life. I've seen it happen, and us
get serious and lively, smack up against it.

Cuscuta Californica

The dodder — or strangleweed, angel's hair, or love vine,
hair weed, or devil's weed, the parasitic goldthread —

has little life of its own. No leaves. Sprung from seed,
the first tendril nods along a spiral: circumnutation.

If it doesn't find a living branch within its first extent,
it dies. If it does find life it wraps on and bores to the quick

which is to say haustoria develop; it spreads
over its host entirely and may reach across to others.

The one part of it that withers away
is its connection to the earth. Now the host is that.

She asked merely to provoke my answer, not to take it in,
a habit she has, her way of handling the moment.

Yellow-orange tangles of it all over the foothills:
devil's gut, pull-down, devil's ringlet, hellbind —

you don't have to like it.

Lone Pine Canyon

No doubt it's the rift zone that does it:
you wouldn't be allowed to build houses here

right smack on the San Andreas Fault.

So the chaparral dares, and the bees,
whether an earthquake might happen or not,

and down near Cajon Creek you still can see
the lone pine the canyon is named after

standing alive alongside the foundation
of a cabin that fell when the people went on

some other place. A thing you seldom see any more
in this part of California.

September, 1950

A dance in the dorm at Scripps College
and none of us had Shinola.
Undauntedly, Stone
instead used brilliantine.

We stepped forth to the fandango
our mown lawns of CMC
in the long twilight of late summer.
Grass halms clung to his feet.

Our troops were in retreat
on the outskirts of Pusan;
the tide was rising, rising,
that would propel us to Inchon.

Rich girls in peasant blouses,
the music, the flowers in their hair!
How little we understood, and we knew it
when that awkward, ugly decade began.

Goodbye Big Ed

Little he thought when he hid out in his own house
for the pleasure of stomping burglars enticed by the dark
that he'd die, and die young, and in great pain like this,
thrown from his bike at speed where he broke his neck

and lay five hours on boulders in the creekbed
until death took him at last. Little he thought
about any of it: the preacher was right when he said
Big Ed wasn't afraid to die. Whenever he fought

it was for fun, or a good turn, or sheer pride of life.
See him armed in his undershirt, out in his back yard
the new boulevard had cut through, by the clothesline,
hollering I'LL GIVE YOU SOMETHING TO STARE AT, FAGGOT

down to someone stopped at the traffic light, meaning
no harm by it, really: not meaning anything.

Bill Munsen, An Elegy

He came sauntering along the street where my truck was
at midnight, as if just happening by:

he'd been waiting for hours in the bushes,
it was obvious, said he wanted a ride

to the Rancherita so we gave it to him, but there
he wouldn't get out, begged us to take him on

to Tijuana where he knew we three were going,
leave him at the Long Bar he said.

McClain jerked him out the back of the truck,
slammed into the cab, and said "Let's go" —

Munsen there defiant on the curb, "You think you're
so fuckin smart" — Kirby lost all respect for him then,

when he didn't fight. We went along
that night, played crazy liars' dice in a cafe,

had a good time though McClain came down on me
for my stories in Quixote magazine

because of their sentimentality: a scene
fraught with intensity. I played him chess for my life

but won. Kirby was shaken too,
McClain was both our guru back then.

When I left him off next morning in La Jolla
Mac said "Maybe I'll never see you again."

Munsen killed himself soon after, drove over
the median divider and went out in a headon

which we thought was a chickenshit way to do it,
inconsiderate as always — though the other driver

only had his legs broken, which didn't bother him
much — he was a tough tuna boat captain

Mac went to see in the hospital.
Naturally, he was pissed off.

Near Aguascalientes (Now Palm Springs)

A day so hot nobody wanted to sit down: all afternoon
the troopers stood up waiting in the shadow of their hats.

There is neither East nor West when two heroes stand
face to face, but this was the West. They were friends

but one of them was a hostage. Chief Cabezon had sent
Cahuilla to capture Paiute, two "renegades," so the troopers

wouldn't do it — then every Indian, not just two,
would have become the white man's enemy,

as Captain Wilson
had explained.

Late that night the earth told Cabezon
horses were coming; later the wind brought him a song

that said they were safe, and sure enough
toward morning his brother and men rode in singing

to the ring of rifles Wilson made, in case of a trick,
carrying the heads of two good Indians in a gunny sack.

