SELECTED POEMS
by
H. L. Davis

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Some of these poems were previously published in H. L. Davis' ***Proud Riders and Other Poems*** (1942). Some of the poems first appeared in ***American Mercury*** (1926) and in ***Poetry*** (1919-1933); some appear for the first time in this volume.

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Introduction

Beset by illness, nearing the end of his life, H. L. Davis wrote a number of polemics wide-ranging in verse form, among them "Stock-Taking," January 7, 1959, an inventory of his poetic intent and disapproval of fashionable trends poets were favoring.

Whether "Stock-Taking" is a poem or essay, or a mingling of both, is beside the point. It does illuminate the workings of his mind.

I'd go beyond "Stock-Taking" to try to nail down the vital essence of his poetry involving man with external nature. Nature is never decorative, never stage setting. I can open his poems at random and find luminous transfusions of life into nature and nature into life recalling primitive metamorphosis. The entire environment is animate but you'll look in vain for pathetic fallacy.

His knowledge alone of the flowers, the trees, the birds, the beasts, the winds and waters, sets Davis apart as a superb ecologist unique in modern letters and, more significant, as a naturalist of transitoriness, that overpowering mood of whences and whithers without which, in all times and places, poetic effort falls short of enchanting truth.

Through these intermingled energies Davis brings into stereoscopic reality the agonies, passions, follies, tragicomedies, hopes and frustrations of life with such low incandescence you hardly know it's happening.

I'll venture no farther in this direction. Under no circumstances would I undertake critical explication of any poem in this book.

How he railed against explication by "intellectualoids," as he called them, merchandising each other's reputations by "stud-book" ratings of poets—proclaiming why this or that poet was better or worse than somebody else.

I respect his attitudes toward ratings and respect my own conviction of how high he stands and will stand in American letters and of his influence on other writers. Prior to Davis, Western literature was still devitalized by inbred romanticism—a lingering echo of the Romantic Movement in Europe.

He loved the frontier and shifted with it as a frontiersman of the human spirit. The frontier might be the Tennessee of his great-grandmother, the frontier of his native Oregon, it might be Mexico. The frontier was always where he happened to be—people groping into tomorrows they couldn't be sure of but with pride and self-reliance.

Davis was a lone man, inexplicable in so many ways. At a time anything he wrote could have been sold profitably to prestigious publications he would write column after column for nothing in ***The Rocky Mountain Herald,*** Denver's obscure little weekly published by Helen, my wife.

His variety was astonishing. He could recite poetry in six foreign languages including Greek and Latin and would branch out into medieval Mohammedan philosophy as easily as if he were throwing a diamond hitch on a pack saddle.

And what a musician! I thought he was pulling my leg when he told me how many songs he knew by heart—hundreds of them—but I soon learned it was plain fact.

One evening at our cabin at Brookside, when my mandolin bogged down on the "Elysian Fields" ballet in Gluck's "Orpheus," his guitar went right ahead with both melody and accompaniment.

His repertoire included the classic composers and he particularly enjoyed "cutting loose," as he put it, on Pergolesi, Boccherini and Vivaldi, and sometimes he'd come up with obscure Basque and Nigerian tunes.

He enjoyed pipe-organ analogy in poetry: vowels, the open sounds, bumping up against the consonants or stops. These events within the line are common in his poems and poetic passages in his novels.

In conclusion, I'd wander far afield were I to suggest that H. L. Davis was a famous American author nobody ever heard of, truly a ridiculous idea, but I cannot forbear mentioning some sad and absurd happenings of his last days.

On October 17, 1960, Bettie, his wife, called me in Denver from San Antonio, saying they were snarled up in red tape at the Border. The Davises had been living in Oaxaca, Mexico, and had decided to return to this country, but the immigration bureaucrats were not about to admit any illegal aliens.

Who was Harold Lenoir Davis? Did anybody know anything about him? Had he been born in the United States?

I dutifully filled out State Department form DSP-10 in Denver and gave my solemn oath that there really was such a person as Harold Lenoir Davis, born in Oregon, etc., etc.

I produced evidence that he was a famous American author [Davis won the Pulitzer Prize in 1935 for his novel, ***Honey in the Horn***] and sent the form to Bettie, air mail, special delivery, October 18. This was his 64th birthday. My letter included some "happy birthday" nonsense. He suffered a heart attack on his birthday and did not recover.

Read the poems. Read them aloud over and over. They tell you who H. L. Davis was and is. If you are sensitive and deserving, they'll tell you a good deal about who you are.

Thomas Hornsby Ferril
Denver, Colorado
January, 1978

I. Published Poems

Note:
Dates on these poems indicate first periodical publication.

The Valley Harvest

Honey in the horn! I brought my horse from the water
And from the white grove of tall alders over the spring,
And brought him past a row of high hollyhocks
Which flew and tore their flowers thin as his mane.
And women there watched, with hair blown over their mouths;
Yet in watching the oat field they were quiet as the spring.

"Are the hollyhocks full bloomed? It is harvest then.
The hay falls like sand falling in a high wind
When the weeds blow and fly—but steady the sand falls.
It is harvest, harvest, and honey in the horn.
I would like to go out, in a few days, through the stubble field,
And to all the springs—yours too we have known for years—
And to the bearing vines, and clean the berries from them."

Call, women!—why do you stand if not for your pride's sake?

But the women would neither call to me nor speak,
Nor to any man not mowing during their harvest.
They watched with their hair blowing, near the stalks,
In the row of red hollyhocks.
Quiet as the spring.
What is by the spring? A bird, and a few old leaves.

April, 1919

Flags

In the wind the flags, which here are called irises,
Snap and blow ragged all along the street.
They are of three colors, yellow and white and blue.
At this I am pleased as a man who sees strange ships,
For the reason that in the country I recall
We had not heard of any but white flags.

There the white flags grew in a damp level place
Where jonquils were, and daffodils and lilacs,
And small cool roses, and hands of locust blossoms,
And heavy-headed peonies, and a red flower
The women called red-hot poker, loud as a bull-rag.
These flowers growing together in tall strong grass.

Sometimes the swallows flying; sometimes rain
Came over the tall grass, and the small red rose
(Its flowers as yet watched for) shed off the dust.
Sometimes it was windy, and the flags blew out;
Or hot, and the jonquils under the lilac bush
Built out in beauty like a clear warm river.

My pleasant thoughts build in colors and graceful shadows
For this flower-garden: flags the color of far waters,
White locust flowers in the rain, young flowers in the grass.
Play up a tune, sing loud and handsome, O soul!
The garden abides, it is not like love, nor the song
Where some lost girl brings honey in the horn.

April, 1919

My Step-Grandfather

My step-grandfather sat during the noon spell
Against the wild crabapple tree, by the vines.
Flies about the high hot fern played, or fell
To his beard, or upon the big vein of his hand.
With their playing he seemed helpless and old, in a land
Where new stumps, piles of green brush, fresh-burnt pines,
Were young and stubborn. He mentioned the old times
As if he thought of this: "I have marched, and run
Over the old hills, old plowed land, with my gun
Bumping furrows—oh, years old. But in this new place
There is nothing I know. I ride a strange colt."

"You know old times, and have seen some big man's face:
Out of the old times, what do you remember most?"
"General Lee. Once they called us out in a cold
Plowed field, to parade for him. He was old with frost.
I remember our style of dress; my dead friends last long
(I would have thought longer); and there were peaked women
Who watched us march, and joked with us as they were trimming
The green shoots of wild roses to eat. But these with me
Lack what the other has—they are not so strong.
And lost battles?—I would be prouder starving in rain
And beaten and running every day, with General Lee,
Than fat and warm, winning under another man."

Alone presently, I laid myself face down
To avoid seeing the field; and thought of how the book
Describes Esther; and imagined how that queen might look,
Preferred for beauty, in her old fields red and brown.
"I am like my step-grandfather," I thought, "and could
Follow whatever I love, blind and bold;
Or go hungry and in great shame, and, for a cause, be proud."
And I came to work, sad to see him so old.

April, 1919

Oakland Pier: 1918

I had a bench in the shadow, back from the arc light
Which burnt in the engine smoke like a coal, and colored
The men's faces red, so they seemed inflamed with excitement;
Sometimes all the engines would charge near me, with a noise
Which shook the orange-stand there, moved the piles of dark-red oranges.

I was sleepy with the cold of the winter and the past midnight;
Half asleep I heard the water of the bay; and a man's voice:
"I remember, in China, when this army was there,
Eighteen years ago, a Captain Abel was worse.
He did not die, either, but went home as you are going."

