WESTERING

by

Thomas Hornsby Ferrill

Ahsahta Press
Boise State University
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To Helen
Contents

Introduction by John Williams

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Introduction

The dominant theme of Thomas Hornsby Ferril’s *Westering* is suggested in the first stanza of “Time of Mountains,” which is the first poem in the book:

I have confused these rocks and waters with
My life, but not unclearly, for I know
What will be here when I am here no more.

Throughout the volume, this theme is developed under the rubrics of a number of oppositions, which are seen by Ferril to be relationships. There is the relationship between the perceiver and the thing perceived, as stated in the lines quoted above; between the scientific and romantic views of man and nature:

And you may ask me, when I’ve finished singing
About my Mammy down in Tennessee,
If grama grass is grass or whirling orbits
Of protons and electrons, or of neither.

The vastness of the West is opposed to the minuteness that it contains:

And the bodies of the frozen dragonflies
Begin to float to the Gulf of California . . .

and the opposition is sometimes seen in the juxtaposition of humankind and Nature:

Mountain, she is ivory,
There’s no purple on her thigh,
It is the shadow you have pressed
On her body, knee to breast.

And there is vastness and smallness other than physical. In “All Years Are Odd,” Chopin and Hokusai, representative of universal culture, are opposed and reconciled to each other, and to the more localized personage of John Sutter; in “Nocturne at Noon,” the English Puritan, as well as Shakespeare, Cervantes, Lope de Vega, Phillip III, and the Spanish Friar encroach upon the Indian, embodied by the Coyote, who lives in a world where “the little mice are dozing,” and who is warned:

Be still, Coyote in the noon,
The practical people come,
and with them the alien but inescapable trappings of civilization—out of
the mud, the city, "The palace of Santa Fé," and all that that implies.

But the most pervasive of the oppositions that Ferri! employs are those
that have to do with the past and the present, sometimes seen directly and
simply, as

In Summit County, Colorado, where
A Ford transmission rots upon the wall
Beside an ox-yoke,
sometimes in the irony of history, where Jim Bridger has become only a
name,

"... ten consonants and vowels
You’re only the name of a lake in the Yellowstone,
And something the postmaster knows in the Clark’s Fork Valley."

And Ferri! knows

... how hard it would be to make a myth
When I hear Wyoming singing to the seven reeds
That quiver on a turbo-generator’s breast . . . .

In an early essay, Ferri! wondered whether he was a Westerner at all,
and refused to define himself as such though the subject matter of his
work in both prose and poetry had been, and was to remain, almost exclu­
sively Western; and I am on record somewhere as having wondered if
there is or even ever has been a West, at least a White American West,
except in the most limited directional and geographical sense of the word.
Of course, Ferri! is a Westerner, and there is a West; but it may be useful
to raise such contrary questions now and then. For a very large part of
that state of mind that we call the West is an Eastern invention, with its
historical roots in a Transcendental fantasy of Ralph Waldo Emerson and
Henry David Thoreau, an invention that has, in our culture, taken on the
weight of myth, however specious that myth might be in its popular appli­
cation. In the New England proto-myth of the Emersonian one, the heroic
cowboy would have been the Elect of God, the defender of property rights
and the status quo, and the mountain man the individual, later to become
rugged, in a one-to-one relationship to God (or Nature, in the mythic con­
figuration). That for monetary gain he was also acquisitor and exploiter of
that Nature is not part of the myth, but the purple majesty of the moun­
tains he roamed in is, in the philosophical near-Pantheism of the
Emersonian tradition.
Myth measures the losses of a culture, and epic celebrates its victories; and out of the Transcendental myth comes the impulse toward the Western Epic. This is a natural progression; but whereas in earlier cultures (such as the ancient Greek) epic has subsumed myth and given it order, in our culture the two impulses remain oddly antipodal, as we may witness in such a poem as *The Bridge* by Hart Crane. One of Thomas Hornsby Ferril’s tasks as a poet has been to bring these two impulses (or impulses very much like them) into some kind of repose with each other.

The most obvious efforts to bring about this repose in *Westering* are in the longer poems, such as “Jim Bridger,” “Fort Vasquez,” “Ghost Town,” and “Waltz Against the Mountains.” Most admirers of Ferril’s poetry consider the longer poems to be the least successful, a judgment with which I find myself in qualified agreement. Except for “Waltz Against the Mountains,” the best of this group, they tend to wander about too much in their beginnings, as if searching for themselves; the predominant tone, casual and often conversational, seems at times somewhat forced and at odds with occasional rhetorical flourishes; and the discursiveness is not adequately supported by structural strategies. But over the years I have come to suspect that this is a poetic method of Ferril’s, oddly akin to that of William Butler Yeats in his use of the “numb line”—that is, the line which by its rhetorical and emotive neutrality elevates a succeeding line, or passage, to an intensity it would not otherwise have had. For such poems as I have mentioned almost invariably build to power and meaning, usually about three-quarters of the way through. And I suspect that the virtue is made possible by the presence of the defect, if it may be called such. It is an old critical problem.

It is in the shorter poems—“Time of Mountains,” “Blue-Stemmed Grass,” “This Trail,” “Morning Star,” “Mountains Themselves,” “Song for Aaron Burr,” “Some Grass,” “Two Rivers,” “House in Denver,” “Fire Tree,” “Go, Mountain!” and “Daniel Boone”—that Ferril’s best work is to be found. There are curious triumphs of rhetoric and perception; in a mountain stream there is

> . . . prodigious stillness where the water folds
> Its terrible muscles over and under each other.

There is the sweep of the extended Romantic period:

> Out of a deep that is, but is not charted,
> Your dream, uncommon to the meadow crickets,
> Is Nature moving, and your words are Nature,
> Uttered of air by flesh resolved of earth,
Each word a member syllable at war
With other syllables, to die tonight,
Or cry against the luminous distances,
Where legendary men grow out of men,
Like reefs the polyps build on bones of polyps
To hurl the ocean back against itself,

and the plain statement, with its blunt evocation of time:

The housing of your differential gears
Will break the gentians, but the Utes are dead.

And there are a few curiosities, such as “This Foreman,” Ferril’s adapta-
tion of the popular English ballad, set in industrial America, yet with the
attendant unstated mystery of many of the original models. Though it is an
unlikely success, it is a success nevertheless.

And one must call special attention to “Blue-Stemmed Grass,” one of
Ferril’s finest poems. It is a triumph of the language; implicitly and explicit-
ly, it gathers all of Ferril’s major concerns into a single poem, and dis-
plays his techniques at their best; it is a poem apparently simple and
actually profound, dealing as it does with one of the central issues of
man’s existence in a universe beyond his comprehension. In these re-
spects, it may remind one of what may be William Butler Yeats’s finest sin-
gle poem, “The Wild Swans at Coole,” a work to which “Blue-Stemmed
Grass” is not noticeably inferior.

It has often been said that Thomas Hornsby Ferril’s relative lack of
recognition comes from the fact that he has been too closely identified
with a particular region of the West, and to a particular city within that re-

dion. Ferril was born in Denver in a house “where a child, his father, slum-
bered,” and he has been content to remain there, knowing the cost and
finding a meaning:

Mine is a city that has never known
A woman on a high wall looking down
Forever on the firelight of her kinsmen.
You’re only a woman looking out of a window;
There are no ships, no smoking sacrifices,
And what we make, we are, and it is finished.

It is finished, and it is not finished. In “Fort Vásquez,” someone speaks
to the poet, and says of the old fort, which is crumbling into the earth, “It
ought to be restored!” to which the poet silently responds, “... let these
old walls go the way they’re going!” and bids them godspeed. At the end of the poem he likens his own work to Fort Vásquez:

I speak new words, to last until they change,
And when my song is lost, if someone says,
It ought to be restored,
   let some one lift
One handful of this earth and say:
   It is!

Thomas Hornsby Ferril’s poems are not yet lost, but they will be, as all poems will be, in that vast future of time that we cannot imagine. In the meantime, he is one of those who matter, and we should honor and read him while we can.

*John Williams*

Key West, Florida

May, 1986
Time of Mountains

So long ago my father led me to
The dark impounded orders of this canyon,
I have confused these rocks and waters with
My life, but not unclearly, for I know
What will be here when I am here no more.

I've moved in the terrible cries of the prisoner water,
And prodigious stillness where the water folds
Its terrible muscles over and under each other.

When you've walked a long time on the floor of a river,
And up the steps and into the different rooms,
You know where the hills are going, you can feel them,
The far blue hills dissolving in luminous water,
The solvent mountains going home to the oceans.
Even when the river is low and clear,
And the waters are going to sleep in the upper swales,
You can feel the particles of the shining mountains
Moping against your ankles toward the sea.

Forever the mountains are coming down and I stalk
Against them, cutting the channel with my shins,
With the lurch of the stiff spray cracking over my thighs;
I feel the bones of my back bracing my body,
And I push uphill behind the vertebrate fish
That lie uphill with their bony brains uphill
Meeting and splitting the mountains coming down.

I push uphill behind the vertebrate fish
That scurry uphill, ages ahead of me.
I stop to rest but the order still keeps moving:
I mark how long it takes an aspen leaf
To float in sight, pass me, and go downstream;
I watch a willow dipping and springing back
Like something that must be a water-clock,
Measuring mine against the end of mountains.
But if I go before these mountains go,
I'm unbewildered by the time of mountains,
I, who have followed life up from the sea
Into a black incision in this planet,
Can bring an end to stone infinitives.
I have held rivers to my eyes like lenses
And rearranged the mountains at my pleasure,
As one might change the apples in a bowl,
And I have walked a dim unearthly prairie
From which these peaks have not yet blown away.
Blue-Stemmed Grass

There's blue-stemmed grass as far as I can see,
But when I take the blue-stemmed grass in hand,
And pull the grass apart, and speak the word
For every part, I do not understand
More than I understood of grass before.
"This part," I say, "is the straight untwisted awn,"
And "Here's the fourth glume of the sessile spikelet,"
And then I laugh out loud at what I've done.

I speak with reason to the blue-stemmed grass:
"This grass moves up through meadow beasts to men."
I weigh mechanical economies
Of meadow into flesh and back again.
I let the morning sun shine through my hand,
I trace the substance bloom and beast have given,
But I ask if phosphorus or nitrogen
Can make air through my lips mean hell or heaven.

All that the grass can make for any beast
Is here within my luminous hand of bone
And flesh and blood against the morning sun;
But I must listen alone, and you, alone,
Far children to be woven from green looms;
We move forever across meadows blowing,
But like no beast, we choke and cannot cry
When the grasses come, and when the grass is going.
Fort Laramie

Skylike grew delphinums
Through the planking cracks in the two-inch floor;
This is Wyoming walking in,
I said, through an open door.

