

KINGDOM OF LOST WATERS

by

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# Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

—Nobuyuki Yuasa, ed.,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# Theater Piece: Solo

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

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

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

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

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

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

\*

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

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

He was alone on the stage.

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



# Distance, My Neighbor

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

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

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

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

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

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

# Curriculum Vitae

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

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

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

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

# Childhood of a Mapmaker

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Visiting Writer

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

## The Day's Address

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

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

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

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

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

# TOWN MEETINGS

## *Memory*

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

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

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

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

## *A Feather*

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

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

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

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

## *Infidelity*

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

A corner remembers her chair.

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

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

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

The corner will open its arms.



## *November*

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

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

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

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

## *Uses of Memory*

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

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

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

## *Taking It On Faith*

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

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

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

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

Earth's brown dove  
comes back to his hands.

# Granite

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

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

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

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

# Twilight

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

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

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

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

*for Marguerite Bouvard*

# Moonlight

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

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

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

## Yes And No

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# Earth And Wizard Water

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

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

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

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



## On Being a Monotone

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

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

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

## A Little Supper Music

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

## Blessing The Hands

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

## And The Feet

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

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

# Lost Sister

It's so hot, the mother complained.

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

That's your granpa, she said.

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

Shush your fairy tales.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# Country Music

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

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

# THE GODS IN WINTER

## *Father Sun, Mother Moon*

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

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

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

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

## *Grandmother North Wind*

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

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

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

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

## *Hearth Spirit, Poor Relative*

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

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

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



## *Cousins Light and Shadow*

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

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

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

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

## Delayed

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

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

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

# Settlers

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

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

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

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

## Small Farm

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

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

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

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

# Climbing Caribou Mountain Again

*Eldora, Colorado*

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

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

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

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

# Wild Water

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

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

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

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

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

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

# Monsoon I

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

# Departures

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

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

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

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

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



# Yankee in the Desert

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

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

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

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

## A Little Life

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

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

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

# Thirst

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

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

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

A woman offers a water bowl.

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

## Monsoon II

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Monsoon Plums

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

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

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

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

## Rain Dance

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

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

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

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

# Prospects

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

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

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

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

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

## Prairie Dogs

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

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

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

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



# Apples

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

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

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

# Tango Elegy

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

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

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

## Domingo

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

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

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

## Meditation on a Piñon Wood Fire

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

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

# This Door

*for Judy Loeb*

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

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

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

•

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

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

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

•

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

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

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

# White Horse Gallery of Indian Art

*Boulder, Colorado*

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

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

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

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

## Adobe Houses

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

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

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



# Snow Garden

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

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

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

# Shaman

*after the raku sculpture  
of Reuben Kent*

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

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

# New Mexican Standoff With Historical Scroll in Background

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# Last Time on the Mountain

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Watching Clouds in Taos

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

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

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

## Ablution . Scouring

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

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

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

•

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

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

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

# Fishing the Big River

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

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

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



# Kokopelli

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

## 1

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

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

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

## 2

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

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

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

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

3

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

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

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

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

4

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

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

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

5

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

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

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

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

6

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

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

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

*for Catherine Fels*





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

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

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

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





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