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CORN SHOCKS AND BITTERBRUSH

By

Jeffrey Ross

A.B. English, University of California, Davis.

Presented in partial fulfillment

Of the requirements

For the degree of

Master of Fine Arts.

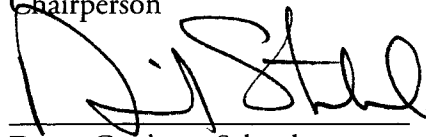
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Field Guide

Field Guide

Not inattentiveness,
for I have come prepared with few
 words for the valley.

A hill of spindly forbes?
 Annuals perhaps?
 A sea of spindled corpses,
horde on the field—
 florets of a larger body?
 Stiffened bracts
oddly slanted
 downhill,
 burdened by some simple weight

or desire to peer,
 as I peer—
 stalks, brittle straws,

a flowering
 caught in death.
They see themselves now through my eyes

and gaze down into the valley.
 I will pick a sprig and ask:
 what burden

will a name bring this hill of dead—
 a new silence,
 or a flowering?

Basalt

You speak to me as if I always were a child,
and of course, I always am. The love of rock
I attribute to you

for I used to think of you as lava, not pyroclast,
but a gentle pahoehoe flow. A dark dressed man
teaching psyche, statistics,

you schooled a resistance, not to you, to myself.
You were steady, not ill-tempered, but lacked subtlety
for individual affairs.

When you had gone too far you found rock already
hardened—love or lava incarcerates an entire house,
and who can blame an island

for what it must absorb to constitute itself. Basalt
is not durable rock and here one death releases two,
but into what and for whom?

Night Ferry

So we have met, and the wind is amenable, the tides
ferry swift, slide by night dark
through this inside passage, and the wind and island shoals,
hemlocked coves, glide abeam past railings and rattling cables—
the wind sliced into whistling furies—alive, a love, below
smells of bread, coffee, decks roll beam to beam, engines thrumming hull-
down—million-pounds plow porpoised swells and swift I move
without hesitation, from blow to blow the spark-rush of white illuminates
her directives—paired funnels dish diesel to the wind, horns
mew as cuddling calves over the landed isles yawing
black behind tucks, the surf's rows of rolling distended blankets—emerging
by the lee, now reeling in wind as sirens, boarders climbs the rails—
and a soft twine, scarf of wind, guides me to the rail—your visage
or the wind that presses me to the bulkheads? Imagine this whole container
steeled, a froth within the gale, and me standing under-bridge,
looking to the green-dialed borealis, so that your guiding captains glow,
horn-bursts white flaring from the sound, old roads, coppered
wakes split to a siren's silent sounds—
you, mind, metal, moorings, cable-coiled, this weighted throw—
the bow beats out of the well, and land, land to you.

Lolo Valley

Rushing the alluvial, headstrong,
Lolo Creek doesn't wander silt-soft and lazy
but rubs you cold, cobble-hard
past an orchard of new houses
secure on pads of sand
and round-pebbled, river-gizzard fills.

A ditch, humped on the down slope,
hugs the collar of low mountain,
travels the valley tilt—
a century impression, once guarded
now gnarled with vetch and wretched spurge,
its cheat grass chin stretching a mile
to the river, where a flat rusted wheel
waits the hands, and worm gears
wait the wheel—water tense against the gates.

Sluice open, the ditch
will crackle with cold fire, thumbing
down weeds, trembling grasses,
spinning fir needles, borne true to compass east.

Do me a favor, and call when the wheel is to turn.
I want to witness the hard Montana scour
the water crouch the depression,
the stone darken like sky,
the fossil ripples wave again across siltstone,
the storm markers—conglomerates, blow downs,
sunken settler plows—gleam wet, luminous.
Boil the lignin that cements
the land, deluding these new seekers.

Do us all a favor, turn the wheel
now—don't wait. Let an ancient
nervousness, again creep into the valley.

