

THE CLOCK OF MOSS
by
Judson Crews

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Introduction

This collection, culled from decades of contemplative writings, presents the travels of an anonymous and classical Explorer, moving through the West from primordial to contemporary times. The view is both wide and angular, balanced between sweet and bitter, a response to observing nature's reaction to the progress of civilization. One watches the pristine quality of earth's sanctity falling to the disappointments: this is more the land of Peckinpaugh and Eastlake than of Remington and Fenimore Cooper. Hope and reality are companions in dialogue beside the campfire or on the trails, and chance comrades in the new towns.

In this poet's view, earth alone is safe to trust, the haven which does not betray. His recurrent themes and notations confirm this: the roll of the seasons' weather, snow into rain, sun into nightfall, lives into death or into immortal glyphs on cave-walls—the glyphs themselves discovered, centuries later, to point to the stars' cycles for explanations. Soar of hawks and eagles, scurry of rattlesnakes and fox-brush scampering, taste of green apples and smell of root-cellars, footprints into fossils, a find of white bones near melted wooden dwellings to demarcate lives spent in carving out land into new territories . . . a howl of wolves near moradas. . . . First, a leap into awe, in recognition of the wanderer's outreaching imperialism and the hold of the land on its settlers. Then, bullets, disease, despair and treachery skewing the marvels, and greed snarling the mythos and the dream.

Judson Crews, master of the sensual poem, fascinates the reader in his ability to extend tactile values to earth itself: the landscape's features to be studied and delighted in, as much for the challenges as for the satisfactions. With this book, Crews steps into a rare and discrete pantheon of American poets who have the ability to move out of the mechanized assumptions and back to weather and land as causes of the deeper human responses. Gary Snyder, Galway Kinnell, Charles Olson and Robert Bly often have given us this pleasure and access. Crews writes us into an intense immersion—the sort of transmutation that is not limited to self-as-ego. Earth is described as the wisdom-of-origins toward which one turns for definition and assurance, and then for finality and transcendence. Time and consciousness of the brevity of one's own mortality are the ingredients of day-to-day survival as the Explorer moves through his landscape.

The poems acknowledge Judson Crews' scholarly capabilities in sociology. His Everyman is Woman as well, moving from a central feeling or event as set into desert or mountain landscape, and found later as sepia tintype, Daguerrotype or photogrammetry. As a man more absorbed in

integrity than attracted to superfluous or the occasion, his motive is to become part of the subject in its own time. The pleasure of discovery is accessed through the travails of his characters. We are enabled to enter the adventure.

Carol Bergé
New York City
February, 1983

I. In the Explorer's Hand

I am still as stone

Beside this motionless glass
lake among naked peaks

One high eagle shifts barely
the serenity of his knowing glide

The landscape has altered—
it seems never unaltered

Either in the moment's perspective
or the ether he drifts upon—

The light changes, the air, the shape-
less clouds reshaping always

What may be beneath the lake
of depths—what is only reflection

Upon its glaze. Savages
peer with caution and care

And fear, into the rare quick-
silver surface in the explorer's hand

The clock of moss or else a compass

It will hardly assure you of the time
of day, but everlastingly of what

Directions the winds blew when
there was mist or rain or cold

Weather we would discount accounting
for—the weather of the mind. How

Lichen or moss has massed in
on certain crevices, old bark, broken

Branches. Time has done it, spring
rains—but mostly lightning blasts

Friend of forty years

Still seeking a key
in the walls of canyons

In the land-fault
or the eagle's glide

Though you have not said
give your heart to the hawk

You have called upon
the hawk's image in

A kind of dreaming—his talon
his beak

—perhaps a feather

A kind of knowledge empty as dreaming

We put in six trees, hauled water
to feed them with. That little pond

Played out, found another two miles
on. Then it was gone and we

Were fixing to move on. A cloud-
burst melted our roof in, cut gullies

Carried fence posts away. One dumb
tree put out some new shoots

In September. We fixed the roof. It
was known this was snow country

in the deep of winter

Brighter places—that's the ex-

pectation, what I set out for when I
came here. It's surrounded me

Displaced me—absent though I was
from the outset. A hole in the ground

I got water out of. Shot a wolf eating
my calf. Shot a jackrabbit for stew

Mangy foreigners came in here—
they'll succeed yet to drive me into

a hole in the ground

If I had sorted out all the quietness

Would I have known an animal was
stalking me? Though all the vast

Snow gave no hint of a nuance of
dark or shadow. The vast stillness

Of the air—no aura of odor alien or
—what was it?

