

ANVIL OF ROSES
by
Thomas Hornsby Ferril

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Foreword

I remember rhymes I made up prior to 1900. My first published poem was printed in a newspaper in 1906.

Now I can say I have been making poems for more than 82 years.

This, my sixth book of verse, assembles recent poems. The following essay tells something about my life and work.

Thomas Hornsby Ferril

Introduction

Anvil of Roses is the sixth book of poetry by Thomas Hornsby Ferril, long respected as the most honored poet of the Rocky Mountain West.

Acclamation came again in 1981 when the Denver Public Library celebrated "A Tribute to Thomas Hornsby Ferril." The program included first showing of a PBS documentary on Ferril's life and poetry narrated by Gene Amole, Edwin Newman, John Ciardi, and John A. Kouwenhoven. It was noted that Ferril had been born in Denver in 1896, had lived in the same house since 1900, and had combined literary achievement with more than a half-century of industrial employment, an unusual way of life for a poet.

On display at the library were scholarly dissertations on Ferril, his books, honorary degrees, prize awards, commission as an Air Force officer in WWI, designation as Poet Laureate of Colorado, and replicas of four bronze plaques honoring him in Denver, one marking his home as a Landmark for Preservation. Participating were Mayor William H. McNichols, Governor Richard Lamm, and members of Congress.

During his career, Ferril has been praised by many of his distinguished literary contemporaries, including Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg, H. L. Mencken, Bernard DeVoto, Thomas Wolfe, Dorothy Parker, and Mark Van Doren.

Ferril's work was admired also by such scientists as Walker Van Riper, authority on spiders and reptiles; R. G. Gustavson, hormone expert; and Vannevar Bush, physicist. In the laboratory of Curt P. Richter at Johns Hopkins University hangs a quotation from one of Ferril's poems which appears in the rotunda of the Colorado State Capitol building:

Beyond the sunset is tomorrow's wisdom,
Today is going to be long long ago.

Paradoxically, some who have given Ferril highest praise as a poet have written nothing about his poetry.

"I don't know why I admire you so," wrote Carl Sandburg in one of many letters to Ferril. In an interview on Ferril, Sandburg said: "He is terrifically and beautifully American. He is a poet, wit, historian, man of books and human affairs, and so definitely one of the Great Companions. Every word from him has meaning for America." But Sandburg never wrote anything about Ferril's poetry.

Nor did Bernard DeVoto explain why he considered Ferril "the best poet in active practice."

So with Robert Frost—numerous expressions of admiration over the

his Colorado mountains, but keeps them under control. His poems center on the life of man.

Second, historical concurrence:

Ferril's love of history usually takes poetic form through realization of concurrence, i.e., creating a wide-ranging context to illuminate a central theme. Typical is "High Passage," the title poem of his first book, which won the 1926 Yale Younger Poets Award. The poem is based on the consternation with which the American Indian beheld the appearance of the European honey bee in the West, foreboding further white encroachment:

What pure coincidences were the day the bee
Crossed the black river and came floating further West.

Other early poems exemplifying concurrence were published by H. L. Mencken in *The American Mercury*, among them "Magenta," "All Years Are Odd as 1849," and "Nocturne at Noon—1605."

A number of poems in *Anvil of Roses* are illustrative, too, of historical concurrence: "Metamorphoses, 1806, in the Afternoon of an Antelope," "Stories of Three Summers," "Down Riverside with Ulysses," "A Parable of Prophecy," and "Anagoge For an Island."

Third, treatment of time:

Ferril's life-long fascination with time is evident in many of his poems. As a child he made up rhymes about time. He named his third book *Trial By Time* (1944). Such poems as "Words for Time" and "Time of Mountains" exemplify this preoccupation. The scope of these ideas ranges from a child's simplest notions of time to advanced time-space concepts of modern physics.

His time ideas ultimately evolved into a time-love conviction in which love, reaching into far-off generations, outwears erosions of the material world and triumphs over man's butcheries and frailties, eloquently stated in "The Prairie Melts" (1937).

Ferril's time-love theme was intuitively explicated by the late H. L. Davis. Mencken's admiration of both Davis and Ferril seems to have given them a common bond when they met in 1936 following publication of Davis's first novel *Honey in the Horn*, which won the Pulitzer and Harper prizes. Davis had previously won the Levinson prize for poetry.

In his foreword to Ferril's *New and Selected Poems* Davis wrote of the poet's understanding of love "beginningless and endless," and noted his sense of time in the lines:

Torrence prize, and an award by The Academy of American poets. He was commissioned by Steuben Glass for "Poetry in Crystal."

Respectable cash awards came his way in national competition: the \$1,000 Robert Frost award from Henry Holt and Company, and the \$10,000 prize for his play in iambics "And Perhaps Happiness," produced by Colorado's Central City Opera House Association.