Catfishing

We pull a pair of three pound cats from the pond—
pectorals rotating, lips almost human,
their dorsal spikes not protecting them from themselves.
They squeal in the mud but I ignore them

because they speak in a wild tongue, an imperative
common to the gut hooked, a wild-eyed imploring—
a “tell us, tell us what you want.” Grandpa fingers
another strip of liver from a cup. Behind him

in the warm air, thermals rise across a grass field—
a broken barn sheltering a covey of straw bales,
quivers on its knees. I thread a line through mouths
and gills, swing the stringer to the tether’s end

into the pond’s mud-shalowed edge. The cats pant,
the water barely a liniment on their backs; limp
whiskers lying like disconnected wires. “Can they breathe?
Grandpa,” he doesn’t listen, wraps the hooks in blood

flesh—an underhand cast—just time now before
another cat sniffs bait—then a small tug and I will
nail him. Grandpa sighs, sits hard in his folding chair,
pining for a smoke his wife, though dead, still denies.

A Flatlander Visits Death Valley

The waist of the valley lies a mile below mountain rocks standing like bookends, stock-still, a thousand years accrued in one frame. A world upside down, this valley, where the land contains the sky.

In Iowa mountains are found in the firmament in the beautiful cumulonimbus. But “cloud” and “billowing” does not do them justice for they are often rock-hard, rain walled,

wind stirring the pot. And the night-sky beyond reveals just enough to keep us interested, then pulls away just ahead of our strongest lenses, our greatest understandings.

But in the valley I hear the crystalline hiss, a sloughed alluvial skin sliding snake-like as a dune, spreading crescent wings, like a landed quarter moon, a slow wave under the silver cholla.

The iron, manganese winds wield a wet tongue of desert varnish – and a sky-black bile coats the desert vault. And spinystars shimmer and a crescent dune crawls across the pan.

Hellgate Canyon Bridge

What approaches—leaves, dust along the banks
the span, cantilevered steeled-tense and braced
above stone-annealed river flanks.

Wood corked tight to suctioned sallow flows

of mist and oh so marvelous I turn to face
the rumbling windy river blow.

See the sunlight thread the girder's frames,
fall on fog and cloud and folding corvid wings,
unlike the quiet Corvus soaring southern spheres.

Canyon wind and river press and sift through the span—
a murmuring? Bridge bolt to buttress socked
in silt, but still a subtle motion through rail to hand—

a sense of slow time—glacial peaks froth
in chop like seas pressed to plain's sloping pier.
But is this thrumming caught with an iron net,
Or love, merging wind and river within a body's weir.

Owl Assailant

A brief burst of air, then grief—
the opening of an inconsequential door,
small, dark, an instant gone. How must
it feel to have talons close on your breast—

four, eight knives, deep into shoulder
back and sternum, pressed—aware
enough to see the groggy earth fall away
beneath—bewildered but with the will
to still try and turn, to see your assailant.

You the Accuser face the perfect rows
the beautifully detailed brown suit.
And the black maw slams silently shut
on this – the realization of being cradled,
carried toward, untoward a greater good.

Snowy Owl

When winter flags the larch's empty crowns,
and spears of cold rounds people huddled close,
and rafts and rafts of birds have disappeared

flying fast against academies of stars
that burn small holes in winter's purpled clears—
hear corvids mob and cackle round her head.

Do not deny the snowy's swiveled scorn
for those who can't embrace to feathered breast
the solitary warmth of "broooing" pride.

Above the Sandstorm

Across the counter-flux, a high desert untamed
whistles down dry tarns through bitterbrush—
a tense shutter and ply, scuttle unanchored frames
up lees of barchan's crowns to dune-crest rush.

Curl your epitaphs within the wind, this slate-clay
peak, a prow awash in a cloud's roving sarabande.
A plaintive caress, coursed above stucco and playa—
we dip our hands into sand-crème, feel hardpan

below the only rocky moor—the sun-dogs above
become thin-cast, hands vessels of wheedling sand
holding, sliding between this vellum overlord of love.

Monarch Grove

Trunks shudder; branches hang a million limp fingers
wafting eucalyptus punk, medicinal salve, a drowsy green-gray
softness descends, blurring our focus in the butterfly Grove.

On the surrounding land people are busy molding metal,
twining fiber, fencing off lots, digging cairns for water-wheels
rising by rope and scaffold, pulleys smoking with the strain –
the thump of wood mallets shunting home axle pins.