An avalanche was suddenly roaring
I was untouched, my eyes

batting away skirls of snow

If it is an objective to strike out what

Has gone before—shut the door but to
see the old snakeskin there. Seven

Rattles was all he had, but a big
devil nonetheless. Moths have found

A way of nesting in his hide. Stinkbeetles
flock out of the adobe in the warmth

Of assured spring sun. Plaster them
up—it's where winter rain seeped through

Among the craggy rocks, among

The rows of protecting spines
the prophecy of flowers, the seed-

Pods beneath them—to replenish
the earth. The great dark ants

Remove them, an army carries them
away, one by one

If the beginning were clear—a new land

Is it a triumph to see what is set out
before you? Fox tracks where there are

No chickens. The armadillo skulking
in his ball of armored shell

A grave-robber by night. You name
the triumph. I will name the villain.

A storm of sand, not like fog—

I know of no yellow or green lantern
light to penetrate it. Diogenes

That old fool, would have a hard time
looking for an honest man out here

Unless he be the devil, in the mode
of a serpent—down upon his belly

That sharp whir is the only honest
declaration I know—the one truthful

utterance I am left to apprehend

White water. Is that where we are

Its ecstatic crashing among
all dangerous rocks, its crashing

Swift torrent. How wide it all has
so quickly become—brooding, dark

and deep . . .

The day's cock of morning

That bird is neither anonymous
nor fragile. His spurs could cut

An old gelding's flanks sharply
if we needed to get to somewhere

In that big of a hurry.
My last pair of spurs

Had some silver on them—sold
them finally when I thought

I needed the cash the most.
When I thought—when I thought

I'm gonna need to eat again
say, three or four days

Guess it is more dignified
to shoot that old bird than

chop his bloody head off

If I had gone quietly into the hills

That day, I would have seen a surrogate
Christ taken down from the cross

Stripped and bleeding. They took him
to the morada in great fear

Thinking he was dead. It was his mother
not his sweetheart who nursed him

Back to life. When he walked again
in his hobbling gait, he swore

He would finally live to see
each Penitente compadre dead

The bones of my ribs are misshapen

As the lines of an old morada
the rites transpired there

Bloody as any. Those broken
old walls desecrated, desanctified

That past somehow annulled—
but not my own. *It* has an earth

To return to, quite its own. Mine
is less sure. I lie down

I rise up. I stare at an old morada
with some envy for inanimate things

It is not Golgotha—it is

A high, dry eminence, Gran Quivira
no savior was crucified here, no

Springs or fountains have gushed up
from who knows where—not even blood

But they lived and died here—birthed
and married. Tilled a little maize—a few gourds.

Not much has ever been known for sure
but there are the high walls of fitted stone

Wall after wall after wall. The dead
were given their own rooms to be theirs

Forever. The living could contrive to
fend for themselves and for the not yet born

The only thing learned for sure
there was no water here for a thousand years

How many crushed skulls they found

In this old ruin. Was it a way
of dying, or was it a way of bringing

Death to others? None of them were
women, none of them were young

Was this a selfish wisdom they had
learned—or was it a generous one

Snake-skins as well were found
in their burial baskets—they knew

Secrets deeper than any
I have known

He was walking sideways on one leg

Careful not to step into the gutter
an old shaman who had once been

Known. This is the way
he had practiced his craft

For years. If it was frontier times
he'd have been
still-born

What goes on inside

Their heads? It was not
the caftans they wore

It was the big hit they
seemed to be making

With these school-boys
—this was not the Levant

This was the pueblo
there atop Paloma Mesa

Who could imagine it
was only the chewing gum

they were handing out?

