

KINGDOM OF LOST WATERS

by

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Introduction

It is the great scale of Western landscapes that makes their smallest details significant: the huge horizon tells us to study the hawk gliding above the sagebrush, to follow the pack rat disappearing along the arroyo's parched wall. In high country, where the air is thin and dry, everything emerges as if offering a message, and the fragrances of a broken sprig of sage, or brushed bee balm, or pine needles fallen on the dusty canyon floor, add to our sense of a special place, a place of silences where crows mimic human speech, a place where the scree on the sides of the canyon as well as the river at its bottom are ways of marking time.

In this sharpened intuition of scale, image, silence, smells, and ancient strata, ordinary Westerners have given to them something of the poet's vision of a world where human endeavor is felt in right proportion, where everything—even the silence—seems to speak.

The poems in Sonya Hess' *Kingdom of Lost Waters* are lyric with this visionary sense: things are come upon, often by accident, seen clearly, and understood in themselves and beyond themselves.

This much of the poetic process can be accomplished by any attentive person west of the Rockies. Indeed, it is probably their intelligent habits for taking in the world that—once lost on the pavements of the East Coast or on the freeways of California—make renegade Westerners so homesick for their empty spaces.

But the poet carries the process further: not only must the thing or place or event be seen and felt and understood, it must be recreated for those who have never experienced it. Along with their wise ways of looking—of selecting what to see—poets must be able to summon up language and rhythms that will recreate that glimpsed world for the perfect stranger. A world. Not a snapshot or a testimonial. The task is well-described in the journal of Matsuo Basho, the 17th century Japanese poet:

Go to the pine if you want to learn about the pine, or to the bamboo if you want to learn about the bamboo. And in doing so, you must leave your subjective preoccupation with yourself. Otherwise you impose yourself on the subject and do not learn. Your poetry issues of its own accord when you and the object have become one—when you have plunged deep enough into the object to see something like a hidden glimmering there. However well phrased your poetry may be, if your feeling is

not natural—if the object and yourself are separate—then your poetry is not true poetry but merely your subjective counterfeit.

—Nobuyuki Yuasa, ed.,

***The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, p. 33.**

It is just here that Hess is at her most compelling: Many of these poems read like meditations, where little presupposition is imposed upon “objects” which instead are allowed to speak for themselves, an illusion carried off by Hess’ careful language. We visit canyons where

little trout flee back and forth
until twilight fills the river’s
long throat

cross pastures where fence posts have been “rubbed hairy by cows” and one can “have a long conversation/with a lark.” When we encounter people in these poems, they are close to this immanent nature, even when dreaming “of something larger/than two rooms/and a tar roof,” or facing each other off in opposed political camps “at the new/road site near a herd/of earth-movers” where “a red scar/tries to reach the mountains.”

Hess’ strategies for revelation vary from Roethkean meditations on “little” events (“Cousins Light and Shadow”) to assuming the myths of native Americans (“White Horse Gallery of Indian Art”) to narrative, as in the lovely “Last Time on the Mountain” where the poem is centered around Ruben, now in his sixties, with blurry eyesight, hunting elk that “bump down toward the valley,/hooves shooting out puffs of white powder.”

Among my favorites are “New Mexican Standoff With Historical Scroll in Background,” with its frozen tableau of beauty and anger, “Distance, My Neighbor,” with the woman putting up pickles and preserves, “slashing cabbages” whose “strips of green flesh/fall into her crocks,” the languid “Fishing the Big River,” “Watching Clouds in Taos,” with its wonderful ending, “Adobe Houses,” “Small Farm,” and “Settlers.”

But whatever the strategy or domain, the poetic rigors of scrutiny and apt diction are always here, along with an abiding sense of the power of Western landscapes to instruct the human heart.

John Balaban
University of Miami
Coral Gables, FL
August, 1993

Theater Piece: Solo

He comes on stage
one saffron morning to watch
the sun; sees the pines, each
needle a prism, turn cold
rose-green, and a winter wren
picking for a seed.

A buck stands near but the wind
divides them. Up the hill
his house smells of oatmeal
and children. The morning light
sinks through each shingle crack
where rains have poured.

A cat joins the man; black,
he sits on a sunbeam and burns auburn
as a witch's wig. The man thinks
he's alone, turns over in his mind how
it was years ago when with brothers
he rode a warped sled down the hill.

Majestically, the stage turns
until it's upside down.
The cat claws to keep from falling
into the ravenous sky, the wren
with a seed in her beak skids down
a barbed slope. Boots in the air,
the man's too occupied with memory
to notice how he's turned.

A cry from the house: pledges
of comfort and make-do,
a sound complex as morning coming
over the sky in real winter.

Each ink-green pine draws smudges
up the sky; the stage tilts, swings
upright; the wren gulps the seed;

*

the buck appears with two starving does
delicately pointed. Air splinters
where the sun strikes it full.

Hearing a cry from the house, the man
breathes deeply and swims uphill
after the blue fish of his own prints,
to the kitchen door where the cat
waits for the small tail of hope.

He was alone on the stage.