They wait by their shrines, by the smudge of olivine,
for the orange-black panoply of fluttering ash. Yet the wheels
have yet to turn in quiet water. And the sky's scoured
a polarized blue—no blemishes (but they are small and harder
to see than birds). And the people are comforted, are reassured.

Huckleberry

Soil, slope, altitude, precip—
A rapprochement on ground
a loose connection, a cameo-flange
of in-violet globes.

When started
you can't stop picking
there are more and more all the more attainable
and the shadows and showers come and go
and the car like mother calls nightfall,
but we don't hear,
for we are nothing but lithe fingers
stooped figures on a curving hill.

Purr berry purr—purposeful, discreet,
balls of future bear bodies, blood buckets
bruised scrota under pinnate leaves
toes knaggy roots, eyes sprouting
shoots,
gut split, heartwood falls with sounds
of spilled matches.

Bend, bend, and bend again
fingers nubile
browsing lips of deer,
purple-tongued bears
in small clearings; a feral astringent
this sun-blighted overstory,
stoop under succored weights,
drop to the supine—
pick a berry.

La Brea Sonnet for a Dire Wolf

Into water stepped the giant sloth,
the tar caught her
behemoth
paw. She stepped in
with her right
foot, stuck again!
Something's not quite
right here. A snout
sniff brings back, black
tarry whiskers, and out
of the bushes, a wolf attack!
But revenge will be hers on this sad day,
For the wolves don't know what their namesakes say.

Autumn Sleep

A pool, deciduous,
no more than a flooded swale,
in a wood
after rain,
 after the clouds open the deep
dermal blue of late day.

Deserters all in this autumn wood.
White oaks already at winter rest
their leaves rustling, ragged
 gone or dead.
The cloistered hearts and spiderwort straws
rasp their brown sheaths;
 all blood behind bark.

And yet *you* have appeared.
A freshet trapped in an open dale.
A tide pool in the hills, bunchgrass
 spread like anemones, stunning
juglans, acer, quercus leaves.

Conscious of the wind above
 I am braced against the bellow
but drawn to the quiet pool –
and cold are my hands in your water.

In the glade I listen—
half in love with easeful death,
 or less, maybe just a slumbering,
not like bear, but butternut,
perhaps for half the year.

The gelid is now restful.
No time for silting cloaks –
my lobata hands pass into winter.

Caloosahatchee

In the swamp preserve
all wood splinters in dark decay,
the grasses burn and water, although shallow, still
flows clear but slothful.

On the pine barren,
the breeze nettles the heat that swarms
under-cap, as you balance plank to plank, careful
of a marled miss-step.

And on the griddle
of the pine barren you remain
wary of punky ground, hissing sounds, the gray-green
glare lost in distance.

You move to the shade
of flatwood forests, the darkness
of cypress domes, indigo snakes, fiveangled
dodders and floating

above all, cloudless
sulphurs, Carolina satyrs.
There are beggerticks, blue waterhyssop, devils gut,
broomsedge bluestem with

bottlebrush; you net a,
pretty false, royal false doubled
double pawpaw. You find fields of *Galactia*
regularis, but

to us say eastern
milkpea. In southern amaranth,
swings bearded sprangletops, blue maidencane. Amidst
a frog's-bit blooms a

manatee mudflower,
a turkey tangle fogfruit, twin
rabbit tobacco and button eryngos, all snarled
in a white twinevine.

Waterlogged gators
Lollygag in black pools, the first
To speak to you with the contact of their walnut
brown, cat-iris eyes.

The panthers are here
in track and scat. Black bears lumber
through the skegs unheard, ruddy daggerwings flapping,
fluttering their ears.

Southern beeblossom greets
with a smallcup spiderlily,
mingling with musky mint, a *Hyptis alata*.
Umbrellasedge tops

lemon bacopa,
below a twirling daggerwing;
a riverswamp nutrush and a saw palmetto
go leaf to leaf with

Florida bully;
ten bald-cypress tower over
redmargin zephyrlily. Ah, a black nightshade,
aquatic soda

apple; step on sweet
shaggytuft, hyssopleaf sandmats
woolly sunbonnets; thumb strum wrinkled jointtailgrass
within slim fimbry.

