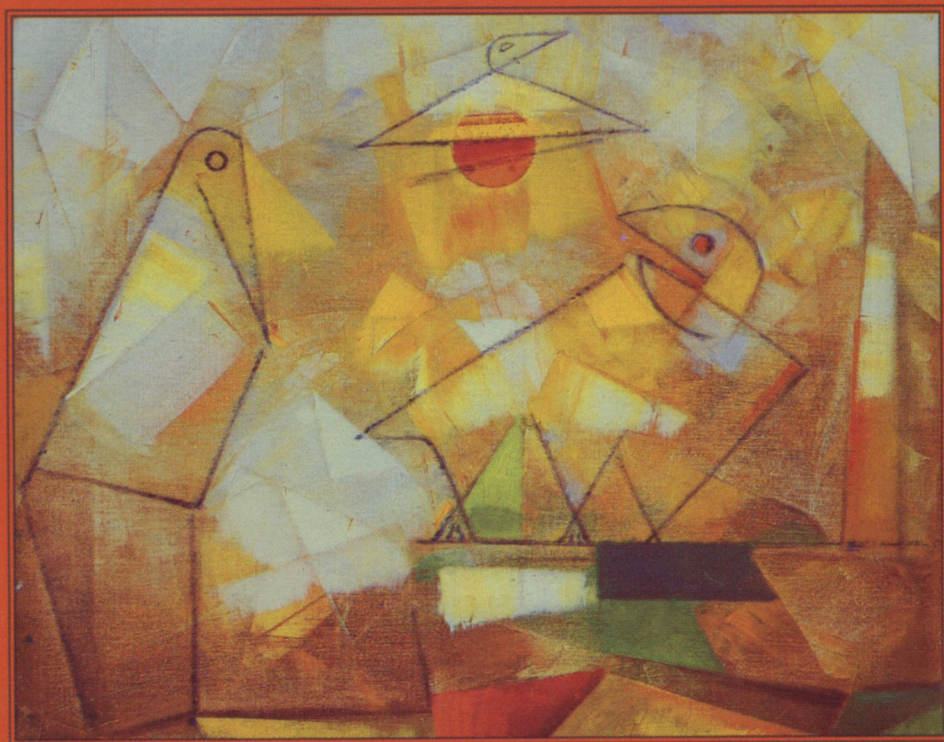


THE PLAIN TALK OF THE DEAD

LAWRENCE R. SMITH



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MONTPARNASSE EDITIONS

THE PLAIN TALK OF THE DEAD

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*Ask the former generations
and find out what their fathers learned,
for we were born only yesterday and know nothing,
and our days on earth are but a shadow.
Will they not instruct you and tell you?
Will they not bring forth words from their understanding?*

—Job

*I chew on feathers,
it's almost knowledge . . .*

—Antonio Porta

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I

GHOST DANCE

Roxy Takahashi

Watching Roxy

Roxanne Takahashi wiggles in sweat
on her desk chair. Island Finance
is air-conditioned, but skin against plastic—
 and now the mole near the right
 hand corner of her mouth.
Menthol cigarettes in a pile of ashes,
their dust on the front of her citron dress.
 Lunch with the office girls.
 Gray lady pushing a cart of bentos.
Roxanne's glossy lips and bad skin
under rosy chalk—
three years out of McKinley High.
 Dry crack seed after lunch.
 Joyce brought it in,
 but one piece of sweet wet mango seed
 sticks in her teeth. Mango hair.

Pete

I could take Roxy to Spats for disco
or movies and ice cream, frozen yogurt
after and she's good for it,
you know. "Go fa broke."
 Actually what gets to me
 is the way her leg slips up
 from a fine small ankle
 smooth muscle and meat
 up the outside
 into a real piece of cake
 that thigh and butt
 tight and sticking out

just asking for it.
 But I don't believe what Tommy said:
 "Honey in your mouth." Anyway, we'll see.

Mama Takahashi

If Roxy hadda gone to Punahou
 she'd be in L. A. right now with maybe
 a doctor or dentist husband
 and a kid or two at least.
 She owes me some things for
 my old age and the hard years
 before she came:
 damn hakujins in '42,
 crazy haoles, FBI and that junk.
 Theyda killed us if they could,
 and now Roxy running with haoles.
 No good from that girl.
 At least until Tommy come along.
 Good boy that Tommy.
 Come from a good family. Yamada.

My Dream of Roxy

Stained teeth, nicotine etchings,
 wings of black hair sweep over her ears.
 "Roxy, that boy lolo. Crazy haole, you know."
 Slams steel drawers, typewriter keys.
 Smoke and diet soda
 catch in Roxy's throat.
 Gall rises. Rubs her stomach.
 In the women's room she waits
 in a stall for the itch to pass.
 Mango hair. Sweet nectar
 sticks to your teeth.

Pete's Dream

Wears a skirt of ti leaves:
 green with a splash of orange
 or yellow through the heart.
 Runs through cane fields,
 burning sweet smoke on every side
 and men with knives, maybe more.
 On the red earth a samurai sword
 with pearl inlay and writing
 he can't read. Picks it up,
 slashes the lunging man
 from shoulder to hip,
 then another and another.
 Runs again, barefoot through the cane.
 Smoke and bloody feet, featureless
 brown faces. "Hey, I know these guys.
 Shit, I'll bet it's kill haole day.
 Listen! I ain't no real haole!
 Crazy mothers, leave me alone!"
 Runs barefoot through cane and smoke.

Mama Takahashi's Dream

Where's that Roxy? Somebody
 gone and left me right out here
 in the middle of Waialae
 and no clothes on me. And my chi-chi
 are gone, and my hair and holes.
 I'm at Jody's Hairdress
 and got nothing on my body.
 Naked to the bone.
 Falling in this hole and dirt coming
 up to my neck. Where's that Roxy?
 Where's that girl when I need her?
 All these hairy monkeys

throwing garbage. Laughing at me.
So much hair I can't see their eyes.

Roxanne's Dream

Step out of the shower and past
the sink where the razor
sits in a puddle of scum.
“No shave for these legs. I'm clean
as a whistle. No. There's some
on my shin and thigh and . . .”
Hair grows
 light brown hair
almost orange
 the color of mango
meat, mango hair. Vaginal
hair grows longer
 curly
crawls up abdomen, stomach,
stretches into mango feathers,
overlapping feathers and down.
“Oh God, no. Get it off! Damn!”
Scrapes skin and feathers: razor
fury blood, but more and more
feathers. Falls on her back,
squirms on the tile panting,
spreads her legs
 opens
her wings
 lifts up and out
the window, crotch legs feet toes
 and lifts to kiss the air:
 mauka showers in the evening.
A plane taking off for the mainland
 (“Mama inside go to L. A. forever”)
and Dad on an incoming plane,

cruising low over the surf
off Diamond Head. Looking younger
than when he died in '72
and smiling.

Lifts as the jets come and go
on another schedule,
and lifts into a circle
which goes neither east nor west.

Circles circles circles as the air sucks
("Suck deep into my body").

Exchange

They picked out her eyes, crystal
by crystal, and flew to a tall elm.
Their nest, I suppose. Young birds
all throat and stone blind.

I drove the highway back and forth
in the light of my windshield burning
until 4 A.M. Our last evening:
she was only a few shreds of dress

and a luminescent eyelash. Details.
Thirteen hours in a rain of dust,
dull moon rocks crushed and spread
across the tops of low clouds

that sit on you like this
for thirteen days. Crossing to the side
where a crow pecks the curb, a beer can
pop top, not the ring I'd seen,

the one I gave to her and they took away.
Nail by nail and knuckle by knuckle
they wrenched her apart, a long
rubber glove from a sweaty hand.

We knew the signs: comets with three tails,
sunsets that lasted till midnight,
an odor of sassafras near the streetlamp.
And thirteen marigolds blossoming

from one stem. We said goodbye
the day before our parting started.
Never spoke of it while she still had lips,
nor needed to afterwards. Reassembled

would I know her? Which tree, telephone
pole, which cave or hand—
and hands, lips, eyes in a brighter
or a dimmer shade, slightly modified.

* * *

I admire the summer gray of your eyes,
and the flecks of green and gold
around their darkest centers—the length
of your nails and hands, the freshness

of the fingertips you run down my thigh.
You think I haven't noticed them growing
night by night, hearing taps at the window,
low whistles from the bottom of your throat.

The Fall of Tenochtitlán

Hovers over sidewalk, wishbone legs
 riding air, straw ranch hat
 snug on the back of his head.
 Square lips, nose, lower jaw
 navigate from one end of town
 to the other, so Doc shows up
 in two places at once:
 Soto's Market and the Chevron,
 Camozzi's Saloon and J. J.'s
 (where a dozen slender boys
 shoot electric creatures).

In the Golden Age of Hollywood
 Doc nursed Hearst's menagerie:
 camels, giraffe, water buffalo
 and gazelle, kangaroo and ostrich.
 In the saddle he rolls a smoke
 with one hand, licks it shut,
 watches a herd of brown parched hills
 graze the afternoon, turn orange and rose
 as the sun drops off the boss' pier.
 The Mad Prince sits in his castle,
 waits for spoils from Havana, Manila,
 the museums of Europe: clever Byzantine
 pirate with a weakness for gold leaf.
 Doc stokes the live oak fire in his
 master's fireplace, brought stone by stone
 from some nightmare on the Rhine.