After he goes, juncos come down
to seek, deer nudge the dead grass,
ice falls in lavender drops from pines,
the landscape of hunger fills.

Distance, My Neighbor

Distance, my neighbor,
have you noticed how short
the miles become?

A little run through brambles,
past Mrs. Johnson's
where she talks to the cat
and pickles the family:
kid cucumbers, infant carrots.

I glare with love
through her window.
She's slashing cabbages,
strips of their green flesh
fall into her crocks.

Just last week her husband
put small herrings into the jar
head-down among silver rings.

That's how they marry themselves
to water, to the earth.

When they die off, when
their house with a sigh
buckles into the cellar,
distance, you'll be at my door.

Curriculum Vitae

Librarians mistrusted me when
I rode off, saddle bags crammed
with their books. I never
stole one, not even a title page.

Winter evenings, beginning
at five o'clock with a final flash
of dying light, my future ran over
the logs in snaky fire.

I knew I would live forever
with the horse, the cow, the frogs
grumping in summer's muddy pond.

What could a thief take
I didn't already hold for good?
Taught to raise spring water
to my lips instead of speech,
going out each May to view
two ladyslippers climbing
again out of the bog.

Childhood of a Mapmaker

Bent over his desk the lame boy reads
the same page in his text
three times. Not a word stays.

Half cold, half sweet, May wind
blows in, ruffles his hair.

If he raises his eyes, he sees
kisses rusting in the open mouths
of logs. Cows. Sleeping dog.
His father on the tractor forges
the cornfield into rows of chains.

Roads the boy can trace in his sleep
lure him over pastures to the city's
red complex. He knows that adventure,
burning glass, girls in unbuttoned blouses.

Several times on visits he's left
his heart there as if it belonged
to the place for stumblers.

Under his hand another page whispers
its list of chores. Not a word about
how to cross the yard without the dog
giving him away. And his mother, imploring
him to excellence from her worn path.

Visiting Writer

The city writer visits a farm,
wakes early to windows flooded
with sky, walks out
at dawn in the chill nip.
Full of cackles, the barnyard
amuses him, he's delighted
when black and white squares
resolve into cows.
They turn heads as he passes.
Pigs crowd together, smelling
his rich new smell.
When he looks into their eyes
he sees they, too, understand.
Pig and poet know where
they're going, even if
not today. The sun stoops
on the hill, everything alive
sings, grunts, preens. A mist
of fermentation blooms from
the manure pile waiting
to be trucked out, spread
on pastures from which the sweet
green grass will rise into milk
as innocent as blank pages.

The Day's Address

A gypsy, three flowers in her hair,
morning trawls a green train
dotted with tomatoes. Too early.
I tell her to leave. She glares
back at me from the eggplants.

I send her to my neighbor
who sits on his glass porch
catching the light in frail hands.
She'll tell him short fortunes.
Already she's climbed to his level.

Her train, a luminous ladder,
hangs out to air over the railing.
She's nude, in there with the old man,
nothing but three flowers, a few
amber sweat drops on her belly.

She'll take the wax from his ears
with shining fingers, pull
his appetite out of his navel.
Now she oils his feet, he'll die happy.

Handmaiden, I carry her dress
to my house, bend to it all day
trying to iron the sleepy creases.

TOWN MEETINGS

Memory

Fog spreads over the grass
to the house, the kitchen,
where a group of starved children
waits for the pot to boil.
A long-aproned figure scrapes clots
of hard soil from roots.

Mist forms above the kettle.
On it a boat with set sails
fares back and forth
seeking a harbor.

This was a cottage
in another country.
These were our parents
who'll die
when we forget them.

The last white light
enfolds them
as our lifeboat goes down
into the pasture.

A Feather

All her life the dying
woman lived by the river,
traveler running past
her window with a different
message each hour
according to the light.

Brownbacked geese
lean against each other
down there in the melodious dark
where the water voice is hers.

They wait for morning's woman
to scatter grain on a flat stone.

Now no more than a feather
she flies over in migration.

Infidelity

Day-long the light
falls into the empty house
bent over sharp edges.

A corner remembers her chair.

On the floor
a square shadow frames
where the bed stood,
the bed where he drew her
on like a glove,
palm open for giving.

A painter's cap hangs
in the closet
next to a splattered ladder.
Tomorrow he'll roll the walls.

The new woman will set
a pot of dried sea lavender
on the windowsill.

The corner will open its arms.

November

These are the last rains.
When the next cloud comes in
it'll bury Town Hall and the mountain.

Out there the wet grass
dances under the beating
until it falls.

In his home by the troubador river
the police chief oils his gun,
sits smoking, conjuring deer.
His dog snores on the hearth.

Held up in night's big glove
village windows shine through tears
at the soldiers coming home.

Uses of Memory

The widower remembers how many
grandfathers lie hidden in drifts,
old women caught in their beards
lying with them.

At night he covers his heart
with his left hand,
lover and lover,
one pulse until death.

Snow drifts from the cedars
over the monuments,
a white wool of silence.

Taking It On Faith

Between strings of rain
tying his earth
to the sailing cloud
the boy looks out on secrets
of an invisible afternoon.