Don't trip over logs
of *Quercus myrtifolia*.
At long day's end, a song of lyreleaf sage – a touch
of little woman.

Deeper underfoot
you know the brack turns sweet-flowing
like blood to the limbs, the constricted aquifer –
Caloosahatchee.

Stack at Navarro Head

The rock stands not uneasy
within the receding sea—

the claverous boils, water
that snuffles and pops around

the base of the sea stack. I sat
on haunches, day after day,

like other land mammals—
foxes with coiffured mange.

Saw the gulls, launching, gliding
somewhere unimportant. Look

at the black water below,
the flotsam, the coils of weeds

bobbing like a hydra's discarded wig.
The rock's sooty mélange is sharp

painful, not the smooth skinned
mammoth of the plains— rolled

by flat seas of ice and squeezed south
by Pleistocene snows. The tide

closes around the stack, swallows
the land bridge—moat protected—

until the seas stop rocking, and the foxes
rise, and I stand and move with them.

Sound of the River

We are, of spirit, those found by the bend in the river,
and our dens are the huts of bowed willow saplings.
But we are here, nonetheless, by the sound of the Flambeau's burning waters.
And the sound of the water is not the music of Donne's bells or clarion trumpets.
For we were thrown into the bellow, one of the river's swirling retinues,
but drowned in a quiet pool.
And our boats were of bark, not of metal.
If you are confused, we were also bewildered.
So we followed a wolf following a wandering scent along the banks of the river.
And we sat for a long while, with our spirit almost as lifeless as body.
And then watched a lone aspen-leaf dance, to the song of a larkspur.

Now let us sit by the river, you and I.
Let us dream in color.
Let us dream of red maples and sit on the skin of the mother.
Let us stretch our arms to this batholith, bulging, cracked under the pressure of our birth.
When was our birth? Our death? Let's not fret about that, not yet.
Look the trees are followers, the leaves of the trees always come to the water.
Come red maples, come to the water and drop your bloody leaves.
Come river birch, tasting of wintergreen, come to the water and stoke
our reflections of golden times.
Come tamarack, come to the water and seep, dye our spirit feet in earthly tannin.
Come and listen close to the water.
Listen to other drowned voices.
Listen for the last spirit voice of Aztalan, the people of the lake-bed mound.

But who are we, settlers of the dead we still eschew?
We have staked our deaths to this river valley.
For we need not push out the dead.
For the river scours out effigies up and down the valley.
First those furtive shadows, trout spirits, darting from Aztalan,
and then other mound builders, drifting like mayflies.
For the mound builders are drifters.
For the Kickapoo are drifters
For the Blackhawk are drifters.
For the Winnebago are drifters.
For the Ojibwa are drifters.
For the Chippewa – Europeans are drifters. The river is clear now.
For there is no room for all the dead that will be coming.

And we have gathered your poetry.
We have gathered your myths.
We have gathered your stories.
And you have already begun the killing, the corralling of the animal spirits.
And your slaughter will be preserved in the earth, a narrow band of red ochre.
And your slaughter will be exposed in the clay banks of a greater river.
And your slaughter will someday be part of the choking wind.
And your slaughter will spread the heat of a thousand new fires
 burning in a hundred different quarters.
And the beaver spirit shall die for lack of bark to succor the body of beaver.
And the crane spirit shall die for a lack of crane.
And when the geese quit their running, the spirit of geese shall fold to the ground,
 the feathers of geese without body.
And the badger spirit will furiously throw up dirt, but succumb for lack of badger.
And when all memory is purged, you will be purged.
Ask the river now, who is coming, with the sound of rushing wind, of water?
For the sounds are unbroken along the reach and breadth of the river.
We cannot feel a thing.
We offer no resistance.
It's up to you to test the waters.
First, look for the broken body;
 then, we wait for you here.

Triple Lens

The Void (in three pages)

A las, there are so many things between heaven and earth of which only the poets have dreamed.

And especially above the heavens: for all gods are poet's parables, poet's prevarications... Ah, how weary I am of poets!