Ferril also was a staff member of *Harper's Magazine* and wrote weekly columns for Colorado's oldest weekly, *The Rocky Mountain Herald*, published by his wife, the late Helen Ferril. He contributed to *The Rocky Mountain Herald Reader*, wrote and edited *I Hate Thursday*, a book of *Herald* and *Harper's* essays.

And the awards and honors continue: his poems framed in the rotunda of the Colorado State Capitol building, his designation as Poet Laureate of Colorado, his recordings for the Library of Congress, his lectures at Aspen, his musical collaborations and television productions, his Distinguished Achievement Award from the Western Literature Association, and his recent Trustees Award from the National Cowboy Hall of Fame.

To describe Ferril's home and way of life would be another story. His library is congested. On his "wampum wall" are his honorary degrees and numerous prize citations. Expert with hand tools, he has done much of the remodeling of his home and his cabin in the mountains. He enjoys talking about how giving form to material has much in common with writing poetry, and how our word "poet" comes from an old Greek work meaning "maker."

There will be more poems after *Anvil of Roses*, some already finished. Autographing *West-Running Brook* to Ferril, Robert Frost wrote: "We have ideas yet that we haven't tried, haven't we?"

Marilyn Griggs
Denver, Colorado
October, 1982

years, but nothing about the poetry, except for the tribute Frost autographed his *Collected Poems* to Ferril with:

A man is as tall as his height
Plus the height of his home town.
I know a Denverite
Who, measured from sea to crown,
Is one mile, five-foot ten
And he swings a commensurate pen.

But more needs to be said about Ferril's poetry.

The poems range from short lyrics to long works of epic import and from realism to fantasy, rendering impractical any categorical classification.

However, three major attitudes are evident: his control over awe-inspiring landscape; his realization of historical concurrence; and his treatment of time which, according to the *New Mexico Quarterly*, "puts the moment into a pattern of the ages."

First, control over landscape:

As a young poet Ferril began asking himself why so much bad poetry had been coming out of the West for generations; he came up with an explanation so obvious it had been overlooked by previous writers.

In a landmark essay titled "Writing in the Rockies" (*Saturday Review*, 1937), Ferril explained how Rocky Mountain poetry had been adversely affected by mystical adoration of landscape.

Mountains were deified and humanized by the pathetic fallacy on grand scale, while human life, the prime subject of all poetry, was denigrated or ignored.

Good writers like Willa Cather and Walt Whitman endowed the mountains with mystical thoughts and feelings. Cather was enthralled by "the Genius of the Divide, the great Free Spirit that breathes across it." Whitman argued that enormous rock formations were better artists than man could ever be.

Inferior writers versified fantastic ideas in which the mountains were identified with God and with heroes of literature, enjoyed family relationships with other mountains, gave blessings to sheep and cattle, and formed "the great chain which holds the Continent's vast brain."

Ferril noted how various English poets, overwhelmed by the spectacular mountains of Switzerland, responded emotionally in like manner.

He argued that inanimate Nature, however inspired, is only stage setting, and that we must never forsake the play for the setting. He loves

Invitation

Let natural substance of our humours make
Anvils of roses,
Lullabies of granite.

Doom is in fashion,
Tomorrow a cinder.

Sad entropies nobody understands
Flutter like fingers fooling with string
cats-cradling nothing
Into nothingness.

The town drunk gibbers in the calaboose,
He whacks the spinneret of a dangling spider,
The spider is a post-hole digger's ghost
Fencing a thousand acres with barbed wire.

Old wisdoms fall and rot
Like leather leaves under a linden tree.

Thundering tumbrels haul away
The sticks and stones of living cities,
In their place high glassy tombstones rise
Higher than the poisons in the sky.

Where did he go?
The popcorn man on the corner
Who used to ring his bell?
Heaven? Hell?
Very well, very well, who gives a damn?
One step ahead of us,
That's all.

Yet look around!

Young lovers sail their shallops on the seas
Over the vapor plumes of drowned volcanoes.

The buffalo grass is a warble of meadowlarks,
Old men are planting acorns on old graves.

Three granite mountain ranges wore away
While I was coming here, that is the fourth
To shine in spring to sunlight from the north.

Davis continues:

The sense of shift and instability of inanimate things is only a part of Ferril's basic concept. Complementary to it is his understanding of continuity of the human spirit. Man, through his power of self-renewal, is always more enduring than the mountains, and every renewal holds in itself the possibility of new growth, illumination and fulfillment.

From this balance of opposites—transition and renewal—there comes a concept of something permanent: love. Not love in its ordinary romantic sense, but something wider . . . resembling Dante's *amor semanta*, the passion that perpetuates life and everything in it of permanent value—love of inquiry, of naming things, of communicating emotion and experience, of recognizing and giving form to material.