And the young soldier: "What did I say: kill?"
The sergeant seemed not to hear him, talked on as an old man will
On some subject he has thought about: "I was no recruit then;
I have soldiered for twenty-nine years, in every country.
That is longer than you are old. You'll go home, and be like
That man with the oranges. Marry, buy land, do well,
And I say nothing: but do not tell me of soldiering.
Talk of hog-killing, farmer. I am old now,
And still quicker than your people."
"Yes, you are a sergeant,
You have better treatment. It is all officers with you.
You have soldiered twenty-nine years: they consider you more.
What do you know of my people? They are quick too—
What is this to talk about now? You are too old;
And I shall be home in two days, as good as an officer."

As the men were silent I heard the gulls following a ferryboat,
Or flying in the dark somewhere; and when they ceased crying and turned
Back into the bay, their wings sounded like leaves
Blowing from poplar trees down the road.
I thought: "Only gulls;
There are the engines, the red-faced men; this is Oakland Pier.
I am tired now, shall I ever be sorry of the quietness
Of the roads in light snow, the thin grass covered and cold?"

April, 1919

Stalks of Wild Hay

I can shake the wild hay, and wet seed sticks to my hand.
The white lower stalks seem solid. Yellow flowers
Grow in the sun, with dog fennel, near apple trees.
White petals carry to this water. So plants breed.
But I, the man who would have put up his life
Against less pleasure than yours, against your black hair
And your deep mouth, ask that no man my friend
Find me in this wild hay now or tonight
To remind me how worthless this was which was so dear.
It is late for me to see grass-stalks my first time,
And for this trouble of spirit to come to an end.

June, 1920

Baking Bread

Red berries are on the bent stalks: these turn to the sky
That might be a pond of water. Geese come all day
In long squadrons which make no shadow, to the wild grass.
Silver-poplar leaf foxing in the frozen stalks,
A white blaze in this old garden, what poplar grove
Was that where the three women worked baking bread?—
Where they began at morning, by their fire under the wet boughs
And laid the loaves in the sun?
So one of these women came
From the bread-board, and a little into the grass,
And braided her dark hair again with cold hands.
One came loaded with dead wood close to the fire
And leaned, pulling her dress tight at the breast, to warm.
One was laying out loaves—two women at the fire.
I saw between them the leaves start along the wind's lane,
And heard leaves like spray on the white trees, and saw the stems,
And low branches, which break in winter, bend and draw down.
Boughs drew between our eyes and the fire, eldest daughter,
That the blaze blew apart like leaves. She said: "Wind again,
To chill us, and to shake leaf-water over our bread.
This is our third month: and what have we to show
When the men brag that they have cleared so much ground?
The bread even tastes bitter of the poplar stems
That blow wild; look, this is spray from the river
On my hands and hair; the fire is blown out.
I am tired of cold and wind, and wild geese, and this field,
And of trimming fire and hair to suit the wind."

And said: "We'll have a house, and pleasure, when the grain's in,
And when all this has lost me the use of my pride."
And like river waves, heavy across the frozen beach,
The hair was heavy which her hands lifted; and her mouth
Had no color; and there was spray upon her face.
By now surely that woman is either old—
Or dead, more likely. Yet in pity of her pride
The mind stirs uneasy, as if she this day
Stood by the field's edge braiding her hair, and gazed
At the fire in wind, under wet poplar boughs.

June, 1920

The Threshing-Floor

See, in a dead vine,
How many blackbirds are swinging—the lives there
In vines and in dead leaves that need no help of you.
Rein your horse into the salal, young man, follow down
The clearest ground, this frosty day, to the threshing-floor.
Red is women close together in the broken weeds,
Watching the horses: red dresses and blue,
Thin cloth of early-day dresses spread among the burrs.

Yellow is where the threshing-floor is, and horses' hoofs
Beat the grain-heads into chaff; and cold wind
Strews chaff over the bushes and to the eyes.
Women call to the horse-driver, and laugh out
At the man behind the horses who catches the horse-droppings
With his hands to keep the grain clean.
And, crippled old man,
You shake in this cold wind, yet have come out-of-doors
To see your grain threshed again: under the sky, clearer
Than a beach, you standing shaking, and face the chaff with red eyes.

I fork a horse on the hill above the threshing-floor.
Driver and bundle-handlers, the ones in red dresses,
I must lose none of this; because men I have known
Are less simple, or are secret as birds in vines.

June, 1920

To the River Beach

Let me go now, now that from grown alders leaves
Have torn loose, and go flying close to the sand
Along the black river-water. White rye-grass bends
Under the wind, under the sky, toward water
Where the pheasants feed, hiding; and the few willows,
With dark alder leaves caught in them, join and part.
I have not seen them for so long I see dark mouths
Black with juice of berries, and I remember the children
Who ran shaking the tall rye-grass. So they run
And scatter as if caught in the wind, gathering
The last beach fruit, late ripening, which they can save.

June, 1920

In This Wet Orchard

"Others came in this wet orchard," I say. "Years ago
There were many like the tall woman who comes now,
Avoiding with her head the low swinging boughs;
And they kept the weeds cut better." Noise of waves;
Wind running through the tree-tops; the speed of salt-tasting
Wind parting the boughs and weeds about her knees.
I begin to say: "I lived in this place all one year
Before I was grown; and you were that one of them,
The girl nearly grown who stood beside the weed fire
In only a blue dress, and that dirty. The wind
Wrapped it on your body and wound it like fire,
Like a fire in grass. You were that one who cried
That she was eating wind. You had a red mouth,
You had a red mouth, your short hair wound over your face
As the flame did around your legs. Thin girl,
Sharp-voiced in the smoke, screaming loud as a hawk,
'The smoke follows the beauty!' There was a young man
With you, I forget his name."
"Are you that brother,
The little boy who lay bellied against the grass,
Staring and staring at us, and at the sky
Where birds climbed and looked down? When we left the fire,
You turned your face to the wet grass in the ditch,
And whispered, 'Like, like, like.' You would take more words
Now, to describe us."
"Yes, or no words at all."
"Well. The waves yonder, the wild crabapple trees
Bring that time to mind quicker. Coarse broad-blade grass,
The cut-grass with three sides, the wild cheat-grass, white
And all broken, with its seed shelled. The tracked ground
And leaf stems marked my hands and arms; the windfalls
From the wild crabapple trees; a young thorn-tree
Which I tasted the bark of. Taste of salt, the sun.
I could eat the wind then, and salt water. I wanted no fire,
For running in the sun warmed me. No friend need
Ever put a hand on me. I was the beauty.
The young man who is dead could have told you."

Then I:
"I remember your face better than your sisters' names.
The tall girl in the wind of that fire."
And she again:
"Yes. If I die here, and hang on a fruit-tree
To scare birds from my orchard, you'll go under me
Thinking that girl died years ago; remember her
Thin legs, wind in her short hair, her shrill voice,
And go between these trees saying, 'Dead so long,'
As if she had never grown, for lack of you.
Look at me. This is my orchard; and these are her hands;
My mouth is the mouth you remember, red or not red."

Let it be, until she has gone; but I know this:
That you can come to this orchard, O thin girl!
I have seen you run here, and seen the wind burn your face
And burn your young mouth, and blow your dress like fire.
And your spirit passes me when I desire.

June, 1920

The Rain-Crow

While women were still talking near this dead friend,
I came out into a field where evergreen berry vines
Grew over an old fence, with rain on their leaves;
And would not have thought of her death, except for a few
Low sheltered berry leaves: I believed the rain
Could not reach them; but it rained on them every one.
So when we thought this friend safest and most kind,
Resetting young plants against winter, it was she
Must come to be a dead body. And to think
That she knew so much, and not that she would die!
Not that most simple thing—for her hands, or her eyes.

Dead. There were prints in the soft spaded ground
Which her knees made when she dug her tender plants.
Above the berry leaves the black garden and all the land
Steamed with rain like a winded horse, appeared strong.
And the rain-crow's voice, which we took for a sign of rain,
Began like a little bell striking in the leaves.
So I sat in the rain listening to this bird's voice,
And thought that our friend's mouth now, its "Dead, I am dead,"
Was like the rain-crow sounding during the rain:
As if rain were a thing none of us had ever seen.

June, 1920

October: The Old Eyes

In these cold mornings the alders can not hold their leaves,
But in the stained pond-water drop them, broad and cold.
Days ago the willows yellowed the river's edge.
The river-breaks are stuck full of gray wild seed.
Dry and without the late hunger is every weed.