Wyoming is old as a rotting plank
That is not humus yet,
Blue flowers walk through an open door,
They grow through puncheons in the floor,
Petals blow on the trapper’s hearth.
Under this floor and in the earth,
I said, is a taproot net,
And the roof is a thing the sun shines through
To make Wyoming flowers blue.

I touched the frame, there was no door,
It was a place where a door had been;
I said there was a time before
These bluest flowers came walking in
When such a quiet opening
In a strong wall in the afternoon,
With no one here and a strong door gone.
Would have been a fearful thing.

(I said Cheyennes and Sioux left more
Than silent flowers upon a floor.)

I watched the pigeons roar and pound
And drag their tails upon the ground,
And I said these walls are thicker than
The arm’s length of a prairie man,
But I said a pigeon circles through
These four white walls of stony mud
As if no smoky pane had ever
Turned the sun to pigeon’s blood,
I said does anyone recall
When birds did not fly through this wall?
My hand touched the bud of a blue flower's coming
And I heard a pigeon's mating drumming;
What is Fort Laramie? I said,
There flows the Platte, here are the dead:
They lie in a fold of the greasewood ground,
A few were killed and some were drowned,
And some had reasons for knowing why
Any place was a place to die,
And I looked to see if any stone
Said Better die here than in Oregon,
And I looked for letters that could be pieced
Into We died here on our way back East.

But I found no words from the honest dead
For the living had marked the stones instead.

Lone men grow honest when they die,
You can sometimes tell by the way they lie
Where they were going and why they stopped,
But these, I said, have all been propped
In cottonwood boxes of compromise
With coppered eyes on paradise
And backs set tight against the world,
With arms well crossed and fingers curled;
How many death-set arms were cracked
To build a sign the living lacked?
How many honest muscles sprung
To fit a hymn that must be sung?
What is a cross upon a breast
That does not face the East or West,
Here under me
At Laramie?

Fort Laramie is Nature now:
I said if there is any trace
Of how many millions passed this place
Under canvas tilts with faces drawn
On the bitter dream of Oregon,
Then any man is natural
As a prairie dog or a coral thing
Or a wind that blows a mountain down.
Bill Sublette was a coral thing,
This is your reef, too, Broken Hand;
Bob Campbell was a prairie dog,
This is your mound of earth, Bob Campbell;
Jim Bridger was a blowing wind,
This is a mountain's bone, Old Gabe;
Kit Carson, did you write a will?
This graveyard, Kit, is also Nature;
Dreamers, fighters, cowards, lovers,
Here is a plank a blossom covers,
Here is Wyoming walking in
With a blue flower and a pigeon's wing.
Jim Bridger

Jim had a body that one morning took
A long pole in its hands and with a cry
That no one can remember strangely pushed
A hundred springing rivers down to mope
In folds of yellow sleep below St. Louis.
That afternoon the muscles of his body
Threw enough of the Rocky Mountains down so any
Of the oxen could step over them. That night
Jim Bridger’s body cooled off in a cornfield
Where some day Kansas City was going to be.

Look at Jim Bridger standing in the cornfield:

What can you say to the old man in the evening
When the Rocky Mountains are coming back around him
Chanting a long blue tomb-song for his body?
What can you say to the old man in the evening,
A blind man standing in a field of corn
With the taproots waiting to lace his moccasins
Where Kansas City’s going to be? Can you ask him:

“How do you know the moonlight on your hand
Is Idaho? How do you know the wind
Is Colorado coming to cool your armpits
When your arms have reached too far for loneliness?”

They let him ride a plowhorse to the cornfield,
But the horse has gone away and the dog has gone.
Jim Bridger rode Grohean, the Comanche stallion,
But Grohean is dead, he’s out there in the mountains.
Do you know how a stallion falls in a water course,
With the neck curved back too flat and the ribs too high?
What can you say to an old man in the evening
When he gets down on his knees to feel the stubble
And feels with his hands the particles of earth
Binding Missouri together under the moon,
Binding Missouri to the members of his mountains?
What can you say when he lies down in the stubble
Staring too long as if his lids were lenses?
Will you remember him, Missouri River,  
The boy with starlight on his shaggy head?  
Do you remember him, New Mexico,  
The shaggy head in the mirror well of Taos?  
You, Canada? You, white Mackenzie River?  
You, grasses and blue flowers rimming the Arctic?  
You, silver gulls of Utah, flying in  
The wake of plows as if the plows were ships?  
Nebraska, wooer of rain, will you remember  
A cloud like a level rain cloud over two  
Horizons and a tall boy moving like  
A thunder master into the bison vapor?

You, Colorado, wrinkling out of an old sea,  
Into the granite and the orchids and the high wind,  
Where do his moccasins slip down hill in the needles?  
Montana, when you lie on your back like a woman  
Hearing the flutes of the Blackfeet over October,  
Do you hear his name among the sorrow bringers?

Wyoming, in the morning when the world  
Is turning over like a wheel and the mountains  
Are tossing up golden rivers to every ocean,  
How do you know which sea to give a river?  
Do you remember anyone who told you?  
You wide Dakotas, listeners of wind,  
Where do the river namers stop at noon  
For shady antelope against their tongues  
With fifty songs to go into the sunset?

Sometimes, when I've quarreled a long time with Jim Bridger  
For lying dead too long under a cornfield,  
And never leaving the cornfield like a myth  
That will not stay in any place too long,  
I say: "Jim, you're ten consonants and vowels,  
You're only the name of a lake in the Yellowstone,  
And something the postmaster knows in the Clark's Fork Valley."  
But I know why Jim will never rise from the cornfield  
And walk a thousand miles to wake his stallion.  
For I know how hard it would be to make a myth  
When I hear Wyoming singing to the seven reeds
That quiver on a turbo-generator's breast . . .
When I write an advertisement and believe it
And watch the people believing my advertisement . . .
When I hear a city rocking at night to the same song,
Every night the same song, always the same song.
And I know why Jim will never stalk the moon
When I listen to people buying automobiles,
And what they say when they finger a fender curve,
When I listen to some of the things they talk about
Before they build high buildings and afterward
When they look up out of their windows at high buildings;
And I know why old Jim Bridger in the cornfield
Will always stay there until he isn't there.

So much for old Jim Bridger, but if you ask me
Where am I going on a summer day,
I'll tell you I am gathering instruments
About me like the seven reeds that quiver
On a turbo-generator's breast.
I'll tell you I am going to crack it out
From Denver to Taos, figuring about
An hour for a sandwich over Raton Pass.
I'll be in Castle Rock in thirty minutes
Which I would say was more than old Jim Bridger
Could make in a long day riding any stallion;
It will be dark from Cimmaron to Taos,
And I'll be tired enough to feel
Some of the instruments slipping away:
I'll feel the wheel dissolving in my hands,
And I won't be knowing about the brakes and throttle,
And the same song that makes the cities rock together
Will be moving through my fingers and the spruces,
But I won't know there's music in my fingers;
I'll be a slow thing moving into Taos,
Slow as Jim Bridger on a weary stallion;
But when I get to Taos I'll start over,
I'll feel the instruments and they will feel
Like something waiting for me in a cornfield.
This Trail

We may have been coming up a misty spring,
A summer of long fire, some autumn when
Those mountains over there were first thrown up
To make a purple window, but we needn't
Talk of the breaking down of a skull or blossom,
Or whether the hair lives longer than the heart,
Or how improbable it always was
That we should ever walk this trail together.

This is no night for winding clocks. I love you.
Fort Vásquez

I've tried it slower but I think it's better
To be going fifty miles an hour or faster
When you pass by those low adobe walls
Builded by Louis Vásquez on the Platte
A hundred years ago. You pass them on
The motor road from Denver to Cheyenne.

This Louis Vásquez led the fur brigades,
He was Jim Bridger's partner many years,
They wandered on these prairies and these mountains:
If you take the skeleton of a cottonwood leaf
And call the stem the long Missouri River
And the other bones of the leaf the other rivers—
The Yellowstone, the River Tongue, the Big Horn,
The Stinking River and the Rosebud River,
The Wind, the Chugwater, the Sweetwater—
That's where they roamed, but one leaf will not hold
Their rivers on the other side of the mountains.

They built their walls the way the beaver did
Of river mud and golden river grasses,
And of these walls this beaver hunter formed,
Three walls are gone. The earth is almost level
Where they stood.

The fourth mud wall, no higher than
The barbed-wire fence a rancher built to keep
The people out, still leans upon the wire,
And the windy barbed-wire cuts it like a saw.
A pace away flashes the whirring pavement,
Behind the pavement is the railroad track,
Where fireweed glows against a bank of cinders.

A long-haired buckskin man was Louis Vásquez,
And a handsome man who had driven a coach-and-four...

Last night a magpie crossed the hunter's moon,
And I said:
"There's a feather for you, Louis Vásquez,
To wear in your hair when you walk alone in October,"
A feather, if you meet an Arapaho girl
In the yellow cottonwoods.

Those cottonwoods
Were yellow puffs that trundled away as far
As I could see, like yellow tumble-weeds
Piling against the rose and indigo mountains;
But the magpie flew away and the long-haired man
Was dead, and a hundred prairie years were gone,
And I was making only some of the words
That yellow trees and hills have made before.

But getting back to why I like to pass
These crumbling walls at fifty miles an hour:
I nearly always go this way with men
Who have to know some science for their business;
They always tell me things I do not know,
And it’s a road I’ll want to travel more
Until I’m surer of each curve it’s making,
And where the people go who turn at crossroads.

I’ve passed Fort Vásquez when the telephone poles
Were whipping by at the rhythm of my heart,
And listened to the driver’s quiet story
Of fighting colloids in a filter press.
Sometimes we shuffle pairs of chromosomes,
While the mountains slowly turn and change their places.
(Mountains will follow as a new moon will.)
They whisper: Do not listen to the driver!
Tell him the old things we are telling you!

And within a bow-shot of where Louis Vásquez
Stretched out his buffalo robes on willow branches,
The whole binomial theorem clattered down
As something that would work all right until
You tried to make its logic alter Nature.

Another time when we were roaring by
To try to help the farmers fight the drouth,
We talked about the way the guard cells work
For photo-synthesis in the blowing leaves
In the barbed-wire fields on either side of the road.
(The barbs are tufted spindles wrapped in fleece
From sheep and clematis that press against them.)
And when the road was blocked by a tide of sheep
We spoke no more of photo-synthesis,
But I thought of the unseen vapors from the sheep
Charging the air with something for the leaves,
Even as dissolution of their bodies
Must charge the earth with something for the roots.