For all he knows the two cedars
at the garden's edge
have signed on as masts
and gone to sea.

His faith follows the rain
down into the sand.
He's too young to dive,
to bring up in his teeth
a green, wet weed.
Yet his heart leans out
toward the mysteries.

Gathered on the wind's arm
the great cloud
carries its buckets away.
There are the cedar trees
leaking at every needle.

Earth's brown dove
comes back to his hands.

Granite

Plump white plum
The moon
hangs over his back yard.
The man
shaped like a boulder
sits with moons
rising in his mind.

This was the way the night
followed him
with her eye everywhere
after love had gone
down into earth's barrow.

He longs for an enormous
current to carry him off
but the small pulse
returns to die
in the pools
of his palms.

The hours roar
through his body
taking him away
stone by stone.

Twilight

Twilight, sad part
of the day.
Bills pile up faster
than dirty wash.
She dreams at the window
of something larger
than two rooms
and a tar roof.

Down the long street
a child runs,
her hair streaming
through the lamp's pools.

The joy of running
goes around a corner
and vanishes.
But the woman's captured
a footstep.
Wild music,
it fills her ears.

In the bowl-shaped eye
of the goldfish
on her table
lies the curve
of a great ocean.

for Marguerite Bouvard

Moonlight

Is anybody there, I asked
the moonlight.
Better to ask the flicker,
hammering coffins from old trees.
Long gone, he says, she's gone,
even the ants know.

I talked to birds and all
they told me was kernel,
husk, migration.
From behind the stove
the broom said
let go old straws.

Each place I live in contains a little house
of moonlight, footprints
in the ashes, half a face
bent to me saying
the world's your pearl.

Yes And No

We could go up the hill
where the stars are moored.

But it's raining,
deer swim from island to island
in the flooded swamp.

This morning we could visit
the city where trains run
all day until the tenements
turn black against a faded sky.

But it's raining,
the river where the ferry crosses
stained brown with tannin.

We could take a small boat
on the river and look for fish.

But the willows rain down leaves
like hundreds of green lips, and
our shoes are so old they'll die
on city pavement, and up there
on picnic hill stands
a young bull the color
of thunder waiting for us
to become his rags.

We could stay home by the fire
listening to the wind
blow away fallen leaves of our lives.

Earth And Wizard Water

The ant writes her tribal name
in daily dust, track and scripture
for the next generation.

In a pool where the grandmother's
spirit rose vaporous and freed
the rain drop spreads her ringed mark.

Lovely the reunion of icebergs after their dissolution,
wave after wave clasping hands.
The seventh leaps over her sisters.

We carry our small tasks,
a grain a glint a pin
a lifetime to the magic sea.

On Being a Monotone

I said, "When I come back
next time I want a voice."
It would be wonderful
to sing fado, madrigal, psalm,
to the strings around me
as the wine was passed.
Never again would I
be silent while others
leaned with the musician.

I said, "When I come back,
will the tambourines be ready?"
Tighten the drum, restring
the banjo, friends,
next time I'll be on tune.

They're all sitting up there
on the porch again, passing
the jug, well into the second chorus,
and I'm down here in the grass
rubbing two legs together.

A Little Supper Music

The moon comes to dinner
among the chickens and pigs,
same as us. The moon falls
into the empty soup pot,
fills it with hundreds
of minnows piled up, riding
the bus to the cemetery.
Half the moon lies down
in the pie plate waiting
for the midnight spatula
to offer it around.
Pigs and chickens sleep
in blue pools between
the white dreams, same as us,
worn down, fed up, laid out.

Blessing The Hands

Open them in rain,
fruits come
and the leopard offering
his dice in play.
Also the little goats
tumbling in grass as if
there were no knife
under the wrist.

And The Feet

Lodged in twenty-six bones
the memory of leaving
a branch that bangs back
into the air
wakes the dreamer with a jerk.

Ousted for good
from arboreal Eden
the whole weight's assigned
to the foot's delicate
armature
even as the husky flesh
is beaten into the ground.

Lost Sister

It's so hot, the mother complained.

Her boy said, the wind's sitting
around doing nothing.

That's your granpa, she said.

No, not that white beard
but the blue one, you can
see it wag in the bushes.

Shush your fairy tales.

Listen, Momma, if only
you'd sit down quiet instead
of boiling you'd hear it,
says sister's run off
with the ashman, never
coming home from the dump.

I'll smack you,
talking fun of the dead.

But I see the curtains move,
she's blowing on them
like birthday candles.

You remember pretty good,
don't you? - only five years old.

Sometimes, early morning.
she says my name
outside the window.

Well, shush now, Poppa
don't want to be reminded.

One day I'll see him
hold on to your hair
at the top of the apple tree
and me alone in the yard
with my buttons
after you and him
gone to her.

Country Music

Four foot ten and a voice
like a diesel horn. She's always shouting,
she yells at the cows, her older brothers.
They bring road kills: deer with crushed
ribs, matted pheasants from the highway
along the pine ridge where big rigs
snort down the incline with owls
up their nostrils. She hollers
at Pa in his sober stupor.