He was drunk. Not on

Booze—on piss and vinegar.
Some piss an old squaw

Had issued just to poison
the spring. The vinegar from

A sour apple the wasps
had stung. They had his scalp

He married her daughter. Whelped
half-breeds for thirty years

It was assumed a God-head

Decided to get involved
to intervene. It was two Indians

And a white man. And a child
from nobody knew where-from

There was a rainbow that circled
the whole sun. No rain

Between a white man and two
Indians and a child—their old car

That broke down, radiator boiling
two flat tires, a busted axle

A rattlesnake bit three of them.
When they found the little girl

Tania was sleeping, her braids
in tangles, her britches soiled

It's the Sly-Wolf-Fart, that huge

Mushroom that grows along the way
near the Lawrence ranch. Red Fox

Was the name the Indians gave to him
in admiration, or derision—who knows

The Michaelmas daisies grow tall
each with a thousand blooms

Climbing

To the petroglyphs over shale
and half-melted snow

Though the sun is bright
and the day is warm

I am thinking that I
cannot even read "buffalo"

A few cow chips mar
the way

I cannot read "holy" or "squaw"
an "arrow" may be the direction

Of the wind. But every one
knows "rain cloud"

Vultures float high
and quietly

Their language only
clear as my own

II. Landscape with Figures

This view of things was

Through my own glass, I must say
which is not to excuse totally

The distortion I must assume existed
—existed if we are to give credence

To most other accounts. My memory
of her, that green belly, and

Those high tits—The Tetons, I want
you to know. This was no teen-

age girl I was lusting after
what in hell? It couldn't be

Ease or comfort—was it a place
ultimately to deposit my bones?

In Texas we got persimmons

This is what she said, standing in
water just at her breasts—those tiny

Little boobs. Thirteen you might think
she was, but eighteen was more like it

They are up there until the frost turns
them to sugar. I know. I said

What you got in Texas. Man
and boy I was Texan for three

Decades. This was at Llano Quemado
the Taos hot springs. Likely, the first

Time she was ever naked in front
of a stranger. Texas. Girls, girls

Some of them are girls forever, no matter
how they grow. The leaves are gone

She said. And they are sweet as sugar
—but you have to shake them down

Through all the San Joaquin Area

All the blazes roaring—though I never saw
them all the day, tons of billowing

Smoke. As night came on I was aware
of the kinds of infernos raging undenied

This is not what rounds my memory
off. I chased smoke for many months

It was only the finding of fire that mattered
—when I found it, those dear girls

Those fine girls. It was sure to be
soon that I would put it out

We ate green apples and heaved

Green spew—we never believed
we would ever be dead. We

Never believed the clover would wither
that autumn would come and surely

The winter. The girls would be *women*
NO—we had never expected

If we had trailed the quail
if we had found the sipwillow

Instead, their menses came
and now they were seeking lovers

How bright the morning sun is, penetrating

The dull panes of the small windows
into the cabin—nearly too much even

I calculate the few shrivelled sticks
of summer sausage, several buttons of

Garlic left of a long plait, some scrawny
nubbins of ear corn, no good for seed

Make hominy, wipe your butt with the cobs
Small icicles outside the window

Drip—about the speed of a turtle's
pulse. Big ones, touching the ground

Glisten with the ice-melt on them
That taut, scrawny-assed thing near

The stove, moving as if she was damned
if she would let me hear her move

She is not going to
thaw out very much

His hat was on straight as he approached

The door. After they entered the room
they went into, she was quickly only in

A thin green slip sort of thing—a slip
She turned her back, squatted on the

Chamber pot and urinated—pissed. Her hair
now wet—it spotted darkly the thin

Fabric of her shift. Had it been necessary,
he thought. She knew who he was.