The latest-bearing tree's fruit is under roof;
Nothing we value is left, nothing is left
Except the garden Eusebia planted as she grew old.
Under the trees of her orchard the tall marigolds,
Past their best, are grown dark yellow with rain:
Half-wild stalks, that gave this woman much pride and much pain
To thin and keep in order.
It has rained, and turned cold.
No one comes along the river or the breaks;
No foot has changed the color of this tall grass.
About her house, big rose-hips ripen, partly gray.
Who sits in the leaves there—the old eyes, and the flesh fallen?
Eusebia Owen is come again, this chilly day:
A ghost comes, and grieves at last because she is old.
The water of dead leaves, which the fruit trees
Shed upon her dress, is not cold; there's no fear now, though
Hard waves in the river gather and pace to the wind;
There's no pleasure in marigold petals upon her face.
She grieves, and says: "So many years I let go,
Working hard, and was content to think that love
Would surely return; but the dead go all alone."

It is so: the years during which this woman lived
Were divided—so many for love, so many following
For work; and at last, let them be busy with flowers.
Dusty summers, long harvests, awhile to rest; but in the cold days
Eusebia gathered tree-cotton to weave cloth upon,
Worked with her garden, and would not fold her hands.
This woman was not idle until she died.
There's tree-cotton, and cold days another year
In which all her use is departed. This sad ghost
That cries for love again, even the spirit is old.

The hair which hangs against the dry breast is gray.
The old dark dress is worn thin; and, wet and cold,
She who wears it would enjoy love again, would lie
In childbed over again.
When I was her friend
I thought she had been content; and see the gray hair
Heavy and stained with water! Once she was vain,
And now leaves stick upon her dress and her arms.
Now she has left secrecy, and I am ashamed
That we were less friends than ever I had dreamed.

June, 1920

The River People

Gray and white sea-gulls, we own tight-rooted grass
Haired over with frost, and wild leaves that women rake
To cover their bulbs from frost—as when I watched and might ask,
Being a child, why she raked them, and why she laughed
At wild geese crying to pass the sharp apple-pruning smoke
Which shut them from the river. She wondered of the sea.
And that she taught me to make little of women, and of all but death,
Is not my debt. Yet in the hard fields of the river I build speech
Till I say: "When I saw the sea-tide I remembered how you lived
When I was a little boy. I helped you, and cleaned grass
From your wind-fallen apples, and I have seen the sea,
Which in that cold autumn you wished for—not level water,
But higher than your head and like a smooth hill
On which the grass turns the light. Wind presses a man's mouth,
And cuts furrows in that sloped water where dark combs run
And bloom white, and bloom like the black-barked limbs of apples
in rain.
As wild cattle break from the counting-pens, with what dust
The low-headed leaders raise blowing on the packed ground—
When the press lay their horns back and mount plunging with sharp feet,
And low quaking-asp boughs whip them on the naked eyes."
And she: "We tasted of waves when we were children gathering mast
Under the myrtle-trees whose broad leafage takes
The bitter taste out of the air. They shook the ground."

And I: "Children on the beach play cattle with myrtle-nuts.
They are Finn and Russian children, who have white hair
And cross the mountains in fall to pick hops. They have cried
When the train passed the hopyards, from ignorance.
They graze cattle on the cliffs for milk. Their hay
Grows wild, seeds, but never ripens. Fine-petalled purple flowers
And late spotted snapdragons fall to the scythe."
"Are they green all year?
We used to race before light when they were burning straw.
We called out for cold of morning. Is there never smoke
Raising the wild geese that glean our hulled wheat? No birds
Like ours that flock twitching the wheat-stems and their sharp
Changing ground when the smoke turns?"
"Not those."

"I'll keep here
And not owe my daughters, but lie against the black ground
Till sand come and weigh down my hands, until birds come close
Having long observed me. I know how much I came
Surely out of the round hills, those that are in grain
Or white stubble against winter; and out of that sound
Of blackbirds changing stand, let that return.
And you also, son, when you described the sea, took your words
Out of cattle-counting and out of river hills rounded with wind."

March, 1925

Mid-September

In the quiet that followed harvest, when it rained,
We too quieted though we owned neither fruit nor wheat
Hearing the crop-wagons. The woman who then lived
Mentioned the tokens with which the month changes: sand
Becomes rainbound and darker than I thought it ever turned;
Grass beaten upon the watercourses, and the red spears
Of rustweed standing high; the smell of apples
Distributed from orchards near the river like smoke,
And like smoke in rain, strongest near the ground; threshed straw
Stacked in the white stubble and abandoned to the birds.
The great flocks of red-winged blackbirds that now join
Under the wild sunflowers: they eat the black seeds and sing
Although their nests loosen and hang open, and catch the rain,
No longer secret. Of music of those dark bodies.
And now naming or noticing these things seemed a child's game
That she played thinking I most loved it; and she learned words
To please me when she named wild vines and scarlet weeds.
The smell of apples enters me at this dawn
As if cold light roused and fetched it; the smell of cut straws,
The smell of wet garden land; of the red hulls
Dropped about the wild rose bushes and soon gone;
Of willow leaves, faint and bitter like their taste.
And I remember what we talked of, and all my mind
That listened when I watched you and saw your mouth and eyes,
Not then thinking that I should ever have such cause.
You were not proud as I had thought; you were more afraid.
Your eyes were light like rain-water in the standing wheat
In which the sky registers its changes, and the wind.
I had imagined they were dark. What had I imagined
Your eyelids? They were white, and tired as of too much light,
And round as if shaped to the hollow of a child's hand.
I had thought your mouth colorless, that was so red.

We began coming to the orchard when I was a child
Shorter than the wild stand of hay in which I watched
The great branches shear motioning in the wind.
It was in this month, and all harvests were at an end,
And the mind quiet. You talked against the sound
Of boughs opening and uncovering the deep sky.
You were tall over me; your face stood where the great boughs
Surged and clapped like banners. I wondered at your voice.
I wondered at your quiet voice and at your eyes
That seemed still, deep when the wind crowded the grass
And whipped heavy asters to the ground and beat out their seeds.
I wondered that you should want to talk to me a child.

Until the deep water gather foam, and the weeds break
And go seeding the plowed ground—before the grass break,
    that shall
Go into the river like a seagull when wind blows
Away the smell of apples—I would shut my eyes,
And be against the sound of birds, and know what she loved
That kept her brave against strength, and gave her sight
To know what loves should last in me, and what should pass
And change the child's mind and body, and the man's, with pain.
She knew that the wretchedness of love made me ashamed,
But would bring me into deeper knowledge; that crying in the night
Should bring me into greater pity, as it has.
How shall change be hereafter unless a tall woman stand
Between my face and the deep sky? How shall my death
But come like her still face not noticing the wind?—
And like her that was tortured with great sickness, and could die
As if death were like the child she made her friend.

March, 1925

Of the Dead of a Forsaken Country

Since they'd slacked pruning and tending orchards in their age,
We children, new to their trees blossoming, scarce thought of them.
We accounted for their fruit bloom maybe as if the boughs'
Radiance, their apple and quince clusters and white plum
Doubling the sun blindingly, had come from veins of light
That swelled from under the deep bedrock to find mouths
And crowded the black twigs and burst them.

Then, being grown,
I remembered those shadowless white masses in the sky
As having been coddled out of switches by their hard care,
And perceived their lives better; how patient, and how cunning: checked
Into the trees' six-months' cadences. I perceived their hands
To have slowed like dry-headed stiff grass rocking in the wind,
Submissive if its seed fall.

This lasted a long time: till now.
I have ridden to turn cattle into their forsaken lands.
I have bedded cattle in their orchards under the black angular
Trees, dead or else speckled from a last starved-blossomed bough,
Not thinking of dead people but of children, till tall dust-whirls
Walked over the cheat grass of their abandoned wheatfields, over
Wild bunches of blue lupin, rock roses, short wild hollyhocks
Belled close with red-orange, over fox-gloves and striped irises;
And walked over the black haystacks and bare draws and ridges and fields,
Tracked by wild horses and no other foot, where wind
Catches the long boundaries between red and green and black
Shaking the broad planes like banners. . . .
Till tall gray-yellow
Dustwhirls mounted out of the dry fields, long-haired
With hands frantic and not patient or cunning, without mouths.
. . . What else should break earth and pace over the bare wild-horse land
To rouse these cattle in the night? They splintered the rotten fences
And milled and flattened the dead fruit trees while the close
Whirl of shapes sucked at the sparse blossoms like loud breath.