And what is happening is happening
To roots and leaves that split adobe walls.
You dead Arapahoes in the silent meadows,
We spent that wide green summer's day upon
A picture chart showing your prairie sun
Lifting a fountain water from every leaf,
But the syllables and symbols were our own,
And coming home we wandered among planets,
And filled the road with particles of light
That bounced against the car like summer hail.

So goes this road, but when we near these walls
The driver usually says:

There's Old Fort Vásquez;
Somebody ought to put a marker there!
And someone says:

It ought to be restored!
And I'm about to say:

How beautiful,
With what you know of earth and air and flesh,
To let these old walls go the way they're going!
Let's bid them godspeed and be on our way!

Or I'm about to say:

How might we best
Unwind a hundred years? How might we now
Reorganize these elements again
With certitude that those who pass this way
Experience alone the works of Vásquez,
And nothing that our different hands have added?
But by the time the driver ends his plea,
Something has come and gone and come again,
And our feet are pressing hard on the floor again,
And talk begins again, perhaps of women.
There's something I am giving up to tell
You this, and if you turn your head away
When I say words like photo-synthesis,
Can I say more than Are we here or aren't we?
_Shall we turn back? Is there some other road?

O I will not forget the measured sagas
Of older wayfaring across this world,
We'll keep them too. We add to what they are.
If you have time some night I'll sing you a song
About a loping crescent of Cheyennes
Moving under the moon toward Louis Vásquez;
I'll make a song about John Jacob Astor,
And all his warriors fighting in the mountains,
Or a song about a shadow in St. Louis,
A shadow warm with wine and honeysuckle,
And Louis Vásquez stepping out of the shadow
Into the silver laughter of the lovers;
I'll make a song of an island near St. Louis,
And gentlemen shooting each other down
With perfumed ribbons pinned against their hearts—
That will be Nature too, something that rises
Out of the substance of my flesh as sure
As any vapor rising from the sheep,
But that will not be all, for we are here,
And what has happened on this road is ours.

So, of these walls that stood a hundred years
And now are going back to something we
Believe we have begun to understand,
And of the slow feet that made good this road,
And of the beaver hands that made these walls,
I speak new words, to last until they change,
And when my song is lost, if some one says:
_It ought to be restored_,
let some one lift
One handful of this earth and say:
_It is!_
Morning Star

It is tomorrow now
In this black incredible grass.

The mountains with luminous discipline
Are coming out of the blackness
To take their places one in front of the other.

I know where you are and where the river is.

You are near enough to be a far horizon.
Your body breathing is a silver edge
Of a long black mountain rising and falling slowly
Against the morning and the morning star.

Before we cannot speak again
There will be time to use the morning star
For anything, like brushing it against
A pentstemon,
Or nearly closing the lashes of our lids
As children do to make the star come down.

Or I can say to myself as if I were
A wanderer being asked where he had been
Among the hills: "There was a range of mountains
Once I loved until I could not breathe."
Ghost Town

Here was the glint of the blossom rock,
Here Colorado dug the gold
For a sealskin vest and a rope of pearl
And a garter jewel from Amsterdam
And a house of stone with a jig-saw porch
Over the hogbacks under the moon
Out where the prairies are.

Here’s where the conifers long ago
When there were conifers cried to the lovers:
  Dig in the earth for gold while you are young!
Here’s where they cut the conifers and ribbed
The mines with conifers that sang no more,
And here they dug the gold and went away,
Here are the empty houses, hollow mountains,
Even the rats, the beetles and the cattle
That used these houses after they were gone
Are gone; the gold is gone,
There’s nothing here,
Only the deep mines crying to be filled.

You mines, you yellow throats,
You mountainsides of yellow throats
Where all the trees are gone,
You yellow throats crying a canyon chant:
  Fill what is hollow;
Crying like thunder going home in summer:
  Fill what is hollow in the earth;
Crying deep like old trees long ago:
  Fill what is hollow now the gold is gone;
Crying deep like voices of the timbers,
Conifers blowing, feathered conifers,
Blowing the smell of resin into the rain,
Over the afternoons of timber cutters,
Over the silver axes long ago,
Over the mountains shining wet like whipsaws,
Crying like all the wind that goes away:
  Fill what is hollow,
Send something down to fill the pits
Now that the gold is gone;

*
You mines, you yellow throats,
Cry to the hills, be patient with the hills,
The hills will come, the houses do not answer.

These houses do not answer any cry,
I go from door to door, I wait an hour
Upon a ledge too high to be a street,
Saying from here a man could throw a rock
On any roof in town, but I will wait:
It's time the people came out of their houses
To show each other where the moon is rising;
Moon, do you hear the crying of the mines:
   Fill what is hollow,
   Send down the moonlight?

It's time the people kindled evening fires,
I'll watch the chimneys, then I will go down;
Steeple, why don't you ring a bell?
Why don't you ring a mad high silver bell
Against the crying of the yellow throats?
Wait for me, steeple, I will ring the bell.
   Pull the rope,
   Drift, stope,
   Pull a fathom of rock
   And a cord of ore
   From the higher place to fill the lower,
   The Rocky Mountains are falling down,
   Go into any house in town,
   You can hear the dark in the kitchen sing,
   The kitchen floor is a bubbling spring,
   The mountains have sealed like the door of a tomb
   The sliding doors to the dining room;
   Then thump your hand on the parlor wall
   And hear the Rocky Mountains fall,
   Feel the plaster ribs and the paper skin
   Of the Rocky Mountains caving in;
   Pull the rope,
   Drift, stope,
   Pull down the birds out of the air,
   Pull down the dust that's floating where
   The conifers blew the resin rain,
   Pull all the mountains down again,
Pull the steeple down
And a cord of ore
To fill the dark
On the hollow floor.

I am an animal, I enter houses.
Some of the animals have liked this house:
The first to come and go were men,
Men animals who dreamed of yellow gold,
Then small things came and the cattle came.
The cattle used this room for many years,
The floor is level with the baseboard now,
But probably the ants came first
Before the people went away;
Before the children wore the sill
With stepping in and out to die;
It may have been an afternoon
Before the conifers were dead,
An afternoon when the rain had fallen
And the children were going back to play.
You children going back to play,
Did you ask the things the animals can’t ask?
Did you ask what made the mountains glisten blue?
Did you say: “The great wet mountains shine like whipsaws”?
Did you say: “We’re here and there’s the sun”?
Did you say: “The golden mines are playing
Yellow leapfrog down the hills”?
Did you say: “Think what it would be like
To be way up on the mountain top
And see how beautiful it is
To be where we are now”?

The children made this doorstone look
Like a whetstone worked too hard in the center,
And the ants went out and the wall went out,
And the rats went out and the cattle came,
But they’re gone now, all the animals;
If they were here, and all of us together,
What could we say about the gold we dug,
What could we say about this house we used,
What could we say that we could understand?
You men and women, builders of these houses,
You lovers hearing the conifers at night,
You lovers making children for the houses,
Did you say to yourselves when reckoning
The yield of gold per cord of ore,
Running drifts per cord of ore,
Stoping per fathom per cord of ore,
Filling buckets per cord of ore,
Dressing tailings per cord of ore—
You lovers making children in these mountains,
Did you say something animals can’t say?
Did you say: “We know why we built these houses”?
Did you say: “We know what the gold is for”?

I cannot tell: you and the gold are gone,
And nearly all the animals are gone;
It seems that after animals are gone,
The green things come to houses and stay longer;
The things with blossoms take an old house down
More quietly than wind, more slow than mountains.
I say I cannot tell, I am alone,
It is too much to be the last one here,
For now I hear only the yellow throats
Of deep mines crying to be filled again
Even with little things like bones of birds,
But I can hear some of the houses crying:

“Which of the animals did use us better?”
And I can hear the mountains falling down
Like thunder going home.
Mountains Themselves

Mountains themselves are plausible. You can look
At the ranges one behind the other folding
Into alien blueness with apparent meaning;
But you'll find you need a bird or something that
An old man said when you start to finish a mountain.

A thunderstorm's an early instrument.
I've used a mountain storm for germinating
The grasses down on the prairie and a sickle
Of lightning for harvest quickly, with wrinkled clerks
Down all at once in the city groping with pencils
Into decimals of wheat long after the arc lights
Have come on. I've done it quickly, often before
I've heard the thunder. Or you can wait for the thunder.

Or you can finish a mountain very slowly
With fans of light that mark the equinoxes,
Setting their red dials at the end of always
The same long street their special sundowns need
For remembering which of the front doors on the porches
Show in a year new scars of tacks from which
Were hung the ribboned wreaths of waxen death.

I have kept careful measurements of this
Since boyhood and prefer the slower way.
Some of the hills I've used are nearly finished.
Magenta

Once, up in Gilpin County, Colorado,
When a long blue afternoon was standing on end
Like a tombstone sinking into the Rocky Mountains,
I found myself in a town where no one was,
And I noticed an empty woman lying unburied
On a pile of mining machinery over a graveyard.

She was a dressmaker’s dummy called Magenta.
I named her that because, all of a sudden,
The peaks turned pink and lavender and purple,
And all the falling houses in the town
Began to smell of rats and pennyroyal.

The town was high and lonely in the mountains;
There was nothing to listen to but the wasting of
The glaciers and a wind that had no trees.
And many houses were gone, only masonry
Of stone foundations tilting over the canyon,
Like hanging gardens where successful rhubarb
Had crossed the kitchen sill and entered the parlor.

The dressmaker’s dummy was meant to be like a woman:
There was no head. The breasts and belly were
A cool enamel simulating life.
The hips and thighs were made adjustable,
Encircling and equidistant from
A point within, through which, apparently,
The woman had been screwed to a pedestal,
But the threads were cut and the pedestal was broken.

I propped Magenta into an old ore-bucket,
Which gave her a skirt of iron up to her waist;
And I told a mountain at some distance to
Become her lilac hair and face and neck.
It was the fairest mountain I could find,
And then I said, “Magenta, here we are.”

And Magenta said, “Why do you call me Magenta?”
The sky no longer glowed rose-aniline,
So I looked at the town and thought of a different reason.

"Magenta's a mulberry town in Italy,"
I said, and she said, "What a very excellent reason!"
(I said no more though I was prepared to make
A speech a dressmaker's dummy might have relished,
About a naked Empress of France,
And how she held her nightgown at arm's length,
And named the color of her silken nightgown
In honor of the battle of Magenta,
The very year, the very day in June,
This mining camp was started in the mountains.)

