The Hearkening Eye

by
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Ahsahta Press

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Boise, Idaho

Some of these poems first appeared in ***Botteghe Oscure***, ***Chicago Tribune Magazine Section***, ***The New Republic***, ***Poetry***, ***Rook Press***, ***Salmagundi***, ***Yankee***, and in the following volumes by Miss Flanner: ***If There Is Time***, ***In Native Light***, ***Time's Profile***, and ***A Tree in Bloom***.

Poems selected and edited by A. Thomas Trusky

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ISBN 0-916272-12-5

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number:
79-51631

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Introduction

A LETTER TO THE AHSAHTA EDITORS

Gentlemen:

You have asked me to suggest someone to write the "Introduction" to your collection of my nature and regional poems. Among people for whom it would ordinarily be no strain, I hope, to speak of me and of some discernible quality in my verse, there are several, perhaps a half dozen, whose names come pleasantly to mind. But, being creative and also professional people earning their livings, writing and teaching and maintaining their reputations, they are busy, very busy. I cannot bring myself to ask of any of them the courtesy of time and application that such a request involves. No, gentlemen, it's beyond me to ask any of these talented and successful people to write an "Introduction" for my verse. Naturally, I refrain from mentioning their names because it would be a disappointment to you to have to miss the significance of any one presence in your publication. I have written some difficult letters in my time, but of this one I beg to be free.

Of course the matter has been on my mind while doing other things, the sort of things that might possibly turn up in my poems—chasing the doe and her fawn out of the orchard, picking up beer cans where people of low mentality and no conscience have dumped them at the bottom of the green lane, or, for consolation in life's confusions just putting my arms, as if they could reach, around a redwood tree. In fact, it was in the midst of doing chores most likely to me in the exuberant growth of my garden after winter storms, and while sparing the pimpernel whose lavender eye peered up at me from its tiny cheek, and while I carefully took the curled dock for my supper, that I found, just there in the cool mud of spring on my premises, the one person on whom I can properly impose. Myself. Although to do it myself includes a psychological discomfort, since it might be seen as an immodest gesture, yet I think of it as merely to the purpose. If there is anything of interest in the content of my poetry, anything that distinguishes it slightly from countless others' of our day, it should be of relative ease for me to recognize it.

So, to begin: I have been writing poetry for more than fifty years. In half a century I should have accomplished, in all ways, more than I have. But I have at least shed some of the wrong reasons for writing, those exhilarating, tempting runs of imagery and lyrical impulse in which the mind of a young poet was caught like a charmed fish in a stream. Yet altogether, it was a good time in which to begin to be conscious, back there in the Twenties. It was not necessary to go to Paris in order to want to write poetry. For me, at least, it was necessary only to be aware of visible things against which there was no rebellion. The seen world of growing things, for instance, was a tremendous stimulus. It was not yet known to be endangered. Nor were, as yet, the most famous and coercive poetic influences of our time strong enough to shame the young poet out of his own shy sense of art. Our Father in Hopkins was not one to do that.

From romantic abstractions, possibly effective of their kind, but windy and regal, I moved eventually toward a smaller, stronger focus, perhaps on similar themes, but the closer view could then be labeled as nudging the metaphysical, and hence more acceptable. The worm's eye view, the pebble's eye view, not forgetting God's eye view, you understand, for my earlier poetry contains religious writing which I miss now, since it was an ardent expression of my youth. There is no substitute for faith, gentlemen, certainly not the cold assurance that, along with comets, satellites, and the trampled moon, we have some place in the universe. Still, I could hope for my poems that if the split between faith and unfaith is not quite clean it leaves no litter around, no false exaltedness of emotional refuse to orbit overhead or underfoot.

Here I must pause and say, with some nervousness, that to extract the poems of nature from the rest of my verse is not easy, and if accomplished, much reduces the area to which these comments may be sensibly applied, or from which evidence may be gathered. However, a little scrutiny, as I have hinted, may turn up an identifiable and pervading—dare I say style?—which might be observed as a singleness in pursuit of several meanings. (There! I have chased the doe out of the orchard but the fawn got left behind.)