Now the Cambria townies wonder
 how old Doc is, and what he is:
 part Indian, part Mexican?
 Montezuma without his web
 of gold thread and eagle plumes.

Old Hearst left him no pension,
so he'll mow down the weeds on your lot
for fifty bucks, too ornery to choke
on deadly fumes from the rented machine.
He only clears thirty.

A cherubic punk leans against the bar
in Camozzi's Saloon, says
"Hey Doc, getting any pussy lately?"
And he starts, growls "None a yer bizness."
Next time he'll bring his Latin lady.

He Just Wanted to Live in California

Phil made booze from yeast and orange juice
 in the Illinois pen. Harboring
 a fugitive—bad rap and two years
 watching snow stubble corn fields.
 Corn tassel hair, red beard and bandanna:
 wash dishes, blacktop driveways,
 roughneck on Bakersfield oil rigs
 where the tall Mojave burns out anger and desire.
 Whispers his dream to a Mexican whore
 as she cradles his lurch, muttering “loco, loco.”

An oil-covered grebe flaps wings and falls,
 waddles through scummy surf, then falls again.
 Oil becomes sky in his dream of flight:
 a beak poked into final suffocation.

Slams clamp on another
 length of drill, whirring chain,
 thumbs caught in the mesh, pinfeathers
 pulled from wings, a puddle of blood
 down the suckhole, toking on a joint
 to draw out pain, waddling, waiting to hit gold
 as sky waits for something to hit.

Along the Santa Barbara coast
 steel spiders crouch over the water.
 Angry flames rise from their backs.

Legerdemain*for D.W.*

The viper dangling over your bed
 is a knife. It sharpens its teeth
 above your skin
 as pores breathe in morning sleep.
 Steel implements appear, gleam,
 then test themselves lightly
 on your shoulder, arm and cheek.
 Each incision bursts into bloom,
 marking the limits of the garden.

A knife-thrower defines your shape
 on the tilting backboard.
 Each thunk nudges skin blossoms
 until you explode into a flaming sword.
 Jack swallows the sword and disappears.
 You part the curtain as yourself,
 show the audience a mangled box.
 (The boxcar with the magician
 won't show up in L. A. for two weeks.)
 From the pearl hilt of the nearest sword
 you pull a bouquet of paper carnations.

Iron and Air

He rose slowly through his skin
and from a distance of yards
watched his empty body
being squeezed and sucked
by the iron lung.

Polio at thirteen, a year
before Salk, morphine at 22,
flight at the moment
of bodily death—hovering there,
high in an upper corner.

The orderly who made love
to lonely non-contagious women
husbands wouldn't touch
passed in the hall. Floating eyes
saw fire die in the pores of his skin.

3 alternatives dance before the spirit:
hospital death, sucking welfare checks;
or feathering into a golden bird
to perch on the tallest eucalyptus
in the grove at the peak of the canyon;

or bursting into a tongue of newborn fire
to lick Nurse Casey's breasts
as she holds them close to your face,
sucking in air and blowing it out
to the rhythm of an iron piston below.

Broken Lines

The palmist in Korea
refused to read her broken lines.
Now Soon stands in the middle of her life,
in the middle of her hand,
watching lines fly away
in all the directions a compass can tell.
Some are unsure as the lines of quail
who explore under pines at dawn,
who feed on delicate seeds
and their own unconscious grace.
Other lines fly determined and greedy
as the pelicans who cruise over waves
in different lines, warplane formations,
diving into the water at full speed
and somehow never breaking their necks.

Knowing that broken lines are still lines,
Soon has learned to survive.
She tells me the story of how
in a storm off Morro Bay
she saw the smokestack lights of PG&E,
a red beacon, and knew she was saved.

Soon culls the seed of her new life
from coal smoke and tar;
she reads her fortune
on the stained hand of the world.

Aaron Weiss in the Museum of Modern Art

Aaron Weiss walking
toward the subway stairs:
shifting winds rattle plastic
on newspaper racks.
He sits in the overlit car,
losing a year of his life
at every stop.

Aaron Weiss as a small boy
or an old man:
he watches them work
behind tattered plywood,
excavating surfaces.

Aaron Weiss in the men's room
of a coffee shop:
he chokes on sulfuric fumes,
layering the wooden seat
with strips of paper.

Small arcs of hair
glow over his knuckles.
Near cup and fingers
a pack of matches,
cover torn off
and sent to a school
in Reading, Pennsylvania.

Aaron in the Park
at the Zoo
anywhere he wants to be.
But when he moves
from place to place
no lines are crossed;

crusts and skins
are never broken.

Small bones lie at the edge
of the sidewalk.
A cellophane wrapper
blows against his leg
as he descends.

The Dream Can Never Remember

At his desk through an age of storms:
refuses to talk, water flowers, unhinge
children for their own moonlight escapes.
She looks into his dull smoky mirrors
and sees that her own are the same.
She wonders how the garbage can lid
slips off on its own
every Thursday night,
moves six feet and inverts;
the footfalls and moaning sounds
tear at the window
as curtains lift their fiery hems.

The house waits for midnight, shifts
in its footings, settles joists and beams.
She wonders who sits at the desk downstairs
and what creature prowls the back door.

Wife and mother, she rides the dragon
each night, speaks in flame and sapphire,
runs unscarred with jade panthers
through flesh-tearing brush.

They show their teeth, but never speak.
They fly, but they fly alone.

Red Cranes Cursing

Father-in-law who called me
bok chit chit, white dead thing:
 when you died you returned
 as a white feathered bird
 to eye the girl child who came after.

Flying to stone sills in upper stories
 across oceans, over highways,
 through the blizzards of the Midwest,
 you kept vigil over us, the lost children.
 Unlooking eye of pigeon or seagull
 fixed in a window's porcelain frame of sky,
 hairline cracks tell the stories of our lives.

When you hugged that same child,
 now grown, on her way to school,
 she thought you were a kind stranger
 in a flannel shirt. You disappeared,
 she said, just as your arms
 squeezed around her.

Chinese scholar with fine bones
 and tall forehead, you saw China
 only as a GI, you excelled
 in the calligraphy of a crossword,
 you tuned your life with a heavy wrench
 delicately, to turn finger by finger
 stitch by stitch into the phoenix,
 red silk smuggled in black mushrooms
 pungent with the earth, sky
 flesh and blood you ate and choked on.

In the ambulance your eyelashes
 still fluttered, telling us you lived.

The flutter from noon to midnight,
the shift on land and in the sea
as the dragon prepares to take flight.
I stop my ears but you still call me
bok kwei: white demon, white ghost.

The Jar Phallus Coffin

I shed night scales, dissolving
down. Breath plumes into wind
snakes that coil around
bare sticks at the base of a thorn.

The evidence is colorless. Bird
flying beast chases seizes
caresses the small night things
beak and talon. Did I love or kill?

Coming back to search
the inside of my teeth with narrow tongue
for a taste of the hair blood
or fire that blossomed on the far side.

My wife sleeps in our bedroom.
Water drips in the kitchen as I creep
back into tangling sheets with her
and our new lives each morning.

Sleeping With Pele

Met Pele at Ron's Poi Bowl
 on Kekaulike St. Sphere bent ovoid,
 tea leaf eggs, light green jade of Burma
 veined with gold and volcanoes
 of immortal flesh, not the stuff
 that warped Grandpa's face to hard
 rubber blisters, rolling on
 taro plantation dirt, losing
 feet and hands on Molokai
 in sand hair rotten palm fronds
 shaped into a hut.

Broken gathering birds' eggs, bird's nest
 in the early mist, lowered by ropes
 down cliffs where even the mongoose
 can't reach. Crystalline cliffs.
 Jade boat through a river of fire.

Pele's hair, rain angling into craters
 and rising steam in thick curls.
 Pokey weed between toes and under feet
 with splayed babies, walking
 mulberries into the sidewalk
 that rides the bridge over Nuuanu stream.
 Scraps of mildewed tatami in the bushes.
 Somewhere makai the swollen stream
 rams a sewer. Broken translucent eggs.

No one in Ron's place was looking
 when Pele turned to him and smiled,
 showed sharp teeth and no tongue,
 hot breath and no voice. Squat ohia
 push ruined gray up through lava
 and cinders. Pele loves her leper children.
 Passes him a note: "Come 217 Mililani

11:00 and bring ohia branch
for safe passage.” Kisses her hand
and tastes fiery steel of hair.
Jade dust. Fine cracks in the shell.

The siren on the hill goes off
once a month. Only Pele knows why.

II

WE MIGHT INVENT ANOTHER

We Might Invent Another

I

He suspected that he was invisible again. It wasn't so much the feel of the wind. It was the way that woman in the blue hat (the one with the ostrich plume) looked at him. The kinky smile on her face was the tip off. Women never looked at him like that. After all, he only shaved every third day or so. He spun around and saw the cutaway girdle on the limbless mannequin. Just as he'd thought—right through him. Invisibility sneaks up on you sometimes. You seldom discover it until you go to the supermarket or department store. Especially when you've covered all your mirrors at home. But when you've been doing a lot of night-flying (and he had been lately) these things happen. He figured if bats could put up with it, so could he.