November, 1926

White Petal Nanitch

By scarlet mottles through the grass-stems on the ground,
By blackbirds' new wildness and silence, by pruned orchards'
White petals on black summer-fallow swept and strown,
I know plowing is ended. Oh, on wind-whitened sands
Budded alder-shadows, out of the deep river green light.
And men whose work here is ended, men I know,
Plow-hands that I worked with when I was young, and sound,
Lounge waiting for the plow-hands boat, and to be gone.
John Meeker, big and red-haired and afraid of horses
When they squeal in the dark. Thomas Hines, deaf, a face
Of bunched muscles that a man tightens when he hardly hears,
Cupping his ear forward, watchful, dull-tongued and tall.
And Gideon Jones, a light-eyed Welshman, whose speech
Was warm and soft-syllabled, sensitive to the courses
Of his arteries. Abner, a youth, silent, a grown youth secretly
Measuring each man, the incompleteness of each.
Steve, a short-bodied Russian who said:
"While we wait,
A green oak stands beside the Caspian Sea.
Fastened to the oak is a thin silver chain.
Picketed to the chain a cat whiter than a dime
Circles and reverses, pacing round that tree.
Winding to the left, he sings fit to break a bird's heart.
And he tells stories, unwinding . . . all the things you've seen.
Things that were worthless, or that happened to your shame,
Or, coming when you mourned, seemed little at that time,
Break loose from the wall of your body, rock and start
As these loose petals from the ground when the wind takes aim
Mount into a white nanitch, color and supply the wind
And whip the rock beaches.
"So these things you've lived
Come out of the men listening, and shine as they depart."

And big John Meeker said:
"Then into that nanitch
I'd feed all I've lived like grass-seed, but one thing.
When I was a young man. . . .

"That was where summer was.
That was where summer reached into me till I believed
It steeped out my strength like vinegar will bone.
The sun the floating mother, the sun like lye to eat,
Burnt through a man's brain, and nothing was but light.
What were words in that land? The grass crumbled like chalk.
The black rocks cracked open. Touch them, they'd sear your hand
Like iron sledged to a gray heat. It was a sledge-hammer
That hammered in light and hammered. . . .

"Well. In the dark
I walked to the niggers' bunk-house, and because the niggers
Kept silent because one of them was hurt, because in the night
The sky was not a burden on me, and I heard clods
Crumble in the gullies as in summer when I was young,
And grass move again, and prickle, it almost seemed
I could touch my old life of pity and of being kind,
And be as I had played, with men as I had dreamed.
And I did not, I would not shut summer out of my mind.

". . . A black man lay hurt in the bunk-house. He lay straight
Under the dripping lamps and faces; and when he breathed
His white rib-bones bent, skinned naked. I saw terror
And not envy of life; innocence of death and not fear;
Pain held him too hard and proud, and too intent
To notice the black man who watched and staunched his blood
That puddled in the bed-straw. Too intent to hear
The niggers, that crowded above his face, talk loud,
Because they were ashamed of their nakedness, of black scurf
Patched on their black chests and bellies, being seen.
They feared that I had seen the nakedness of their minds,
With words they covered and denied it, all that crowd.

"The man dying, the hurt nigger, kept manhood. I say he reached,
Guided by his pain, to greatness. O dead man, proud
Over all their faces that pretended and that were afraid!—
When courage among men has failed me, when I have seen
The kind spirits I knew when I was young burn off at dawn
Uncovering my nakedness to many eyes and to my own,
Through you, held steadfast among cowards by a wound,

I have seen beyond fear and beyond flinching, how from pain
I shall build my own greatness, and not notice light or sound,
But bring summer to waste and silence, and bring peace."
And Gideon Jones said:
"How would you, with a mind like mine?
I gandied near Blalock, where the black cliffs shine
Like agate because the wind polishes them down with sand
And searches your gullet with river-spray hard as brine.
The Greeks at work had to lean slantwise on the wind.
Our rotten ties, piled and burning, drew flocks of crows.
If crows should come low to this river and give us a look,
I would smell that spray now, again that damp whitish smoke,
And taste the Greek's garlic. . . .
"A freight-train rum-dummed past,
And, when the block fell, we found a man lying in the grass,
Small, papoose-faced, tiny-handed. Like a yellow pear
Lost out of a market-wagon. When we spoke
He rubbed tie-smoke into the palms of his little hands
And sipped it with his wet mouth, and saw us not.
He ate our bread as if he'd found it. He worked with the Greeks,
And talked with them, in his spagnole, for two weeks.
. . . Only to the Greeks, mind you, never to me
Though I could speak his lingo.
"Have you been alone
And walked spraddled, or carrying your arms stiff, to shape your shadow,
Acting, to change the shape it falls in? If on bare ground,
It falls dull-edged, black like a place soaked with water,
Brittle, restive like a bird. If on this sand,
You cast smooth, even your fingers cast and obey your will.
If on unpastured grass roughened with wild sunflower blades,
You'll see it lengthen and contract according to the wind,
Squirming in the grass like a frayed banner, never still.
I wanted to know how I cast upon that man.
I wanted him to let on, and tell me. Why? Why need to know
Whether I seemed feeble or terrible, unkind or kind?
I did need, and he would not return a sound.
. . . We worked in patches of wild sunflowers, petalless, black-headed,
That dropped spray. . . . Julio Garcia was that man's name."

And Thomas Hines, the tall deaf man:
"I was a kid
Skipped ship at San Francisco and walked the street.
A girl braced me, a whore, that whimpered when I said no.
Hunger'd come out on her features, and nobody would bid.
I took my last dollar to get her a bite to eat,
And then, 'Where shall I sleep?'
"She answered, 'You can come to my room
If you want to.'
". . . I dared not touch her all that night.
I pretended to be asleep and deaf, with all my strength,
To keep her mind from me. . . . I imagined that we lay there dead
As I have seen Spanish statues on their tomb
Accounting their past days and nights of life no more
Than crows that gang to a dead horse. I valued mine,
And this day among them, and those to come, nothing.
"When dawn
Lit that yellow room, I had slept, and she was gone."

And Abner, the grown youth, leaned forward, his quick voice
Hurried to be done before the night, or lest we speak,
Or lest we remember an incident and explain his words
By some hurt that he kept secret:
"Listen now,
Listen now. This is not something that I have read.
I have had a life separate also, and while we worked
I lived and experienced and learned something that concerns you all.
You have come to this country how many plowing times?
But how many have you stayed till the wild-cherry bloom
Burnt, or the grain stooled or pollened? You have seen black fields
And streaked grasses, and fruit-petals on the ground, but not their end.
And neither have you seen your own bodies. You look at your hands,
But what color is your flesh, and what nature? I know
Our flesh, that covers each of us like a wombed child,
Is eager to be dead. I know that, I have that to say.
That mother wholly desires only to be dead.

Did you think that she enjoyed you, and liked to obey your mind?
No more than a woman long unnoticed, who has invented
A child's game to keep down and kill the pain of her youth,
Shall hang to the poor game she played with, with on her mouth
The sweet she had never dared imagine.
"The new sweet, death.
Which of you declared pain a greatness? Here is pain
More than any wound furnishes, a more commanding voice
Than any you have feared, than anything has that draws breath.
How can you take account whether you be kind
Or terrible to any other man, having to prove
The contempt of your flesh, that prefers death to your mind?
And to be brave against death is manhood denied.
It is to be cuckolded and to give consent.
To be shamed publicly and to music by your own head.
. . . Dark, dear, treacherous, cunning to lull me, diligent
To enact my mind's lover, how when you fasten upon death,
Upon death your bridegroom, death your lover and your friend?
How much shall you then court me? How can I enjoy you blind?
. . . Where's old man Reinhart's right arm, and his thin hand
After the threshing-machine caught them? Has any man listened
Under the black wire-grass to hear how they met the earth?
You have seen his fixed eyes. He listened, and that mirth
Is in his mind always. His mouth shakes.
"Cowardice at death
Is to cry over the coupled lovers, and to protest
And imagine they'll forbear coupling and be ashamed,
Hearing a man's voice bear witness. . . . Save your breath.
This knowledge I press into my forehead, I would mark the bone.
I prepare myself incessantly, day and night.
I would say at my death 'Look, I marked this when I lived.
Do not laugh over me, or think that I have been deceived.
I was never deceived. I turned all my mind and might
Not to be so beyond any one second, and I had no rest.
When the new bunch-grass—when riding in the bare fields
That see the green river in the wind bud endless white—
Tempted me to exult, I could find no way to yield'."