Since the form of these poems tends to be lyrical and a lyric is, if tied down for definition, a typographic entity, I am sorry that these poems are not more adventuresomely, inventively, and oddly lyrical. I admire the

idiosyncrasy of any reliable fresh and peculiar form and find it lacking here, although I detect nothing stale or chosenly reminiscent. (Many experiments in form and rhythm lie in my desk.) Chiefly what a poet starts with is amorphous, however potent. It must be concentrated, even made solid although pliant, given a good shake to slough off what is trailing loose, and surely gotten off the ground, not with hot air, God forbid, and not (at its peril) with wings, but with a glad, close-to-sickening lift within itself. The mechanism of this lift is a lyrical mechanism. If my poetry fails to suggest, even faintly, these interesting problems of the written and the-about-to-be written word, neither any one else nor I ought to be talking about it, for it would not deserve such close and *gabby* consideration as it is being given.

My poetry has urban and contemporary concerns but its main emphasis does lie with earth. With earth and love. However, the few poems of love collected here are present because of their environment. For fifty years I have lived close to the western earth and most life for my poetry is drawn from that source, or recognizably related. The promise of earth and the fate of earth, stated or unstated, are at the centre of these poems. If they have any strength it is honest because it is the strength of stone unadorned or adorned only by dry lichen, and if they have music it is what fell into them listening to the wind and waiting on the rain. A mystical sense of identity with the earth is implicit here in observation and in pleasure of details rather than in preachment or invocation. A mystical sense of identity seems to me utterly important whether one is writing of the Pacific Ocean or an empty tin cup. Identity is for the poet what knowledge is for the scientist.

Some of these poems are early or, more exactly, hark back to my childhood, as *Letter to an Old Home*. May I say I am partial to this one? It is close to the experience it deals with, it takes hold of it and does not let go, or so I believe. Since it is usual for one commenting to pick out a poem here or there, let me continue. May I recommend "On a Hill" to the reader? A sturdy poem full of the western day. Also "Smith Brothers' Lumber Shed," which by a severe listener will be found given to guile. I like it. Then finally to mention a recent poem, "Moon Poem," which begins with the moon as I often see it, rising just beyond the woods very close to my home. In this poem something strange happened, something frightening, in fact, for the clear light of the moon turned into the light of dread that illuminates mankind in our time. I had not foreseen that this would occur where for many years I had watched the one beautiful sight, a white

radiance rising through André's black trees. In conclusion may I suggest that it is permitted to the cicada to mourn and rejoice at the same time in "Eve of Elegy," but the poem itself tries to make a choice.

Yours,
H. F.

June 23, 1979
Calistoga, California

Section I

On Forgetting the Name of a Small Plant

A grace, a slightness, a green twist
Lightly angled from left to right,
A trace of utterness, a pendulous
White streak, God help me, what flower hangs
Down so upon its own ascension? *You.*
Can I forget your name and still know mine?
The soft interrogation of your tendril speaks
To me, yet does not speak your name,
And so I leave it where I must,
Known so clearly long ago,
To-day not clearly lost,
A tassel seeded in my mind,
A tangle where you taper most.
How can so much that's feminine and Greek
Take off and leave no evidence behind?
Grand botany, old friend,
In some small corner of your discipline
Permit me room and make it bright
And wish me luck,
That I may spring upon the fugitive

In the last syllable of her flight.

Dictionary

O sassafras, your portrait in a book
Has made the letter S a pitcher of dew,
Has made the years fall open at the blessings,
And cut time's alphabet in two.

And there are no more words words, only
A piece of woodland coined with sun-in-dapple
And near my foot the three-times trillium leaf
And under her parasol the pale May-apple.

And I am standing halved by past and present,
Confused in light that's double like a shell,
Recalling the hermit thrush, his fine soprano
And that no other bird could hide so well.

Recalling maiden-hair in frail triangles,
And a little snake who had a yellow chin,
And Judas-tree with green hearts hung, so choicely,
And next year's beads of flowers tight within.

O sassafras, your portrait in a book
Has left my mind half-slanted and awry,
Tilted to eastward in a western land
To see the wind-flower tremble and hear
the whip-poor-will cry.

Vintage
Napa Valley

My neighbour, the vintner, has an old stone wall
And over it eases in dark loose green
An ivy, elate with crimson each fall

As if, in a valley whose honour is wine,
Whose fields are ritual to the last grape,
Even the ivy, the visionless vine

Is whipped by a dream that cries in the stone,
Yield from the richness of your want,
Till in winey nimbus of its own,

In winefall of colour over the wall
The dry stem is fluid with coral and rose
And the first crush and most ruby of those.