II

The other day I called up a friend, my closest neighbor, the one who lives in the nice white ranch with green and white awnings that appear when the tulips are done. “Wanted you to know that I’ve got a semi-automatic rifle here and two clips of ammunition,” I said. “I’m going to fire them off in random sequence in the direction of your house. Just thought I’d let you know.” His lights went out, his shades dropped, and the house waited. I fired my two clips off, noting an occasional chirp of glass and the different notes of percussion and acceptance. Then I ran like hell over there to watch the last bullets land. I half expected to find my old pal smiling in a mutilated heap, but he had disappeared and taken all the sounds with him. As I watched the holes appear on his living room wall, in a fascinating succession of patterns, I had to provide my own “whump” noises. Acceptance, I suppose. A lesson in relativity.

III

Today I am small. Tomorrow, on the other hand, I may be large. It all depends on how I set the projector there on the desk. For instance, let's say I choose to be large tomorrow, or more precisely, fat, since all those internal images would blow me up like a loose suit ballooning in an updraft. Or consider this possibility: I could be the whole damn room, my epidermis pressed smack up against the walls, floor, and ceiling. Of course, if you walked in on a day like that, I'd look like a mural of human entrails. You probably wouldn't recognize me. But then again, you might.

IV

It was a plain brown picnic table. Not the kind of thing you'd expect in a French restaurant. But who knows? Maybe the cuisine was Burgundian. Rough, splintering, well-used and tacky. Had the clientele carved in all these Kilroys, XX +YYs, covert and overt obscenities? In the middle of a veal cordon bleu, perhaps. The homey atmosphere didn't disconcert me until I noticed the striking resemblance the waitress had to my mother. Gray. She brought the golden plates. They were elegant and there were three of them. (But only two in my party.) Embarrassment, as you might imagine. Before I could call it to her attention, she brushed by the table, palmed one golden plate, and shuffled through the kitchen doors.

V

I don't see how I could get to this before Friday, at the earliest. What with the hippopotamus in the lake, chugging along the bottom in the grass and mud—only showing her nostrils once every two or three minutes. Things like this take time, you know. It's these federal regulations. And we might even have to send to New York or L. A. for parts. When you go for something exotic like this, you've got to expect some hassles. I'll bet you didn't even notice the moon when you stepped out your door this morning. Check it tomorrow—you'll find it slightly less than full. Full moon in the morning and I've got to figure on losing at least a half a day's work in the shop. You guys on the outside think this job is so damned easy. I wish you'd walk in my shoes for a week. For instance, see that fella over there, the guy with one arm? I've got to pay him time and a half just to come out even.

VI

It's these no good plastic railroad ties. They keep turning them out like footballs, pizzas, or hula hoops. And here I can't even get to the phone, except on my break between 3:15 and 3:25. Phone booth, I should say, with scribbled filth on the walls and a dirty floor, gum and urine. The wooden decoys swimming in the lake—that's another story entirely. You'd think we'd had enough of that, learned our lesson. But every morning you wake up, pick up the paper, your morning coffee, etc.—and there it is again: "Decoys found floating near the amusement park." I've pretty much given up. I used to vote and keep abreast of world affairs, but now it's all a body can do to keep going from day to day. If it gets much worse, I'm going to have to ask them to change my shift.

VII

A steady diet of tennis balls has its advantages and disadvantages. Once you get by the thirst factor, which is compounded by the fact that you have to limit water intake to prevent swelling, you've won half the battle. Turnips make a nice side dish, but only in season. R months, I believe. Taking out those stitches, one by one, is the part they always forget to tell you about. I had 105 and, believe me, I counted straight up the wall before they were through. Faulty batch of nitrous oxide. And huge footprints everywhere. It could have been the ice storm and the resultant loss of electricity, but I have my own ideas. Sometimes nurses and patients can change places in a case like that. At any rate, it's always wise to consult your physician if the symptoms persist.

VIII

I started my compost pile of words last Spring. At first it was mostly the idea of recycling or conservation. If I could grind up old orange peels, onion skins and apple cores, I figured why not words? There was some indecision as to whether the words should be composted with the peels, skins and cores, or separately. Finally I said what the hell, it's too much of a bother to have two piles, and sometimes it's hard to tell the difference between say a moldy piece of broccoli and a cast off word. For instance, take "clarification." I tossed it on the heap last July, but kept an eye on it to see if it would break down into useful elements again. Like nitrogen. I figured the pieces would link up with other pieces to form new organic compounds—but they didn't. But then I said what the hell's wrong with "clar," or "tion"? In fact, "tion" is a favorite of mine now, just by itself. Not that I'm against synthesis. Did I ever tell you how I put together a tree out of spare parts?

IX

There is always the possibility of the erotic, although that usually remains a possibility. Twelve telephone books stacked on the chair. Old Christmas ornaments hanging from the chandelier. Dental mirrors arranged on the coffee table. She had to scratch carefully, because the skin was barely holding. A particularly violent sneeze and you might drop a limb or two. And that simply wouldn't do with the leather shop closed. There's not a thing open in this town after 5:00 on Sunday. Hollow leg leaning against the fireplace, soft music, golden-bound first editions: stacking them in various positions or arranging them end to end. When he began to rub them on the lambskin throw, she went out for more sherry. Lubrication. She did that two or three times. Several months later, thinking back on that evening, she wondered whether the whole thing was worth it. After all, Dante never actually spoke to Beatrice.

X

My wife and I were taking our evening stroll, heading toward those apartments the locals call the rabbit hutch. We were about to cross these abandoned tracks: thoughts of night freights and California. You know, romantic. So she reached for the crook of my arm. But when we turned to look for the sunset, what we saw instead was the eagle. It was a big one, say 50 feet or so from pinfeather to pinfeather. There it was, looking more like a pterodactyl: gliding in place, riding the wind. Then it settled feather by feather to the ground, wings still spread, horny clawed feet still extended and poised. He eyed our girl child, who was playing right over there, on the other side of the tracks. She laughed when she saw the creature. Then she ran a bit, peeked back, then ran a bit more. You know, hide and seek. Three hops and the bird covered the distance. My wife and I screamed to the child who had never listened. Then up they went without a sound. Banking left, they rode the sunset west. That was 10 years ago. Right on this very spot. And fantasy be damned, I want my daughter back!

Manifesto

1

The Mr. Burger: two meat patties
lettuce tomato onion
catsup and mayonnaise.

2

A regular burger can be ordered
with no lettuce, with the real meat
of car accidents, muggings,
butcher knives in family disputes.
Existential burgers are no longer served
at Mr. Burger.

3

The teriburger: a patty marinated
in sweetened soy sauce and fried
as a city block explodes into objects:
blind paper sacks, parked cars, bent
straws, dried brown palm fronds,
hibiscus and broken bottles.

4

The Mr. Burger with cheese:
all of the above, with vegetables
any man would want—or woman—
hair knuckles shells raw fish,
sushi at a downtown bar.

34

Melting curbstones wait
for the number 6 bus.

5

Mr. Burger speaks with many voices.
If Mr. Burger spoke with only one,
there would be no customers.
You can't sell the same burger twice,
and people don't come back for spoiled meat.

6,7,8

Have been discontinued
for the month of September.

9

Most people don't buy burgers,
french fries, cokes or milk shakes.
They wait for the rain to stop
under the eave by the ordering window.
Then they go back to the bench
and wait for the bus.
Under the eave they notice the rack
of torn classified tabloids.
The papers are free but no one takes them.
They don't contain doctrines or interesting ideas;
they have only words and objects for sale.

10

When you eat a Mr. Burger
you eat a burger: no more, no less.
There is no inner burger.
Its contents are two meat patties
lettuce tomato onion
catsup and mayonnaise.

11

The Mr. Burger patty may contain
what the Honolulu Health Dept.
would call “foreign matter.”
For instance, politics and social disturbances.
But have you ever heard of beef
that didn’t come from a steer or cow?

12

There will be other styles of Mr. Burger
when the owner invents them.

The Color of History

Lathe shriek, steel sliver flicked
arm's length to pierce an eye
as Buñuel takes coffee and churros
half a world, half a century away.
Even gun bluing can't stop rust
in steel, the precise corruption
at the center of terror's rose,
sudden fractures in the heart
or rain on the night of a sickle moon.

Tropical birds, industrial accidents
strung together pole to pole, line
crossing telegraph line, while
obsolete eagles flap through smoke
above the heads of hipsters and cowboys,
splinter a saloon mirror, bottles
lined before it as the Schlitz globe falls
and the fight over an Okie girl drifts
through shivered glass past jukebox
onto the street. 2:00 A.M.
"This one's history. Last call on six packs.
Grab your broad and hit the door."

The Soho studio twilight trembled
cigarettes between fingers.
"I would like to tell you, Maurice,
what I saw in that café, listening
to Matisse and Picasso talk about
wet pussy, the colors, shapes
and sizes of nipples, how each
felt in the mouth. And their jokes
about Gauguin. All these years of looking
back, raking Parisian cinders,
I have found that moment
continuously impossible."

Telegraph lines in the Amazon
 synchronize their disuse
 with pink dolphins
 nosing among rotten tree boles.
 Parrot fish, spines of scorpion
 fish, fountain pen plumage
 loaded for the swimmer's veins
 and obstructions at the heart.
 Aborigines taught Australians
 how to crawl, decided not to let
 those sharkbait suckers drown.