The sun was low and I moved to a warmer flange
On the pile of broken machinery,
And Magenta said, "It's always afternoon
Up here in the hills, and I think it always was."

"Why always afternoon?" I said, and she answered:

"Mornings were crystal yellow, too hard to see through;
The realness didn't begin until afternoon;
We both are real, but we wouldn't have been this morning
Before the blue came up. It was always so:
Nothing real ever happened in the morning,
The men were always digging for gold in the morning;
They were dreaming deep in the earth, you never saw them,
But afternoons they'd come up to bury their wives."

Magenta stared a moment at the graveyard.

"These women wanted me to be their friend.
I spent my mornings with them making believe.
They'd sit around me talking like far-off brides
Of things beyond the mountains and the mines;
Then they would get down on their knees to me,
Praying with pins and bastings for my sanction.

"Then they would look into mirrors and come back,
They'd look out of the windows and come back,
They'd walk into the kitchen and come back,
They’d scratch the curtains with their fingernails,
As if they were trying to scratch the mountains down,
And be somewhere where there weren’t any mountains.

“I wasn’t what they wanted, yet I was.
Mornings were never real, but usually
By noon the women died and the men came up
From the bottom of the earth to bury them.”

“Those must have been strange days,” I said, and I tossed
A cog from a stamp-mill into a yawning shaft.
We listened as it clicked the sides of the mine
And we thought we heard it splash and Magenta said:

“The men would measure in cords the gold they hoped
To find, but the women reckoned by calendars
Of double chins and crows-feet at the corners
Of their eyes. When they put their china dishes on
The checkered tablecloth they’d say to themselves
‘How soon can we go away?’ When they made quilts
They’d say to the squares of colored cloth ‘How soon?’

“They could remember coming up to the dryness
Of the mountain air in wagons, and setting the wheels
In the river overnight to tighten the spokes;
But by the time they got to the mountains the wheels
Were broken and the women wanted the wagons
To be repaired as soon as possible
For going away again, but the men would cut
The wagons into sluice boxes and stay.

“Each woman had seven children of whom two
Were living, and the two would go to church.
Sometimes the children went to the opera-house
To see the tragedies. They can still remember
The acrobats and buglers between the acts.”

I spoke to Magenta of how the graves were sinking,
And Magenta said, “All this is tunneled under;
I think some of these ladies may yet find gold,
Perhaps,” she sighed, “for crowns,” and she continued:
“Maybe you never saw a miner dig
A grave for a woman he brought across the plains
To die at noon when she was sewing a dress
To make a mirror say she was somebody else.”

“I never did,” I said, and Magenta said:

“A miner would dig a grave with a pick and shovel
Often a little deeper than necessary,
And poising every shovelful of earth
An instant longer than if he were digging a grave,
And never complaining when he struck a rock;
Then he would finish, glad to have found no color.”

I didn’t know what to say to that, so I said:

“It’s getting dark at approximately the rate
Of one hundred and eighty-six thousand spruces per second,”
And Magenta smiled and said, “Oh, so it is.”

And she said, “Up here the men outnumbered women,
But there were always too many women to go around;
I should like to have known the women who did not need me.”
She indicated that their skirts were shorter.

“And so should I,” I said. “Are they buried here?”

Magenta said, “I think there were hardly any:
They came like far-off brides, they would appear
Each afternoon when the funerals were over.
Some disappeared, some changed into curious songs,
And some of them slowly changed into beautiful mountains.”

She pointed to a peak with snowy breasts
Still tipped with fire and said, “The miners named
That mountain Silverheels after a girl
Who never was seen until along toward evening.”

“This is an odd coincidence,” I said,
“Because I’ve been using that mountain for your head.”
All Years Are Odd as 1849

Is there a silver cup, John Sutter,
You can fill with wrestlers, waves and ghosts,
And sounds that are a nation
And a dying for it?

My cup is gold and California,
The movers come with banjos on their knees,
My acres are a golden stream,
America is at my feet
Panning John Sutter's gold,
So what of a silver cup?

All years are odd as this one is, John Sutter,
Chopin is dead today
And Hokusai is dead . . .

Acres of oxen are the California road,
The wagons move, the cedar buckets drip
On fennel and on jimson weed, John Sutter;
Old men and children are the California road;
But there is sea at either end, John Sutter:
Behind the Atlantic Chopin lies as still
As Hokusai, a dead thing in Japan,
And there is world and clipper ships between.

How did it feel, John Sutter, sitting in
A laurel chair last January when
The others crouched on bullock skulls, to hear
Them say that gold was in the world?
In your tail-race?
Looking dull like spruce gum chewed in school?
How did they heft, the two bowls balanced on
That stick of redwood?
Gold, John Sutter, yours!

John Sutter, California, is a golden bowl,
But Chopin was the little silver cup
He carried nineteen years with Poland in it,
Earth from the homeland weaving sound forever;
Now he is dead: out of the silver cup
They spill his earth upon the earth of him
And sounds that are a nation
And a dying for it.

Chopin is dead today, John Sutter;
Is there a silver cup America
Can hammer out of California gold?
And Hokusai is dead today, John Sutter,
Who filled the world with wrestlers, waves and ghosts;
Can California shape a golden ghost?

When he was young, John Sutter, Hokusai
With a cask of ink and many brooms for brushes
Painted the Dharma bigger than a farm,
Painted two sparrows on a grain of corn.
That was the banjo-thumping in him, John,
Selling to men a thing he had not found.
When he was old, John Sutter, Hokusai
Lifted an old man’s prayer unto the sea
That he who made the Dharma like a farm
Might fix life in a single point of light
And lose the brush that made it. He is dead,

Behind the ocean Hokusai is dead.
All years are odd as this one is, John Sutter;
When will America, dipping your golden brush,
Fix life into a single point of light
And pray an old man’s prayer unto the sea?

Stand in your golden agony, John Sutter,
Hark to the moping oxen, acres wide.
Hark to the axles, creaking thimble-skeins,
Taste the hot tar, smell the green water
Tipping from dusty cedar buckets, John.
Behind a sea a silver cup is spilled,
Behind a sea a point of life is dead . . .
You shall see wrestlers, waves and ghosts,
You shall see silver cups, John, spilling over.
Hold high your golden bowl.
America shall dip
The golden sands of California
With cradles, John, with cradles, coffins, pans.
All years are odd as this one is, John Sutter.
You are America, John Sutter,
Stand in your golden agony, they come!
Nocturne at Noon—1605

Walk quietly, Coyote,
The practical people are coming now
Into the juniper, into the sage arroyos
Where the smoke is sweeter than anywhere
And the mud is ready for building
The city of Santa Fé.

While the Puritans over in England
Are getting ready to whisper,
There is a way and we will build a ship,
People in motion are looking at the sage
And seeing where the yellow goes in August
In all the violet sage and silver sage
Along the Rio Grande,
Not that they need the yellow on a faring,
But knowing where it is
And what hills are behind it,
As gulls know where an ochre billow beats
On something that is rock.

Coyote, on the silver road of Spain,
Stalk in the noon, the little mice are dozing,
While you are panting, evening comes to Spain,
Darkens the sculptured rats in Tarragona,
Closes the last Sevillian marigold,
Blackens the windows in Our Lady of the Sea,
And the sailors’ sheds grow dim in Barcelona.

Be soft, Coyote of the noon,
Far to the east here is an evening that
Is more than many nights:
This evening, for the first time in the world,
Will Shakespeare leads a madman to his heath
Against the wisdom of a patient fool;
This evening, for the first time in the world,
The little hoofs of Don Quixote’s nag
Start striking fire from flinty roads of Spain,
A little trot today, some salty grass,
The first star and the last pale cloud are set.
The cloud is over England, Lear is ebbing
Into the northern lightning of the air;
*Somewhere there is a storm, my Sancho Panza;*
The star is sinking in the Rio Grande,
Where Cradle Flower with teeth white as a beaver's
Laughs at her lover, Medicine of Corn,
Weaving his body through a hoop of osier.

Be still, Coyote in the noon,
You cannot see the sinking of the star
Into the burnt slit of the Rio Grande,
At noon, Coyote, stars are frail as pollen,
But Lope de Vega's gone to bed,
Philip the Third has gone to bed,
And the child Velasquez sucks his thumb
In the blackness of Madrid,
But Will Shakespeare hasn't gone to bed
And over England lightning flashes,
Soft, Coyote, Lear is mumbling
Into the northern wind.

Quick! To the south, Coyote, look!
Is it a rabbit in the noon?

No hare, Coyote, those are ears
Of a mule that comes up the deep arroyo,
Ears in the grass on the edge of the mesa,
Up comes the head, it's the head of a mule;
O soft, Coyote in the noon,
*Onate comes up the deep arroyo,*
Rides up the silver road of Spain,
Juan de Onate's over the edge now,
Stare, Coyote, at Onate,
Have you seen a peacock plume before?
Or a spur as heavy as two young turkeys?

Still, Coyote, see his face,
For the mud is ready for building now
The palace of Santa Fé,
See the faces red and black behind him,
The practical people are coming now,
The Mother of Christ rides up the mud,
There's another friar on the left,
They're up on the silver sage again,
They see where the yellow is again,
The mud is ready for making walls
Where the smoke is sweeter than anywhere.
Be still, Coyote in the noon,
The practical people come.
Elegy—New Mexico

Row twelve, grave ten,
Block C, Oise-Aisne,
Only the shepherds go to sleep
To songs the shepherds make for sheep,
Sleep, Cosme Gallegos.

Jose Maria Peña,
Six twenty-two D.
Silvio Gonzales,
Eight six C,
Aragon, Carabajar,
Graves, rows, blocks all,
Earth is thick
And grass is thin
On you and Peter Peloquin,
But the piñon trees are much the same
And somebody with another name
Is singing the songs you used to sing
To the other sheep in another spring;
Somebody with another name
Is watching the grass grow into wool
To turn into clothes
To turn into clay,
Somebody with another name
Is going to earth a different way.

The sheep that cry the whole night long
Never will hear the shepherd’s song;
Only the shepherds go to sleep
To songs the shepherds make for sheep.
Screen Doors for Your Tomb

Here I go putting screen doors on your tomb
And telling you, New Mexico, to wait
Outside while I unfold your winding-sheet
To show you how I think you'd like it better.
I've raised you from the dead, New Mexico,
I've raised you from the dead to watch you die.

When will you pity me with bitter laughter?
When shall we laugh and fill a bowl with tears?
I will go north under the frosty horn
Of the goose-going moon, New Mexico,
Remembering you did not laugh at me,
Nor I at any vine or any bowl,
We only smiled like somber tamarisks.