Zarathustra—Friedrich Nietzsche

I

A man walks alone on some mountain slope where ahead, above the crest, strobos a red light. The beacon is often obscured, not by fog beneath the tower but smoke illumined, salmon fleshed, lines lensed up from the valley. Here the fire comes for him, a crawling cochineal hue with soot and sooted claws, turning fir pyres to carmine—his footprints ending mid-stride. To live he must squat low in a grotto's greenstone, shelter with body the half-burned paper logs, the hot-pressed air socked dense as black tar. Only winter will smother these smoldering brands, and he may return to us only footprints, words wandering down-slope.

Now, if we care, how can we detect him, by the curls of backfilling water, a passing wake of smoke, vacuums sated by some whirling worldly stuff? Or like a child's outstretched arms shadowed on night snow, a marker filled with a dark matter just time shy of sudden stone.

II

Why does a man stand in a park, watch children play where he played years before, building houses atop the grass with leaves, raking leaves into rows, rectangles, and squares, these into rooms and hallways. Like fox kits they play strengthening their legs to fight, hunt, and build from these loose leafy schematics. They dig basements in earth, build stories, fill attics— these first steps carved spatial on grass become their burgeoning voids. And the man watches them wrestle the wind across these spaces, retrieving leaves for which they need to mark the boundaries of their future emptiness. And he wants to tell them to let the leaves fly, but they are in a different world altogether, still purging the space inside their borders: the matter in which they were recently born. And the man knows the park's stone pillars do not stand as monuments and in silence nearly sees the advancing moss, devolution of limestone into space, the air replacing mortar.

III

Let me tell you of the caravel, hull shaped like cupped,
proffered hands, that moves from west to east,
from night to dawn—the ship lateen-rigged by women,
many men but let me say now only navigated by one.
Ageless, bow-lit and blinking, it travels close-hauled
rounding the earth's sphere in the diffusing darkness—
nearer it travels to the straight lines of the sun—the light
striking the topmast before he wakes again—but he
has come this close and the light nearly spills upon him
and in that instant he is nearly a conscious stone on water,
where the light moves through, illuminating both the world
and the solid matter that *is* for an instant, and will be you.

Letters to David and Henry

David,

Brother, it occurs to me that we are as efficient loving the dead, as we are clumsy loving the living. I must surely love, but why don't I feel? Is love organic, easier piqued by a vegetative mulch to the nose? John Donne lost his brother Henry to religious violence; how might he have thought differently of his brother after acquiring this death's key? But we two lack the backdrop of the English religious wars, the cunning of the secretariat, the minds bitter brilliance. How can love be expressed between brothers without some bellows blowing our disfavor? If love is easier dealt with in death than life, I wish nothing but to improve the latter, but I don't know how. Thus I offer you this bifurcate letter—let an imaginary Donne help lead me into, not out of this sibling love's labyrinth.



Henry,

It is only I, with a deep and confounded sigh— on this morning I awaken thus to hear my voice besiege my own dream on thy death my dear brother—Henry. Why dost thou penetrate my sleep, to awaken me with the slap of an angel's wing? The waking morning light is an even tintured red, both to grow on my morn, or die as the moldering red sheet that begot thy darkness and laid death upon thee that day at Newgate. That my mind's eye shall see thee in thy grievous light does not surprise; my eyebeams penetrate, eviscerate thy memory as painfully as an executioner's inordinate horn dost blast in my ears. So I beseech my faith and reason; blot out the cacophony; stamp out these fecal toads that pour croaking from Satan's pockets, rousting, imploring, and expectant, licking with oily tongues my inflamed memories, as now I stand lost amongst the light of both horizons— Henry my sun hath spun in both directions.

David, not a random occasion, this happenstance
of brotherhood; our knowledge, the orbit of one so close,
the razor-wire helixes, twisted a figure as he is.
Are you thinking, back in the snow belt, how to trap
the gathering hares with no holes to pursue in December
woodlots? I hear your footsteps but rarely a sound beyond.
Each of us pad now on our own soiled ground and I can
tell you, here there are no points to the stones we sit on.
I am less sure of the comfort of your assemblage,
but we will catalog details in familiar ways, use
old crates, clunk the contents, light and heavy tools,
abrade our hands, test the tensile of family cords—
a drill-bit, divorce, foot broken in seven places—just
to stand is itself a sometimes difficult achievement.