After Dreyfus, when the French choked
 on Maginot steel, and Hitler's boys
 made Moroccan regulars dance
 at gunpoint, smile for newsreels
 with their forests of spiked salutes,
 the French made up for it all
 by delivering Jews to splintering boxcars.
 The boys are in the Amazon now,
 poisoning Indians with their strange guttural
 Portuguese, and the only French
 are Jacques Cousteau and his band.
 In the mining camp, coffee
 and chicory, beans and pancetta:
 the skillet explodes, nails eggs to trees.
 Rich men through the eye of a needle,
 a needle through one eye after another,
 sewing humankind together
 into telegraph wire, the nexus
 of our global village. Back in France
 Picasso refuses to collaborate.

When a nurse wants to draw
 my blood, right arm or left,
 the vein pops out like a hard-on.
 But I don't love needles, little

steel deaths poking the mainline,
telegraphing Mother in the jungle,
little girls with pigtails, hookers
in the holding tank, sharks cruising
under the pier after dark.

Bobby Volare squirts snake juice,
lowers his hat brim and framing
hammer, spits out the tale of his habit.
“Once in this Fresno shooting gallery
a black guy jumped on my chest
to start me up again. I was stone cold
dead on that shit, but he saved
my ass. Still hate niggers, though.”
Plastic tubes, pig iron, spikes.
With the jawbone of an ass
and a broken bottle, the King
of Spades and Sally crawl the bed,
over edge, down on floor, out into
the hall and their fertile sunrise
where motors hum under humming
wires, needles point true North,
leaving glass and magnetized steel
slivers under our skins, crusting over,
tender to the touch, ready to shoot.

Memorial Day, 1986

Men are jogging by secret Edsels.
 The confirmatory cheers of barley have been squandered.
 Six microbiologists remain seated
 as desultory seas wash
 the wealth of Switzerland over their ears.

Now there is time for plain talk.
 So let the tongue blossom on the mountainside.
 Let the bees of the field gather in consensus over the dead rat.
 Let hymns of desperation rain over the streets of downtown Dubuque.
 Only the miners beneath the valley have communed with death,
 so let us not speak in false harmonies
 of electric wires inside flesh
 or the linings of our throats will rise up
 in righteousness and seize our tongues.

The ancestors have been talking now
 for more than a hundred years.
 When they speak rain turns to one side,
 ducks, then follows the empty road
 beneath the river
 to neither darkness nor light.

I believe what I hear in the dumpster's whine
 of Grand Island, Nebraska; the squalid belch of refinery flames
 above Richmond, California; the empty halls and ominous chants
 of Alcatraz; the articulate murmurs of Arkansas com;
 the numberless dead births of Newark and Muskogee;
 that the ghost dance will finish
 when he falls to the White House marble floor
 and his glass eyes roll through corridors
 through open doors and fly through the iron
 of his gates past monuments to justice
 straight to the sacred mountains.
 Then his mouth spills the chowder of our lives

in little pieces, until the flow runs clear
and the spring remains forever clear
in those marble ruins.

Men will jog and find means to open gardenia cafés,
narcotic confusion in the still air of our cities.
We shall wait in the watchful domain of the North
until the plain talk of the dead
is spoken on the evening news.

Footnotes

23. The caves were originally published in 1902. In a niche of cave 133 the excavation team discovered famed sinologist Sir Reginald Worthington. He first appeared to adhere to the surface, indistinguishable from a *bas relief* of the teachings of the Lotus Sutra. Kuan Yin on the Morning Waters. In the second printing Sir Reginald had completely disappeared. Subsequent research on the Worthington heraldic coat of arms has revealed remarkable correspondences to Shang motifs (*fang-i* type) on bronze ritual vessels. Percival Harris has suggested an explanation based on irregular Lap migratory patterns, but this is not generally accepted. It has been pointed out that Tunhuang is, in fact, hundreds of miles from Hangchow.

18. According to a long established tradition, so firmly rooted that in default of clear documentary evidence to the contrary it is difficult to reject, Robespierre refused to wear clothes during the Summer he spent with Jean-Jacques Rousseau at the Hermitage. The *sans-culottes*, of course, wore everything from bed ticking to hopsack, and then there were the occasional flourishes of nudity: the Feast of the Supreme Being (pp.128-35) and the two manifestations, one at the Tuileries and the other at the Champs de Mars. But the interchanges which transpired between the philosopher and the Incorruptible One must have extended beyond habiliments or the lack thereof. Certainly the Committees, the Jacobin Club, and perhaps even the dictatorship were discussed. There are notebooks dated during that period in a hand which is similar to Robespierre's but which is different in significant ways. Most authorities have dismissed them as forgeries, but this Summer was such a step out of the ordinary for the champion of Public Safety that some doubt remains. In one notebook there is a discourse on physics and human chemistry, questioning whether blood and its airy vapors would sublime and rise, and earthly merde descend as heretofore, or whether the process would reverse itself now that history had finally begun. Needless to say, Robespierre always deferred to Rousseau's knowledge of the calculus. There is also much in the notebooks concerning inner light and social obligation. A song on the ascent of horse leavings was inscribed; it was to be sung to the air of the "Marseillaise." Every day in the New France brought amazing births and strange endings.

4. When evaluating Egyptian monumental sculpture of the New Kingdom, first consideration must be given to the fact that, along with concerns for the crocodile and desert asp and to a more extensive degree than previously seen in burial edifices, it formed an integral part of the total orgiastic socio-cultural vision, and furthermore affected daily sexual behavior throughout the social spectrum in the most specific ways. Often men would forget they were married and dancing girls would be forced to dance with each other. Stone was mated with stone and cut in such a precise manner that no unsightly cracks could be seen, all in accordance with the menses or phases of the moon. The female nature of the Nile cannot be overstressed. Technical and artistic expertise were remarkably advanced during this period. For instance, statues of Isis or even tomb paintings of ladies in waiting invariably depict those characteristic feminine swellings behind the *ilia* and above the buttocks. Love bumps.

14. Under “*fair trade*” laws manufacturers may demand that unscrupulous customers submit to various tests. The well-known “bait and hook” test requires skin penetration without blenching. An interesting variation on the usual barb through the web of the hand is two wooden pegs lodged in the breast flesh just above the nipples. Both male and female customers are eligible. These pegs are connected, in turn, to lines by which the customer is twirled around a light pole at the center of the parking lot. The participation of State Bureau representatives is suggested but not required. Of course, “*loss limitation*” necessitates payment in full for test failures, although items over \$100 are excluded by statute from this provision. Overcharges are refundable every third Thursday.

12. Many American and German texts have insisted that the U.S. move from radio to television was Promethean. Consider the A.R. Jenkins article (*The American Psychoanalyst*, Winter, 1958), where it is argued that Ed Sullivan represents the fire-bringer and encompasses as well the stone god origins of Prometheus. Clearly Ed Sullivan is a stone deity, but it is equally clear that his affinity is with the ancient Cretan stone god (later to be called Zeus on the Greek mainland), not with Prometheus. How else could we explain the semi-conscious praedipal fantasy which can be seen again and again in Sullivan audiences? It is hardly necessary to point out the parricidal rage and oral frustration that have been well-documented elsewhere. If it were not for his irrationalism, dualism, and pessimism, unsuited to the American experience, Freud's *Totem and Taboo* (New York, 1950) might prove to be particularly helpful here, Reisman and Fromm notwithstanding. Witness the Sullivan show of August 22, 1957, where a large russet horse was led on stage in the final moments of the broadcast.

III

**NOT SNOW BUT MANNA
SETTLING ON LOST CITIES**

Wild Laurel

Under the olive tree this pig
roots grass, dirt, fallen fruit:
snouts uncured marbles in shade,
takes what it needs.

This pig makes desert moves
through its mouth, travels with dead
snakes down the rope of its gut
into the cavern of sense
and motion. Dreams stay
outside, sleep in upper branches.

The moon before it falls:
pomegranate mark on its side.

Fabricating Neighbors

Green and wrinkled glass tumbler,
barnsiding propped against the tv,
the pleasure of a brick wall, moonlight
around the edges of a drawn curtain,
the cry of a sperm whale, roller skates,
lips twisted through a window screen,
stained ceiling and carpet, acid rain, gestures
to frustrate the stillness of air, good company,
comfortable creatures crossing red lines
where signs appear in unknown languages.
Scorpio rises, explaining the need for trust.
When I sneeze, small feet run to my side;
when I reach for fingers, scattering laughter.

Metaphysical Detective

Iron bars reach across the window
at the top of the stairs.

“Fire moves upward quickly.”
“And smoke,” she says; a thigh stirs
as silk cords dangle to the floor;
holds one slipper to her chin.

Seen through the crystal tulip
rises slightly, flame plumage
at the neck, gills part for a moment
to breathe the atoms between us,
seeds of our transparent fire
seen through the claw of the tulip.

“It seems unfortunate, in a world
without water.” Upstairs the sound of birds
flying in and out between the bars:
a claw scratch, the brush of a pinfeather
against frost hard glass.

“Near morning, I’d guess,” she says.
Rising, a razor on a table
to draw across the crystal of an eye
looking up the stairs, toward iron,
sky on fire, birds dashing into night.

