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N. Scott Momaday

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Eight Poems by N. Scott Momaday

This marks the first time that a major selection of N. Scott Momaday's poems has appeared in one place. Of the eight poems published in this issue, three—"Buteo Regalis," "The Bear," and "Before an Old Painting of the Crucifixion"—were singled out for discussion and praise by the late Yvor Winters in his book, *Forms of Discovery*. The editors wish to express their thanks to the *Southern Review* for allowing us to reprint "Angle of Geese" and "Before an Old Painting of the Crucifixion," both of which originally appeared in the Spring 1965 issue of that quarterly. With the exception of "Simile," which appeared in *Sequoia*, and "Rainy Mountain Cemetery," which has not been published before, the other poems appeared in *New Mexico Quarterly*.

Pit Viper

The cordate head meanders through himself:
 Metamorphosis. Slowly the new thing,
 Kindled to flares along his length, curves out.
 From the evergreen shade where he has lain,
 Through inland seas and catacombs he moves.
 Blurred eyes that ever see have seen him waste,
 Acquire, and undiminished: have seen death—
 Or simile—come nigh and overcome.
 Alone among his kind, old, almost wise,
 Mere hunger cannot urge him from this drowse.

Earth and I Gave You Turquoise

Earth and I gave you turquoise
when you walked singing
We lived laughing in my house
and told old stories
You grew ill when the owl cried
We will meet on Black Mountain

I will bring corn for planting
and we will make fire
Children will come to your breast
You will heal my heart
I speak your name many times
The wild cane remembers you

My young brother's house is filled
I go there to sing
We have not spoken of you
But our songs are sad
When Moon Woman goes to you
I will follow her white way

Tonight they dance near Chinle
by the seven elms
There your loom whispered beauty
They will eat mutton
and drink coffee till morning
You and I will not be there

I saw a crow by Red Rock
standing on one leg
It was the black of your hair
The years are heavy
I will ride the swiftest horse
You will hear the drumming hooves

N. Scott Momaday

The Bear

What ruse of vision,
 escarping the wall of leaves,
 rending incision
 into countless surfaces,

would cull and color
 his somnolence, whose old age
 has outworn valor,
 all but the fact of courage?

Seen, he does not come,
 move, but seems forever there,
 dimensionless, dumb,
 in the windless noon's hot glare.

More scarred than others
 these years since the trap maimed him,
 pain slants his withers,
 drawing up the crooked limb.

Then he is gone, whole,
 without urgency, from sight,
 as buzzards control,
 imperceptibly, their flight.

Buteo Regalis

His frailty discrete, the rodent turns, looks.
 What sense first warns? The winging is unheard,
 Unseen but as distant motion made whole,
 Singular, slow, unbroken in its glide.
 It veers, and veering, tilts broad-surfaced wings.
 Aligned, the span bends to begin the dive
 And falls, alternately white and russet,
 Angle and curve, gathering momentum.

N. Scott Momaday

Angle of Geese

How shall we adorn
Recognition with our speech?—
Now the dead firstborn
Will lag in the wake of words.

Custom intervenes;
More than language means,
We are civil, something more:
The mute presence mulls and marks.

Almost of a mind,
We take measure of the loss;
I am slow to find
The mere margin of repose.

And one November
It was longer in the watch,
As if forever,
Of the huge ancestral goose.

So much symmetry!
Like the pale angle of time
And eternity.
The great shape labored and fell.

Quit of hope and hurt,
It held a motionless gaze,
Wide of time, alert,
On the dark distant flurry.

N. Scott Momaday

Before an Old Painting of the Crucifixion

The Mission Carmel, June, 1960

I ponder how He died, despairing once.
I've heard the cry subside in vacant skies,
In clearings where no other was. Despair,
Which, in the vibrant wake of utterance,
Resides in desolate calm, preoccupies,
Though it is still. There is no solace there.

That calm inhabits wilderness, the sea,
And where no peace inheres but solitude;
Near death it most impends. It was for Him,
Absurd and public in His agony,
Inscrutably itself, nor misconstrued,
Nor metaphrased in art or pseudonym:

A vague contagion. Old, the mural fades
Reminded of the fainter sea I scanned,
I recollect: How mute in constancy!
I could not leave the wall of palisades
Till cormorants returned my eyes on land.
The mural but implies eternity:

Not death, but silence after death is change.
Judean hills, the endless afternoon,
The farther groves and arbors seasonless
But fix the mind within the moment's range.
Where evening would obscure our sorrow soon,
There shines too much a sterile loveliness.

No imprecisions of commingled shade,
No shimmering deceptions of the sun,
Herein no semblances remark the cold
Unhindered swell of time, for time is stayed.
The Passion wanes into oblivion,
And time and timelessness confuse, I'm told.

These centuries removed from either fact
Have lain upon the critical expanse
And been of little consequence. The void
Is calendared in stone; the human act,
Outrageous, is in vain. The hours advance
Like flecks of foam borne landward and destroyed.

N. Scott Momaday

Rainy Mountain Cemetery

Most is your name the name of this dark stone.
Deranged in death, the mind to be inheres
Forever in the nominal unknown,
The wake of nothing audible he hears
Who listens here and now to hear your name.

The early sun, red as a hunter's moon,
Runs in the plain. The mountain burns and shines;
And silence is the long approach of noon
Upon the shadow that your name defines—
And death this cold, black density of stone.

N. Scott Momaday

Simile

What did we say to each other
that now we are as the deer
who walk in single file
with heads high
with ears forward
with eyes watchful
with hooves always placed on firm ground
in whose limbs there is latent flight