Spring comes with its green flakes.
Water sings on the hills, soprano,
lightly and pure. She's out in the meadow
shouting the cows home. Bossie, brown
blanketed white like snow melting
on a slope and Belle in her bold
black and white jacket. They boo
and mooch along ahead of her voice.
It rings against the mountain, returns
to her, twin sister, heart of her heart.

THE GODS IN WINTER

Father Sun, Mother Moon

The strong man holds his palm
up over the pines, the birches.
He puts one finger on clear ice
and shines through. Is my face
hot from his hand, is it
cold from the glass?

The hem of his tunic, embroidered
with planets, brushes my roof
as he takes his big stride.
In the afternoon he pisses a river
into the valley, steam rises,
the houses close their eyes.

I lie down. The ice stands up
in the window. Slowly the woman
unveils her cantaloupe dances,
seeding my dreams.
My fingers close in sleep
trying to catch her scarf.

She steps over my body,
carrying her lamp along
night's springboard to the pool
at the end of the world.

Grandmother North Wind

The old woman's voice drones,
falls silent, weeps out of rocks,
hangs garlands on fir trees.

She calls up the sun
for an hour, chanting.
I've heard the brooks
respond, clapping shut
their white doors.

Grandmother, if only
you'd come sit quietly,
I'd offer you fruit and fish.
Speak in a whisper to me,
I'm always listening.

No. She stays up there
casting her shaman's voice
from the top of the land,
carving her declarations
on pale bone.

Hearth Spirit, Poor Relative

For the holidays I give her
everything I can, illustrated letters,
the beetles' signature on bark.

From the hearth she raises
both fluttering hands.
She whispers, *more more*,
and I need her to tell
how we used to live,
gathering around her when she
was important and blessed.

After I've fallen asleep
and the house draws in
groaning with cold, she goes up
into the windless black air.
She spreads herself thin,
stealing off with my last
small red jewel.

Cousins Light and Shadow

Before day comes
I wait on the lake for fish
to rise to the roof.

I can catch one.
I'm ready. Daybreak
shows me his brown face.
Just when I lean over
light strikes the air
and we both fall backward,
blinded, into winter
where for days we think
about gloom.

Between hunger and love
fish and I live with
a light so obvious
we share its shadow.

Come sun to my basket,
fish to my blade. I slide
over the lake's bright skin,
my bones hum: this is the life.

Delayed

Long forks: the hay
pitches itself into
afternoon under a sky
so blue it shocks.
I would have come
to your house as you asked
but stopped here on the way.

Rubbed hairy by cows,
fence posts gleam pewter
with age. Insects kiss
my knees. Am I too large
for this busy world?

I have long conversation
with a lark. Someone galloping a horse
along the road goes off
with my head, so I sit
where I am, confessing
my body to the grass.

Settlers

In the time of the axe
abandoned sailors
felled great trees whose souls
escaped in green mist.

They warped boards
into lintels and cradles
while sap still ran
from the wounds
into the mouths of ants.

Above stripped hills
purple with thistles
strange constellations lurked
and the small cows slowly
grazed through violet evenings.

All night the sleepers
heard their bells
ring old shipboard watches
as if they'd never found land.

Small Farm

Your back muscles, a team
of dead mules, refuse one more pull.
Four more posts to drive,
another row to plow
and an acre of sumac to clear.

Nuclear pile, the sun burns
in your spine for eight hours
after it's gone to Finland.
Your bed feels like a thicket
growing up the side of tomorrow.

No pay for overtime, only
melons smelling like women in love
and corn, straight gold husbands.

Far beyond, the frost's white ark
where at last you crowd in
with your mules and grain,
your axe and firewood.

Climbing Caribou Mountain Again

Eldora, Colorado

My crooked walking stick
punctures the mountain's
tough hide as I labor
toward a wedge of sky.
What I left up there a year
ago remains to be seen.

The ruts switchback past
upland meadows where
spirit animals may graze
in summer and in cold October
white snow sheep gather.

Old wolf in woman's clothing
my squat shadow
runs beside me.

The last ridge at last.
Azure sky lies inside
my skull, a cap of peace
over the little rages.

Wild Water

The old wild men of the mountains
rush down toward us, crying out,
laughing like pebbles.

They smell of sweet water
(their beards, their leggings).

Everyone in town stumbles out
to watch them. And they go by.

The sound of their voices drifts
back like stones clog-dancing.

An annual message, it echoes,
one deep voice for all of us.

From mountain meadows they pour down,
they go by, we fly out of windows,
doors, lofts, and bird cages,
holding on to our hearts.

Monsoon I

Sheep go by in clouds.
The cloud, its majesty
unsaved, shreds apart,
stained grey rug.
Raising hands, the trees
pull down another drink.
Algae spread. Green-nosed
cows give clouds of milk.
Doors stick. The dog dances
in mud, it freckles his nose.
Potted parsley, captive,
leans toward the light,
looks for a bit of sky.
Release! Release! in little
strings the dirt we are
flies up, falls
into new positions.