I brighten my eye, I hold out my glass,
Poor in spirit, poor in thirst,
And still get more than my right of grace,

For if no grape hangs upon this vine
Yet sugars of excitement swell
In craze of vintage beyond belief

And intensity pours
from a falling leaf.

Black Arum

(Dracunculus vulgaris)

That you should smell of carrion
And be beloved as filth
By flies, the soft small vultures murmurous
About your spathe,
Is destiny not fit for flower,
Although you be corruption's flower of state.

I, for one, pause to admire
And call you beautiful, as foul as sable
And, mused upon by your hypnotic hue
I do forget the pure, the mountain lily,
White Shasta's little nymph, and red pluck of the rose
For one whom evil raised with darkest care
Out of time's tropics, a hazard to the soul.

Offended heart, do not believe this flower,
This floral lie,
Even its awful fragrance, that of death,
His flower indeed, and his profane ideal,
With a like will to wither
As the lovely and the real.

The Ancient Olive Trees at Winters

Folly that heart so hot and bleak,
Burnt with confusion's double scar,
Should haunt the beauty of these pale trees,
Too silver and too singular
To be the loiter of despair.
Pure trees in a pure avenue
With droop of grace antique
Above the black and Gothic knees,
And stir of mobile stateliness
In lucid terminals of view
All ways tranquil toward peace—
Too rich a place, wrung heart, for you.

On hillside rough the sad oak, rather,
I'll visit, a tree itself forlorn.
The lichen smear it, mosses smother,
A feverish tree by nightmare stung,
Whose sap is running to the dust away,
And from the root of summer twisted
The dismal thing is sick to die,
Yet long is willingness protested,
For in this dry, exacting air
Death may be slow to sidle up.
A tree may wait the jaw for years,
At last too weak to feel it snap.

In this poor place, under this tree of tears
In shadow scalped by every season,
    Here will I
    Sit and sigh
    And think and sing
Since life has led me to a dying thing,
Is there a living reason?

Praise for a Valley Weed

(Beside the Southern Pacific tracks)

Where dusts of old departures blind the heart
And a white face forever flits
Forward down a perishing view,
Here stands a plant, frail scaffold of great nature,
    Abatus and gloriosus, you,
The pillar in our bones, no less,
And trodden pith of spirit. Lacking your kind,
    Adsurgens, trivialis, structural weed,
These perfect wheels, these lords of travellers, indeed,
Had never rolled out of that hot oblivion
Where, ages gone, life's shanty rocked forlorn
    And barely stood,
While God without end shot slowly past.
Lacking your will to rise, your poise to fall
As deepening loam upon a shabby star,
What end save sterile time would earth have known,
What fruitful forest giving lounge and food,
    Callicarpus, ambrosioides all.
What golden victuals or what amethyst vine
Would fill this valley of the San Joaquin
And bask along the brilliant wake of speed
Where fuels and men and metals make such haste?
    Pusillus and chrysophyllus, little weed.
Whose smile would deck these corridors of arrival,
Whose feet make merry to descend at home
As day, with a drag of rusty stars, turns west?
Had you not given soil for food for hunger
What language had grown tongue to test
    The lilt of its own seed
In all the mumbling ages of your earthward rise
    —Lucidus ever in humilities—

Not these, the hardy, classic two, deciduous of death,
Still budding with your name and honoring your deed,
Petrophilus, oliganthus and sanctorus
and fraternal weed.

Fern Song

Had I the use of thought equivalent
To moist hallucination of a flute
I could be saying how
A certain music in my woods has driven
A certain female fern to tear
In panic from her good black root.

But no transparency of clear intent
Assisting me,
I only guessed at what the singer meant
That hour I heard his intervals prolong
Beyond security of common song
Into a raving sweetness coming closer
While the lyric animal himself
Was still remote,
Since thrush may have a mile of music
In one inch of throat.

In Memory

The old black orchards in our valley
Are blowing white, and the bare fist of the vine
Is full of the young sweet leaf.
We are made more real by this pure joy,
But made a second time by most pure grief,
For you are dead, dear friend, and we are left,
Dark crystals that reflect your light in vain.