That was it. They all could go home. Wilson
was generous, gave the Indians the food

he wouldn't need now for his expedition,
spoke to his friend of brotherhood, and meant it:

a good man (as we brotherly men go) who lived between
contending races all his life, survived, and succeeded:

Mount Wilson where the hundred-inch telescope is
is named after him, and a little town

down on the desert after Cabezon —
who also got to keep the two heads.

The Mojave in March

The desert at this season
disfigured by green
what life there is thriving

as it can
tiny white poppies, these
ephemeral grasses, filaree:

to me
it looks cleaner
when it's brown

the rest of the year
rock colored land
in shifting light

and shadow.
As for me
I need a shave,

need not thrive,
I mean
need not to

this penitential season.

Another Part of the Desert

When his fire went out the stars came closer:
he had more company then but it was colder:

little stars, or far, he hadn't seen in years,
scales of the Dragon, ribs of the Bear, the Lion's whiskers:

those elegant constellations! And he like a rush of sparks
flying upward from a log kicked in a campfire

belonged in the midst of them while they all
went their separate ways and flared out or winked out,

he thought; still, it was cold, he couldn't stay there, he got up
and went on by the light of his old friends

slapping his sides like a cock to keep warm
and chanting a song to the rhythm of it, how the ocean

wouldn't make him a beakful of water: Mexican macho cock:
and that felt like a lie, but it cheered him up.

Whenever he stumbled, he said "Excuse me" to the rock
but thought that maybe that dislodging was the right step

in a dance so intricate he'd never catch on to the beat, —
not knowing that all the while his own ribs and whiskers

were guiding stars to multitudes, lit
calamitously or serenely by their own light.

To William Stafford on *The Return of the Native*

[a reply to his poem "Hanging Tough":

All right, I'll ask about home. How is the grass
That lived all over the hills? . . .
. . . But the people I won't ask about . . . .]

I don't ask about the people either. The heath is the hero;
but people are needed for us to hear the storm tear the beeches
while a few yards away it merely gnashes at the open heath,
"waving the furze and heather as with a light caress";
as they go through the stages of human folly, anguish and pain,
their shadows stretch out, contract, swing around through the days
and seasons
so we can know it was a year's and a day's weather taking place
there —
the weather, and the everyday occupations, the yearly celebrations,
and only then the once-in-a-lifetime emergencies of the people,
and the finches, and heathcroppers, miller moths and tadpoles,
shrubs and grasses, all who see or hear or suffer
while the life of the place works itself forever into these
unsanctified pages.

Where We Are Now

Brick without straw — what broke the camel's back —
after all other indignities, one that exceeds.
"You get your self another wetback, I queet."
Plague and pursuit, and then long wandering —
Marah and Meribah — O the bitter springs,

the dazzled shade of a tamarisk in the heat

Bill Burchfield

When they told Bill Burchfield he had lung cancer
it made him nervous so he smoked a lot.

Our hospital room got to be like a bus station
on the prairie in winter, but I didn't mind.

In his youth, in the Marines, he went to China
and Tibet, hunted the Himalayas for blue sheep

on a slope so steep if you hit one it would slide
for miles out of sight, beyond reach, but he thought

the guides would go back later and get them
for their families to eat.

Doctors coming in so smug, cut and drug
is all they know — well, that and radiation.

I took Bill's advice, not to go for the operation
they said I needed. "Some of these guys,"

he whispered to me, "are knife
happy."

A Word Like Fire

The prophet that hath a dream, let him tell a dream
Jeremiah, ch. xxiii

In my sickness I withered from one shape
to another: finally I was a little dry spider.

The doctor put me down somehow into two holes
in the wet sand, and went away. I was to wait there

until I got well or died, when the sand dried
and caved in on me; that would be time for my resurrection

in this life or the other. What is the chaff to the wheat?
saith the Lord, Is not my word like a fire?

saith the Lord, and like a hammer
that breaketh the rock into pieces?

Jeremiah wept to say it, but I find
I still have some eagerness for this experience:

the doctor goes away but the Lord
goes down with each of us into the grave.

That was my dream, and I am afraid
but have taken a dare from Holy Writ to say it

and may the name of the Lord, or his billion names,
be praised, I shall praise them for ever and ever.