Davis quotes Ferril:

Love of watching, recognizing, naming,
Knowing why similar ash of men and cattle
Leaves talismans that differ as a hymn
Might differ from an idle opal mine.

"In Ferril's poetry," Davis observes, "the past, as a great Uruguayan poet once noted, does not lie behind us but ahead; living does not carry us away from it but into a deeper understanding of what it was and what it is."

Ferril's poetry is written to be heard, as he insists all poetry should be. His musical ear controls every syllable. An accomplished mandolinist who never learned to read music, he can play hundreds of tunes and often tapes his own compositions on the recorder that swings over his bed.

Ferril worked for the Great Western Sugar Company 42 years. His poetic outlook was enriched by contact with executives, boards of directors, factory workers, farmers, and field workers. He became well informed on agronomy, animal husbandry, and genetics. Much of his work involved articles and motion pictures teaching advanced techniques to farmers and field workers.

While working for the company, he won *The Nation's* poetry prize and the Yale Younger Poets Award. Other awards included *Poetry's* Oscar Blumenthal prize, a *Forum* award, a Mitchell Kennerly prize, the Ridgeley

Anagoge For an Island

I can still see him like a misty ghost
peering down down from the Waldorf-Astoria
into the slits and canyons of the island
and I will tell you of his time and substance.

Rain is water that falls from clouds in the sky
but down toward Castle Rock in Colorado
there was no rain.

Taffeta ashes of the hogbacks
dusted the Bible in the window bay
dog-eared on Isaiah's desolation . . .
a garden that hath no water.

In Spring, as if dividing good from evil,
the boy would watch the land-side of his plow
cut sun-baked slabs
and feel the mold-board turn
the powder furrow over.
His eyes could taste the foaming flanks of the horse
tugging tomorrow out of yesterday.

Sometimes a great cloud
thunderheaded amber
over a knucklehold of sky
on half his dreams of watery woods and flowers
but the great cloud rolled away,
there was no water,
only a whiff of wind that tried to help
the windmill suck up dust.

In Autumn he would cut the brittle grasses
stabbing his ankles like nettles.
He'd mow around around around the field
to the pinching smaller island in the center,
crowding the rattlesnakes
into the final tussocks
the chatter-blades clicked over.

Jackrabbits loped away as the island tightened
tighter and tighter on the rattlesnakes.
He didn't bother to kill the snakes with his pitchfork,

into an island in the center of a field
and watched the jackrabbits go loping off
to sanctuary somewhere

if there was.

Children hippity-hop
To all the stars there are
And stars unknown
Plaiting flowers and song tunes in their hair.

So take my hand
So tight our knuckles crunch,
We're going over there beyond the dunes.

Dunes make record of the moving air
After we've gone our way
Into far gardens I am sure are there.

A Parable of Prophecy

Dire foreboding thundered across the land:
IN EIGHTEEN HUNDRED AND EIGHTY-ONE
THIS WORLD TO ITS END WILL COME!

Phosa McAllister playing stock in Albany
Was afraid of hail
And had been all her life.

Phosa was doing "Mother and Son"
And the boy in the play was Bruno,
And when the hail began to destroy the world,
Smashing the sky-light in the theater,
Phosa scrambled to her dressingroom,
Put on her muslin Ascension robe
And hovered over Bruno
Praying to God.

While lightning was splitting horse chestnut trees
In Albany where a number of chickens were drowned,
Out in Nevada a bison bull
Trundled up the other side of a draw
And snorted three clumps of rabbit-brush to shreds
Before he found sweet grass he hankered for.

That night a great big calico cat in Taos
Was playing creepy-mouse with a little chipmunk
Perched on his haunches at the sill of a shack.
How close would the chipmunk
Let the cat approach
Before he scooted to safety under the sill?
But the chipmunk didn't scoot away at all,
He was frozen stiff by the blazing eyes of the cat.
The cat just picked him up and ate him up.

A lovely evening almost everywhere
Except in Albany,
Only a sprinkle of rain in Washington
Where President Garfield, soon to be murdered,
Pondered the tariff under his umbrella.

they lay too numb in the sun,
nor did he bother about the few
he forked up to the hayrack with the hay,
knowing they'd seek the floor of the wagonbed
and dangle off before he creaked the rack
to the loft a mile away.

Wisdom does not increase as the years increase,
the boy grew old and hump-backed
and as wise
as he had always been.
They sought his wisdom.

Familiar of lark and maggot,
of mortgages,
of whining gilts and stallions whinnying,
he knew of hoes and muscles of machines.
He knew what had to happen
when sunlight struck a leaf
and what to say replying to a woman
My man is dead . . . what do I do next?

He's long since gone but I can see him still,
digiting the sun's arithmetic
slide-rule calculating water into life.

I hear his quiet voice in Washington
telling the gentlemen of the Ways and Means Committees,
who sit like baffled students,
the meanings of the water and the land.