Joy is a season of short grass,
And death must be believed,
And here we stand, here we look up
Into the eyes of a tall man we love, trying
To say good-by, the word that has no mercy
And will not be deceived.
Speak for us, earth, we cannot.
Empty seed and stain of sap,
Bright wet stems of March so soon to dry and fall,
Trillium's ivory triad fading on the forest mat,
Yield, after your kind, sad honesty of farewell,
And let the pendulous maple flower to-day
Chime and hum in muted resignation
As if the heartwood of the tree were sighing
    Good-by, good-by.

But you, rough orchard bough and everlasting vine,
Speak truth to our friend
As to one we cannot do without,
And lift the majesty of your buds
    Against all dying.

Section II

Eve of Elegy

The last cicada prays for love
This bright November night,
Singing alone to his own song
The quavering gospel of delight
With which he late persuaded
The delicate mob of pearly kin.
The music-shaken mystics
Who tremoloed to him.
Sing on, you widowed melody,
Tender monotonist,
With sweet obsessed voice
    Rejoice, rejoice
A music that should mourn its dead
(Where pathos dangles on the twig),
But stutters with hope and joy instead.
Sing on, so solitaire, so wed.
One listener will praise
The blameless errors of your ways,
Since music at this hour of night
    Mends all,
Love that has no meeting,
Faith that has no choice,
    Forsaken, Forsaken,
        And
            Rejoice, rejoice!

The Buck

Heard him from the cliff where the fern dripped,
Faint, deep, he's calling to the doe.
Heard, where the brook ran cold and subtle
Straight from icy vitals of the snow.
Heard him from the trail where summer smells
So soft, and the large air is faultless balm,
Voice like blunt horns in caverns blown, the buck,
In granite silence and cliffglittering calm.
Bell bell that rings in middle of a rock.
His cry of green wood lifted hot and dense,
Till forest feels it in the least, the leaf,
A murmurous knowledge out of sun and sense.
Rumor rolled on mountain wind, heard heard
From far in wood's black glamour and the place
Witness to such wild beatitude
And the clear startle of Sierran grace.
Somewhere, sheer hope assured, by snow's white side
And the gay dangle of dewed glacier lilies,
Desire does overtake its own at last,
Blithe among cedar slopes the running bride:
Not desperate disunion gaunt on stone,
Not the chilled heart left louder and alone.

Hungers

I hear the young hawk calling
In the warm autumn rain.
This is his first October,
He dreams what he will learn—
Devour and be well satisfied
        Inflicting pain.

I too shall go to the soft wet forest
And walk there, famishing. Walk alone.
I'll hear the hawk announce his hunger
To the empty pine,
And see his meagre droppings hang
        A shroud over the stone.

Poor raptor of my own woodland,
He never will be well filled
Though he prime his beak on barb and limb
And tear apart
The failed-of-fleetness he has killed.
The feast that was spread has been consumed.
Sour liver and trivial lights are what he'll get,
        The fresh hot heart of death
        Is not for him.

Moment

I saw a young deer standing
Among the languid ferns.
Suddenly he ran—
And his going was absolute,
Like the shattering of icicles
In the wind.

The Mountain Quail

Death is silence. A kind that does not break.
Of that I am sure.
Of mercy no opening,
Of tenderness no aperture.
And yet I call your name, and call.
If time could fly apart, and you stood there,
Before the event could thunder shut
And you had lost your lightning, what
Could one as I, so thin and lonely, say?
Perhaps this only,
"Listen, the mountain quail
Goes over our hill
And through my heart to-day."
In torment of joy that would be all
As on and on she rings
The reticent clapper
Of her solitary bell
And in the leaves she stoops,
Beseecher and mourner, true quail,
And picks her way away.
Among the birds of melancholy
What is she haunted to tell?
To me she speaks of joys refused,
Sharp and cold on memory's constant file.
They are the joys that hurt the most
And pierce to the wincing of remorse,
As tree by tree the forest sighs
Toward the rambling gong
And single as the faded bell
I am here alone,
Full of hard learning and alone,
For slowly it has come to me,
Like a message from lichen on a stone,
That native to our hill
Are all the kinds of silence
    Ever known.

Frog Song

You would not guess it is the voice
That croons warm water from the ice
And melts the season to reverse
Stiff white its fatal trip into excess.

You would not guess it is the voice
Roused by planets in their course
Who sweep their burning manes across
Spring's muddy flowers and soiling of the snows.