Morning, After Suffocating Sleep

Every morning's shave leaves a sink full of guts.
Evening and ashes settle into dust:
scorched satin pillows in the smoldering bed.
Hair and feathers choke the drain.

Sunshine curdles along the kitchen sill.
The refrigerator grumbles until a light beam
shrieks through the air, nails her hand
to a cabinet, knife-point through knuckle.

This music goes on until 8:00.
Knowledge of this or that day, spurious tomorrow,
flies from treetop to treetop,
refuses the stale suet of the feeder.

He violates the doorspace with heaviness,
shirt and tie, a belief in inevitability;
a coffee cup, a chipped plate, radioactive
isotopes under her feet, she turns her back.

Ancient Bride

Legs in motion, cut off cleanly at the knee,
which is the result of time. Parking meters
gobble your coins and still insist on your death.
Lifting the young girl's skirt, he can ride her
back into the past, the future, the sunshine;
as each wave hits the rock, fifteen others
sink back into weed and submerged spasms.

Splinters of the wine glass she threw
lurk in the carpet waiting for heel and toe,
a threatening note, tears preserved in a vial
from the pyramids, an accumulation of sand.

She hit him on the neck and squealed
in the excited cadence of a young girl,
a fiancee with long black hair,
teeth that once had an edge
in the vulvic blossoms of another time,
a place that has moved from stone to dream.

Letter From Mountain Rest

The bare bulb is a spinning cross
when I squint, a nova without glasses.
Vision lies broken at my feet;
her sister above me
lights up a necropolis of gnats and flies.

Needle and waxed thread
sew up fingers
to draw the hand into a cup.
I hold it out for wind and water.

Shuffling light across a rusty sidewalk.
Psoriatic onion skins collect in net bags,
later to be stored beneath basement stairs
where rats rustle them
into autumnal dance, the feast
of loss and gathering.
Food and drink will be offered
to the ancestral gods
before every meal.

On the other side of the mountain
horned beasts pace on the desert hardpan,
ignore the explosive vacuum of canyon,
endless flats, our imitative craters of the moon.

Tweed diagonals, the scumble of stucco
next to louvered glass, rice water skin
holds the form of this scene in a bubble.
The hurricane lamp goes out; airlessness
trips on the carpet, sprawls breathless
across the floor and never moves again.

Leaker

groundhog near the hedgepost, pipe beneath
a parking lot full of apple crates, 22 birds
low the level, fingers twisting one from the
tion of giants, buses stopping at every tree
not wanting to know the source of those drop
id to build tissue around the hips, transfer
al or try to manage on less than that, she'd
nothing, absolutely nothing to do with camel
the trail of chemicals which led to a church
bility less than that, zero in fact, or less

Gertrude Stein Never Left Oakland

Birds hang beneath the bridge, watch steamers
draw blood, reopen the channel's wound.
Immune to shifts and jolts, mudflats stretch
beside her in sculptures, junk wood
and scrap iron Kama Sutra licking on her hips.
Waves take time to finger the burrows of crabs
and sea lice riddling her splayed out legs.

Fair, the kind of World's Fair on Treasure Island
made so three succeeding wars
spawned parties where the lace you found
was made in such a way that
sailors grazed Yerba Buena, went to town,
caught Miles at the Hawk, cruised Fillmore
alleys and Finocchio's, learned that
Oakland eats her angel children too.

Is the water in Paris burning
as it does here, near freighters loading
napalm, shipyards in Alameda?
Fog sings you into a sleep of second
sight, ignites the oil slick of miles
you thought you'd traveled.

Bakersfield

Birds can't fly in Bakersfield.
The heat and stone blue sky
hold them down so close to the ground—
and high tension wires, wandering Basques
the length of '99, dirt farms, the earthquake
of '52, road stands, the Santa Fe tracks,
cotton, smog settling in from the North as
Chinese still flee the ruins of '06,
low riders at the mall have so filled
the valley with objects and ideas—there is
no space to fly in, nor rest within the trees.

Dead palm fronds cling to trunks;
crippled hands knuckle under.
Heat rises, you say, but this heat
sucks you down into dust
and brown mountains, ambling away,
holding their distance, the plunge
of desiccated birds into scorching noon
as they think of coastal fog, mother ocean
and their cousins the gulls
who rob golden scales
forged from the heat and stone blue sky.

A Brief Essay on Action

Any tree needs water, minerals,
my expectation of its blossoming.
Stepping forward, the discourse on lilacs—
when I wandered as a child through
Lilac Park in Rochester, N.Y.
only occasionally in Spring
(as my father had acute hay fever
and most of the day lay rigid
on the couch, hanky over his face)
I rehearsed the baritone
of my future, the age of 33
being still some years away—
not forgetting elms and chestnuts,
which each choose one season
of prominence, as do most plants,
animals, and gods (e.g. mistletoe
in Winter, Loki and Baldur). Gardens
make little sense in Summer, caught
in the middle like that, a family quarrel,
Proserpina gathering chrysanthemums.
I wanted her to know just how
I felt: petals of fiery hair, flared
nostrils, the garage door swinging
up, and even the unsmoked Luckies
hidden in my desk. It was no use
back at home with Mother and Father
in the other room planning all my
previous catastrophes. And no sound
at all from our dog who had died
on the highway some years before.
My brother Gary believed lost coins
(as well as nails, buttons and marbles)
would reappear in our fleshy rows
of watermelon and pumpkin.
He recalled his alligator life

earlier this incarnation.

There were lilacs forgotten and green
in their nakedness most of the year
at garden edge, while vegetables
sprouted, grew full and decayed
just where we had left them
in the midst of their well-planned cities.

Action came slowly in those days,
as Jehovah's Witnesses predicted
the apocalypse which had already arrived
almost everywhere else—precise
junctures, fragments of the moment.

Financing the struggle was also hard,
but we kept growing pumpkins.

After all, we did succeed. We have succeeded.

My father stressed his faith in building
character, responsibility, an appreciation
for values and women with good thighs.

Our program began at the end of April.
And impossible, inevitable as it was,
I have always acted in our best interest.

Charlie Parker and the Dog

You talk about Indians and high yellow:
man, she did that long black hair
with chopsticks,
and had some trouble back in '43.
But she was singing,
singing that hair from Chicago to Detroit.
Some windy nights
across my brass bed
when it floated from Chicago to Detroit.

And don't you know, don't you know
sweet axe goes right down
to the rooted bone, T-bone,
and when it runs it just goes ahead and flies,
then slows to spiraled turnings,
tightens up my mainspring
like you do, Honey,
when you shake those bones in time.
Slide your spine into another tempo,
Monk's own crazy time.
Singing on the bed through smoke and rain.

That forest of yours got so much bush
the axe just can't push through: rawhide thongs
from every tree, dried meat and squash
cut down through skin, fat, flesh and bone.
We're calling the tribes together:
women by the river, dancing in the fire,
playing through the night of smoke and rain.

Dog on the stoop with his jive five spots,
you know he ain't never gonna be there
with his bebop rhythm 'n' blues.
But there's the dog, holding both wind and rain,
chewing his conjure bone, and playing it right,

because dog said “We gonna take the music back.”
He said, “The dead folks is dancing in the street.”
And the street can hold them all.

The Reinvention of Gardens

The texture of a dying toad is fear:
bumps and terse convolutions vibrate,
heave with the heart—
the toad wears his brain on his skin.

There in the imaginary garden
he guards the sacred carbuncle;
it remains lodged in his forehead
until the final moment.

He knows you will seize it
and turn away, run
leaping through the fountains of the moon,
but then as you watch
it will melt like fairy gold to blood,
creep up your arm
and enter the holy chambers
through your eyes.

He knows a wart will form
there between your brows,
a carbuncle as red
as the eyes of your ancestors.

Breakfast in the Wilderness

An eagle among teacups,
 blood rivers flow down chipped veneer,
 two wings over the feet
 two sprout from the shoulders
 and one in the afternoon.
 The scar on his left cheek
 made him sit
 in an odd position,
 twenty times more powerful
 than a bird in flight
 among rocks above sea lions.

I told her again, and turned
 to the open icebox—a shriek
 and a clap of thunder, shit on the beef,
 in the milk. The fruits are unclean.
 Forty more days
 on dried dates and wild berries.
 And birds, birds, hawks and birds
 bring breadcrumbs
 over the mountains, one by one.
 Beaks full of water, dew gathered
 from the pockets in desert bushes
 only birds and lizards know.

One morning I'll be lean enough
 to smash this crockery
 and splinter the table
 I built as a child,
 apprentice to a hard father.
 I'll rise slowly,
 feet held breathlessly still,
 ankle to ankle, my arms at my sides:
 look down the mountains row by row.

Then I will speak unsheathed words
and watch them dive
into circling eagles below.

Mudang

The worst always happens
 when you appraise destiny,
 discuss the amount of last year's rain,
 stand on the perch of our times.
 Flying home in pieces, each chunk
 generates limbs and feathers
 in random combinations:
 a thousand new races burned
 by the sun in mid-air.
 Snowflakes dying on the grass.

About as much family resemblance
 as an elephant, peacock and polar bear.
 Trinities like these in golden cages.
 Burning or boring a hole
 through the center of the hand.
 Instructions from the East.