Departures

Give me your departure.
I'll take it with me
in my rucksack
with the bag of lentils.

Each step lighter as I climb
I'll carry it to the mountain
where bears fatten, where
berries harden
under scarlet leaves.

Soon I'll carry it
into the next county,
only a mite of barley left
for the evening meal
camped under the Lion.

The new town's visible
beyond the plains.
I can't enter it empty,
my back bared to a strange gaze:
look! she comes naked,
with no gift or memento.

Let me take your departure
for a cloak with me.
You may carry mine for a feast.

Yankee in the Desert

Unexpected nude
the desert lies without lace
or oasis,
her subtleties the various
kinds of buff grit
beading the eye.

Was it here Adam and his lady
crossed over running
from the sun's gold sword?
Here that Jacob met
someone carrying God knows why
a ladder as if to pick
invisible apples
from insubstantial trees?

Once
I fell from the Winter Pippin
kicking the ladder as it flew.
Uncondemned, I climbed
again to my feet
to walk where the wind
tans my hide,

where sand forms warped rungs
over mule and drover,
the quick, the stubborn,
the innocent footprint.

A Little Life

The dead belong to the wind
that carves old hills down
to old plains. At the luminous
edge of dry land the ancestors,
yours, mine, look the same,
faded stalks in a desert
where apples never grew.

From where I stand a little
of life is visible. Burnished
carapace, wings drawing
long forages on the air,
and bones, spines, noon's
dazzling razor
that hurts all day.

Aunt Rose, Grandmother Lil,
Auntie Chi, parallel infinity
too small to be seen in the black bag.
I remember them wonderfully lost
like sunny hours at the lake,
and many old uncles on ladders
to apples everywhere.

Thirst

Kingdom of lost waterholes,
animals with leaves drawn
on their flanks,
in the hot sand
marks of a dragged hoof.

The man, too, is lame,
tracking invisible beasts
over the dunes.

Midmorning he sees
a huge white mirage:
the hospital of pity.

A woman offers a water bowl.

Crawling out from his heart
a lion of air
licks her hands.

Monsoon II

Hard to keep the skyscape
from coming *pock pock* it's rain
through the holes. Dippersful.

Under the hills canyons roar.
Red petroglyphs turn white.
My hand's puckered with water.

I'll bail out, you bail, the canoe
sinks slowly with its beds
and dogs into the red ground.

Put a bucket under, no, that one,
use another basin in dark rock.

Next week we'll see the sun.
Birds wing water out, dip
long beaks into the sky's lymph.

I told you corn would grow
and beans again flowering as if
it were always summer here.

No flowers painted on bowls.
Frivolity dies in deserts so hold me

while the rain slants through,
pock pock, tricks in the roof.
The sun's already burning hard

as a brass fist, smashing the time
for dreams into the earth
flat as a paper picture.

Through deserts of timeless weather
we arrive at the opened gate
of tall green blades.

Monsoon Plums

Nails fall head first.
In some out of the way corners
they're subtle as pins. Leaves
still hold their many places,
and hard, sweetening plums.

Flash floods carry away a few
sins of selfishness. The sum
of putting words above the yellow
bruises of so many others.

Clouds drip down. Let me tell you
how much an old life gives up
just thinking about the sun.

How it strikes the plums with
damson brilliance, draws juice back
to the heart. How it forms a fragile
sunspeckled skin any tooth can pierce.

Rain Dance

I listen to the rain fill wells
deep where lizards have been living
and the stones of consequence.
They once were sand. Once the sand
stood upright in house walls.

Beside the door, a fringed shawl.
When she wore it the roses
danced in a long-haired wind.

Children on her arm slept
deep in the shawl's red well,
and tears, even laughter.
Rain's come round again, fringes
blow across the doorway, falling
on stones it could wear away.

The sand smacks its lips. Opens.
Water seeps into underground lakes.
Her daughter, in jeans and shawl,
leans in the doorway, goes
to the river with her pail,
threads of hair flying in the rain.

Prospects

Danger's unseen razor
opens a mouth
in the heart,
an immense cry.

Will the fish
weigh in my net?
The corn
rise from the fish?

Will the man
come to our door
with an axe in his hand
to collect my sisters, my mother?

The family spirit
still dwells
in the ring of ash
where our house stood.

Pulled along by
our blistered hands
on a frayed rope, tomorrow
stumbles toward town.

Prairie Dogs

August's end; people decline
from heat's high wave.
Oldtimers sit on low walls,
watch us stroll by blinking
under cap brims as dust rises
from campers going home.

They've seen our better times
when the streets were mud,
horses, oxen, a shepherd
bringing his flock to auction,
big wheels of the shiny rich
coming to summer homes.

Between the beard's bristles
dry lips remember kisses,
a tongue that cursed intruders
and politicians for their hands
in the bank's gloves.

No one speaks to these
lumps of clothing. At night
they disappear like prairie dogs
into holes, into the ground,
into fading memory. Who are we
to pass them without greeting,
to make nothing of eighty years
and the knowledge of earth
still visible in their hands.