January, 1927

Steel Gang

The boss came over and called us out a little bit after dark.
He said, "I don't want you boys to think your work ain't up to the mark,
But Paddy Duffy goes bragging around, the steel his Mex can lay—
All how that spiggoty gang spikes down two miles and a half a day,
And how two miles and a half is more than any man's gang can tap.
So I want you men to help me out to make him shut his yap.
No matter what record a Mex gang makes, I claim white men can trim it.
What I want you to do is, prove I'm right—for one day, go your limit.
I want you men to go tomorrow and make that record climb.
You put it where these damn spigs can't reach, I'll pay you triple time."

We counseled it over and said we would. We hit the deck at three,
And the engineer whistled, "Let's go!" before it was light enough to see.
The tram rolled up to the head of steel. The ties came sliding off
And we had 'em laid and the steel half-spiked before a man could cough.
The tram rolled over the spikers' work, and they never missed a lick.
Right under the wheels, they spiked right on, and drove 'em tight and quick.
When the surfacing-crew came up at a run, to raise and level track,
The tram was a dozen rails ahead, and never a man looked back.
We swung those hundred-and-ten pound rails like a grocery-clerk flips matches.
We grabbed those damned ties four at a time, and dealt them out in batches.

At half-past eight o'clock that night, the boss said, "Pull the cord!"
Said, "Call 'em off! Christ, four miles and a half! There's a record, by the Lord!
Call in the men and let's go in—they've earned a feed tonight.
You can boost for your goddam greasers, but I'll string with a gang that's white!"
The snipes let go their tools in the dirt, the hogs climbed down from the tram,
And they flopped in a heap in the outfit-train, too tired to give a damn.
Too tired to talk, too tired to wash, too tired to even eat.
The cooks had a feed shook up, supposed to be a special treat;
But victuals didn't have any taste. The men dragged off to bed.
Some had too much of an edge to sleep, and lay and gaped instead,
Their eyes half-shut and their mouths ajar, too dead to fight the flies
That stuck and bored in the sweaty places, and crawled around their eyes.

For that day's work they paid three days; and then, they paid full pay
For the following day, when none of the men would budge out of the hay.
Then, for the day that followed that, they offered us double jack
Because we had all lost heart in the work, and they wanted to bring us
back.
So we worked that day for their double time, and then pulled up and quit.

The spig gang stayed and finished the job after us white men lit.

September, 1928

Rivers to Children

We rivers, we torrents
We heavy-backed waters
Burned out of the green ocean,
Came, clouds, from the plunging
Sea restless as flame.

One-willed and unchanging,
We rained and flowed westward.
We crossed these same meadows.
We touched and knew children
Like you; not the same.

Where are those children
Whose fields we then rained in?
We wet their brown fingers,
And grasses about them.
We rained in their eyes.

Where? . . . Surely we waters,
We deathless, recurrent
In leeching this compost,
Have knowledge whenever
A living thing dies.

No grave could have slipped us.
How have they hidden then?
Where are they hidden—
Neither on earth, nor
Under the earth?

And you, shall it come to you,
Children, and teach you
How to evade us?
Even your eyes?
Even your mirth?

September, 1928

New Birds

Now all of the snow's gone from the high desert, now the frost
Lets go of the ground except in the deep draws, we find
And recognize and enumerate new birds.
The blue bird's the first comer back to the dead grass range.
Out of some waterless grey rock-break, his low voice
Utters a song almost tuneless; but his blue wings
Are bright like gay innocent music. The brown thrush,
Colored like old hay weathered in the rain, then sings
At evening, when all's darkened except water. Then, concealed
Among dark pastures of the desert, he sings his hurt.
The loud-voiced little yellow-hammers shine by day,
The color of new sagebrush blossoms. Red-winged black-birds
Blazing at the wing-joints with scarlet like the blaze
Of naked red willows in the black creek-beds, flock and talk.
The thorn-brush jolts with hundreds of bright black-bodied
Birds joking over their new country. Then come swans.
Dark wild swans come from the cane marshes in the south,
And pass, long-throated and still-mouthed. Then white geese
Trail, reaching across the dark sky, broad-winged as eagles,
But flapping their broad wings. Silence follows them.
No other new birds follow after these.

That ends our discoveries. Having noted them,
I go back to noticing the birds that wintered here,
That lived out winter in the desert, when I wintered
With them and the cattle for company. Birds that came
To scratch in the hay for a little scattered grain.
Those birds were colorless and songless. Without their presences,
I'd have been too lonely to live on this bare plain.

It is the same with my beloved as with new birds.
Old thoughts, that were my company when I lived alone,
Under her beauty's and youth's energy, have been lost.
I strive to recover them, to put them all in words,
Thinking they'll help me again, when she is gone.

May, 1933

Proud Riders

We rode hard, and brought the cattle from brushy springs,
From heavy dying thickets, leaves wet as snow;
From high places, white-grassed and dry in the wind;
Draws where the quaken-asps were yellow and white,
And the leaves spun and spun like money spinning.
We poured them on to the trail, and rode for town.

Men in the fields leaned forward in the wind,
Stood in the stubble and watched the cattle passing.
The wind bowed all, the stubble shook like a shirt.
We threw the reins by the yellow and black fields, and rode,
And came, riding together, into the town
Which is by the gray bridge, where the alders are,
The white-barked alder trees dropping big leaves
Yellow and black, into the cold black water.
Children, little cold boys, watched after us—
The freezing wind flapped their clothes like windmill paddles.
Down the flat frosty road we crowded the herd:
High stepped the horses for us, proud riders in autumn.

Note:
This poem first appeared under the title "The Sweet-Tasting" in ***Poetry*** (April, 1919); it was reprinted as the title poem in ***Proud Riders and Other Poems*** (1942).

II. Unpublished Poems

Note:
Dates on these poems were recorded by the author.

Recollection of Joab Goodall

"O weh, ihr langen Jahre, wohin entschwandet ihr?
War denn mein Leben Wahrheit, oder traumt es mir?
Was mir fur wirklich galt, war's denn auch Wirklichkeit?
Gewiss, ich hab' geschlafen, wer weiss, wie lange Zeit.
Doch nun bin ich erwachet— —"
— Von der Vogelweide
(trans. from O.H.G. by Fiedler) *

When I walked with him, the spirit of good speech had left him.
We walked about evening, when upon the shallow rainponds
the sun laid red surfaces. Evening, when raindrops
were strung in flashing red strings along all the vines.
Broken alder leaves in the road became skinned and bruised
black, and daubed our shoes with fragments.
Thinking of the rain
I spoke only sometimes; but old Goodall beside me
was sullen with weariness, and would not respond.

Through the meadow, nearer the water, a cool wind
came strong through the meadow grass from dark wet fields.
"Stubble, the dead hollow straws all full of rain water,
and oaks about those hills, soaked now through the bark,
black-limbed now, sour smelling, and cold; shedding vines
whose leaves dropping carry rain, and smell of it.
This gaunt-boned eighty-year-old too, this damp-skinned
and damp-bearded old Goodall here in the dark."

* *"Alas, where have all the long years gone? / Did I really live, or was it just a dream? / What seemed so real to me—was it actually so? / Certainly, I was asleep—who knows for how long. / But now I am awake. . . ."*
(G. Jocums tr.)

Sullen with weariness, hard breathed. His bones shook
and he gave up before me. —"I am overworked;
I need some warm place to liven this blood of mine.
A chilled sweat, and tired out too; sit down now:
we'll sit down against I am rested. Yonder's the moon up."
Yonder was the moon up, and the ponds and vines
were white and dapple white. Then, as by the book,
he really, I to piece my dream, watched the moon.

February, 1923

Trial and Error

This begins halfway through remembering stories from the past,
From the remote past, most of them, when few things
Were as they are now, except human beings. Finding them
So far back in time strips them of the trimmings, the externals
By which we identify one another: clothes, houses, furniture,
Children, motor cars, swimming pools, perhaps books,
Perhaps even, sometimes, ideas.

It may have been the same
In the remote past: not the same things, but there were things
That covered what a man was, and set him apart
From others, things by which others knew him. The place
Where he lived, the horse he rode, his relatives, his wife,
His voice, complexion, beard, politics, religion or lack of it,
And so on. With time, these things fall away
Or dwindle into shadows: river sand blowing away
From some long-buried old structure of bleached boards
That appears a vague shadow through the sand-haze, and then stands
clear,
Naked, angular, itself.

So, in the stories
From the remote past, externals fall away
And become shadows, or a sand-haze against the sun,
And what caught them and held them comes into sight, for the first time
Not buried under them, but as it was.