Henry, I am tired, and sit now in front of Mitcham house,
a place thou know nothing about, and think of the years
that marks this light from thy darkness. I am Anglican dear
brother, the Dean of St. Paul's. For some I have climbed
down hell's ladder to reach my reformed summit.
And if it be my occasion to cast disparagement
on our Jesuit friends then I shall not be reluctant to make
it so. Half the pain of England lies at their scorched feet.
Martyr's fires burn, immovable, and thus seared our
family tree. Where is the legacy? There, obscured
by smoke, chopped into stacks of Jesuit hay. Protestant
or Papist, I wish thee to believe, they both stand accused.

David, when we speak, it is often of politics, trajectories
of other constellations. Who between us would want
to tally our footfalls, the measure of lines, doubling back,
moving point to point to generate something as self-indulgent
as an Ursa Major. We measure our age against
others, like twin pontoons of a catamaran—
the cat hikes, and we lean into each other. But faith
is religion; you and I are potentialities not waiting.
We see the clog ahead not with resignation,
but with a shrug, damned to ground by our choice
of reason; and two have only one life's season.

•

Listen Henry, after thy death, I traveled to sea
with Essex, Raleigh, where I saw the Spaniards
in the sea being burnt, they in the burnt ship drowned.
I was married, and in an ironic turn, imprisoned,
punished for my fidelity. Ordained Anglican,
and within two years my wife Anne died after bearing
the last of my twelve children. Thus with roots exposed,
thy leaves thy love is left balled in earth; Henry my world
lies inside out. Yet through all this I have been writing,
and like a whirlwind now sit on these disused steps.

David, there is no time before or after death.
We can speak, but words cannot overpower the choice
of choosing “just” the possibility. Is it rational
to assume that I, by a reaching gesture do nothing
but take extra breaths between normal rhythms?
The modifiers of the sky dangle their wares in equal
measure to both of us, yet we, preoccupied, peer
into a life of jars—potato roots done probing,
white and tangled against interior glass.



And now, I sit upon these stepping stones, and my
ruminations run black in this bloody, pooling light.
It is here, where with my art and melancholy heart I step
back, look upon the slicing wrath of men that rendered
my Henry’s walk a semi-circle end. Thy arc sits gray
and hard, dead, and dost it lead to my retreat, to God,
or my soul to hell? I say Henry, my fears lie open to thee,
when my intellect peels scabrous under the hail of my
melancholia. So listen Henry, listen to me...

Do I love you brother? Will I know if I outlive you?
Even the sensitive, the desirous can know truth
but feel incapable. And a soft language these words—
we hear them cast with little weight—let's not another,
lightly plumb, let me say "I don't love you brother"
let a heavy sound flex a suspect wave. And yet death
will not bring us to water, but a field. I know not how
to start the digging, until the site is found and plotted out.



Henry, I am a sick man, as sometimes I am sick
with religious despair. An apostate, or recusant
may have done treason in any land, and thus fled
the grace of God. Or I, like a thief, Catholic, who pays
no dues running, and hath chosen no martyrdom, I will
still wish deliverance. Henry, where do I turn for grace?
I open an octave to my soul's precipice. A blushing
man hath yet the color of death, and dost not mean
embarrassment for sins but the want for a soul's survival.
My red will lies apparent, and only Christ can dye, take
my soul, and leave my body a dead, fortuitous white.

I cannot rely on this letter to adequately break
into these underground chambers. Maybe love cannot
be held, only propelled by the polar swings of dense
bodies. We stay not by blood, but pain of absence—
an indirect gravity, the only detectable evidence of love.



I ought now burn this letter, not allow investigations
of my tongue, as they lie intact upon this page
for reformists or papists to exact their rage.
This letter shall burn, molting into black,
and, as if martyred, my thoughts will ascend
their charcoal vapors to my brother's end.
And God, and Henry, shall see my suffering.