If I knew how to prepare
 for the knock on the door,
 or who he'd be, bridegroom or beggar,
 I'd stop gathering
 small pieces of rag, string,
 old feathers and down, dried
 sinews and vocal cords
 from ancestral dances and songs.
 And even though I know it's there,
 just beyond the peripheral wall,
 I'd stop looking for the crack
 in the air, the open door.
 I'd let the world fly through.

Archive: 1968

Sliding over slack skin below the hip
 the scalpel point leaves a fine red line:
 incisions, triangular patches,
 square translucent sheet
 for an area near the heart.
 Prophylactic gloves mate tissues,
 build secret pockets, make shapes
 like breasts and nipples.
 Rouge and lipstick. Perfume.

*

Hangared bird, dusty white feathers
 out of kilter now, folded wrong.
 Happy bird munching C-rations,
 flies, and sunflower seed,
 reading government reports
 on the dangers of flying.
 He breathes slowly, barely moving
 the pallid dust on the floor.
 A deep breath in this ammonia
 might singe his lungs, bring tears.
 Doors are snug; bolts are rusting
 in the hinges they hold down.

*

The foot shakes and jumps,
 slamming a metal footrest,
 turning the whole chair to one side.
 Grabs the knee and wrestles the spasm,
 hits the thigh, brainpulses
 that haven't the sense to stop
 when the need is gone. Behind the chair
 a pusher holds rubber grips.

He doesn't see or listen. There is
 stubble on his head and around the chin.
 At night he runs through soggy fields;
 fireblossoms light his way.
 Announcements. Withdrawal.

*

A cough behind the door. Hors d'oeuvres.
 Trimmed bread edges dry
 and diced egg grays in descending sun.
 Chilled bottles warm, hold their corks.
 Tablecloths relax to lankness.
 Puffs of air rustle the lace that arches
 over a well-turned man and woman
 on top of the utmost layer.
 His hair is blond, hers is long and black.
 Two angels wait in the garden
 by the fountain's still water.

*

Nose, closed eyelids, lips, ears
 change places on the sleeping face.
 Thick hairs stab into the pillow.
 Nothing fits. Under the sheets
 you might find a body of straw,
 toes tied together, legs bowed to a V.
 Shredded paper stuffs the mattress,
 acrylic ticking and no stripes.
 Such a man's children
 might dance like gleaming steel,
 suck sweetness from neon signs.

*

Sounds rise from the furnace.
Bearings wear unevenly for months and years
or roll along smoothly until the day
a flaw, a slight distinction, blockage . . .
Bearings grind to red heat,
the sound catches you in sleep . . .
Birds in the furnace, screaming.

*

Archivists pack away sheaves of paper
curiously scorched at the edges.
They wear rubber gloves to prevent
tiny cuts in the web of the hand,
passageways for spores that sleep
and dream until the taste of blood,
then lash into life, strike deep
into the handler's heart
with a flash of venom like a snake.
The chosen one screams, speaks strange words
and agonies, but he does not die.

We Should Trust Ourselves

It's getting dark again, and
 the light bulbs all have popped
 because they can't burn steadily
 for 50 years
 as Ripley once claimed in "Believe It or Not"
 for a bulb that expired in 1937.

I like the feel of electricity too,
 but I don't stick forks in open sockets
 or paint with my penis
 or light up market streets in Saigon
 (nor do I ever plan to
 even now, in a gesture
 of penance to the citizens
 of Ho Chi Minh City)
 with a gasoline torch
 and my thin blond hair as the wick.

Enough of what I intend to avoid.
 If you've been following me,
 you can guess that it's time
 to get back into the mine.

Never mind coal dust
 and methane
 the canary still sings
 and we're digging deeper
 past fossils and buried heat,
 water blind fish, sulphur cones.

You can't see my skin anymore
 or your own.
 Squeeze my arm and I'll take a pinch
 on yours—it's nice in the dark.

Twelve positions on the sheet.

Jupiter in the house of Mars
 with Scorpio and Venus conjunctive—
 this is the age they have seen:
 green fingers push husks out of earth
 stems and legs fling seeds into air
 a weed-bearded mouth breathes cool water
 up through the mountains to exit as fire;
 and the heart of the world is fed from those peaks,
 not snow but manna settling on lost cities.

I can feel us leaving the mine now—rising.

I can feel the orange of tomorrow's sunrise.

I can guess at the sound of our names
 spoken across the morning waters.

I can taste the fur you've tied to your arm.

* * *

When they wanted to choose a king
 in the realm of luminous darkness,
 they looked for a rich man with a
 beautiful wife who spoke French.
 Then they killed him, but permitted his wife
 and the two brave children to live,
 reminding them how hard it is
 to believe when there is no other light.

We are still in the cities of Urmuz,
 drawing the map that will show us
 where we are. The map is in the mine.
 The map is wherever you're reading; maybe
 this time we should trust ourselves.

IV

JOURNEY TO THE WEST

Back Roads

On a B-class gravel road
in a land I hardly know,
narrowing to a dusty gash
cut surveyor straight
through giant wheat gold,
hedge high and tickling
the car on either side,
I saw us zippered in
before and behind
by that wind laughing gold,
and no turnaround.

A white house at the end:
vine arbors, morning glories
on the picket fence,
light and sound singing life
crowded lush to the foundations
and up the walls.

It stood there
crisp in the afternoon,
like the picture
in my first grade reader
of the house that framed
old Farmer Jones
and his plump gray wife,
he with his hay fork,
she with her wire-rimmed glasses
and candy giving smile.

And here they are!
Stepping off the porch,
coming pat like somebody's
third act, welcoming,
throwing me those candy smiles,

and Grandfather Jones
showing me the place
with a sweeping wave
of his bared brown arm.

Then I saw
the cat-sized, rat looking animals,
short bristling hair
with plum brown bulging eyes,
and the purple backwards birds,
and the octopod snakes,
all teeming gentle
around green crushed fences.

“But they’re all mutants!” I said.
Farmer Jones smiled to the horizon,
more serious now,
yet still wise and warm:
“Yes, my son, and you also.
But you will fly.”

The Bee

Coming home from the plant,
just turned the corner of Maple and 6th
when I ran into her.

Didn't touch her—know what
I mean—but ran into her
there in front of the Payless drugstore.
How can I tell you what she looked like?

Gorgeous top to bottom, with these
real tight fancy clothes. Real tight.

Black turtleneck sweater
and stacked like something else.

Bright yellow pants, jeans
or something like that, but so tight
I don't know how she got them on.

She looked like she was in trouble,
street map all unfolded
and not knowing where to go.

So I put down my lunch pail
and say, "Here, let me help you.

I know this town pretty good."

Then she looks up from the map
and I see the front of her face
for the first time, not just side view.

Well, she had these funny eyes,

I mean beautiful but funny—
didn't look straight at you
and kind of far apart, just not right.

Did I tell you she had black hair?

Just like Carla's when I first met her.

Dark, dark hair, and her eyes were too.

I never got to the map
after she looked me in the eye,
but everything got fuzzy
and I heard this buzz in my head.

Just like the time

I got kicked in the teeth
in a high school football game.
And I hear this voice—far away—
saying “I don’t live here. I’m looking
for somebody.” But she says this
like what she’s saying
is not exactly what she means.
Anyway, I must have said something
because she left
and I headed for home again.
I got halfway down the block
before I saw that I’d left
my lunch pail on the sidewalk.
Went back and got it, then went home.
Boy was I dizzy, almost like being drunk.
Carla looked at me funny all night.
She even smelled my breath—
thought I’d stopped off with the boys.
And it was just like a hangover next day,
next couple of days for that matter.
Headache, funny feeling in the gut.
And Carla was real grouchy. She knew
something was up, but didn’t say much.

Exactly one week later—Tuesday again—
I see her on the corner of 4th Street
and Oak, a block from the apartment.
And she’s looking right at me.
I thought Jeez, what if Carla
sees me talking to her? If she’s going
to the cleaners, butchers or something.
I didn’t even walk over this time,
just stayed where I was, and she came to me.
Starts talking and leaning right into my face.
Holy smokes, I get a whiff of perfume
that almost knocks me out, sweet
and heavy, the kind that makes you feel

like you can't breathe so good.
Here it goes, dizzy and weak again.
I mean I'm no wimpy guy, but anybody—
even a broad—could've knocked me over.
She was talking funny stuff too,
about flowers and workers
and who the chosen ones were going to be.
I get real nervous about now.
Not only is she weird, but somebody's
going to see me and tell Carla for sure.
God, I'm going to be in bad trouble.
But she keeps talking, crazier and crazier.
Next thing I know she's gone
and I know that something's wrong.
I look at my watch and it's 6:00.
I must have stood there half an hour
and not even known. Boy, some trouble.
Then I look down and see
my lunch pail on the sidewalk,
and when I pick it up, it jingles.
Opened the lid and looked inside—
the thermos was busted to smithereens.
Must've dropped it standing there.
Must've slipped right out of my hand.
When I come through the door
Carla's already shouting and hollering.
Man, she had my number. When she yelled
about stopping off with the boys again,
I didn't want to push it,
because I'd be cooked even worse
if she figures out what really happened.
Vodka, she said, so she couldn't smell it.
Screaming all night—couldn't even watch tv.
Made me sleep on the couch.
But that was ok, because I didn't
feel like doing anything anyway.
Know what I mean? Kind of numb all over.