Had it been only to provoke him—
that spot would be there in his mind

As he addressed his Congregation on
the Sabbath. They are a menace, pigs,

he thought. I'll have to marry

Then the children came, scattering

Roses—primroses. How symbolic
—who had been responsible for this

Act? No one, no one. The children
in their innocence, had gathered them

Themselves. The bride, in perfect
white, low-cut, front and back

The cleavage of her ass plain as of
her tits—the lace frothed as meringue

Inviting appetite. This was no frontier
town—not since sixty years ago. She

Was no ex-whore. The thing was, her
old man had a load of money. But--

She was worth every cent that he was
worth. This she would make plain

It's waking. You
awoke me. It's bright

Sun. And as far as the eye can see
it's a wedding day. Not to a bride

To the earth's birth. To birdsong
to the rainbow in a cloudless sky

Epithalamia. You are hissing in
my deaf ear—dreamer, dreamer, dreaming

Those spines

Of the prickly apple
following
 the intricate
light, spelling out
a quarter east and a quarter
west
 three-quarters left
and right

The light has not stripped
you naked

 the cloud-like
puffery of many petticoats
is where you're at
a neat little silk ribbon
bowed
 at your breasts' cleft

You look me straight
in the eye
as you slip the knot
as if all
 the intricate spines
would fade

Sleeping, your own needs possess you

In every part. Waking, my desire hovers
stymied—will neither strike nor prey

Your legs are parted slightly in child-likeness
the slit is almost childish—like some

Young girl's where the hair has barely
begun to grow. But the lips are thick

In softness, gape slightly. Pink shows
a thin segmentation like early dawn

Your mouth tremors slightly almost as if
to speak of desire's name, is still again

That sliver of pink has a moist luster
speaking—what is thy name

Childbirth. What do the scriptures really

Tell us of Mary's plight? Unlike,
was it, in this prairie hovel of mud and wattle

A woman's screams that rent the paper
panes. It breeched. Alone she cursed

The fool husband. Finally, late, late
there with a neighbor woman to her aid

Was it dead or alive—it was blue—
black, or blue. It finally breathed

Its wizened gasps, that seared its lungs
breathed its world into existence

The blood is everywhere—and now
a half-tub of her guts on the kitchen table

The scroungy maverick heifer in the breaks
had a better time than this, her

Bull-calf, half out her ass, wolf-devoured
and she bawled, crazed, with engorged bag

Her teats weeping tears of milk and blood.
Did God presume to give a better time than this

When he presumed He'd be man
born of woman

A widowhood in heeding wonder

Grubbing in the root cellar—carrots
turnips packed in sand; apples, tomatoes

Deep in wheat straw. Eggs, sowbelly
in a chest of salt; pickles, sauerkraut

In crocks of brine. Spiders have found it
a good place too—as well the outhouse

Black widows, black widows. Think—
once in the canyon coyotes found

What turned out to be, the coroner
said, a thighbone of a human man

She found her heights in

The heights of the bleakest craigs
even an avalanche was not

To change them much—sun nor rain
nor deep snow. How cold she had frozen

Once in a slumber of seven years
an avalanche or two she had weathered

She had found heights few had found
—neither was she grandmother nor mother

Nor even wife. The heights she had found
were ultimately her own

lichen the sun could not subdue

If she had spoken, if I

Had spoken—that face of evil
that had fallen upon that place

The fear that had chilled us
each. She was a faster draw

Than I, but a poorer aim—
I was oozing blood from the left

Testicle. But she was dead.
What could she have been doing

In such a place—naked with a
bandolier and a six-shooter

You would know it was out
West. You would think it was

The old days. You wouldn't think it
was She, holding out the apple

She came out in black little Spanish

Dancing shoes, her heels beating hell
up from the floor—a cascade of red

Tip and toe, sheer billows of
satanic smoke. What a crown of jet

Curls flounced as she whipped her head
far down, and down, and regally erect

Whipped her shoulders forward and up
her knees churning staccato—again, again

Suddenly, stock-still—a thrash
or whirl of wings or feathers is in

The air. A raven alights upon her
rigid wrist. Queenly, she promenades

Naked of thigh and buttock, she
exits the stage

God, the idiotic plaints

I put to you, not even sunset
I climbed the tower to take

A last look. No fires you could
light a stale cigarette butt with

I knew you would take off
your garter belt and hang it

Somewhere I could see it
by the time I got back down.