I see him high up in the Waldorf-Astoria
about to tell the bankers down in Wall Street
the meanings of the water and the land.

He backs his twisted back against
the fake logs in the onyx fireplace,
he turns away from the cold electric flicker.
He's at the window now
staring far-off down
at midges moiling in Manhattan canyons
as if remembering
how once there was a boy
who crowded frightened rattlesnakes

Desert Epilog

Implausible, that naked night,
I still am not quite sure
of what we used for words
for being there.

I seem to think you were saying something about
a madonna dark with candle smoke
and wasn't I trying to tell you how to tell
the white death-camas from false asphodel?

No matter,
my invention year by year
contrives new overtures and afterways
to that far passion.

Here alone in this hot afternoon
I almost touch but do not touch
these tortured torques and splines
of desert lava worn by slow abrasions
of old old winds
that blow and blow forever.

I close my eyes,
I hear our wooded river.
I see our first new moon.

Cecropia

Protected by the brick wall of my garden
Against the chaos of our times,
I watch conjunction of a midnight moth
With honeysuckle blossoms.

A boy named Wilbur intersects the moth,
Wilbur called the moth a hummingbird.

Tonight in some forsaken crucible
Of memory
Wilbur glows a moment and goes out.

Parking Lot

We'd climb up to the hayloft
In Al Wright's barn
To read dime novels
Hidden under the hay.

But Tip Maloney said they were no good,
He could make better stories of his own,
He'd snatch a grab of dream
About old Squeaky Bob at Lulu
Drifting off
To killing rattlesnakes in Snodgrass County
But he never finished.

Where did the stories go?
Tip, where are you?

Now in this parking lot
I'm inexact in trying to fill the air
With Al Wright's barn
If it was ever here.

The turnstiles of the stars were beautiful
Except in Albany
No planet asking
Whether a bison bull out in Nevada
Was killing life or making life
When he chomped up living grass.

No planet asking
Whether a cat in Taos
Devouring a chipmunk
Was doing good or evil.

No planet asking
Whether Charles J. Guiteau
About to murder James A. Garfield
Was maniac or messiah.

Next evening Phosa McAllister in Albany
Continued playing "Mother and Son" in stock
And Bruno, the boy in the play,
Did very well.

Waterbug

I climb to a lily-pad lake
at the top of a mountain pass,
some of the water flows to the east,
some of it goes west.

Look how that struggling waterbug
is pushing sundown back
on golden golden ripples
of the lake.

Which ocean will he blunder to?
He does not know, nor I,
but I can feel the wonder
of the blue bandanna sky.

Night of Datura

I have heard songs of passion,
I have read histories of oceans,
Fingers, faces.

They tell me nothing
Of that luminous night.

You were aglow in moonflowers
But no moonlight touched you.
There may have been a thrust of swanlight
On your hair.

Cygnus was over us as I look back.

Absalom

When I was milking in the barn
Our bullsnake Absalom would hear
The first splash in the bucket.

I'd give his mouth a warm white squirt
And he'd be gone
Come milking time again.

We never had a rat around,
He saw to that.

Gnomon

At sundown on this autumn equinox
the cone-shaped shadow of my gabled house
slides up the cone-shaped spruce across the street
exactly fitting twilight to the tree.

I wonder at the random flight of nighthawks
tumbling high above this tight precision,
darting this way and that
leaving discernible
no zig-zag wake of light.

There seems no meaning in the cries they cry
yet there were ordered comings of the birds
by hazy tickings of the autumn air
long long before that cone-shaped tree was there.

Stories of Three Summers

Colorado

1776 ★ 1876 ★ 1976

I. 1776

Two hundred years ago
In the dog days of that summer
Of Life, Liberty and Pursuit of Happiness
Two friars scuffing golden rabbit-brush
For the glory of God
And the Holy King of Spain
Were goading their guides,
Their cattle, dreams and horses
Down the Dolores River
And over the Uncompaghre Mesa
Where Colorado was going to be.

*They needed guides to show them where to go
As we do now.*

The guides were Utes,
Young men and boys
Who knew the roads of rivers and old trees
Their fathers and their fathers
Had long traveled
Under the Goose-Going-Moon,
Under the Star-That-Never-Marches.

Admiring citron trees
And stalks of sarsaparilla,
Fray Silvestre Valez de Escalante
Smoked his cigars,
Stared at the constellations,
Knowing no more than a prong-horned antelope
Of how a leaden statue
Of King George the Third
Had been melted into bullets
In New York.

Nor did he know
He'd never reach

Owl

I was counting anthers of purple fringe
On Deadman's Hill the day
A great white owl soared over
Veering off toward Laramie.

I saw the great white owl return
To perch on a crag and stare
And stare and stare and stare at me,
What was I doing there?

I watched the owl until the crag
He perched on weathered into clay,
It may have been a thousand years
Before he flew away.