The Bird and Po-Chüi

Po-Chüi, poet, Prefect of Han-Chou walks
down a snow path under a dark morning's sky
river. A scree of snow covers a frozen pond.
A pen has been empty for three mornings now.

For days Po had seen him bend forward into wind,
stretched to catch an invisible string proffered
by the changing light of the season—responding
each time to spring's taunt with one staccato call—

No pinions, clipped nor leathered thongs anchored,
the hobble-less, squabbling dander of young,
ran with two legs like a man through snow—jumping
to wing, dusting powder from needles, a light descending
flurry marked his aerial trail through the pines.

Po breaks pond ice with a bucket, listens
to the mute forest, listens for sign of yellow
iris, listens for the man turned crane Ling-wei...

Snow falls from some boughs. In distant shadow,
a house, courtyard—a comet-sun rises scattering
illuminated tails through the trees, and Po...
dips his bucket into the pond's naked shoulder.

Hunger's New Global Distribution Network

Heating up, that's the word for the world's
wild economy. Our analysis? Bullish,
look for GW on the Mercantile Exchange.

But move fast, for territories are expanding.
Every morning Hunger swings open shop doors
in new rain shadows, astride surprisingly

sodden slickrock, under incessant rainfall
on silent northern peats. But listen, the beauty's
obvious—no Big Board, no Dr. Strangelove

nerve center—no black sets, blinking lights,
no warehouses, no Teamsters signing bills of lading,
saying “the carbon copy's for you.” No pallets

on the tarmac, barges in the bight (a hydroponic
bonanza)—for as J. Wesley Powell predicted “no rain
would follow the plow,” and no soil will follow the rain.

America My Beautiful

There is a song in the distance, the strings of electric cords. We are told only foreigners know the words, a ribald humming, and Yoo says the answer is coming in Arabic songs; the pain is so great “you forget the milk you have been fed from the breast of your mother.” A new “rendition” of mother America. Gonzales says they are not covered under the Geneva Conventions. Yoo says the illegal combatant doesn’t deserve the protections. But under the new “rendition” of mother America, Arar is splayed like a Syrian song. Who is Arar? Ask the hooded men who bound him. Ask the pilot that flew him. Who is Arar? Ask the torturers who sang and beat him the new “rendition” of mother in Syria. Listen to the president playing a new “rendition” of mother America. Into her calm waters, into our reflections he says “torture is never acceptable.” He says “nor do we hand over people.” He says “to countries that torture.” Who is Arar? A man beaten by “two-inch-thick electrical cables.” Sing to Arar the new song of mother America. Who is Arar? He said “you just give up.” He said “eventually you confess to anything.” Who is Arar? He is the foreign face of mother America. Who is America? “You become like an animal.”

Stack at Navarro Head

The rock stands not uneasy
within the receding sea—

the claverous boils, water
that snuffles and pops around

the base of the sea-stack. I sat
on haunches, day after day,

like other land mammals—
foxes with coiffured mange.

Saw the gulls, launching, gliding
somewhere unimportant. Look

at the black water below,
the flotsam, the coils of weeds

bobbing like a hydra's discarded wig.
The rock's sooty mélange is sharp

painful, not the smooth skinned
mammoth of the plains—rolled

by flat seas of ice and squeezed south
by Pleistocene snows. The tide

closes around the stack, swallows
the land bridge—moat protected—

until the seas stop rocking, and the foxes
rise, and I stand and move with them.

Triple Lens

East

On Long Island,
Whitman's long lines lie strung out, tossed-up
like weeds along miles of Paumanok beach.
The Atlantic surf curling around the continents stern,
collecting sand, cherished debris where Walt's mother-sea
whips up dunes along the shore to keep her whitecaps
clean and buffered from the landed earth of his father.
Like an outstretched hand, clean tombolo
sands reach the island rock, and Walt waves
his arm synchronous with the surf, the water piling
on shore like Old World immigrants, endlessly
rushing and receding.

West

In California,
Jeffers stands as a fleshed figure
head on a Carmel promontory, like a physician
with mason's hands he feels the earth's tremors—
the locked tectonic titans—North American, Pacific,
Juan de Fuca plates, where flagged pines signal storm,
and that all will be bowed to leeward.
The wind labors breath, the cliffs—the wind's
whistle accompanies the temblors—
above the broad wake of this barge's bow
Robinson calls the *Continent's End*.