I knew what it said, only it seemed incredible,
not anything you'd want to say out loud

in the world, that has its own enervating problems
with their own ineffective solutions, its detestable hopes

that are like hopes I have myself or have had
(they come away like the nail from the quick);

is that what it's like to be naked: nailless, eyeless,
given to visions, aflame: and what a cool breeze then

flows like neutrinos through your empty spaces.
I have felt it like clouds of them billowing through.

This World

That sudden movement will attract
a child to any insect — which (if it
succeed in catching it) it
will crush out: that very thing

unless the child have a wise father
who can fashion a tiny halter of thread
so then the greeny gold beetle will fly and fly
and the child keep it as a toy.

IV: Where A Swallow Cut With Its Wing

Another September

On the gimbals of the equinox everything is about to turn,
is turning: pyracantha berries neither green nor red,
the yellow poplar still mainly green, the green
of a gingko dimmed, that will change to bright yellow
quick as a traffic light, sycamore, ash, persimmon, peach
supercanopied yet but with fringes fallen at their feet,
the crepe-myrtle glorious in bloom, the naked ladies —
when into this falls a fetid rain, chilled here to fall,
and snow on the high peaks, but a summer storm
out of the Gulf — the kind of thing we didn't have for thirty years
but have again now something else is turning.
The odor of it rises from the sidewalk. The light
under raincloud brings all colors to vivid life.

Sturnus Vulgaris

A starling shits as it flies, alights
on a power wire over the street:

spies a loquat in the gutter and
flutters down in a hurry;

that's a starling, always busy.
Meanwhile up high somewhere

a mockingbird has been singing
and singing, that elegant predator;

now it comes paratroopering down
still chirping in air, alights

with a flourish that drives the starling away,
struts around the loquat cocking its long tail:

while the starling, short tailed, hunched in flight,
aims its yellow beak with starling purposefulness

somewhere else, flying straight as if it
wished it were a bullet. And that's not all.

Things like this keep happening all the time.

From A High Elm at Dusk

A curt sweet note made me
trespass across a front lawn
to see the lit side of the bird
that sang it: a robin,

turning its red breast toward
the last light, while cloud
darkened behind it:
R. S. Thomas was right

it is a sharp song.

On A Painting by David Hockney

Why doesn't she object to him
revealing her that pitilessly, her
swimming pool living room
the exact slump of her shoulder
the expensive droop of her sundress
her worn anxious elegant face?
Her stuffed antelope head that looks just like her?
And he such a famous painter
all her friends would see it and
know it. "Exactly. There it is
exactly, my cunt of a life."
In case you thought it was so easy being
a Beverly Hills housewife.

Thin Ice

The father has come to Scripps Pool
to be with his wife and children.

Not to swim: he is in his slacks and penny
loafers; but they all came together in her car,

the blue Datsun. The girls are excited,
one almost two, one three: they bring him dead leaves

from a magnolia. "Did you ever see
such a big leaf?" he asks. "Are you ready

to crackle it?" They do this repeatedly. He crackles the leaves.
The girls remain excited, increasing in wonder

as their game goes on and on. Again
and again they cause him to exclaim

and to crackle the leaves. Having begun it
falsely, he doesn't know how to bring it

to an end. The wife, for whom he is doing all of it,
looks on. She can't stop it either.

Alcohol

The leash taut as a bowstring between them
a man and his mastiff are out taking a walk.

The dog would like to race and ravage and bite.
The man knows all that, and holds tight.

Decorously, decorously, daintily, so
the two of them go. You might say

it's the dog only who has business to do
but the man is in it too. Maybe someone

will say "That's a fine dog you have there."
Someone else no doubt will leave them both alone.

And when he sleeps at last tonight in his cold bed
he'll sleep so tight with the dog there maybe he'll wake up dead.

Shoot Out

Niels Bohr noticed in Westerns that at the draw
the first man to go for his gun was always killed.
The other, who waited for that, was quicker.

Was it because the first man had to decide to shoot,
While the other, just reacting, could take a short cut?
That's what Bohr thought.

When I'd have explained by the plot: the bad guy wins
toward the middle, the good guy has to wait his turn.
That's how you know the bad guy. He knows it too,

and gloats for awhile, then loses his nerve
when he gets hints the movie is about to end.
According to the script. The scriptures. Amen.

But what if Bohr was right? And what if the script
is lost, or not even lost, but just forgotten?
And what if the wind hones the edge of my house?

I'm comin to get you, Tex.

A Meditation on the Desert Fathers: Five Poems

The monk learns from his cell.
It tells him, You're not a monk.