We can know
From what time has done, how we ourselves, and those around us
Once delivered to time, will shed off all the externals
By which we knew them and ourselves: clothes, houses, furniture,
Children, cars, swimming pools, all the rest of it
And stand out in the past, as the haze clears, for what we were
(Not as we imagined ourselves, even secretly) and for what we are
To those who must look for us in the past. Naked, angular, the truth,
Or some shreds of it, oversimplified into a new truth
That misrepresents us, and will last.

Some part of the truth,
Not the part we liked, usually, waits in us now
To be brought into being. Our trimmings will fall away,
Our coverings of sand be driven off, our leaves scattered;
Dead branches and bleached scaffolding will stand for what we were—
Something of the truth, a few virtues, the ones easiest understood,
And, for contrast, a few faults. The rest driven away
To be piled over other scaffoldings. It has happened to others.
We are no more favored than they were.

There is nothing to regret.
What use will such coverings be to us? Passion, hope, love,
Memory and regret and even truth are things for the living.
Some skimped story out of the past will be enough for us,
A blurred hint of something that we were, or were partly. Old snow
Floating in the black flood of a spring freshet . . . .

My great-grandmother,
In Tennessee, more than a hundred years ago,
And when she was young, in her mid-twenties—she married young—
Was out gathering cymlings in a stump-pasture when some half-drunk
Indians,
Shawnees, treacherous and hostile, rose out of the undergrowth around
her,
Armed, hatchets and rifles and war-varnish, and came after her.
She ran for the cabin. Her husband's Negro servant
Held the door open till she was in, and then forced it shut.
One Shawnee was so close behind her that it caught his head
And the Negro held it shut on him. He beat against the logs
Trying to pull loose, trying to get in, or to get out.
The Negro held him while my great-grandmother, with a three-legged
stool,
Beat him over the head till he died. At first, he threatened,
And then begged, and at the last, screamed so the other Shawnees
ran away.
Afterward, the men came and buried him. Afterward
She never liked to have it spoken of. She thought it was evil
To kill a man like that, even one who was evil.
It shamed her to be reminded of it.

Oh, there was more to her
Than killing a bad Indian and being ashamed afterward. Passion, hope,
Love, memory, all the things for the living that have become mine,
And will some day be driven off and scattered. Something will be left.
What will it be? What will answer for me then?

1 January 1959

The Standards

There was Paul Robeson, the Negro singer. In an interview
For the newspapers in some West Coast town where he appeared
In concert (very well attended), he was quoted as saying
That he considered the Soviet Union to have the most perfect government
And social organization that had ever existed in the world.
Because, it seemed, there was no discrimination of any kind,
Social or political, in the Soviet Union against Negroes.
(And, of course, no Negroes, either: and Mr. Robeson,
Who could live there if he wanted to, lives in London.
That, of course, is his own business. But non-discrimination
Against Negroes is what, in his eyes, makes a government perfect.
It is the only thing that matters. After all, what else is there?)

And there was Howard Fast, the onetime Communist writer: Jewish.
He strung with the Party through a lot of embarrassing incidents,
And lifted his voice loyally in behalf of the Soviet Union
Long after most of the comrades had piped down and hit for cover.
But finally it got too much for him. He quit,
And announced, in a series of articles, that it was not perfect,
As he had insisted, but, on the contrary, distinctly bad,
Evil, corrupting to the spirit. Many things
Had combined to strike the scales from his eyes, but most of all
It was discovering that in the Soviet Union
There was discrimination against Jews. That fixed it.
That, for his money, made any government evil
However good it was otherwise.
(Good or bad, in government,
Depends, for Mr. Robeson, on its treatment of Negroes,
And for Mr. Fast, on its treatment of Jews. Nothing else matters.
What else is there, in government, that could possibly matter?)

3 January 1959

The Present Crisis

The news tonight was about President Eisenhower
(On whom comment would be superfluous; at least
It always has been) summoning the leaders
Of the new Congress to a conference at which he explained
His budget for the coming year. All the various items,
What they were for, why they were essential. Most of them, no doubt,
Came out about as they went in. Who could question
The necessity of an appropriation for the Treasury Department
For income tax collectors, auditors, investigators,
Legal counsel, tipsters, and fixers, approximately equal
To the amount it collects in taxes? These things are routine.
Looking too closely at them is unpatriotic.
It can land an ordinary citizen in jail.

So with the rest of them—
Agriculture, Postoffices, State Department, Interior, Labor—
All except one, which was considered to deserve special attention
Not as being less necessary, but more. National defense
For the coming year. The President was under the painful necessity
Of announcing that it would require an appropriation
Of 42 billion dollars. It was of the most desperate importance
For Congress to pass it as it stood, unchanged. Those Russians
Are getting ahead of us in defense. Failure to shell out
Every cent of the amount asked for would place the nation
—The world even—in deadly peril. Peril to all our liberties:
The liberty of being beaten to a pulp by labor union organizers
For trying to work in some place that has refused
To pay them a rakeoff. The liberty to have your car wrecked
By union pickets, while the cops stand watching in amusement,
If you try to drive somewhere that the pickets don't want you driving.
The liberty of having your private business picked into
By credit investigators, by the FBI, by income tax investigators;
The liberty (theirs) of opening private correspondence
And having it published in the papers, without the consent
Of the person who wrote it. The liberty to spend a month
Or more, of your time, in raking over old check-stubs
And receipted bills from four or five years back
To convince income tax collectors, auditors, investigators,

Legal counsel, tipsters and fixers, or a set of bird-dogs,
For some Congressional committee, that you are not a crook
And that you didn't intentionally beat the government out of eleven dollars
Four or five years ago; the liberty of telling them
What you think of them; and the liberty of going to jail for it.

Liberties are slopping around loose all over our wonderful country.
Who could face being deprived of them? True, it is painful
To fork over all that money for developing armaments.
It can be imagined what anguish our military experts felt
When compelled to face the bitter and inevitable truth
That in spite of their care and skill and foresight, the danger
Could not be withstood without some new officers' clubhouses
In places like Kobe and Seoul and Okinawa; some new golf links
In Formosa and North Africa; some custom-built airplanes
With cocktail bars and ladies' lounges, for some of our major-generals
To use for week-end trips to the country. These are hard necessities,
But they are necessities.

Anguish of the labor bosses
Thinking of a whole 42 billion clams running loose, of the big payrolls
All that dough will build up, of the rakeoffs that will roll in
When they put their organizers to work on them. Of the big industries
Hauling in government contracts, always with sorrow
But under stern self-control. Of stock-market operators
And investment banks, and automobile finance companies,
All downcast, but waiting with their buckets for the gusher.

Harder still
Would be the relief in the country if it didn't turn out
Every year, when the budget of government expenses
Was being prepared, that those Russians had got ahead of us
In their defense preparations. But they always do,
And there is always this hard ordeal. The hardest thing
About it, is for all these people to keep their faces straight.

6 January 1959

A Long Look

There is no such thing as a nameless fear. If it's fear,
It isn't nameless. Fear may not be the right name for it.
It may be apprehension, misgiving, foreboding. It may be only
Half a feeling that the other half cancels out. For always,
When it takes hold of me, there is a point through which it moves
As if it were emerging from a jostling and yelling mob,
Into silence and emptiness; and it is as if a voice
Had been saying, over and over, through all the hubbub
That kept me from hearing it, or heeding it,

"No. Keep courage.
Keep hope. What you see is not chaos shaking a world apart
Permanently; it is only change. Disorder follows order.
There is not room in the old patterns for all the swarms
Of new people inching out of beastliness. They must all be broken
And the good they held scattered underfoot, to be trodden on,
Dirtied and cheapened and mocked. The higher the good,
The more necessary it is to bring it low, lower than themselves.
That is the beginning of change. Afterward comes order;
The new patterns rise, lifting the good high again
As if it had never been trampled. Many of those
Who joined in the trampling will be lifted near it; many
Will fall back and be as they were, plodding their round
Under the new order as they did under the old,
Waiting until it, too, is broken. The pendulum's motion
Never alters; it only gains weight, and moves more cumbrously
Because heavier-laden at each swing. But it moves always
Forward and backward and then forward. The distance does not change,
Only its load is heavier at each swing. Covering always
The same ground, but carrying more people from the mob over it.
What matters is its carrying more people. It is all movement.
Order has its beginning in this chaos; chaos again
Its beginning in the order to follow. Keep courage.
Keep heart, keep hope."