Apples

He walked out leaving
three apples on his desk.
No note to say where he had gone.
Gone to the wilderness?
He draws campfire sparks from
his thumb under the green pines,
fire flaps its tongues, the blessed
silence drowns his ears.
Who can find him now?

He may be in some winged pod
with its rows of nodding seeds
on the way to the tropics.
Coral rings bound to the sea
by old promises, palm nuts rotting
on the beach. High in the interior
rain weaves huge leaves
into rugs for the monkeys.

Somewhere in a valley he may be
picking apples, pocket full
of streaked yellow, russet.
He spits out pips.
His hair is white with dust and joy.

Tango Elegy

Waked by wind's dry messages I reply
it isn't true that lilacs bleed when cut
or bulbs underground by the adobe wall
dream all winter of fragrance.

Behind the wind rain travels
on bright feet to wash away
the summer, the time my uncle's
tractor on a hillside slid
and the cutter bar butchered
his leg to the bone.

True enough in the long grasses
wind tangos with its partners, stooping,
reversing, carrying on as if the music
would always rise from earth where
the best of instruments are buried.

Domingo

He's in the garden singing "Ojos Caramelos,"
yanking up the secret exclamation of carrots.
Dizzy with her, agape among the morning glories
of his private July. They expose their dishes,
her face lingers centrally in each one. Mama said
plenty of carrots, and cilantro, I'm cooking now.

In a kitchen corner her Sunday shoes lie exhaling
a powdered sweet sanctity. He leaves vegetables
on the drainboard and sings "La Bamba"
in the bedroom. Humpty-dumpty on the dresser edge
an accordion grins manically through loops
of his brother's necktie. He avoids the mirror.
Fifteen and no mustache, has she even noticed?

His hands find their places. A few notes wheeze,
two chords, he's into Caramel Eyes. His eyes close.
Her face escapes his fingers. Aunts in the kitchen,
uncles on the front step hoping for rain, rain,
in the dry. He squeezes her with knowing hands.
Fiddle under his arm, Papa calls to him
to join the men, play them some happiness.

Meditation on a Piñon Wood Fire

Mountain winds roar in the flame.
Smell of harsh flowers, wet sheep,
horses, old wool. Into the icy palm
of night a boy turns one
inflamed cheek from the fire.
He's known both from birth. Now
he's old enough to climb with uncles
to the high summer pastures.

Christ's always with him. The cross
he wears strikes like an icicle
at his throat. In the eternal
mountains of his world lie many
trials: cliff, abyss, snow water,
night's voice from rock and piñon pine.
He attends dumb sheep. None of them
know his name. But Jesus does, speaking
in crackling parables from the fire.

This Door

for Judy Loeb

They're not content, she says,
to let those mountains float
in the tawny dust
raised up from the plains
but go hunting for them,
long black noses over their shoulders
in case they meet game.

Here I sit with my feet in sunlight
on the rug's red battlefield,
blue and yellow flowers
fight it out with the footprints.

As evening falls I burn snow
in my lamp until they return
with a winter wind freezing
the ruts of their passage behind them.

•

They balance up there, she says,
against a white sky
only to give a shout,
only to be heard by some
lone farmer in the valley.
At home the shouting's over.

She says, for all the nights
I've listened to the anguish of mice
and had to comfort the cat
I've also clung to high rocks,
stealing eggs from the vulture
without asking
what is this climbing for?

I know to keep my counsel
when I serve
that interesting omelet.

•

Thunder's big as the mountain,
she says, and in the bushes
out back an abandoned dog
sings hunger and exile.

Boredom means counting your fleas,
she says, to pass the time and forget
how your bowl was filled at home.
Now, he's feeding the ticks.

Air's big stones thunder together.
On bites and sores
rain turns the dust to blood.
One more time I'll open this door.

White Horse Gallery of Indian Art

Boulder, Colorado

Dolls in beads and buckskin
smoked dark by cooking fires
hang on the white wall
beside the shaman's rattle.
Some place beyond these mountains
it still resounds.

Part of a kachina circle
Black Ogre hunches, and more awesome
Black Ogre's Uncle.
That's keeping it in the family,
sending terror and blessing
around the network.

Magpie black and white
banded with sky's azure fire
Morning Crow Maiden
with triangle eyes and corn
looks straight across
at Evening Crow Maiden
who needs no eyes.

As if a furnace even in summer
burned in the gallery's center
power throbs through the building.
In corners the old ones keep on
thundering: *eagle maize sun.*

Adobe Houses

In a country of pure light
windows are made small.
Through one I can see
a saddle blanket of snow
thrown over the mountain's
rusty crest. The sky
rides away to Chimayó.

When women in doorways turn
their heads, laughing back
into cool interiors, a flash
of yellow and red swings from
their ears, beads of eclipsed sun.

If there's a second floor
only one small window stares,
high, dim eye for a grandfather
or baby crowing at dawn.
From wood stoves in winter
pale signals gasp upward
to some old spirit in the sky.

Snow Garden

Wind snores by in its white rags.
I take my broom to the snow,
body swinging around it.