You do not pity me? Do you not fear
Some day, New Mexico, when I am tired
Of prayer sticks and you have forgotten more
Of the hunting songs I told you to remember,
I'll chuck you into a Studebaker wagon,
Shovel the old words into your new grave,
As I would be done by, and hurry home?

Why have they planted gourd vines over Pecos,
To wind through bones of rock where bones of men
Have moved out in the red light of the evening?
O gourd vine in my fingers, yellow blooms,
You are not honest, gourd vine in my fingers;
Who bade you clamber down the rocks of Pecos
Now that the bones are gone? Who told your yellow:
Pretend to be a gourd vine growing here?

New Mexico, I buy your water bowl,
You made the water bowl against my coming,
Our eyes are clear and big, like eyes of cattle;
How shall I say you fashioned for yourself
This curving clay because you needed water?
How will you say you made the bowl for me
Because I use no bowl for hoarding rain?
Have I forgotten Greece? Forgotten Egypt?
When shall I ask some bowl what beauty is?
Let rain dissolve the bowl, New Mexico,
And wash our hands! Come, let us walk together
Into the quiet sorrow of the greasewood;
The purple towers of rain are crumbling
On seven mesas made of panther fur;
Come, let us hurry while the towers are standing!
Call to the Badger of the South,
Wolf of the East,
Bear of the West,
Lion of the North,
Tell the Six Mountains: Bid the rain stand still!
Tell them we need no rain for making corn,
Show them the gleaming silver in my pocket,
Tell them we need only one bowl of rain
To give this bowl back to the grama grass,
Tell them we want the feel of something on
Our lids and lifted arms, New Mexico,
Like water that has nothing to believe.

Dissolve the bowl! Dare we remember dancers?
New Mexico, you are too old to dance,
Who are these dancers whom you call your children?
New Mexico, with coronet of leaves
Binding your snowy hair, I will remember
Your eyes are not upon the young men dancing.
The men are buffalo? Or are they eagles?
Perhaps the men are deer. You stare at me.
I am beyond the dance, you stare across
The drumming of the singers. I am here.
Old man with coronet of cottonwood,
You stand there like the ending of a myth
In which I play no part unless to break it.
I stare at you, I cannot look at dancers:
Slowly your crown of leaves turns into laurel,
You look as Bacchus looked when he was old
And they have painted stains like stains of grape
Too bright against your lameness and your eyes.
Bacchus, you hear no drums of Thessaly,
If there be deer, they die with Actaeon,
They are not here, nor is there here one eagle,
Nor is there here the brown mask of a bull
Nodding his horns into the song of hunters.
Old man, why can’t you pity me for mourning
These hollow animals with dancers in them?
Are you too old? Have I too long to live?

Or are you still too young, New Mexico?
Were those your mummy fingers that today
Twisted my carburetor’s needle valve
And filed the points of my distributor
In the arroyo where the sheep were crying?

The sheep are far enough away to sound
Like children. Do not go, New Mexico!
They will be safe tonight under the star
That never marches. Here in the grama grass
We lie together. Sing, New Mexico,
That I may know more of the shining wolf
That stalked the Holy Namer of the Earth
Before the Turquoise people built their houses;
We’ll sing an honest interchange of wisdom,
And I will sing my songs that you may know
Tom Jefferson’s position on the tariff,
Follow me closely that you understand,
From songs that Africa and Harlem taught me,
How cloth was woven by Priscilla Alden;
And you may ask me, when I’ve finished singing
About my Mammy down in Tennessee,
If grama grass is grass or whirling orbits
Of protons and electrons, or of neither,
And if old age could ever come to lambs
If lambs could gallop at the speed of light;
We’ll sing together, but we must not laugh,
Nor mourn in lamentations deep as laughter.

Remember, you are beautiful to me,
I’ve raised you from the dead to watch you die,
Remember, while you’re still too young to close
Your eyes upon these sheep that are not yours,
We must be somber as the tamarisk,
Grave as the darkness tree, New Mexico;
You must make bowls, and I must tell the gourd:
Pretend to be a gourd vine growing here.
Fall Plowing

Here is the bloom of a season plowed under,
    There are leaves here that have caught planet light
And shadows of horses and the glint of thunder,
    Dead leaves are buried in the world tonight.

    Furrow long, furrow long, over and over,
    Open the meadow now, cover, uncover.

The plow has torn the footprints of the reaper,
    The plow has written in a scroll of earth
How drying bloom of stalk and brittle creeper
    Is worth more than footprints of men are worth.

    Furrow long, furrow long, the teal are flying,
    When is the sowing in plowing for dying?

Green fields turn over slower than the sea,
    Slower than any ship the dull plow courses
A heavy wake of footprints, bloom of the
    Living earth and shadows of the horses.

    Trees on the hill are yellow and red,
    Dig the grave deeper, summer is dead.
Song for Aaron Burr

Over the marshes of Lispenard,
Over the Bowery Lane,
Silver gulls that blow from sea
Never will blow again.

I had a daughter, fair was she,
My daughter is dead below the sea,
Into the hollow, hollow dark
Whither, whither we?

I saw her cross Minetta Brook,
O gay my child was dressed,
But ever her wind blew toward the sea,
And ever my wind blew West.
Waltz Against the Mountains

We are waltzing now into the moonlit morning
Of a city swung against the inland darkness
Of the prairie and the mountains and those lights
That stab from green to red and red to green.

The music ends. We lean against the sill
Feeling the mountains blowing over us.

What keeps on moving if your body stops?

I ask you this as if we were not new,
As if our city were an ancient city.
I ask you this in Denver, Colorado,
With a moon for the year's end over your naked shoulder.

Denver is younger than a white-haired man
Remembering yellow gold up to the grass roots.
They tell of eagles older than Denver is:
I search the crystal edges of the twilight
For birds still floating over these prairies and
These mountains that had floated over these prairies
And these mountains when there was no city here.

I walk alone down Blake Street and Wazee,
Looking for asters growing through the hub
Of a wheel that brought my city up from the prairie;
But a welder's mask with purple eyes is hanging
From a peg in a wall where a yellow ox was tied
The night the people came in a wagon to rivet
The steel of a set-back tower to a set-back tower.

I was pulling hair from the trunk of a cottonwood tree
The longhorn cattle rubbed when a sudden man
Started tossing red-hot rivets up through the leaves,
Scorching the amber varnish of the leaves.
He made the red-hot rivets stick to the sky.
I had to quiet the glowing clatter down
The frozen silence of a long long time;
I had to leave the tree and look for another.
The prairie twinkles up the Rocky Mountains,
Feel how the city sweeps against the mountains;
Some of those higher lights, I think, are stars.
Feel how the houses crowd and crack uphill.
The headlands buckle with too many houses.
They're trying to find a place where they can stand
Until the red lights turn to green again.

I'm only half as old as the city is,
I'm younger than an old box-elder tree;
I'm hardly older than the old cathedrals,
Yet I remember primroses and yucca
Out there where all those houses are tonight.
We children gathered primroses and yucca,
We gathered sand lilies and cactus blossoms.

But there's hardly a child in all the sleeping children
From here to where we think the stars begin
Who sleeps in a room where a child, his father, slumbered.

When you wake in the morning tracing a drowsy maze
In the wall paper the sunrise trembles through,
The ceiling never whispers old directions
A ceiling learns from leading old men's eyes.
Off on that prairie frozen cattle flatten
With snow you cannot tell from moonlight on
Their shoulders and with darkness-clotted skulls
And darkness sagging in their hollow flanks;
And through those mountains black above this prairie
Are other animals alive and dead,
Some warmer than the rocks and some as cold,
And we are here, moving ourselves in music.

What keeps on moving if your body stops?

Mine is a city that has never known
A woman on a high wall looking down
Forever on the firelight of her kinsmen.
You're only a woman looking out of a window;
There are no ships, no smoking sacrifices,
And what we make, we are, and it is finished.
There's hardly time to speak beyond the flesh
In a city where the young men are always finding
A better place to start a cemetery.
Yet when this darkness cools the trembling tips
Of music in your breasts and earth has found
More certain use for me than waiting for
A woman on a wall, what keeps on moving?

We used to know, we don’t know any more.
But I have seen enough of hills and blood,
And lovers and old men and windowsills,
The bones of churches and the bones of mountains,
To know how far we may have come together,
And where we’re going for a little way.

So late you came up to these mountains from
A valley by the sea you hardly know
Yet where to gather blossoms of wild plums;
But part of what you are was here before
You came, and part of what you were is gone.
Already melting snow moves through your shoulder,
Atoms of hills are warm within your shoulder,
And somewhere in your fingers that press my fingers
Are particles of corn the bison made
When their bodies clogged the river in the spring.

You are a woman younger than the city,
You are a woman older than the city,
You are the mountains changing into woman,
You are a woman changing into prairie.

See how the moon goes down behind those mountains.
The hills with every waning moon are lower.
They cannot last. They go where we are going.
They wear away to feed our lips with words.

The moon’s a sand lily petal floating down
Behind the blue wall of the Rocky Mountains.
I see you as a woman on that wall,
Stepping down crumbled distances forever,
One terrace of a mountain at a time,
One terrace of a prairie at a time,
Until you join your kinsmen at the sea.
What keeps on moving while the mountains linger?

It may be something spoken at a window
About the uses of some hill we've borrowed,
Or something a welder sings to a cottonwood tree,
Or something the seasons make the lovers say
When it's summer on the plains and spring on the ranges,
And we follow weeks of lilacs up from the prairie
Into lost towns of the mountains and return
With lilacs when the hay is being cut.
Some Grass

I will not name this grass,
I did not know its name when I was younger,
Then there was more than summer for a boy
Who walked in it with fingers and with hunger.

It is not meadow grass,
But prairie city where the flagstone courses
Along a place where no one built his house
And I remember seeing tethered horses.

It is not grass alone:
Between the flagstone and the curb there grows
Thistle and lambsquarter and some wild thing
That was and is like mint against my nose.

I will not pull this grass,
I have too many dollars in my pocket,
Or not enough, there is no way of telling;
I dare not pull a green beard from its socket.

It is not grass alone,
Or I would cross the street less often than
I do to see it, yet it may have been
Much more like grass before I was a man.
Two Rivers

Two rivers that were here before there was
A city here still come together: one
Is a mountain river flowing into the prairie;
One is a prairie river flowing toward
The mountains but feeling them and turning back
The way some of the people who came here did.

Most of the time these people hardly seemed
To realize they wanted to be remembered,
Because the mountains told them not to die.

I wasn't here, yet I remember them,
That first night long ago, those wagon people
Who pushed aside enough of the cottonwoods
To build our city where the blueness rested.