You would not guess it is the voice
That can be heard through prison wall,
It can though, can with sorrow drill
And spread a marshy hum in a dark place.

You would not guess it is the voice
That stirs a woman past her prime
To kneel on the scanty path to come
And thank the cold frog in his slime
Who does not know his stupid rank
But throbs as vivid as a lark--
That's it, she quietly thinks,
Full utterance and little time,

That is the voice.

For My Gold Jungle Cock Killed By a Stray Dog

It was slaughter of a sauntering innocent.
It was villainy done by a foreign boor
On his superior, one too haughty
To pick his feet up fast. And now, poor little one,
Your gilded style and strut and the black spangle
Of your tail's long scroll are gone.
It was sudden, like a lamp thrown over.
End of the daily opera that swelled
A tight bright bust. End of two brilliant years
Spent badgering the cat, a milky fool.
Nothing is left, only this rumpled body
In my hands, and it refuses to grow cold.
Embers of spunk and glory do not cool.
You are not dead, then? Oh, you are dead, then, yes.
Your eyes are dead. Both eyes. Those tiny tough
Pink eyelids, like an old man's,
Clicked shut after one view down death's hot gullet.
Who could look twice? These are the facts at twilight.
You cheeky bugle for the last time blown, good night.
Under the madrone you slept in by the fence
I lay you down. And something comes to light.
Because you are so small your silence is immense.
You are the enigmatic miniature in which
Vast things exist, though Origen, philosopher
Who spoke of this did not mean you. And yet, attend.
"Understand that in you are the sun, the moon."
Said Origen,
And set his wisdom rolling, if it might
Gather its moss of evidence.
Look! Look! Here comes a big moon quickly rising
Out of André's woods above the fence.
There lies a dead cock in his golden ruff.
After twice ten thousand moons, philosopher,
You still get proof,
And better yet,
all that ascending relevance.

Deer Season

The old hunter called from his rusted car
To ask if this year I had seen the great buck,
And I said No.
Ten minutes earlier I had seen him,
Brown and clear,
Suddenly lift his head and go
Down from the orchard to André's wood
With his branching crown that made him look
Such a first-born,
And the son of a tree.
By now he was a thicket and a hill away,
A wrath of hooves and flying joints,
Bounding on arcs of muscular scorn,
Crying Ha! to the sons of men.

As the old hunter drove away
His gun was dozing over his knee
And he lifted his scarlet cap
From the white globe of his head
And bowed. It was not meant for me
But I bowed also, and there were two of us,
Bowing and bowing.
We bowed to venison, we bowed to majesty,
We bowed to bullet and to target's luck,
We bowed to silence, we bowed to terror,
We bowed to the great buck.

A True Summer Night

These old hot nights, how the cicadas carry on,
How they do shake
A thousand wedding-bells and make
The sweet demented sound
Run over the warm western ground.
Where there is summer, where there is night,
Where these frail ministers of joy are found,
How gentle and wild the throb of their delight,
How ethereal the hubbub and scurry of music,
While ever the answer and echo return
Down-risen, up-fallen, scintil and tumble of tone,
And casting of mandolins all around,
As midnight and summer succumb
To the haunted persuasion of joy.

There can be no ravage nor cold to come.

Section III

Slow Boone

Call it our land, our valley, but not ours
Got by our fathers' guns and Paiutes slain,
Until a slower haste of continent
Wins twice to west across the brimming plain.

O quick compatriots, now is the need
To reap a secret in the acre sealed
Untouched by prairie rage or primitive.
Say truth is deeper than the battlefield.

Say all sure things that frenzy overtakes
Win to the greenest goal by their own powers.
Say patience like the burning of a rock
Turns passion, then will the land be ours.

Then will the native heart be cleared for use,
The horny miles run inward to the mind
And the blood's visionary length at last
Be in the poet's actual vein refined.

His then a continent to sensitize,
His the blue land not plowed by pioneers,
His the last newcoming the plains will know,
A slow Boone quietly fingering frontiers.

12 O'Clock Freight

Away, four miles, I heard the Santa Fe
Go down the track, and I could see the sight.
A freighter pulling out with clang of cars,
Sealed and sullen in the flowered night.

At home and in my mind I saw her draw
Her secrets where black fences line the rail,
And choking orange groves abandoned to
No rain and flaky pestilence of scale.