Where there's no footprint
the broom makes one.
Where my prints were
broom wipes them out.

When the path's clear
I discover a mouse has tunneled
from his room to my banquet
of peanuts saved for supper.

Shaman

*after the raku sculpture
of Reuben Kent*

The wind talks to him,
its voice issues from his mouth.
Iridescence flickers across
his shoulders, grasses
root in his cape.
I've heard him call down
the spirit, pass on blessings
in a pasture. He's almost
invisible in the dusty swirl
on a town corner where
geraniums lean out of
window boxes to be near him.

On rainy nights he passes
through canyons, touching
petroglyphs with his thumb,
giving them his name, taking
his father's name back
from them, whitening in rain
and burning with black rainbows
when at last the moon
clings to his body.
Town would look the same
without him. Hardly anyone
would miss him if
he rode off on his horse of air.
But who would hold us in balance
between the rain and the dust?

New Mexican Standoff With Historical Scroll in Background

Primrose morning.
Townspesple gather at the new
road site near a herd
of earth-movers. A red scar
tries to reach the mountains.

The section smelling of hot tar
shows where they paved over
the mayor and his brothers.

Down from a distant bald mesa
the color of peaches and old roses
gallops a man on a pinto horse.

Does he carry a message? A white flag?
Has he lived in the distance a long time?

Those desiring a new road
stand west of the pot holes,
their outlines blazing with
day's incendiary approach.

Those against it stand
with their sheep to the east,
emerging from yellow haze
like enduring statues.

Behind the rider racing toward them
a black strap of pavement
unrolls at the same speed
over Zunis, cactus, hoofprints,
dead scouts lying in the heart.

Last Time on the Mountain

From the bole of each ponderosa a black shadow burns along the slope, carbonizing the snow. Elk bump down toward the valley, hooves shooting out puffs of white powder. Their big, bare heads nod.

From the valley men clamber up with guns, Ruben's clothes so dark he might be taken for a pine. Behind him, compadres, a city cousin, booted men with the taste of hot meat already in their mouths.

He can imagine shed antlers in his front yard, tourists stopping to buy; he spends the money six times on the way up as the sun goes in, flakes fingertip across his lined face. Money melts that fast, with the blurred whisper of blown snow.

Hey, Ruben, look out, watch where you put your feet on slippery rock. Blue boot, blue hoof, it's snowing slow as the history of his life.

Somewhere along the way maybe he's died, trudging up through a misty spirit world. After sixty years, harsh outlines blur; he no longer drives at night. Snow glare, or cold and wind rising, bring tears.

Ruben, you got the thermos? Let's stop here to warm up. The long gun never weighed more, his arm's numb from carrying it.

Hush, they say,
listening to the elk, the breathy
snorts coming down to them.
Each man glides away to a chosen tree,
keeping the mountain wind, a white
razor, on his cheek.

Ruben could count
his bullets. He thinks maybe
they won't fly in this after-life
he's living, a bullet might fall like
something spit out, grit, or gristle
he can't swallow.

The first crack
of sound: snow fumes up where the beast
wheels, tries to gallop. The herd veers,
scrabbles back up, *bang bang bang bang*.
Sweating, the men drag three bodies down
to the snowmobiles.

Blood melts
the snow to splotches of roses.
His eyes tear. He sees a mob of creatures,
some standing up like trees. The unfired gun
bounces on his crookt arm.

Ruben,
tomorrow, huh? He climbs in beside
a friend, they drag the elk around, down,
to the soups and stews within four walls
where a man can find his way, even at night,
to the hot familiar stove.

Watching Clouds in Taos

Almost August, the heat's sunken
into barrels of cactus and
my legs that will not walk
another mile through the hot doze
of dust. Night's only a surmise
in the hollows where fat skunks dream.

I wait at the edge of an alfalfa field
for cloud ponies to haul thunder
over the distant range. Danced-for
rain disperses or chants in some
other dry valley. Fresh clouds circle
a blue hole that suddenly fills with
the corn king's thermonuclear smile.

A farmer mows the alfalfa, it grows,
rain spatters into crimson hollyhock cups.
No use waiting for more — get up
while roots are still full of night's cool
and mow again; bundle, bind, store.
Earth's breath rises, falls, fills
irrigation ditches with its sacred body.
A bishop crosses the field carrying corn.

Ablution . Scouring

It shatters in drops like
bright nerves from the fish's tail,
runs talking to itself through
the pueblo, takes the rough shape
of stone chinks in wells' walls.

The seventeen sisters
of the high country hang down
from the mountains like white vines
and form glass in the valley
where children pierce their own
faces with curious fingers.

The man who an hour ago
was a buffalo dancer rinses
his unmasked face in a cool moon
raised to him from shivering depths.

•

It wears robes of bronze,
garnet, or a yellow shroud,
eats farms and tombstones,
makes a whispering entry into
houses and the locked hems
of wedding dresses;

it grits in the lids of coffins,
and where a body was laid shallow
in haste, drinks the moisture
until a few seeds split
and the Governor of hell
shakes out two flowers.