Ladies in sunbonnets plant sweet peas
Under windy trellises of chickenwire.
Snowballs blossom,
Doves coo to their mates,
Taffeta girls and mandolin boys
Sing old sweet songs at twilight
On the jig-saw front piazza.

Sales are brisk for ladies' linen collars
And Mustang Liniment, the Foe of Pain,
Hand-hammered horseshoe nails
Are in abundance

And rosewood coffins.

The sun comes up with a bang on the
Fourth of July!
Bells! Whistles!
Stove poker beating dishpans!
Parades! Parades!
Proud horses nodding plumes!

Miss Neoma Haggerty
Is *The Spirit of Liberty*.

A shuffling boy of a Negro slave intrudes,
Parading down the steet alone
In a tattered old Prince Albert coat,
The clapper of his hand-bell clangs
The *lost-child* clang of the mining camps,
He chants

Loss Chile!

Loss Chile!

Loss Chile!

They reach the park,
They hear *Centennial Hymn*
By John Greenleaf Whittier of Haverhill,
They hear *Centennial*
A poem by Lawrence Greenleaf
Proprietor
Of the Toy-and-Stationery Store.

Jack-Knife

I always keep a jack-knife in my pocket,
You never know when you've got to throw
A knife at a tree,
Or slit a trout,
Or scrape old insulation from a wire,
Or hear the green grass taunting you
To mumble-de-peg,
Or slice a birthday cake,
Or smooth off epigrams
From ancient slabs of soapstone,
Or flakes of patina
From old bronze turtle shells.

Under the undulations of the desert
Trundling megatons
Kill yucca moths and prairie dogs
And mice,
Caesar's Palace trembles

And rolls dice.

We elbow through an opiate shadowland.

The air is foul,
The seas are sour,
Trees of the forest disappear,
Why do we cringe back home from blundering wars?
Why are too many people here?

We grin and grimace into apathy.

There is no laughter,
No delight,
If there be sunrise
Sunrise will be night.

I go out Washington Street to Washington Park,
Old men are fishing by the lake,
I say hello and ask one pensioner
 "Why do we call this *Washington Park*?"
 "Because we always did . . ."
And the old man drifts
Like the bobber on his bait
Way back to when "they let us kids
 go swimmin' in Wash Park Lake
 before it made you sick."

Platoons of children trot around the lake
With placards on their backs

Jogging for Jesus

I ask one straggler if he'd like to hear
Me tell a story about George Washington,
 "Is that your dog's name?"
 "Does he bite?"

My beagle has a water-fight with a sprinkler,
The lake is rippling up the undersilver

What he was yearning for . . .
Those holy missions
Blessed by the vespers of the Western Sea
In far-off California.

*We never know
Until long afterward
If even then.*

Francisco Atanasia Dominguez
Was sick with chills and fever
While Lord Cornwallis
Was prodding his red-coat musketeers
Toward Flatbush
But knew nothing of it.
Nor did he know
Foreshadowings of *Figaro*
Were lilting in the singing heart
Of Mozart.

We never know.

II. 1876

Ten decades of manzanita berries
Come and go on the Uncompaghre Mesa,
The Fathers Escalante and Dominguez
Fade into waters naming the arroyos.

In Colorado Territory
Statehood long denied
Can be denied no longer.

Sagacious gentlemen in Oddfellows Hall
Puff out their waistcoats
Prouder than pouter pigeons,
Hitch up the galluses of their pantaloons
And slap each other on the back
To end their endless bickerings
Over a Constitution

*For Beautiful Colorado
Most Glorious Jewel
In the Diadem of States.*

The smog is drifting my way,
I can taste it.

I turn my car on Adams Steet in Denver,
John Adams, do I hear your voice?
Yours, Abigail Adams,
Bride of a President,
Mother of a President?

I hear one sparrow chirp.

I make another turn at Franklin Street,
You, Benjamin Franklin?
You lewd outrageous fellow!
Would we put up with the likes of you today
Even in Washington?

Washington . . . Washington . . .
I repeat the word . . . what does it mean!

At home I drowse in honeysuckle shadows,
Our heroes, where have *they* gone?
Where have *we* been?
What are *we* heading to?

There ought to be some moral
To my chronicles,
I am too old to break with my belief
The world is getting better

Yet . . .

My garden wall is a lens through which I see
Tortures of war on every continent
And across the alley
Little Felicita before she became a nun
Jerking the legs off grasshoppers.

Eyes half closed
I watch a bumblebee in the honeysuckle
Buzzing the sandy dynasties of Egypt
From flower to flower,
I hear the warble of a rosy breasted finch
Over the wheezings of the snow-bound elephants

The poem starts
 O, day, aforesight, ominous
 and heralded with fears
Continues through
 Two thousand
 and eighty-one words
And ends
 Till Freedom with her halo-light
 pervades the world at last.