And then by palmy drives and boulevards
Where stucco gleams beside the carob-tree,
And Spanish patios in vain enclose
Lone hearts from Iowa and Kankakee.

And past Anita's wealthy meadows where
Her smouldering pea-cocks doze among her hounds
With sapphire laces folded in the dark
That daily trail and twitch about the grounds.

On by the oaks whose forest stoops upon
The listing hills where once the drift of deer
Drew down with winter's waters green.
A herd of dreams in glassy atmosphere.

Here comes, she comes, here comes the glooming train
Flying her bloody smoke. People in bed
Rouse halfway, and made lonely at the sound
Touch hands and touch their hands to a dear head.

And tell me, night, the names of all the men
Who ride the freight train, stretched upon the cars,
Heavy and motherless and rockasleep,
Their hungry faces pointed at the stars.

What destiny, dark suburb, what asylum
Of rot will they slip off into at last,
When on the final freighter, oh caboose,
The ruby jerk and leer of light go past?

Into the valley, long San Gabriel,
The train crawls bleak and moaning down the track,
And from the rail the starlight spurts again
With sudden gush of brightness after black.

Smith Brothers' Lumber Shed

Here in the shadow of the Smiths, my forest,
The flower of Oregon is straight and dead,
The pine that whistled and the cedar's harp,
A silent lumber counted in a shed.
So many miles, so many winds between
This corner south, your sable forest north,
Where loud you rolled your branches on the storm,
Slow begot new green, slow brought it forth.
O Mr. Smith, O Oregon, I saw
All that you both possess under one shed,
The earth profoundly holding up her trees,
And every man, a home upon his head.
And more, believe, I saw and counted most
The northern stars still trembling through the branch
And far below, the pale glass of a flower,
And I forebore to pick it up so blanche.
It is for Mr. Smith, he must be laid
Sometimes limpid among lengths of lumber,
Heaving his eye up to remembered shade,
Hearing the lovely voice of living timber,
And see—it's natural, not as a Smith possessed—
His fir-trees drinking at the snow's fine breast.

Noon on Alameda Street

Sun, when it shines on traffic, has a look
Of loaded radiance that might explode,
Yet keeps its kindle like a meaning known
Only to motors in the city road,

Only to fury lifted of all horns
Mourning to themselves a thing to come,
For we have heard delirium in a claxon,
Seen revelation lit on chromium.

On Alameda Street the earth is turning
Secret among old sluices and their kind:
The voice of men among machines at noon
Comes like a sigh from history to the mind.

For in this noon there is no light like light
(Oh, tell us, dark on asphalt, of the sun),
But brightness spawning upon dirty glass,
But fever smoking at meridian,

But men and women riding in their graves
With hands upon a wheel they cannot keep
Clear in the rapt confusion of the crowd,
Crowd and the fate of motion and of sleep.

Driving Clock

(Below Mt. Wilson Observatory)

O lovely wheel that weds along the groove
And wedless parts the shimmer of your rim
To silver singly in the tempered air.
You, slow as God, have overtaken Him.

O pale perimeter of grace, anointed
For that hypnotic glide impinged on might,
Who forged you on the anvil of the stars
And set you turning to the laws of light?

How cryptic is the calm, the intricate
Unindolence of power that knows its place,
So gravely balanced between pole and pole,
So local in the mystery of space.

Time is a solid here, co-bound and wrought
With matter's destiny. Tell, who can tell
How period is lapped in pause of steel,
How truth is made to fit itself so well?

Secular Revery

I think of the little girls at Sacred Heart.
They live behind white stucco on a hill.
They see the world by mountain morning light,
Their evenings, blow no winds, are very still.
The air in their young nostrils is mixed green
Of yerba santa and ramona's balm:
Time has no choice, it cannot break the utter
Amplitude and species of this calm

Calm hillscrown in the keep of southern Sisters.
Soft creatures at the roots and in the brush,
The voice maternal of the father quail,
Tranquilize this quality of hush.
Close within the walls, so saved for God,
The angel-browed into their books are turning.
They take their knowledge with a grain of truth,
Smell footsteps in the sage and tire of learning.

All the while, deep in the cloistered blood,
Is a gift of cells that nature has made sure,
Holding more mysteries than all religion,
More summer nights than all of literature:
Greetings, little females in the chaparral,
Whose mothers keep you pure in mountains fresh,
And sowed you, yet unborn, with mind and matter
Ripening now for Latin: and the Flesh.