Sausage and eggs, big boy
you said. Get a fire going

So it happened you got a wood-tick

Imbedded in your genital pelt. You never
noticed, till he was sucked full

Of your blood, and began to hurt—that
loathsome thing black as a blueberry

How ashamed you were and loathing
as if he were an unchosen rival lover

Leeching upon your intimate self
I screwed him out, careful not to

break off his head in your tender
flesh and make a festering sore

It was only after I threw him and
shattered him and splattered your blood

Upon a rock—that I knew
my true feelings. Then I observed

For days that dark star, and questioned
myself, Am I not he

She hated rattlers. Does it matter

She identified them with male sex?
She swore she'd shoot a hundred if

She got a single one. Gutsy, she stripped
to bandolier and holsters. She shot him

Twice, it looked like. He leapt and struck
her left breast—how near her heart

I gouged with my bowie to try to
suck the venom. No good—

I got her to the coroner, still naked
swollen, black—and a gaping wound

DA preferred charges, made them stick
I got 30 years, served nine

What matter
—she was dead

You clasped your hands

To your breasts, if that
is what you could call them

It was God's supplication. God
damned. Those little warts

That suddenly became pig's eyes
topping two small eminences, long

Since collapsed like hound dog's ears.
You were not my auntie, nor

My granny—at whatever distances
removed. I knew what you were

An old, black whore—out of business
forty years. *No harm anymore*

They drove them out

Of town, down to the edge
of the mud flats. However

Bad the need for them surely
had been and still was

Did it matter this much?
They had been called whores

And that is what they were
still called--
but it was the beginning

Of a change of sorts--a few
of the young high-school

Girls were already beginning to
learn to "give head"

It's not that she led me on

I was a fool for asking, where are we
going—we were gone. We?

I was there alone. I could tell you
the awe I felt, the vista and all

Its mystical receding planes
but it's not so—I was numb

My wonder was a deeper wonder
why was I brought here

How will I seek a way
of turning back

There were other places we had

Cleared out—of soft fern or clawing
brambles. Lain there a time or two

Going back, how strange we found them
foreign as it were—though unforgotten

If we went deeper (we did go deeper)
we found what we could never tame

Clawing wildly even as before the cave
of human dawn. Your blood came soon

When the moon was high. You were
pensive, finally in a rage. You broke

The thatched cage of the captive eagle
you cried angrily, he would never tame

How clearly we entered the forest

Every time an unfamiliar trail
though it was almost as if

We knew it. You found something
you thought familiar. Or else I did

Then suddenly you were screaming
suddenly you knew we did not know

any direction out

Returning to Taos, after many seasons

Refusing to renew the unction of breathing
sharply in upon the air, to tackle

The bridle holding bay the central total
I sought the powder-maker's small

Purchase of survival, whacking sticks
in a small pile, reading them over

In an *I Ching* fashion, under the stars
of that high heaven as smoke curled up

The sharp frost came in upon us early
the woman poking me, saying we had to get

Up and go—she couldn't stand the cold. We
traced a trail I seemed to know before

Professionally, Judson Crews is a sociologist and psychologist. His vocation, however, includes literature. He began writing poetry and editing, publishing, and helping to print and distribute "little" magazines while completing a B.A. in Sociology and English (1941) and an M.A. in Sociology and Psychology (1944) at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, his birthplace (1917).

Crews left Texas soon after completing his degrees and serving in the Army Medical Corps (1942-1944), residing for varying lengths of time in settings as diverse as Big Sur and New York City. In these years, he added the visual arts to his literary interests, becoming known in avant-garde circles for his accomplishments in both areas.

With a major exception being his residence in Zambia, Africa, in 1974-1978, Judson Crews has spent most of the last three decades in New Mexico, Taos in particular. The literary magazines that he has edited, printed, and published during his residence there, including **The Naked Ear**, are seen as significant examples of that kind of periodical. His own writing has appeared in numerous publications. Collections of his work can be found in the archives at Yale, the University of Texas, and UCLA.

Ahsahta Press

POETRY OF THE WEST

MODERN

- *Norman Macleod, *Selected Poems*
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- Women Poets of the West: An Anthology*
- *Thomas Hornsby Ferril, *Anvil of Roses*
- *Judson Crews, *The Clock of Moss*

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- *Leo Romero, *Agua Negra*
- *David Baker, *Laws of the Land*
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*Selections from these volumes, read by their authors, are now available on *The Ahsahta Cassette Sampler*.