Kind of sick, but kind of all right
at the same time. All week like that.

All day Monday I was worried about Tuesday.
What if it happened again? I knew
it would. What the hell could I do?
On Tuesday I even went home
a different way. Afraid of Carla,
I mean, not so much of the girl.
But I never met one like her before.
She was gorgeous, but too. . . something,
I'm not sure how to say it.
Anyway, I'm going home again
and there she is—right on my corner!
Holy Mother of God, I say to myself,
Carla's going to see her this time for sure.
Two more steps down the street
and she's going to see both of us
from the kitchen window.
Then I kind of lost control,
kept walking up to her
even when I tried to stop.
I knew it was bad. Big trouble.
She doesn't say a word, just looks at me
and smiles and I feel myself
bending over, leaning into her.
The more I look into her eyes, the more I lean.
It was like falling into a manhole.
I saw her lips getting ready to kiss me.
Boy was I scared—right there on my corner!
Everybody'd see us. Carla was going to kill me.
Her mouth was funny—a soft little circle—
when I finally touched her. Oh God,
I didn't know what was happening.
She was sucking and sucking on my mouth
and it felt so good. She was sucking
so hard I could feel my guts

lifting up inside me. Light and airy—
 almost like I could fly away.
 I think I did fly for a second, swear to God.
 When I woke up it was dark. Past eight.
 I waited awhile and tried to think up
 and excuse, but couldn't. No use.
 Man, I was ready for all hell
 and that's what I got. Pots, pans, dishes
 and Carla ripped up all my sports magazines.
 She said she knew what I was up to,
 and I didn't say too much back.
 She said she'd kill me
 if she caught me, and I knew she would.
 I got sicker and sicker all that week.
 Couldn't sleep at all, or if I'd doze
 off a bit her face'd be there and that mouth
 and I'd wake up like an electric shock
 with my hair all on end,
 heart pounding out of my chest.

Monday the next week I called in sick.
 Carla was at me all day—made me go in
 Tuesday, and I knew it was a mistake.
 I should've stayed home for sure.
 I came straight home from the plant,
 even punched out a half hour early,
 and I thought I'd made it.
 Looked up at the window and saw Carla.
 I even waved, but then—Bam! —out of nowhere,
 it was her. Must've been in the alley.
 Oh my God, she was right there on my street!
 I look up and see Carla. Too late,
 she's seen me and the girl.
 And then it starts happening—
 I can't move at all, not even my head.
 Only I can feel Carla watching us
 and all the neighbors stopping on the street.

I was cold sweating almost to death.
Then the girl starts wiggling around
in a crazy dance and her clothes split
right down the middle and peel off.
Standing naked right there in the street.
Two beautiful tits, with funny sharp nipples,
and all the way down it was beautiful,
but things kept on happening.
It was even faster than I can tell you.
She puts her arms around me and squeezes
but then here come a bunch more arms
and legs around me, squeezing, squeezing,
and her tits sticking into my chest,
legs and arms wrapping my whole body.
Then a godawful pain in my crotch.
Wanted to yell and scream, but I couldn't.
All the screams blew up inside me
and trickled out like warm water.
She laid me there on the sidewalk,
right in the middle of the crowd,
and then she was gone.
I knew Carla was waiting for me.
When I came through the door
she was coming at me, screaming
with a butcher knife in her hand.
I shouted for her to stop
and tried to jump out of the way
but she got me in the leg
and the knife stuck there in my thigh.
I wanted to grab it out
so she couldn't finish me off,
but I didn't have nothing left
and slipped down on the floor.
I kept saying "Please, please,
you don't understand.
Carla, it was a dream! A dream!"
"What do you mean it was a dream?" she said.

“It was a dream of you when you were young,
but now, believe me, it’s only death.”

Honolulu Night Cruise

One hundred yards of mist:
 the McCully St. bridge trapped
 as it steps over the Ala Wai canal.
 Machines, black canvas float on the barge,
 send down taut ridged tubes
 to penetrate the water.
 She wore her heart-shaped abdomen
 in blue jeans, and my hand.
 Over the railings come ashes
 of gubernatorial announcements,
 flutter to the water, sink
 into sea mucus algae crabs.
 Honolulu nights under the dredge.

Wild dog and mongoose on the edge
 of the airport dump, cannery,
 their tongues cut out, torn
 from throats, fried with hot peppers,
 howling in the night. Rasping voices.

*

Movements in the dirt around Palolo.
 Night calls from spirit warriors.
 Moon women: damp cloth around
 thighs and hips. At night polyester
 tank tops, body stockings lift up
 and are gone, disappear from the road
 into bamboo sounds of frogs,
 undrained as their night dark hair.

*

The dead volcano swallows light.
 In a city of precise greens, blues,

yellows, it stands at night for darkness.
 An armory inside the rim prepares
 for tomorrow's tsunami, possible
 dead swimmers at Kuhio beach, up the streets
 and in lower stories. The same night
 holds helicopters offshore—dancing
 over catamarans, tourists in dinner boats—
 sweeping the reef with searchlights.
 Rubber slippers along sidewalks,
 thongs pulled through split pads,
 winos by cages at the surfboard
 rental concession.

*

Mouth nibbling, biting, groaning
 as night humidity sweats darkness.
 Hair again and again, moist and in motion.
 Eyes caught in the thrashing rhythm
 of daytime pile-drivers, now silent
 as the moon pushes sand
 under block-long plywood barricades.
 Diesel machines, smooth and sturdy
 shoulders, round hard purposeful breasts:
 “Slice the ends off the *chit gua*,
 rub off the hair, gut it, then mix
 the soft insides with ground pork,
 corn starch, *shee yow* and *may jing*.
 Stuff it and steam several hours.”
 Bleeding gently at the hips, glass splinters
 high on the wall, in her bed, inside
 a steaming gash.

*

Two scoops of rice, kim chee
 and the daily special. The rich sea

smell of garbage rotting in alley bins.
 Mist on Tantalus, concentric rainbows,
 elusive gateways, birds and buses
 looking for the right one-way street.
 Light planes from Maui cut straight
 paths over St. Louis Heights:
 golden pilots, cargoes.
 Ordinary objects arrange themselves
 into a clock
 that loses ten minutes on the hour.

*

The throats of plumeria open wider at night.
 Groans and panting, rusting Volkswagens.
 Dressing near the beach, back on tatami.
 Soaked hair, dark as coconut oil,
 moving up and down, washing in hard
 and sucking back. Up through the concrete
 rust, guava roots, ti, creepers.
 Lying against a hill, kneeling on the lanai;
 a blue flying saucer on top of Ala Moana
 lifts with moon clouds, then flies west.

Watching the Rock

Summer, alien chemistry,
short brown mountains pose as dead volcanoes.

“Lead me to the rock
that is higher than I am.”

Dust rides the slopes of Diamond Head
to Queen Kapiolani’s park; powdered crust
creates the island, its foundations, conjures
ti leaves, bananas, orchids, hibiscus, breadfruit,
avocado and plumeria from Pele’s fiery crotch.
Coral reefs with their towers of death
build themselves more slowly, but once you’ve
got the formula you can no longer work.
For instance, the invention of electricity
in the Islands and the song they composed
to celebrate new light: sandalwood incense
and Buddhists chanting in the mountains.
Then the endangered birds you never see;
at the Honolulu Zoo there are only empty
cages, plastic pictures and explanations.
The trees explode in star fruit and gold
showers, but sound has traveled elsewhere
with its feathers and iridescent screams.
Pacific storms sweep over the island, unfold
sheltering wings of mercy and truth
that slip down mountains into sewers and canals.
But one December day the radar shack boys
read the clutter on their screens as a flock of gulls.
They were heavy-bellied gulls, and when
they’d finished, the incense of Oahu’s sacred
and profane rose up to the face of heaven
in columns of smoke and fire.

.....

“We must learn to sing praise and perform vows
as we watch the rock turn green.”

History books with colored illustrations:
ceremonies on Diamond Head. But this boy's
clothmaker father beat him there by the log
before he broke free. Runs up the slope
where it's Kalakaua now, runs up to find
the tabernacle. Contrails leave unreadable
figures in the sky, fool's gold cuts into his feet.
But he has been given the gift of future sight,
this sudden landscape, so the boy will build
the city in a memory chant:
"I have a story to tell you
in which I will list the names
of all the gods. . ."

The Oyster Monkey Cantos**I**

The oyster monkey lived in a town
called Windber, Pennsylvania. He made
bones from coal, or sometimes finessed
the middleman and pressed bones from
grass, leaves and the trunks of trees.
He wanted the tree of bones inside
the flesh to live for centuries,
so it could ignite the darkness
that runs with blood, instruct the heart
to sing beneath the mysteries of light.
He cut the bone into coral branches,
spelling out the names of all the saints.
Like Capuchin monks he made his inner
frame a jewel, crypt into cathedral.
But the monkey had not fallen in love
with death; it was his secret dream
to unite the kingdoms of Heaven and Earth.
And there below, in the sunless cavern,
the mine still burned and the cancer's
dark fire spread beneath the town
that caved chunk by chunk into Hell.