Tumult drowns down the morning star,
Trumpeters sleep late,
Husks of skyrocketes
Tangle the tumbleweeds
And business of the grasshoppers
Goes on.

On August 1 Ulysses Simpson Grant
Takes pen in hand and signs a piece of paper.

Another State begins to be a State
And over the long blue echoings
Of plains against the ranges
Eagles fly,
Beavers build dams
And there is joy
In Growth
And Progress
And Prosperity.

III. 1976

Another hundred years . . .

Trails of pack-mules fade into vapor trails
To Elsewhere,
Any Elsewhere anywhere.

Here to Las Vegas
In two martinis flat!
Caesar's Palace!

Metamorphoses: 1806

In the Afternoon of an Antelope

That afternoon
while Zebulon Montgomery Pike
was shivering in cotton overalls
on the *Fontaine-qui-Bouille*

and Ludwig van Beethoven was fighting off
killing himself yet one more twilight
and little Napoleon was changing into
Emperor of More-and-More
and the carp in the rivers flowing down
from Fuji
were unaware of the death-going change
of Utamaro who painted their pictures . . .

That afternoon
a beautiful antelope that had no name
leaped over a greasewood clump
on the *Fontaine-qui-Bouille*
in a marvelous flash of sprung parabola
white-rumped
and disappeared forever.

Nobody saw the antelope.
Pike did not see him.

There may have been no antelope at all
if no one saw him
for it is documented well
that afternoon
a man in Philadelphia
named Jason something-or-other
was arguing with a barrel-thumping cooper
whose name is not recalled

*If a gun goes off in the woods
where there ain't no man to hear it
there ain't no sound!
Ye gotta have ears to hear!
There ain't no Yankee Doodle if ye ain't!*

Leaves of cottonwood and I pretend
I see the Washington Monument
Splitting the heavens
Like a whetstoned obelisk.

I make a rhyme:

*The first stone came from Bunker Hill,
The last stone came
From the Emperor of Brazil . . .*

The phallic obelisk takes off like a rocket
In a blaze of hatchets and cherry trees
Plugging a Washington's Birthday sale
Of sure deodorants
Or your money back.

I who tell those stories of three summers
Must not let allegory blunt
My plain intention
To interweave old tales of Colorado
With deeds of far-off patriots long ago
We try to celebrate
By mere coincidence
Of dates on calendars

Like saying *Happy Birthday*
To ourselves
As we click a stop-watch on oblivion.

Off to the west
Where my elm tree used to be
Before the beetles killed it
I see the Rocky Mountains
Trying to shoulder up
Above the violet-ochre smog
Of Jefferson County.

Jeffco we call it.

Jeffco, I ask,
How often do you think of Thomas Jefferson
In morning times and evening times?

Dear Sir:

The papers say you welcome suggestions for an appropriate name for the new Air Force Academy to be located near Colorado Springs.

May I suggest it be named for Zebulon Montgomery Pike, a most distinguished American officer who explored this area in 1806 and died heroically in the War of 1812.

Sincerely
ELMER SPELVIN

Good God! I shoulda stayed in bed!
Here's another cock-eyed son-of-a-bitch
who wants to name everything Pikes Peak!
Pikes Peak this!
Pikes Peak that!

Take this Miss Ferguson:

Dear So-and-So:

Your letter of July 4 suggesting that the Air Force Academy be named for Pikes Peak has been referred to the proper authorities.

Sincerely
GENERAL SWIFT BLUE WINGS, USAF

The glaciers drip their Aprils.

*Mama! Wake up!
That's Pikes Peak where they run the auto races!*

*Of course, my dear!
Pikes Peak! How wonderful!*

*I must have dozed off back out where
the driver said we saw
a beautiful antelope jumping over a bush.*

Mama, did we see the antelope?

*We must have, dear,
The driver said we did.*

Of Hannibal,
I hear a squatting sorcerer in Denver
Talking shop with a con-man in Babylon.

Out of the time-slosh of the tides
We've learned to crawl
And race the stars so soon,
We can't remember who we were tomorrow,
We can't remember who it was
Back in those quaint old days
Who walked the moon.

Do I hear terror singing into laughter?
Do I hear torture gasping into love?
Dare I believe more dreams than I can prove?
We never never know until long after

If even then

For centuries are only flicks
Of dragonflies
Over the granite mountains.

I smell the armpits stinking salt
at Appomattox.

Robert E. Lee is facing Ulysses Grant.
Gaping in disbelief are gray-clad boys.
Grant looks like a man,
he looks like a human being.

*He's talking' quiet-like . . .
What's he sayin'?
Says we can keep our horses
and go home.*

I break away,
I try to force my feet
to start down Riverside.

Over my shoulder I look back
at the tomb of Ulysses Simpson Grant,
shinbone shrinking in the hollow boot,
dusty cud of black cigars in the throat
the cancer used for food.