This was not as something spoken,
But as something that had been spoken and not listened to,
And then pieced together out of scraps half-remembered
And half filled in, after the speaker had fallen silent,
From reason, or imagination; but still, not mine,
But clearly as if another had said it. So that I could answer it,
Out of the fear that had hold of me, out of the foreboding,
The sense of jostling and yelling, and afterward, of emptiness,

—"Patterns or pendulums or whatever you may call them, what matters
Is not carrying more people with each swing, and not the movement.
What matters is time. Time's needed to bring on chaos,
Time's needed to build back the new patterns. The pendulum needs time
To carry out its swing backward and again forward. Why keep heart,
Knowing that it will swing forward from this? What's to hope
From new patterns, from the rise of an order that I shall not
Be alive to see? Let it be that this chaos is its beginning,
It is not mine. My world is this jostling, this hubbub,
These slavering mouths, this sight of good trodden underfoot.
What matters if it's passing, since I am too?"

But still the voice
—Or the memory of the voice—droned on its round in my mind
Like a child on stepping-stones in water, the same words
It had spoken before I began listening.
—"No. Keep courage.
Keep hope. It is only change. This is the beginning."

6 January 1959

A Stock-Taking

These poems (not to compound foolishness by calling them songs)
Are made up of abstract elements. They come from abstractions.
From decisions, intentions, policies, doctrines, systems,
Laid down by men who, at most, only half believe in them
For the guidance of men too timid to disbelieve, in whom belief
Is lack of understanding. They believe the most devoutly
In what they know the least about.

Poems should be direct.
They should consist of substances. They should have a texture
Made of some experience of the senses, of things felt, seen, heard,
Of stones, earth, light, colors, running water, wind,
Reflections of the sky on blowing grass, patterns of weeds,
The flashing of sun on a hawk's wings, hawks, the blaze
Of a cock-pheasant strutting through red bushes in old snow.
A poem should call up such experiences—or commoner ones,
Uglier, perhaps, for contrast—and having gathered them,
It should lift itself, by them, beyond into some truth,
Some exaltation of truth, abstract and eternal,
Drawn down to exist with them as an experience, as something concrete
Possessing the qualities of cold, light, color, of stones,
Of running water or the sky.

That was once possible.
Now it is not. The formula has been turned hindside-to.
The things we live by do not begin with actualities
That can grow or be lifted into union with abstract truth.
They begin with abstractions (which may be truth, or may not)
Half-realized at third hand, or fourth hand, slanted, colored, pruned,
And then narrow down into experience. Justice for all mankind
To be followed by war; pity for the helpless poor
That will culminate in torture, slavery of minds, mass murders,
Restraints, suppressions, epidemics of mob fever
Stirred up by truckling politicians to fatten despots
Or overcrowd some area of wild country with a few million yaps.
Have you ever looked at their faces?

The concrete experience
Used to be the beginning. Now it is the end. It comes last
And more often than not so slowly that it seems not to come at all—
Discomfort and pettinesses flowering into hatred, which dwindles
Into disgust and then to nothing. There are other steps:
Anger that becomes habit and sinks into resignation
And finally to callousness and dullness. These are experiences.
They work slowly, sometimes for a whole lifetime, but one dies of them
Sometimes without knowing it.

Somebody hereafter
Will see how the formula has changed, and will know how to use it
To make man's real tragedy into art. This is only fumbling
At stating the problem. It is only a first try.

7 January 1959

Reconciliation

A man tried to injure me a good many years ago.
(I could put this more dramatically, but it was not dramatic;
And I rest my case on the facts.) He kept at it
For a long time, part open and contemptuous
And part under cover. He really worked hard at it,
But finally he let up, feeling, maybe, that he had fixed me,
Or maybe having more important things to worry about.
As I had: not all important, but unavoidable,
And many of them nerve-racking or agonizing. Caught in them,
I forgot all about him: not only that he was alive,
But even that he had ever lived. He was a small candle
Overglared by arc-lights blazing so much fiercer that he seemed
Never to have existed.

If I had thought of him at all
(I didn't) I would have thought merely that he had forgotten me
As completely as I had him. So it was a shock—
And a curious sharp twinge with it, almost like grief—
When, a few weeks back, a letter (many times reforwarded)
Came from him. Short, simple, well-written. He was getting old,
He said, and many things he had done in years past
And regretted afterward, kept coming back to him.
He would feel easier if he could think that what had been in them
Of enmity and bitterness, no longer stood between us.
Past things were not past; they were unchangeable, but he remembered
And regretted and felt sorry about them. It didn't seem much,
But it was harder than one might imagine. He had hoped, he said,
That his letter might help to bury them, to clear them from his mind.
That was all, except that we were both too far along in years
To nurture old enmities and regrets.

All straightforward,
Direct, very honest. It may have been the honesty
That shocked me as if something stable, some small landmark
So familiar that I had forgotten it, had disappeared.
I wrote him that things so far in the past were all buried
Long ago. I had not thought of them for many years.
There had been too many things since to regret, to mourn for,
To be ashamed of. I had no time left for enmities.

Afterward,
Having mailed the letter, realizing that writing it
Had not stilled the discomfort and uneasiness, the curious
Half-pain like a numbness wearing off, I thought, "He is right.
We all have wrongs, cruelties, mistakes, to look back on.
I have as many as he has. I would not dare go back over them
And write about them as he's written."

Then the thought struck me,
"What did he write for? What's the underhanded little sneak up to?
What does he want? To inveigle me into writing something
That can give him some hold on me? I hope I haven't done it.
Lord, what if I did? What did I write him at all for?
What did I write?"

But there was no feeling of anxiety.
And all the discomfort and uneasiness and half-pain were gone.

7 January 1959

The Philosophers

John Stuart Mill noted, in one of his essays,
That the lives of millions of people had been altered
(He didn't say whether for better or worse) by the writings
Of two men of whom, in all probability
Not one in ten thousand of them had ever heard.
(Their names, if it matters, were Samuel Taylor Coleridge
And Jeremy Bentham).

I think of this sometimes
Thinking of our world, and the people in it, and their lives,
And what they live by, and what for. . . .

And how Hegel,
The first of our prophets, and the most disliked, laid down
That half of the things a man does are not his doing
And not his responsibility. They are imposed on him by History.
He should not be blamed for them. And following this, Karl Marx
Demonstrated that half the things a man does are not
His doing. They are imposed on him by Capitalism,
By the Economic System. He is not responsible
And should not be blamed for them. If he had as few worries
As the rich have, he would be virtuous; and if the rich
Were reduced to his poverty, they would be virtuous. Nobody
Is really to blame, only the System.

Then rose Darwin,
With the discovery that half the things a man does
Are not his doing. They are imposed on him by Race.
He does them under its compulsion. He can't help himself
And must not be held responsible. Then appeared Freud,
And he pointed out, bringing us a step nearer the light,
That half of the things a man does (or perhaps more than half)
Are not his doing. They are imposed on him by his Libido.
It was in him at birth; he should not be held responsible
For obeying its impulses. He has no control over them.

This does not mean, I suppose, that four halves of the things
A man does are imposed on him by compulsions for which
He can not be held responsible: History, Capitalism,
Race, Libido. One can't apply mathematics
Too strictly to philosophic doctrines such as these.
And it is true that few of the swarming millions
Encumbering the earth now would even know what they were,
Even vaguely. But it is also true that their lives
Have been altered by them and are perhaps in process
Of being altered still more, whether for better or worse
I don't know, but I have my suspicions.

Truth is truth.
Many people dislike this doctrine of shifted responsibilities,
But nevertheless, their lives, too, are being altered by it.

10 January 1959

Death or Glory or Nothing

My grandfather served as a lieutenant in the Confederate infantry
In the War between the States. He was killed in action
In the Vicksburg campaign, in the summer of 1863.
A few hours before he died, his division commander
Made a speech to the men about their duty to their country
And what it meant to do battle for its liberties. Their valor
Would, he said, be engraved in the hearts of generations
Yet unborn. They would be remembered with gratitude
And honor and reverence, for all time to come.
And it would be enough for posterity to say of those
Who might fall, that they gave their lives for their country, in
The great battle of Champion's Hill.