They were with me, they told me afterward,
When I stood on a splintered wooden viaduct
Before it changed to steel and I to man.
They told me while I stared down at the water:
If you will stay we will not go away.
High-Line Ditch

I ride a quiet broncho, mountain bred,
Along a prairie irrigation ditch,
A waterway about as wide as a highroad,
And deep enough, when you were a boy in a tree,
To make you want to start to build a boat,
Larger than any boat you'd ever seen.

To the left when you're riding north along the ditch
Are the Rocky Mountains standing as if some child
Had cut the mountains out of purple cardboard,
And propped them far and cool behind the hayfields.
Some of the mountains are made to look like mountains.
The hayfields and the mountains and the sunflowers
Smell of going away and never coming back.

You can fix your eyes on the wheel of a farmer's windmill,
And as you ride you can roll the flickering wheel
Along the ridgepole of the Rocky Mountains
Until you have to twist your body to see it.

There are cottonwoods on either side of the ditch.
They arch the water with their mingled boughs,
Making a silver tunnel for blue herons
That fly too slowly to be plausible.
The trees are tall. They crowd so close together,
You could almost rattle a stick along their trunks;
And down the darkness of the silver tunnel,
Not magpies, but their after-images
Are painted in dissolving black and white.
You're always looking where a magpie was.
The cottonwoods are trees that would grow too quickly
For an older place. You who have dreamed with oaks
Might find the cottonwoods too insecure.
But it's different if as an inland prairie boy
Who never saw an oak you ever wound
A top string on a newly varnished top
When cotton was flying from all the trees at once
And found the cotton winding into the varnish.
Often, a summer's day would seem like a snowstorm.
A cottonwood out here can be as old
As any city is, and when you sing
A song about the moon, it is a moon
That comes up big behind a cottonwood tree.
A cottonwood was with me when I first
Became aware the word for death meant death.
I remember how it was for I was standing
With my back to a tree in front of a shuttered house
Where a neighbor had died, and I heard the neighbors say
As each would come through the doorway into the sunlight:
"Let me know if there is anything I can do."
I reached my arms behind as far as I could,
And the bark made handles for reaching a little farther.

I tell these things to the moving shoulder blades
Of a quiet horse, my fingers in his mane.
Something the neighbors said is not forgotten,
Nor is it fixed too sharply on the wheel
Of the windmill that I roll across the mountains.

Yet death that I remember is not death,
Nor is a varnished top a varnished top,
Nor even a cottonwood a cottonwood.
Some love there is suspended through them all,
More than I've known, increasing as I move
Into the twilight of a curving path.
At night there comes a different starriness
When you lean back in your saddle and look up
At Cygnus, gallant swan, turning his wings
Across the Milky Way, the cottonwoods,
Over the errors in the township borders,
Over the people trying to love each other.

With Cygnus I've outridden the erosion
Of a hundred hills and I have ridden far
And naked out of earth of time dismantled.
I've galloped over God. I've crossed alone
The terrible threshold of the glittering blackness.
But when you're following the gleaming swan,
It's good to feel some dark weed clutch your stirrup,
The tall marsh elder dragging its pollen across
The starlight on the black arch of your boot.
House in Denver

I can remember looking cross-lots from
This house over the evening thistle and
The bee flowers, watching people coming home
From downtown. In the morning I could stand
A long time watching my father disappear
Beyond the sunflowers which you noticed farther
In the morning. Now tall buildings interfere
In piles of shining masonry, but are there
Walls yet to come no more secure than these?
My city has not worn its shadows long
Enough to quiet even prairie bees.
I often hear a droning sunflower song
Dissolving the steel, and mark a thistle turning
A curling wall back when I'm thistle burning.
Old Men on the Blue

I know a barn in Breckenridge on the Blue,
In Summit County, Colorado, where
A Ford transmission rots upon the wall
Beside an ox-yoke. You can stand inside
The barn and peer like a pack-rat through the logs
And see how summertime looks outdoors, and see
A sleigh with hare-bells ringing under it,
And snowy yarrow drifting over the runners.

How high the mountains are behind the barn
Along toward evening nobody seems to know,
And nobody seems to know how blue they are,
Not even the old men sitting all day long
On a ledge in the shade in front of the general store;
But they watch the gasoline go up and down
In the big glass pump where the white-faced people stop
Who are crossing the Rocky Mountains.

They watch the white-faced people crawl away
Into the hackled fractures of the peaks,
Up where the Mississippi River ends
And the bodies of the frozen dragonflies
Begin to float to the Gulf of California.

The mountain ranges in the evening fill
The sockets of the old men's eyes with blue,
And some of their cheeks are lavender and lilac.
One long day after sunset sunlight poured
Out of the east, from an amber thunderhead,
To make their cheek-bones shine like yellow gold.
The old men do not speak while the pump is running,
But when you drive away you can hear their voices,
Like sounds you hear alone at night in a canyon
When pieces of blackness clatter on pieces of water,
And you think if you didn't have the car in low,
You could overhear what the mountains have never told you.

At night the old men sleep in houses that
Will always have geraniums in the windows.
Kenosha Pass

You go in high gear to Kenosha summit:
That turquoise ocean lapping thirty peaks
Is hay now but the buffalo are dead.
The housing of your differential gears
Will break the gentians, but the Utes are dead.
This Foreman

"What did you see when the girders rose?"
"A house of steel, a net."
"What else?"
"Men in their working clothes,
Men with their foreheads wet;
I saw them sway on the high steel beams,
But I knew their heads were wet."

"Did you see a workman slip and fall dead?"
"I saw one leave the steel;
I heard what some of the others said,
And I saw the swallows wheel
Round the foreman with the twisted head
Whose foot was half a heel."

"When the man fell, what did this foreman do?"
"He sang, he sang like a swan
Of how two naked lovers loved
In a cage of steel till dawn;
He sang—and his mouth was a slit of dark—
Of a sword that could be drawn."

"You say you heard this foreman sing?"
"I heard him sing like a swan."
"You say this foreman stopped to sing
When a man had fallen down?
(He says he heard this foreman sing
Like a swan when a man fell down.)"

"You heard this foreman testify?"
"I heard each word he said."
"Now briefly what did the witness say?"
"He said when the man fell dead,
He slid like a flash to the dead man's side
And gave the dead first aid."

"All right, now what did this foreman do?"
"I heard him sing like a swan
About two naked lovers trapped
In a web of steel till dawn."

*
“You swear to God you heard him sing?”
   “By God, that man’s the one."

“Court please, I’ll ask the witness more,
   Court please, I wish to show,
   Court please, the witness on the stand,
   Court please, is trying to
   Make light of what he saw and mock
   The State, Court please, and you.”
   “Do you affirm that this foreman sang?”
   “I affirm that he’s the one.”

Now the bailiff hammers a terrible din,
   But nobody shouts: Tin, tin, come in!
   Because they all stare at the foreman instead,
   Who licks the slit in his crooked head.

   “You stayed there after twilight came?”
     “The twilight did not come;
     The steel net shone like a russet flame
     At the touch of the watchman’s thumb;
     The men went home and the watchman walked
     His rounds slowly and dumb.”

   “All right, the twilight did not come;
   You stayed, what happened then?”
     “I saw the foreman stealing back,
     He climbed to the top again,
     He moved in the misty girder net
     And he sang like many men.”

   “Court please, I’ll ask the witness more:
   What did this foreman sing?”
     “He sang the strength of steel and steel
     In days past measuring;
     He tapped the beams with a monkey wrench;
     I could feel the high crane ring.”

   “You’re sure it was a monkey wrench?”
     “He sang of a snare for love;
     He called to the silver hounds of love
     In the wooded moon above,
     And I heard him cry ‘The hounds are dead,
     What am I dreaming of?’”
“Go on, you heard this foreman sing?”
“I heard him sing like a ghost,
How a man gone down was a man to lead
The van of a falling host:
‘Let my green steel stiffen in the frost
To snare what men love most!’”

“What men love most? He sang of that?”
“I did not understand,
For he sang of the living lives of men
As if the steel had spanned
Their lives with something true and cold
That nobody had planned.

“Did your family know that you were there?”
“Your honor, I object!”
“Sustained!”
“That’s all.”
“Go down the hall to the last door and collect
Your fee . . . the last door on the right.”
“Poor chap, his mind is wrecked.”

Two figures loitered down the hall,
And each signed for its fee.
“I could not understand your song,
Explain the hounds to me.”
“Not here, fool! Climb the steel tonight,
The moon goes down at three!”
Some dim rememberer of quarter-decks had brought
A globe of the earth to Kansas and had given
This fading world to the new bride in the clearing,
And the bride loved best the blue where the ships were driven.

"The prairie rolls like sea, new bride, but is not sea,"
The globe had said, "but you are a woman fair
Enough to be a shining harbor's name, or the dream
In the wind that makes the tallest ships go there."

"I will be the shining harbor then," she told the globe,
"With the oldest prairie beating on my breast,
And the blue of it shall sing like sea in me forever,
And my tall man will say that this is best."

"But your tall man will never stay," the globe had said.
"He plows as if no women wait for ships,
For there's a westering, ever a westering,
That is another lover to his lips.

"You must be that to him, if you be shining harbor,
And you must be another prairie far
From here, and another home he cannot see from here,
Perhaps the Oregon will be his star.

"After the ice, but still before the grass has come,
You will know this. Gently he will have curled
His fingers through your hair at night and darkly stroked
Your body with the circles of the world.

"Those hours when you are Oregon and not his bride,
He'll be your lover home a night from sea;
Morning will pull his draw-knife on new oxen yokes,
Sundown will hack an axle from a tree.

"He'll say this little world is like a wagon wheel,
And he'll get a wheel and prop it in a yoke,
He'll show you that from here to Oregon is less
Than a span from one spoke to another spoke."
"And wheels like this will roll to Oregon, you'll say,
But not to him, and if you must go there,
Who must you be to him in Oregon at night,
To feel sea fingers moving in your hair?"
Fiftieth Birthday—1859

Regarding Charles Darwin and Abraham Lincoln, born the same day, February 12, 1809.

I.
It's February, eighteen-fifty-nine:
Stephen Douglas is sleeping like a baby,
But young men are lying awake in Missouri and Kansas,
Along the Wakarusa, the Marais des Cygne,
Wondering whether they ought to murder each other
Or go out to the Rocky Mountains looking for gold.

Up in Gregory Gulch and under Pike's Peak
The long-tom rockers frozen in the sluices
Can hear the miners coughing all night long,
Their boots are wet. Their boots are never dry,
Not even when the camp-birds go to sleep.
There is no gold. The rockers warp like coffins.