I make my lips push out the words

*It's been a busy day for us, Ulysses.
How's for a mug of Old Peoria
down at Beekman's Tavern?*

II.

Yet come with me, Ulysses,
be you ghost or substance
as I walk again.
The past is made of great stone men
who speak their requiems
out of the cypress of forgetfulness.

112th STREET. SAMUEL JONES TILDEN,
NINE FEET TALL ON A GRANITE PEDESTAL,
SPEAKS WITH A VOICE OF STONE FROM
THE ARMATURE ON WHICH HIS HOLLOWNESS
IS FABRICATED.

That afternoon on the *Fontaine-qui-Bouille*
Zebulon stared at a mountain
shading his eyes from the glitter hurt
of high-up beckoning snows
and ingots of golden ice
not knowing he was changing into that mountain
transformed irrevocably
as *Cygnus* into Swan
or *Clytie* Sunflower.

Turning away from the peak he was changing into
Zebulon went to jail in Sante Fe
changing into a trivial quarrel a while
then sloughed off into old oblivions.

Only the mountain lingered.

Grave antiquarians and ghosts of grandfathers
stalk misty corridors of crumbling books:

Now
er-uh . . .
was Pike the dupe of Wilkinson and Burr?
Was Thomas Jefferson a two-faced Janus?
er-uh . . .
And how about that rock that hit Pike on the head
when he bled to death in Canada
or did it hit him in the belly?

They blow away in phantoms of disuse.

The glaciers drip their Aprils.
Cogs in the cog-road up Pikes Peak
are slick with grease the lichens cannot live on.

A bus is braked on Pikes Peak Avenue
in Colorado Springs:
Mama! Wake up!
That's Pikes Peak over there!
That's Pikes Peak where they run the auto races!

And here's a letter
to General Swift Blue Wings, the Pentagon:

100th STREET. THE FIREMEN'S MEMORIAL IS A
COLOSSAL TABLET FLANKED BY HEROIC FIGURES
REPRESENTING COURAGE AND DUTY. A
BAS-RELIEF DEPICTS A HORSE-DRAWN ENGINE.

These firemen do not speak to us, Ulysses,
they seem to be waiting, waiting, waiting . . .
they do not tell us of great fire parades,
banners flying,
rosebuds on the hose-cart hubs,
they do not tell of the gala Firemen's Ball,
beautiful ladies, waltzes, minuets,
they seem to be thinking only
of Courage and Duty.

Ulysses whispers
 Courage!
 Duty!
 Yes!

93rd STREET. THE BRONZE EQUESTRIAN STATUE OF
JOAN OF ARC IS SILENT. ONLY OUR WORDS ARE HEARD.

Ulysses, how do you feel about this statue?
 Hocks and pasterns don't look right to me.
You're speaking of the horse,
I meant the girl.
 Right handsome girl I reckon.
I'm convinced she must have been a girl
yet she dressed like a man
and led her troops like a hero.
Sex, Ulysses, has myriad deviations
like colors in a rainbow.
 Humbug!
But after defeat and capture,
so much like a pitiful girl.
 Throw her in prison?
She was tried by the Holy Church
and burned at the stake.
 For dressing like a man?
Perhaps included in a dozen charges.
 Fair trial?
Much as we handle criminals of war.

Down Riverside with Ulysses

I.

Down Riverside I wander
like walking railroad cross-ties
in a treadmill dream.

I hum that silly old song I sang
to my first mandolin:

*In the afternoon
we went through Grant's Tomb . . .*

And there it is,
the hubcap dome
the somber tomb
of Ulysses Simpson Grant.

Friendly place
like that old hotel at Como Colorado
where you'd pay a quarter
to have them take a picture
of you and your girl using a burro
for a telephone.
She'd talk into his ear
and you'd hold up his tail
like a receiver.

Friendly place,
so many tourists milling around,
Grant should come smiling out to meet me
like Posey Jones at Como
but he doesn't.

I am dissolved in terrors of his days,
I smell the fetid vapors of the dead
so sickish sweet
bloating against that meetinghouse
at Shiloh.
I smell the children in the caves of Vicksburg
gnawing shreds of mules,
I smell the blowflies in the eyes
of Chattanooga,

cannon are mounted
on rough-hewn granite boulders.

Soldiers and sailors
are splotched with spray-can paint,
scrawled with lip-stick,
old obscenities,
words of love and passion.
Hollow soldiers, hollow sailors
platooning spray-can rainbows
up the tanbark sky.

Do I hear them hay-foot straw-foot
through centuries of Gettysburgs?
Do they prod the stallions
of Thermopylae?