Young men, fidgeting
In ranks, trying to remember that it would be enough
For posterity to say of them that they gave their lives
For their country, in the great battle of Pea Ridge, or of Iuka,
Or Wilson's Creek or Prairie Grove; or Chustenalah,
Lone Jack, Cabin Creek, Poison Springs, Steele's Bayou,
Cowskin Prairie; or Pigeon's Ranch, Mesilla, Valverde;
Or of Chickasaw Bluffs, Brice's Crossroads, New Hope Church,
Redbone Church, Tullahoma, Big Shanty, Snake Creek Gap,
Lickskillet, Olustee, Sabine Crossroads, the Little Blue,
Baxter Springs, Port Hudson, Brashear, Arkansas Post,
The Yazoo Cutoff, Mill Springs, Pleasant Hill.

These were battles.
Men were killed in them, and nobody remembers anything about them,
Neither where they were, nor what for. It can't matter much
To dead men, whether they were killed in a small battle
That nobody remembers, or a big one. But it was a bargain
Not of their making, and their side of it at least was kept.

15 January 1959

Counting Back

Counting back over the things that, during a long sickness,
Cast shadows deep enough to hide in from the pain
That kept blazing through me like light (for knowing deserts,
One comes to know light as an enemy, a punishment) I remembered
Some wrens that nested in the broken window-frame of a house
I lived in as a child. Sometimes they would fly into the room
And pick crumbs from the tablecloth: solemn, brisk, purposeful,
When I was alone in it. Never for anybody else,
Not even for my mother, who loved birds.

And once, in Nevada,
In the Rabbit Rocks Desert, when I had followed rabbit-trails to a spring
And lay down to drink from it, clouds of pale-colored little birds
Swarmed over me, perching on my hat, and on my hands.
Everything except the birds and the water stayed motionless:
The coarse grass and gray willows motionless. Overhead, a hawk
Stood printed on the sky like something cut in smooth blue stone.
Only birds and dark water and my heart moved.

In the Malheur Desert
In Eastern Oregon once, an abandoned homestead: a half-wrecked
Board shanty among half-dead poplars. A trickle of water
Pushing through matted dead leaves. Twists of rusty barbed wire
On fallen fence-posts; beyond them, lines of gray rock-buttes
With light glancing from them, and gray sagebrush lifted toward the sky,
And a stray dog, abandoned like the cabin, at a distance,
Circling, watching, avoiding me, that ventured close
After a long time, and brought out two week-old puppies
From some hiding place under the house, and watched anxiously
As they came wallowing through the dead leaves to see what I was:
Watched for a few minutes while they played, and then took them back,
Hid them, and went away herself.

Long after, in Mexico,
In the rainy season, in a village in the mountains, a tree-toad
No bigger than the tip of a man's finger, almost transparent,
That when it rained at night, squeezed under the closed door
And came into the room where I was working, into the light
To take shelter until the rain stopped. Little and fearless,
Knowing that nothing within reach could wish it harm.
Crossing the floor, it would let out a shrill little whistle
At every few hops, lest I might step on it, not seeing it—
So small, so near transparent—and then settle itself
On the work-table papers, where the warmth of the lamp struck
And wait till the roaring of the rain passed. Then, whistling,
Go out under the door as it had come.

Once, in California,
In a place in the mountains, in the timber, two small king-snakes
That came every evening toward sundown, hunting for crickets
And grasshoppers, in the small space where the stone of the terrace
Met the boards of the house. Too busy, too absorbed
With their hunting, even to notice that I was there. Sometimes
They would pass within inches of me. When they had finished
They would go back where they had come from. Always toward sundown,
Always absorbed and busy and indifferent to me.

Then, once,
In Mexico City, late, in an all-night restaurant
Packed with men yelling and arguing, mostly half-drunk,
A girl in her mid-twenties, overdressed, made up badly,
Breathless and a little scared, who stopped at my table
And asked if she could sit down till the mob thinned out.
It was only that she was afraid of being grabbed at
By some of the drunks, and possibly fought over, and of having
Her clothes ruined. If they saw she was with a man,
They would let her alone . . . .
I said, "Of course, sit down.
Have a drink."

She laughed and said, "Having a drink
Would be swindling you. I am one of the girls here,
And if I should order a drink, they would bring burned sugar
And water, and then they would put it on your bill
As cognac. No, it will be better if we just talk
Or pretend to be talking. These drunks will be leaving before long,
The shows will be out, better people will be coming in.
Some of them will be looking for girls, and perhaps among them
Will be somebody I would like. You have to move fast
Or the other girls get in first. But it has happened
More than you might think, and it might. What do you think?"

. . . Counting back,
I think I preferred animals and birds. Their indifference
Pleased me, and pleases me to remember. It did not leave me
As hers did, feeling half slighted and half relieved.

4 February 1959

A Service for the Dead

In autumn when wild snow geese had begun to flock
At nightfall from high wheatfields to the less cold
River backwaters and the ponds walled in with rock,
This was what the railroad Greek steel pullers told:
That in their mountains, after long centuries alone,
Their people brought down Prometheus from the place
He had been pegged out for the vultures on a stone.
They loosed him, set back his torn flesh against the bone,
Washed his old clotted wounds, and from his face
Old filth of the buzzards, and they brought him down
To rest and reverence and stillness in their town.

They brought him all he had hungered for, long lost
Peace, silence, clean dusk instead of shrivelling sun;
Sleep instead of hard watchfulness; warmth instead of frost;
Safety from peril of foul vultures swarming down;
Mildness, ease, honor. But when any scattering of birds
Storm-driven from the mountain, passed and beat their wings
Outside his temple, he would half lift out of sleep
And struggle against rest and rack himself full length
And rock the stone temple with calling back dead things:
Dead strain and agony; dead greatness and dead strength.

Last Spring

Small town by pale desert waters where I once lived,
Town bleached-looking in cold March sunlight, and its springs
Still swollen from late snows melting, town that has kept
So unchanged all sounds and feeling of past things
That my years away seem figures scrawled in the air
In some half-dream that faded before I slept.

Yet sun and dust have dimmed the letters of old signs
And worn the old window-panes dull like weathered stone.
Gray fences are sagged or fallen, sidewalks broken,
Gardens run wild, old trees gone, new trees grown
In places that were treeless. What is still the same
Is what in the old years had not entered life at all:
New green in the creek-beds, new colts, children at some game
Among tangled bushes, skipping puddles. The children call
With voices I knew in the old years, and their faces
Are of people I knew and remember and could call by name:
Children of children I once knew here, long since grown.

It is through these that the town has held off time.
What's unchanged is in their lives, not in the streets
Or old fences or fading buildings, not in what survives,
But in what dies and is renewed: grass over stone,
New snow-waters flooding, children in aging places
Holding our old innocence of mind and blood and bone.

Night Pastures

The land's dark except where a light wind weaves
Threads of faint starlight in the cottonwood leaves.
The land is silent except for the sound
Of gray lupin shutting with the cooling ground.
The land is old land. I may have laid my bed
Tonight, on somebody I once knew who is dead.
    In this land none of the old marks last long.
It covers and destroys them. When I was young
No lupin grew here, only a bright stand
Of white bunchgrass brindling in the wind like sand,
Luminous even in the dark before dawn,
Lighting the ground faintly all night. That is gone.
Now the land's lightless, and the night wind, shifting,
Carries only the rustle of lupin leaves lifting,
Shutting till daylight. Lupin leaves shut tight
In the dark, like clenched hands, keeping in their light,
Clutching the radiance they gathered by day
To nourish their roots on, giving none away,
Turning it all inward till the morning break.
    Thinking of the old grasses keeps me awake:
Beautiful pale spears that have given this land over—
Bunchgrasses, redtop, wild millet, stone clover—
What they were like, and of their leaving; that in pride,
Sooner than contend with coarse lupin for this ground,
They broke root and departed, maybe with a sound
Of their last light falling from the darkness as they died.

Clearing Old Stones

Best the indifference of the stones, the hill
About these old graves, my own. A cure, a mending
From sickness of spirit in raking up dead burrs
And dead weed-stalks that have matted all the ground
Since the old farms fell vacant. Raking dry stems
Of old lupin, hollyhock, sunflower, lean milkweed
Blown from neglected fields, from fraying stubble
Long abandoned and left bleaching in light and wind.
Under these, chaff of old harvests, stems of flowers
Carried once from some backyard garden long since gone,
And scattered among these stones. Cut twigs come last,
Sprays of wild plum that people brought and spread
To hide a grave till our first grief was past,
Before their own grief struck or these weeds came, cold emblems
Of lives here wasted, hiding the earth from light.

It is like a deliverance to see the dead stalks, raked and piled,
Burn and blow skyward into light upon a flame
Stretching and flapping against silence, and at last
To clean the earth bare again, to bring and scatter
Armloads of wild grass, bright and hard-stemmed and innocent
That grew here before flowers or any mourning came.

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