II

The oyster monkey once took a train
to Atlantic City, tried his luck
against the King of Heaven and lost.
First he swam out to the Master of the Sea,
ten miles or so off the Jersey coast
and fifty fathoms straight down.
He asked for help against the Heavenly

Father, but the green monarch over
 legions of fish, squid and the order
 of submersible dragons refused
 direct assistance, and instead offered
 old tanks and surplus howitzers:
 disfigured, rusty, choked with kelp.
 When the Master left his throne to call
 for his ministers of trade and war,
 the oyster monkey swiped the magic
 sword, snug in its jade-starred scabbard,
 and swam back to town. But the Lord
 of Chance had spies under the boardwalk
 and informers everywhere, so the hero
 was doomed. The sword was invincible
 but the oyster monkey was, after all,
 only one monkey.

Assaulting penthouse
 webs of steel and glass, 51st floor,
 he crossed the bridge between Heaven
 and Earth. Wires strung from above
 dangled the King's golden totem:
 inverted key, nose buried in stone,
 and the white animal face smiling
 like a man. The oyster monkey lunged,
 screamed delight as he kicked through
 his martial dance, swallow's flight
 along the garden path, then sudden pain
 as he dropped sword and scabbard,
 paws curling smoke, and the key
 burst into a hand of dazzling flame.

The King of Heaven bound the fallen
 monkey in adamant chains, sacked
 him in burlap, directed his lieutenants
 to stuff the egregious rebel
 into the trunk of a Cadillac stretch,
 then down turnpike to half-constructed

cloverleaf: gnarled rebar, spikes, sleeves
of wood, where he was poured and formed
in the presence of wet cement.

Dawn came, broke through with the rumble
into crack of concrete casings;
the overpass shivered into eggshell.
Out stepped the oyster monkey, looking
for all the world like any one of us,
except he had more hair, and beneath
the hair his skin had turned pure gold.
The first light of day hummed over
his precious edges as he scampered
down turnpike, raised level thumb
in the sign of democracy, spoke the
password primeval, smiled at passing cars.
The oyster monkey learned there are
times when even bad luck pays off.

III

The oyster monkey wears polished
oyster shells around his neck
so when he leaps and gestures
beneath the flow of moon
they shine and clack
as air pours light over his hands
and into the water's dark still table
as a sky of pure night and colliding stars
collects in the horizon's bowl.

The night clothes oyster monkey wears
cling nervously to his skin; other sentient
beings catch glimpses of his inner
fire, watch vents of smoke emerge
as square miles of flesh are abandoned
by their inhabitant ticks and fleas.

IV

Back in Pennsylvania the oyster
 monkey strolled up a mountainside
 to search for the dragon. He looked
 down the crestline ridge and saw
 the dragon's spine weave through marsh,
 the low country of fog, streams and lazy
 grass where men have chosen to live.
 The oyster monkey looked up; he knew
 he would have chosen to ride the dragon
 forever: teeth, musical claws, eyes
 shallow and deep as the mountain god's well,
 streamers of red, gold, and incredible
 luck, the monkeyskin dragonskin
 swallowing both sun and moon like
 pork-filled buns, sucking up and digesting
 the ancient explosion of light and dust.

But he returned to Earth. And on
 the way back saw hill people pay
 tribute to the dragon with an
 image of its bones: a '53 Chevy
 with neither windows nor wheels,
 refrigerators gulping sky
 for water or snow, tires in piles,
 pieces of a bedframe, springs,
 a mattress half mulched into ground,
 an upturned harrow, now married
 to the hillside. The oyster monkey
 knew the dragon could be conjured,
 would rise, flesh out this crippled
 spine, breathe fire and steam
 to restore the forest, heal the slash
 mine bosses had torn through its side.
 But when the dragon returns vapor
 to flesh (those idle word clouds men

choose to ignore) and swishes his tail,
 then men must die. Forgotten worship
 will reach from their dreams, seize
 their throats, and prayer will finally
 come as pure as ancient rain.

V

The oyster monkey drove a protest
 loaded bus down to Washington D.C.
 (funky wheels, souped up with joy
 and painted green) to take on flunkies
 of the King of Heaven. This time
 he had more luck. They all sat in
 at the office of Senator Crunk,
 parlayed with the Hill's chief
 theorist of new brain politics,
 arrived at formulas to raise Pentagon
 stone five feet off the ground—then
 let it drop. But success to the monkey
 was as alien as failure. He knew
 the Potomac's depth, but forgot its name.
 Reaching through grids of lost memory
 the monkey tried to rebuild the City
 from a light-strewn cherry blossom storm,
 retrace plans that burned in 1812,
 blew across the land in a eulogy of ash.

VI

The oyster monkey's favorite dish
 was oyster sauce chicken: deep-fried
 chunks of breast meat cooked in a wok
 with bamboo shoots, water chestnuts,
 green onion, chicken broth, oyster

sauce thickened with cornstarch and all resting on a bed of steamed spinach. The monkey insisted on this dish at the Festival of the Moon, along with steamed bread and red ginger for luck, and followed by moon cakes. But the Moon Festival came only once a year, and the oyster monkey was restless, so once each month when the full moon came round he ate the same meal (except for the cakes which are baked only once a year) at evening on his porch.

VII

Monkeys are destined to fall out of trees, off horses, dogs, sometimes right off this sailing blue world, and usually smack on their heads. No wonder memory so often fails them, making the same mistakes over and over again. After the fall they apply a balm: snake bones and herbs leeches out in whiskey. Monkeys are bright, cunning, the smartest creatures in the world's twelve year turning, the smartest on Earth, but sometimes too smart for their own survival. Monkeys have been known to be arrogant, but what a keen sense of justice they have. In the street they will lift the beggar from his knees. They live to hallowed age, but die far from the land of their birth and alone. Since the oyster monkey is the monkiest of monkeys, you can guess his fate, but he of course could not.

He went to a hermit to have his fortune
 told: tea leaves and the lines on his paw.
 The hermit said: “In the shadows of age
 you will have prophetic power of speech.”
 The embers of his bone tree glowed,
 sugar burned, raced through blood and rose
 like thunder through the monkey’s skin.
 He made a triangle with his arms.

VIII

Nicky Cosmos was starting a theme park
 in the reclaimed Florida everglades
 south of Miami. He was soliciting help
 and ideas from the most creative animals
 in the Kingdom. He would fly them down
 (all expenses paid) for a conference
 and the usual parties, late nights
 in the sun, hostesses and so on.
 The oyster monkey hadn’t decided
 whether or not to go. An unfinished
 letter of reply sat in the carriage
 of the monkey’s Smith-Corona:
 “Dear Nicky,
 The Chance you’re offering here
 is in some ways too good to turn down . . .”

IX

Next on the monkey’s list was a trip
 to San Diego: the Zoo, a journey
 for endangered birds, to see them
 and hear the extinction of their song.
 Searching for that cage or the tunnel
 in this absence of light, monkey

among children, balloons and informative signs, stopped before fence-mounted placard (PRESUMED EXTINCT) and there behind plastic a picture of himself—the sad red legend of disappearance. Torrents of fire spread up through stomach around heart to the halo of digits and limbs, and lastly to the everlasting fusion of his brain. Not even the Eight Immortals, with their invisible kung fu, could stand against non-being. But the oyster monkey refused despair, sat before his empty cage, assumed the Lotus and chanted out its sutra, filled universe with his measured breathing. The light between Heaven and Earth increased, fell open to his ears and the monkey heard birdsong, the clear reaching tones of teletype, computer language. It was ecstasy, laughter, an explosion of letters and signs.

X

The oyster monkey entered broken flowers, broken fields. He looked for someone to translate his story to legend, legend to myth, and myth to the things of this world: a blues singer, an improvising fool. He added coal fields, gold mines, dragons and word flight to his life. He sent a dove into the broken flowers, broken fields but it never returned. It joined boardwalks, tea leaves, concrete, moon cakes

and cathedrals of darkness. The oyster
monkey entered broken flowers, broken
fields to find the music of the search,
but the ox had disappeared and the boy
and all footprints in those broken
fields of light. The doors closed
then opened. But the oxherd could not
stop to say that a fetus only grows
to retell the story of its conception,
that the whole tidal wave of mountains,
fog, trash and blistered grass has
been lost again, somewhere in the next
valley, and beyond, stretched out to
that gentle sunny plain where words
can excavate themselves, then lie empty
in the broken flowers, broken fields.

Contributors

About our lives—
what can we say?
We were born, then divorced.
We issued from darkness
through a rosepetal cleft
as cream cheese,
dried in the light,
hardened and cracked into the edges
of teeth, fingers and brain.
Now we talk endlessly
about writing.

LAWRENCE R. SMITH
THE PLAIN TALK OF THE DEAD

“Lawrence R. Smith, in *The Plain Talk of the Dead*, more than any poet I’ve read, sees and hears the presence of ancestors who are not only European but Japanese, Korean, Chinese, Pawnee, Mexican, African, Hawaiian. His surrealism is necessary, active, intelligent, and American. He opens his reader’s eyes wide.”

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— Diane Wakoski

Lawrence R. Smith is the editor and translator of *The New Italian Poetry: 1945 to the Present*.

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En Rade (At the Crossroads), Max Ernst, 1955

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