A girl is standing by a well in Georgia.
There's going to be a war. There will be war.
She knows what the men are saying in the house: How soon?

And up in self-reliant Boston
A bell jerks all the sparrows out of midnight.
Pale children taste the clanging in their mouths
Like brassy fur when they grope out to the pump.
They smell their tanbark fingers and slough off
To work until it's time to work by daylight.
The slaves in Mississippi sleep, and sleep
The passenger pigeons, still enough of them
This side of Mackinaw to make the orchards
Crack down as if the wind had carried millstones.

The grassy fetlocks of the bison drift
Across another last meridian,
All westering, and under the prairie yucca,
Safe from the wet-nosed dogs that follow the Sioux,
Drowses in earth the numb Pronuba moth.
The moth will die without the yucca plant.
The yucca plant will die without the moth:
A thousand lilies in a torpid worm,
In one cocoon, lilies and bayonets.

II.
It’s February, eighteen-fifty-nine:
Over in England proof-sheets lie on a table,
A book so far away, so far ahead,
Nobody hears it yet: There’s no Design.

There is no Destiny! There’s no Design!

Can you hear what the book is saying, yucca moth?
You who are about to die, wild pigeons?
You barnacles? You orchids? Weary bison?
You apes? You black men? White men? Can you hear it?

There is no Destiny! There’s no Design!
Only the Known! Only the Undiscovered!

III.
But back in Illinois Bill Herndon’s worried.
He takes another drink of pop-skull whisky.
Morning’s all right with Mr. Lincoln writing
How many letters the good Lord only knows.
And briefs. The law business is picking up.
Rich clients now. More railroad litigation.
But along toward three o’clock he goes to pieces.

Billy, I’m coming to a tragic end.

This whispering of his. This Destiny.
If he’d only come right out with it: I’m licked!
No more show than a tallow cat in hell
And I’m going to kill myself.

That would be easy.

You will be President of the United States.
There will be four white horses groomed within
A year to take you smack up to the White House.
But how can you make that sound as if there would
When he flops back on all this *Destiny*?
An old man with a night-shirt in the stars!

Another drink.
   Too much New Testament!
If he feels that way, why doesn’t he read the prophets?
Read Amos! Jeroboam was as good
A politician as Buchanan. Micah!
Let him read Micah! Micah skinning the rich.
Horse trading with Jehovah. Good old humbug.
A border row. Israel against Judah.
What’s more he knows it better than anybody.
Destiny is swapping votes and winning.

All overcast with it. His birthday too.
Fifty tonight and mooning like a corpse.
Sorry, sir. Mr. Lincoln isn’t here.
He’s gone out walking. Is there any word?

IV.
Talk to him, grass, Tell him he knows where the world is
In the dark because he can hear his feet and tell him
Take a post-hole digger where there isn’t grass
And find where there isn’t water and how deep.

Show him the bones of a cornfield after the hogs
Have grunted off with the nitrogen, potash, phosphorus.
Tell him the stubble’s saying to the cattle
*Many happy returns of the nitrogen.*

Tell him to use his lips, his hands, his throat.
You can drag your elbow up with the wrist hung loose,
Then snap that index finger bright as steel
Like an exclamation point at the end of a phrase
That wouldn’t be horse sense if they stopped to think.

Tell him make faces. Keep it plausible.
Tell him write letters till his brain knots up.
And keep them low. Too easily understood.
Tell him to leave the stars alone tonight
For more than lighting the skull of a hog in the stubble.

V.

Lincoln, why do you walk so far tonight?

Do long steps on those words they said again
Today about your being president
Next year make this cold prairie Washington?
Tonight you’re fifty and it’s February,
And fifty is a kind of February
Against which doubtful harvest has been stored.

A few more flings at Douglas and it’s over,
Leaving the phrase maker, whom you’ve defeated
In all but victory, victorious.
You’re fifty and you’re clever and you’re old,
With all your bright redemptions ebbing back.

So now you’re coming home to be our lawyer?
Knowing too much of justice to remember
How pens were once the flight feathers of eagles
And ink, pressed from the roots of blackberries,
Could reckon wood lots into more than cities.
You’re coming back to be the other lawyer,
Salting the wheat with prudent mortgages,
And scratching sober wills dividing houses.

This is an eagle’s quill, provided, however . . .

VI.

Lincoln, the more you fail, the more you talk
Of *Destiny*.

But one more weak than you
This night has said: There is no *Destiny*.
He says *There is no Plan*!

For saying that
He’ll go a long way, the way you’re going,
Into a myth the people will remember.
Behind this prairie and behind the sea,
Tonight this other man is fifty, Lincoln.
This man was born the day that you were born,
Allowing for an ocean’s gulf between you.

His mother was Josiah Wedgwood’s daughter.
Charles Darwin is his name. He lives in Kent.
He lies in bed now, for there’s too much pain
Which he would call too much of Nature in him.

But all day, Lincoln, they were telling him
What they were telling you of being fifty.
He smiled the way you did, but in his eyes
Was something that his father used to see
From a dark windowpane in Shrewsbury
Those afternoons that made his father say:
    “I’ll walk no more too late among these hills
Remembering so many Shropshire dead.”

And like his father now, he walks no more,
But if he could walk further than his garden,
Some might mistake you for him at a distance.
This Darwin has a beard, but wears a shawl
Like yours, and crouches over six feet tall.

You’d like to know this pale and certain man:
He is a naturalist. He measures doves,
Excepting Noah’s, which he hasn’t seen.
A black man taught him how to stuff a bird.
He was a boy. They bled the lark together.

And Lincoln, he’s a Whig, the way you were,
But he’d as soon change to Republican,
Or any sort, if quickening the hoofbeats
In Africa, or Kansas, or Brazil,
Might yet unlock the bleeding chains he’s heard,
Or bathe those fly-blown eyes of quiet slaves

That stared at him one morning in Bahia,
As if this were a world, and he a man.
He must have seen his first slave market, Lincoln,
About the time you saw yours in New Orleans.
VII.
But Whig or no, it's something to be fifty,
Or does it seem like half of something, Lincoln?
Who knows how many centuries there are?
Or too much more than half, the way it feels
To Darwin when he looks at any tree?

All day there's been an oak tree by his door,
With February grinding in its boughs,
While good friends wore the house away with wishes.
But Lincoln, Darwin's not a politician;
The tree has asked him things he cannot answer.

Walk slower, Lincoln, and remember trees:
Off yonder are the Indiana beeches,
And to your right, the dark oaks of Kentucky.

Can you remember on the Sangamon
An oak tree taller than the Andes mountains
With roots that wrapped the oceans to the world?
There's such an oak in this strange Darwin's garden,
And wrens that come to peck the fallen acorns
Have sometimes opened plants with their beaks.
They've frightened choirs of angels through the wicket
That Darwin's dog can open with his nose.
And sometimes when the wrens are gone the worms,
That creep from nowhere into fallen acorns,
Have whispered graves are surer things than tombs,
And whispered till the whipping thrushes found them.
Darwin has heard these worms and he has called
A thrush a tomb and a worm a resurrection.

VIII.
Now Lincoln, lick and lift your finger to
The night. The cool side is where Darwin is,
Like a new wind slowly circling all the world,
Blowing a certainty against the flowers,
The weary mountainsides, the bleating lambs.

Now turn your body, Lincoln, with the wind:
The wind is blowing over you to Kansas.

-
A civil war has started out in Kansas,
And all the West is blacker than the South.

If you believe in stars, look to the West.
Can you hear the Kansas war chant in the night?
They sing it's hard wayfaring to the stars:
It's the click of a spur and a cinching girth and a whisper
A dark Missourian breathes to a sleepy horse.

That border is a fleck of bridle foam.
The dogwood stems are turning red like wine
To hide the winter's blood till thunder comes;
But April rain will never never mend
The osage orange hedges trampled down
By phantom stallions on the Wakarusa.

IX.
You're going to that Kansas in December,
And that would interest this curious Darwin.
He too would call your Kansas a warring place,
For drouth is breeding less of seed than beetles.
He'd ask you, Lincoln, if he met you there,
If corn the movers brought from Illinois
Fared better than the maize the squaws had planted.
He'd lay his great hand on the trembling prairie,
The way he does on heads of frightened children;
And if the bitter horsemen paused an instant,
He'd listen for some crackle in the ages.

The tall Pawnees are breathing into mouths
Of dark and hollow ash stems they have painted.
They're catching owls and mixing clay with tallow
To halt the passage of the nodding bulls.

The Kanza clan-mothers are singing to
The mothers of the bison in the evening;
But over the pits where fish and cinnamon
Have turned to stone the slow calves walk away
To leaner grasses nearer the grassless mountains.

He'd say that Kansas was a warring place.
X.
Turn, Lincoln, it's the hour for going home.
That little glimmering two miles away
Is your dim town. One of those lamps is yours,
But only one.

That's something else about him:
This Darwin's always walking back against
Some town that other people think is real,
And finding that it is, and they were wrong.

He's ever dreaming backward with precision,
As if the things which happened might have happened.
He's measuring against his death a book
Even today, after his friends were gone,
He scrawled at proofs until he cracked with pain.

He's calling it *The Origin of Species*
Or *Preservation of the Favored Races*,
Which sounds as if it had a timely flavor,
But that depends on how you look at time;
But read it, Lincoln, if it drifts to Springfield.

It's not a handbook for a politician,
Unless he feel himself a kinsman of
The seas that are no more and seeds that spin
Into the sunny furrows of the glaciers.
The only rules of caucus and the forum
Are integrations and constituencies
Rising from earth itself through misty clods
And feathered things, through beasts and silent blossoms,
Into a testament of loneliness
For hearts that lean too hard on *Destiny*.

XI.
Lincoln, he'd say that lamp of yours off there
Might do as well as any of these stars
For guiding you until we know them better.
He'd tell you there is no Design in Nature,
Not even Chance as gamblers use the word:
Only the Known, only the Undiscovered,
And he'd say that of barnacles or Kansas.
Lincoln, you have your hands and lips that are
A summary of more experience
Than sleeps within these February grasses.
Out of a deep that is, but is not charted,
Your dream, uncommon to the meadow crickets,
Is Nature moving, and your words are Nature,
Uttered of air by flesh resolved of earth,
Each word a member syllable at war
With other syllables, to die tonight,
Or cry against the luminous distances
Where legendary men grow out of men,
Like reefs the polyps build on bones of polyps
To hurl the ocean back against itself.
Lincoln Memorial

When you look at Abraham Lincoln sitting there,
A stone Kentuckian umbered in Hellas,
Can you hear the muscle chant of the Asian slaves
Tugging the sun from the sea before the sunrise?
Do you stare an hour against the blue Aegean
Waiting more timber cutters out of Egypt
To sing the lamentation of their meadows
Into the fluting of their Parian marble?