At the camp site under a dune
a woman in cracked leather squats
to scrub an iron cook pot
with harsh grains that blow
back into her face
glittering like a million rings
stripped from widowed fingers.

Fishing the Big River

Above the gorge columns of red
basalt broken like old gods
hold up the rimrock. Melt water,
green and fast, fills the stony bed.
At each bend men stand in the sun
for a day off from shadows.

Over all, a curved, stone-pure sky.
Up and down the river, under
the sinewy surface run small fish,
rose, brown, teased by false insects,
wavering lines. People fish
in their dreams, noon lasts for hours.

Little trout flee back and forth
until twilight fills the river's
long throat. Time to go home,
alarm the dogs, drink beer,
drift off on a soft raft sinking
into night's big river where
the old gods roar through
with the noise of busy water.

Kokopelli

*Kokopelli, the flute player, carries
the tribe's seeds in the hump which
is part of his back.*

1

Fall equinox. The Tropic recedes
in the sun's turbulent wake.
As the woman shells beans
elm leaves stream like bats
past her kitchen window.

Would God send her to sea
for pearls? Here, they grow
on vines. All her pits
into one pot. Dry pods snap.
Her spine radiates violence
and the harvest falls percussively
into the soup.

Yet, there's October.
A year's raveled sweater
thrown over her shoulders.
Blood of apples, sweetly
squeezed through an iron press.
After frost everyone, even cows,
gets drunk on the fragrance
of fermentation and death.

2

It's dry here as an old shoe.
Grey shawl fringes walk
across the valley, corn dancers
call them. The mountains brood.

Old stone, old faces,
carved wood inherited
from chiefs, all turned
toward the same point.

There's absence we all feel,
day after day thinking
"When the rain comes."
It'll drive white spikes
into corn fields, wash
red petroglyphs.
Canyons will roar.

In mid-air it dodders off
like a shy relative
who departs in old shoes.

3

These old toe bones
walked a lot, curled under
for grip, lay underground
until a tractor
turned them over.

Small nubby turnips
they brought someone here
after big storms, battles,
pushed him up taller
to bang the quarry on the brow.

No future in them, no truth
or lie. They're bits of old trek.
Done travelin'. Down home.

A scapula, scratched, may be
some use after all after
the loss of flesh — to start
fellows on a journey or
prophesy them back.

4

So many impulses to dig
in the ground, put in seeds
for my loved ones, poor offering.
The ground's full of graves;
white fungus grows along
roots of healthy trees,
white rice in the hands
of the dead.

After digging, quick!
cover up before the sun
that withers and blesses
with the same strike.

Beans come forth
first in tiny strings.
Long after I've eaten my fill
nitrogen floods the ground.
Next spring. Next summer.
The ground's an ancient
nesting site of the heart.

5

He sleeps, dream warriors
pass in silence over
the bony ridge. His ears
fill with underground rites.
Fire in the pit, a meal
cooks in his mouth.

He makes a drum from the black
cow's hide, grips with his knees.
Welcome to the warriors.
Silent, they race by
causing his hair to rise.
He rides behind them on his drum,
slow as a cow. Too slow.

The old man breaks his leg,
uses a bone to pound
the young ones when they pass.
He drops his dream
into the firepit. It smokes
up. Ash. Wisp.

O willow. Green girls clumped
like plums, light shone
through transparent skins.
He had seen the central
rich heart of each one.
High in a tree his bones
turn green and burn.

6

High grass hides my prints,
stalks full of leaps, clicks,
and underneath, green garters.
From all those summers ago
I still carry stick-tights.

Bindweed always catches on
interesting points, toes,
knees, half-remembered visions,
and lusty pods spill generations.

I know last year's seeds
never come back
but in our socks they travel
great distances.

for Catherine Fels

Sonya Hess was born in New York City, and grew up on a farm in Massachusetts. Her mother died when Hess was very young, but a foster mother instilled in her a love for reading and literature which included the Bible, Greek mythology, Buddhist texts, Yeats, Eliot, Shakespeare, and the natural sciences. These interests gradually led to her continual study of contemporary literature and criticism.

On her own at an early age, Hess held a wide variety of jobs over the years, from cleaning stables, working in kennels, packing fish, and cooking on a tuna boat to office work and a stint as a Spanish dancer. Her favorite non-writing job was working one winter in a greenhouse where classical music was provided to keep the plants happy.

But Sonya Hess has always been a writer. She has published short fiction in a wide range of magazines, from **Redbook** and **McCalls** to **The Denver Quarterly** to **The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction**. She has been awarded writing fellowships with The Macdowell Colony, Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, and The Helen Wurlitzer Foundation of New Mexico. She has published an adventure novel for young readers and six volumes of poetry: **Poems** (Ohio State U. Press), **Stretching Fence** (Ohio U. Press), **A Paper Raincoat** (PuckerBrush Press), **The Far Traveler** (Juniper Press), **Palace of Earth** (PuckerBrush Press), and **Constellations of the Inner Eye** (PuckerBrush Press).

In the mid-1980's, Hess moved from Maine to northern New Mexico, where she presently resides.

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