You never see gophers in our town anymore,
nor moles. The good gardeners have ended them.

Looking through a prism at a white wall,
what Goethe saw was a white wall.

She killed both her children but didn't shoot
herself. Her mother: "Maybe she ran out of shells."

Yes, the wind blows a lot out here,
sometimes hard enough to carry sand.

II: The Well Rising

Goethe looked through a prism at a white wall
and what he saw was: a white wall.

That's when the skin began to split —
great snake still struggling to be free.

Any tiny crack in the wall, or even
a bump: rainbows! Or the sky —

"Whenever the slightest cloud appears, immediately
colors appear. The evening star: a tiny colored flame."

And not just Goethe, anybody. And not just
through a prism. Everything is there already.

III: Where A Swallow Cut With Its Wing

The way the wind wanders without a sound
until it touches what stays put, or tries to

and the great tsunami out on the deep
ripples at tremendous speed across the taller waves,

sunlight streams out past us at night invisible unless it
strike the face of the moon, or a planet

and the light from a flower can glare in the wilderness
without changing anything, or it can make all the difference.

As I went out at the front door, I heard the telephone
ring, but I merely went on my way, leaving it ringing.

IV: Movie Review

In *L'Argent* by Robert Bresson the paper bills are a symbol. What they mean is: money. Also the brandy in one mattress, the sleeping pills collected for suicide in another, all the little nasty things traded from hand to hand, stuck away to be kept, all the little tickets and slips and chits — permissions. When their symbolism is finally exhausted, the same thing happens to them as has happened, offscreen, to the actors, who aren't acting anymore, the same thing we see happening to the redeemable among the characters, whose suppositions are abraded until so worn that the human light shines forth from inside. The concentration, the stamina, and the conviction necessary to produce such effects must be tremendous. How do we know who's available for grace and who isn't? It's as plain as the nose on your face.

V: Con Los Hombres A Robar, Con Los Cabrones ni al Agua

She came in naked, for her glasses,
trying not to interrupt this. "I can't help it," she said.

No need to look behind things for a theory.
The "blue" "sky" for instance: that's a theory.

The wounded jay turned toward me, defiant,
threatening with its little black beak.

It was an advantage, coming ahead like that.
Had it been the other way, that would have been the advantage.

No, it isn't any help. Wisdom is wisdom,
help is help. Didn't you know that?

Bagdad Chase Road in July

Within the immense circle of the horizon
only the two of us on two legs
that don't have feathers on. Hello,
horned lark. Hello, loggerhead shrike.
Hello, dove-size bird with black fan-tail
fluttering along the ground, a jackrabbit
would jump as high. And for the vast
absence of our own species,
thanks, thanks, thanks. Not that you
didn't dig the mines and make this road
we're on; but it's your absence
today that earns my gratitude. Thanks too
for the monument and bronze tablet
to mark where Ragtown was, and the railroad
going down to Ludlow, so I can rejoice
they've already all disappeared
with hardly a trace. Thank you sky
for speaking only after lightning. Hello, jackrabbit,
hello groundsquirrel, good luck raven,
I never saw you hover like that.
Thank you, rain, for flavoring our jaunt
with a hint of danger, and for the splashy mist
when you lashed the desert hills to show
what you can do when you mean business.
Thank you, other twolegged bare featherless creature,
for sharing the jagged horizon of my life.
Thank you rainbow over the East Mojave
low to the ground so early in the afternoon:
thank you for being here with us.

Dick Barnes was born in San Bernardino in 1932 and raised in the mountains and desert of Eastern California. In 1950 he went to Pomona College, a mile over into Los Angeles County, and has kept circling back ever since. He teaches medieval literature and creative writing at Pomona, but "you can take the boy out of the country . . . ." He lives in Claremont with his wife Pat and quite a few children and animals.

A first collection of poetry, ***A Lake on the Earth****, was published by Momentum Press in 1982; other books include* ***A Pentecostal*** *and* ***The Real Time Jazz Band Songbook****, published by Il l'a Donc Fait, and translations from the Anglo-Saxon (****The Cotton Gnomic Poem****, Grabhorn-Hoyem), Middle English (the* ***Cloud-author's Benjamin Minor****, Mellen) and Spanish (****Three Spanish Sacramental Plays****, Chandler); in collaboration with Robert Mezey he is currently translating the collected poems of Jorge Luis Borges for Viking Penguin.*

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