The marble blocks are moon blocks olive-silvered.
Patience! The slaves are overdue from Samos;
Four ships tomorrow from four-citied Chios!
The blood of helots cools along the levers,
The salt of helots stiffens in the coils
Of rope binding the cylinders of stone;
The muscle chant is moon-set in the lime.

When you look at Abraham Lincoln sitting in
A house the sea-slaves builded long ago,
Do you turning stare beyond the wide green trees
Over the roofs, the singing distances
Where the prairies are, and the rivers, and the mountains?

Do you say with a whisper crossing many rivers:

America, are there no visible forms
Of beauty risen from your earth to which
These dead have gone and those who led them down?
Is only the chant of slaves too beautiful?
Only their agony to be repeated?
Fire Tree

The slow hawk noses like a fish
Into the cloudy split
Of granite sliding through the sky
With nothing under it.

Below me folds of granite sag
And belly into black,
Below me mountains rise an inch
And tremble and fall back.

Out of the vapors of that world
A tree of lightning grows,
And like a lightning stricken tree
Back to that world it goes.
Lodgepole Creek

Among these buttes that are neither prairie nor mountain
I must have crossed the Lodgepole a dozen times
The way you'll cross a draw that will be dry
By noon before I ever thought to ask
If this was flowing water or had a name.

But once in Wyoming (when I was making an answer
To a peak in the Medicine Bows that wanted to know
Whether a man could see as far or farther
If there were mountain ranges in the way)
Somebody said to me “Here’s Lodgepole Creek.”

We were on the road from Cheyenne to Torrington,
A road where you take turns talking for a while
Until Wyoming makes you move in silence.

I was surprised when he said “Here’s Lodgepole Creek.”
If there was water I must have noticed it.
I may have seen the bridge, but I remembered
The name enough to recognize it when
I heard it later over in Nebraska.

I was talking to an old Nebraska rancher
About the earth and grasses. He was saying
How the slow Brule clay unlocks a wagonhound
Or even the skull of a man sometimes when you’re plowing.

I said: “Is there water in this part of Nebraska?”
He said they got it out of Lodgepole Creek,
Which I recalled as having seen in Wyoming.

It was hard to believe it could be Lodgepole Creek,
But he said they used the Lodgepole over and over:
One man’s field would fill another’s well;
You could use the Lodgepole where you couldn’t see it.

“The Lodgepole’s upside down,” the rancher said.
“There’s not enough on top to drown a man,
But the sand will sink you down to where it can.”
Across Wyoming and across Nebraska,
I next met Lodgepole Creek in Colorado.
I was out in a straw-colored night somewhere near Julesburg
Between a full moon and a thundercloud.
I was smelling the wind-bruised sage the rain was healing
And speaking of Jules Reni and the Union Pacific,
And telling how the Indians burned Julesburg.
If you mailed a letter from Denver to Omaha,
It went to Omaha around Cape Horn.
I said: "One day out here the bugle sounded
For boots and saddles while my grandfather
Was blessing the Sixteenth Kansas Cavalry."

Then a flash of lightning took the moon away
And showed a strip of water to the left
No wider than a banjo string and I said:
"These dry arroyos are trying to start a flood."
But I learned the banjo string was Lodgepole Creek.

You wouldn't think such a little trickle of water
Could be so old or go so far alone.
There's something deeper than prairie under this water.

Some day I'll take a long drink like a bison
From Lodgepole Creek. One drink will drink it dry.
And I will sing a long old winding song
No ocean ever sang, nor any river:
A song Wyoming, palm trees, cinnamon,
Jungles of coal, acres of Hereford cattle;
A song Nebraska, elephants changing to stone,
And a Minataree drum beat muted by
A hardpan plow-sole underneath the corn;
A song of Colorado with no mountains,
But a girl who's going to sleep on a trembling homestead,
Smelling the dark wick of her lamp gone out,
Smelling where a man with sage brush on
His hands had stroked her body whispering
"You will be safe tonight and I'll be back."
Go, Mountain!

Mountain, she is ivory,
There's no purple on her thigh,
It is shadow you have pressed
On her body knee to breast.

Mountain, it shall not be so,
I will stay and you shall go!
Move three paces toward the meadow
With your piñon-hackled shadow!
Daniel Boone

La Charette, Missouri River, 1811

Daniel, don't turn your head,
But keep the river level with your eyes,
And when this stranger starts talking to you,
Give him to understand
He's interrupted somebody who was
Lying on his belly looking at
The river at Charette.

You're spancelled, Daniel Boone,
The fellow draws a letter from his pocket
(Too many of your wife's relations write)
Presenting compliments of Israel Grant.

Well, tell the fellow you are eighty-odd,
Tell him today you brought in sixty beaver,
Tell him you came to Charette from Kentucky,
Ask him about the health of Israel Grant.

Don't tell him how a boy walked down a river
Or how an old man started up another,
Don't tell him... Could you tell him, Daniel Boone,
What hunters lying on their bellies see
In rivers moving level with their eyes?
John Colter

John Colter, have you seen how laurel bark Shrinks from the burning kisses of Apollo? Daphne who ran from love became the laurel; The flight of Syrinx is the marshes blowing Music on the waters of the Ladon.

But you, John, fled the Blackfeet On the Jefferson Fork Where the male gray wolf And the male blue crane And the red-necked buzzard are.

In the clubbing of the Blackfeet You are the dim bull swaying, The blood beads of his nostrils, You are the prairie moaning, You are the throat of a snowy horse Crying for bark of the cottonwood, You are a luster ebbing from the beaver, The soggy beaver, diving, diving, Gnawing his body and diving.

You are the blood of running. You are the myth of swimming.
Sacagawea

Sacagawea of the dark Shoshones,
You have seen lovely women in St. Louis,
Even today you saw them in St. Charles,
Women who know how Mary Duff is dressed
When stepping from the role of Juliet
She brings all Covent Garden into Boston.

Sacagawea of the dark Shoshones,
Women with smaller feet than yours have moved
A ballroom's length in measured promenade
With William Clark and Meriwether Lewis;
Your feet are flat, Bird Woman, theirs are thin,
Theirs have not walked across America,
With William Clark and Meriwether Lewis.

Sacagawea of the dark Shoshones,
Five years ago you dressed like what you were,
Today you dress like women in St. Louis;
You are as weary as our twenty rowers,
You say no word to Charbonneau, your husband,
While we move slowly up the dark Missouri.

Now you are staring at the misty poplars,
Do you remember poplar bark, Bird Woman?
Do you remember how the Minatarees
Fashion the red clay with the bark of poplar?
Something Starting Over

You don't see buffalo skulls very much any more
On the Chugwater buttes or down the Cheyenne plains,
And when you roll at twilight over a draw,
With ages in your heart and hills in your eyes,
You can get about as much from a Model-T,
Stripped and forgotten in a sage arroyo,
As you can from asking the blue peaks over and over:
"Will something old come back again tonight?
Send something back to tell me what I want."

I do not know how long forever is,
But today is going to be long long ago,
There will be flint to find, and chariot wheels,
And silver saxophones the angels played,
So I ask myself if I can still remember
How a myth began this morning and how the people
Seemed hardly to know that something was starting over.

Oh, I get along all right with the old old times,
I've seen them sifting the ages in Nebraska
On Signal Butte at the head of Kiowa creek.
(You can drink from the spring where old man Roubadeau
Had his forge and anvil up in Cedar Valley,
You can look back down the valley toward Scottsbluff
And still see dust clouds on the Oregon trail.)
I entered the trench they cut through Signal Butte,
And I pulled a buffalo bone from the eight-foot layer,
And I watched the jasper shards and arrowheads
Bounce in the jigging screen through which fell dust
Of antelope and pieces of the world
Too small to have a meaning to the sifters.
One of them said, when I held the bone in my hand:
"This may turn out to be the oldest bison
In North America," and I could have added:
"How strange, for this is one of the youngest hands
That ever squeezed a rubber bulb to show
How helium particles shoot through water vapor."
And the dry wind out of Wyoming might have whispered:
"Today is going to be long long ago."
I know how it smells and feels to sift the ages,
But something is starting over and I say
It’s just as beautiful to see the yucca
And cactus blossoms rising out of a Ford
In a sage arroyo on the Chugwater flats,
And pretend you see the carbon dioxide slipping
Into the poverty weed, and pretend you see
The root hairs of the buffalo grass beginning
To suck the vanadium steel of an axle to pieces,
An axle that took somebody somewhere,
To moving picture theaters and banks,
Over the ranges, over the cattle-guards,
Took people to dance-halls and cemeteries—
I like to think of them that way together:
Dance-halls and cemeteries, bodies beginning
To come together in dance-halls where the people
Seem hardly to know that hymns are beginning too;
There’s a hymn in the jerk of the sand-hill crawl of the dancers,
And all the gods are shining in their eyes;
Then bodies separating and going alone
Into the tilting uphill cemeteries,
Under the mesas, under the rimrock shadows.

I can look at an axle in a sage arroyo,
And hear them whispering, the back-seat lovers,
The old myth-makers, starting something over.
Thomas Hornsby Ferril was born in Denver, Colorado, in 1896. He served as an
officer in the Signal Corps Aviation Section in 1918, then as drama critic for the
Denver Times (1919-1921), and worked in motion picture advertising (1921-
1926). In 1926, his first book of poetry, High Passage, received the Yale
Younger Poets Award. His second book, Westering, was published in 1934,
also by Yale University Press. Since 1934, Ferril has produced four more books
of poetry: Trial by Time (Harper, 1944); New and Selected Poems (Harper,
1952); Words for Denver and Other Poems (Morrow, 1966); and Anvil of
Roses (Ahsahna, 1983). After 1926, Ferril edited Through the Leaves and
The Sugar Press (1926-1968), publications of Great Western Sugar Company;
wrote plays, musical productions, columns for Harper’s Magazine and other
periodicals, and a book of essays (I Hate Thursday, Harper, 1946); and edited
and published, with his wife, The Rocky Mountain Herald weekly newspaper
in Denver from 1939-1972. The Ferrils edited The Rocky Mountain Herald
Reader (Morrow, 1966), containing selected material from past issues of the
Herald. Ferril won many prestigious literary awards, was named Poet Laureate
of Colorado, and was the subject of a 1982 PBS television documentary titled
Thomas Hornsby Ferril: One Mile, Five-Foot-Ten. He lived in Denver, in
the house in which he was born, until his death in 1988.
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