Are they chanting to the world?
Do they even try to whisper to the world

*Once upon a time there may have been
boys who tedded hay
and opened gates
and waved farewell
and went away?*

I am Samuel Jones Tilden.
I rose like a Star of Hope
over the lingering evils wrought by Grant.
I charmed the masses with the truth.
They made me President!
Great tides of ballots!
But the White House door was slammed
in my face by politicians.
I was destroyed by just one vote
in the Electoral College
and Rutherford Hayes came sneaking in
like a fox.

Is he trying to say, Ulysses,
that instruments of what we call
Democracy betray us?

No answer.

102nd STREET. A QUAVERING BRONZE
VOICE SPEAKS RAPIDLY.

I am Orestes Augustus Brownson,
Divine Essence of God!
I preached from the pulpits of reason.
I stood for the rights of the poor
and heavily laden.

Read my ten books explaining why
I was a Presbyterian,
a Transcendentalist,
a Unitarian
and finally
a Roman Catholic.

Do you think, Ulysses,
that Orestes
got too much tangled up
with fighting what he hated to believe
and lost the battle?

Ulysses starts to speak
but shakes his head.

First Hour

They call the mountain Thorodin,
They call the canyon Golden Gate,
They call the graveyard Dory Hill.

You loved to go to Dory Hill,
You scuffed the weeds and read each stone
As if the tangle and neglect
Were yours alone.

We took you there,
We laid you down,
We wept and hurried
Back to town.

Sundown climbed Mount Thorodin
And Thorodin began to dial
The first hour of a long long while.

Make up our minds to hang the criminal,
give him a fair trial
then hang him.

Wretched business!

But the Holy Church repented,
they changed her into a Saint
but it took a long long time.

How long?

Precisely 489 years.
Joan was sainted the year we elected
Warren Gamaliel Harding.

Who was Harding?

One of our Presidents
who got into trouble
for trusting his friends.

So?

I'd like to hob-nob with the fellow.

You have, Ulysses, in the history books.

III.

I am alone.
Ulysses is not with me,
never was
save through some fond excursion
of my mind.
He's back there in his tomb
as far from me
as that remote Ulysses long ago
who spent nobody knows how many lifetimes,
old soldier yearning home
from fabled Troy.

Only this road called Riverside is real,
children playing, buses, pensioners,
I watch the roll, the yaw, the pitch
of gulls that sail the sky.

Down Riverside I stop at 89th
before a monument.
They call it Soldiers' & Sailors' Monument,

A Pretty Box

You could not speak
but may have heard our voices.

Your eyes responded to three pressures of our hands
on yours . . .

We love you . . .

That was all.

Now they were talking of what they called
the *body*.

Next day I signed my name.
They said I could call for the ashes
in thirty days.

By night I dreamed of walking down
an endless corridor pinching me
tighter and tighter.

By day I had to pass the mortuary
on my way to work.
I'd glance through my windshield
trying not to look
but I had to look.

After thirty days I rang the bell
and was greeted by a smiling girl.

I felt a surge of inner laughter
when she gave me a pretty box
gift-wrapped in silver,
no more of what you were and are,
my lover,
than clippings of my nails
or snips of hair
that fall on the floor
under my barber's chair.

Silence

Echo of silence
blown away from music
is on the elms
and down the linden blossoms.

There was a well here once,
the well is filled with ashes.

Foreshadowing

My giant sundown shadow in November
strides on ahead of me and longer
than the tallest cottonwood
is tall in June.

The grasses wither
as if the grass were dead.

The snows will come,
the snows will melt and freeze,
sun-slant spindles leaning
toward the south
into the taste of grass
that did not die,
sweet new blades
of April in my mouth.

Sleeping Longer

The lady is sleeping longer
in her chair.

Sometimes she touches
her long long hair
as if the girl
who wore the hair
were there.

Fishing Upstream With My Father

So much spoke to me of your death,
The urn-shaped flowers of mountain heath,
Canyon darkling fallow umber
Shading into autumn slumber,
Yet some deep feel of joy to be
Began to pulse and pulse in me
As I began to wade and talked
To us of river floors we'd walked.

Under that sad but warming sky
I was precise as casting a fly
In where I let your ashes fall
From our Big Rock pool in the canyon wall
To the meadow's undercutting shelf
Where the stream curved back to meet itself
And almost did, each ripple burning
Into foretelling of returning.

I let a bright Gray Hackle whip
A peacock loop from the springing tip
Of my rod and watched it coil, uncoil
Over this now and over all
The nows and nows and nows to come
And the line felt good against my thumb,
And we gave that day to the river more
Of us than it had known before.

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Begin Again

No boatman's horn
comes winding down
this dying lake.

The last pale orchid of the bog
is gone.

As if I were an ancient mage
I make the lake start over.

I give command!

Begin again!

Feel ploughshare glacier nudging in,
Feel wings and fins,
O love the rising waters!

Feel children growing up
to love each other,
clasping their hands
under the evening star.