Swift Love, Sweet Motor

And will they always be so tender, her
Face a kind of star to burn him up, she
Nearly there and wholly tremulous, his lap?
Where ecstacy lolls unabashed, his knee?

Will always run the road under the wheels,
The kiss of tire to boulevard complete,
The fuels of joy and speed flow brightly, make
Sunday combust in a miraculous heat?

Will ever just this perilous hot way
Survive to make them almost crash in bliss,
Just missing (where old panic licks his grin)
Black flowers and funerals of the abyss?

Question to question: and no answer mine.
Love rides locked to love whose motors pass
Leaving upon my traffic eye one token,
A gleam at fifty miles through shatterproof glass,

Her smile, a little honey-comb just broken.

Tin Cans at Keeler

(Written at Owens Dry Lake in 1932)

Here in the desert is a pallid lake
That once was murmurous upon its bed
With sparkle lapping on the inland shore.
Only dust remains and it is dead
And not a single water rears its head
And no blue brook with shiver of great drops
Comes this far boiling keenly on the land.
Man stole the water and the stricken lake
Lies like a trance and staring in the sand.
No flash nor spread of wave, no wet shimmer.
Just one thing shines here under the bare skies—
A heap of cans, new-dumped. The enormous glitter
Beats in the air and quivers where it lies,
And the brood of dirty brightness multiplies.

Section IV

Letter to an Old Home

You'll surely tell me if the whip-poor-will
Still whets his beak at dusk, rips out a song?
How I remember in the tremulous
Old woods the uncanny tongue so wild and strong.
That bird can sing a most devouring note,
Can sing you clean without a pause for grace,
Leave only your cold mortal marrow somehow
And the white hark of a startled face,
Yes, and your dry throat salty on your breath:
And though you quake, the makings of a smile
Show at your mouth, your slowly open mouth,
To hear him crying in that ravenous style.
I never was so fed upon by music
As when, a chilly child in the large night,
That song sprang on me from a fence corner,
And sucked my being out in hard delight.
The cry soared into me, and how I shook.
Not spoke, not wept, not ran from that shrill ground,
But rattled in my sandals and consumed
Under the eerie passion of that sound.
Time cannot resurrect nor would I wish
Ever to lose the dying I took alive
When hungry revelation ate me up
But missed a morsel, panting to survive.

On a Hill

I was walking up the firebreak, Holly's hill,
I was setting my toes hard on the gritty ground
Where earth cracks early to the little fists
Of peony, phacelia and horehound.

The air hung clear. Each mountain was there.
Nothing from nature took one inch, one green
Spring was swelling in the western light
That shown upon itself with a twin sheen.

Up from the river came the barest rush
Of water running dark under the lather
While sumac, toyon, fern, a hundred more
And I stood rooted in a holy weather.

And suddenly I found myself like this.
A thing at ease from heart to cuticle
Remade to common radiance on the hill,
Dark core of canyon rock and dreamy particle.

Not for my sake, whose sake is not enough,
Would I inscribe a meaning on sublime
To make it last beyond its chance of awe,
Unnatural in the decency of time.

Better to be consumed in what I saw,
Utterly taken and left small and still,
A grain of sensibility in native light,
Barely lodged upon a granite hill.

Prayer For This Day

Here, west of winter, lies the ample flower
Along a bough not builded on by snow.
Now earth conceives the bridal and the bower.
Now what was rain is vistas in a row
Of spring, or miles of water knocking upon stone.
The random green heals over without flaw,
Hills heave their smoothness to the midmost sun.
Oh, what are we to say that worlds are lost?
Or what bears heaviest on the heart almost?

Still to a century superb for death
The emerald shrub again, the rose undwindled:
Still quail are whistling with a bubble's breath
And lean and tender lilies taper still:
Still satin moths at night with great eyes kindled
Throb into flame. If there is time to will
Prayer from a heart too long by reason fondled,
Then here where flinty branches loosen into white,
Here at the balmy side of spring's re-birth
Kneel down. We ask no vision, no heavenly light,
But simple faith, like faith of grass, in earth,
And seed's old dream against the night, the night.

Deep Harvest

The mild, the solid sound, American,
Of lawnmowers roving on a grassy day
Is a mellow clatter, it is not only
A twist of blade laying the lawn away.
It is the audible summer in the states,
When hayfields wallow in the lovely grain.
And bees shoot in their tongues after the honey
As clovers hum and rock under the strain.
Now over all the land the wheat is blond,
It hisses and is quiet on its roots
As wind and windless happen to a place
And heat strikes home into the twinkling fruits.
The green blood of the leaves is duller now,
It is a foliage in her elegies;
From the great barns crawl out the loud machines
And the deep harvest lapses under these.
Yours and a native song let make, O blade,
Before the bough is blank and the cricket dead,
About my country's grass and the white crops,
How you possess them fragrant and to bed.

Falling at Palenque

Now after many books I have come at last
To see these haughty fragments all unite.
Whatever keeps to mystery
Need not come forth, since to arrive is to be stunned
And so made whole, and what I learn is love,
A wildness to belong, and never to take leave.
No matter to be so alien and so late.
The fires of origin burn backward here
And fill these ruins with a rush of light
And I am in the presence, of that be positive.
Even my northern eyes can see
The long bright body of true god
Flex through the tropical stone from glyph to glyph.

Ancient America, astonisher beyond compare,
Is there more to be given?
Suddenly my shoe, idiot cobbled in a cold climate,
Plunges me down the temple stair.
Catch me! Do not catch me!
To fall and fall at the feet of praise,
To fall disembodied, to go down softly,
To fall like old flowers, and rest like foam,
To fall and not shatter, to rise and give thanks
Where perfection of descent goes up
Without a flaw forever goes uphill,
And imply no fable to my bones,
I am traveller only, tourist intense,
I will never get home, I never will
For the whites of my own eyes
Are coming toward me
And I must look my fill
At you, Palenque, holy planet,
Luxurious and inhabited star
        Rising and rising from antiquity.

True Western Summer

Corporeal summer, no marvel is lost
In your obsession to be real.
To love you has been my boast
In the bald days of cactus and hawk
Where never a brook in liquid shade rolls green,
Nor softly to my heart rambles the rain,
And to love you humbly under the feet of the quail,
By fallen acacia seed and brown bud,
And in the poor kingdom of the crowned toad,
Whose wealth is drought,
There to love you well,
Even where shadow that gives no shade
Lies dark as obsidian strewn
There to love you still.
And now to love in alarm and delight
Seeing the little stone in the field
Tremble and soar to your meaning alive
Alive in the top of the sky,
And to love you more as a ravish of light
Feasts on the literal and the revealed
Leaving only of truth the passionate skull
Small and perfect where it fell.

Moon Poem

Naturally it was the naked moon
That lay in naked trees in evening woods,
Only the naked moon gives half her light
And lets the rest seep downward to the roots
While I am waiting. But she did not rise.
Get up, you lumbering planet, I called at last,
And when, in spite of her eternal habit
She did not rise
I knew with panic there was no way to help
The poor bright sagging shape, and I could feel
Bristles of animal fear stand on my scalp,
So close she lay, so close to me she lay.

My error to call it the moon, my grief,
Rather, some weary spiritual light
That wastes from the lives of men away,
A mortal light, a light of dread.
Whatever it is, it suffers for us,
Let us give it a suffering name,
Give it a holy suffering name
As it goes down, as it goes out
And the cold fire
relinquishes its flame.

Arrived

(This poem was written before the moon landing.)

These are the earth-born who were done with earth
And left it ruining, to inhabit the moon.
Across the abysmal atom they arrived
        safe and infinitely soon.

Theirs was an old and solitary courage
Always embarking for a better shore,
Best where no other pilgrim strode before.

Their hopes were coiled around heroic change,
From arc of that farewell they could forget
The heart has but a human range.

By grace of irony they came in time
To turn and see the brightening of the earth,
The suddenly celestial planet of their birth,

And knew in shock as that pure light rolled in their eyes,
It was for this, only for this they came,
To see the earth illuminate the skies,

A light that for the first time fell on man
And now, with pitiless love, endowed his lonely mind
With trivial things the exile leaves behind.

Great radiance lit by memory's hot embers—
The wasps are in the grapes, the dry fern curls,
Tendrils of summer slip, and the first rain of autumn
        drops a few dusty pearls.

O vivid world of heartbreak slowly spinning
From dark of hope to desolation's glare,
How beautiful is home this evening
        lost in its tomb of air.

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