Midwest

In Wisconsin,
during the Pleistocene, the glacial lobes
played with scoop and pail in the sand counties—
building drumlins, kettles, moraines—they still stand
silent, depressed and dusted in Midwest earth. And along
a Lake Koshkonong backwater, close to Blackhawk
Island, Lorine Niedecker kneels by a course motionless
as green amber, and watches a drop of water
convex her entire world on the back of a frog.

The Funeral Season

Red

Drawn to the old bricked streets whose sand-creviced gaps tripped us barefoot boys; I walked from the town's cement-frost to the out land along the red road, past pasture fences locked to lines of loess and gravel–scarp dug insolent along girdled hill. There I recall panning stones from the river's breach; a future fast in tow, didn't know of memory, how important this wakeful mortar is, a binding to outlast

shacks of cobbled shingles and papered tar, cats, skinny kids, green as grandma said of gills; my eyes diverted from windows, screen doors ajar muddied catfish skinned adrift from smoky grills; a mile from the marshlands this still-rich life was found wholly on the margins of town; cornstalk's broken banners folded into black soil, and beyond the furrows, bales of straw scythed mechanical, with a trailing wagon dribbling chaff.

But packed underfoot around the culvert's iron, below the turf and topsoil, lies a thick red line of earth, a settled and burnished horizon drained of nutrients, a dirt leached and bled by heat and ancient tropical rainfalls; a sunset entombed on a brilliant eve when the long-waved-light skipped 'cross Iowa, now turns piles of coal-mine slag into volcanic cairns, only blades or cut-banks reveal old burns

of red—the border of the visible spectrum.
And are visions beyond only the recollected?
Not from godly light, but the sympathetic sum of waves embedded in my unconscious, reflected on roads so similar to this, that these spirits are awakened by an unfathomable mundane: bricks, peaks and troughs, saddle-eyed pine, earnest fishers casting clear over rivulets, as once again my vision sets against a red line.

The Cultivator Wind

We heard no sirens that Sunday, instead
it was the silence, the blackness in one eye
the rush to open east-side windows, disconnect
wires to the tower, the antenna that reached an open

hand north to Des Moines, south to Kirksville.
The scudding clouds shrugged like wakes across
the horizon, ahead of the thunderhead's
black grounding hull—and why wasn't I picked

out, consumed, this lover of cyclones, standing
at the root-cellar door, then descending
from wind's mouth to earth's musty stomach
before the first tossed tree—the family huddled,

inhaled in unison then, unconsciously
leaning to the southwest against the cracking
creaking joists, as some lone outside obstruction
held the tail of the wind, spinning it to a scream

until letting go into silence. In the after-storm,
new furrows were plowed across those country
gardens, the colors stripped to sepia, harvested
moving east—the brown light lasting hours.

Austin Farm – 1964

Corn shocks fly—the sounds
of the scratching legs of locusts—
frost lines, under turf under skin—
an Illinois autumnal at five a.m.

In the yard we hand-pump water.

“All night in the fall” says Theron,
the hay elevators replace
the fallen stars, and in spring,
peepers begin their nightly count
of stellar constellations.”

From the cellar kitchen, below
the farmhouse’s saddlebrown
asphalt shingles, smells of berry,
bacon and basement coal—Great
Grandma, steam-armed, aproned,
irons the meddlesome dawn.

Star Dust – Bloomfield, Iowa – 1974

A house could sit for sixty years, roof sagging,
bricks falling out like old teeth, nothing to notice
but cracks in the stucco, or the creak of a porch
swing. Then one day the house would suddenly

sit up and explode. The gas fitters grumbling
about how gas lines always leaked worse during
lay offs, corn or soybean collapse, after divorce.
That summer no houses blew in Bloomfield

and not only because of the otherworldly
remodel—the unearthed pipe, the leaking iron
lattice gasping at the surface replaced by plastic,
the posters instructing people to follow their

bloodhound nose seeking the sulphur and boiled
egg spice, the odor of gas—a marigold
mercaptan. No, it was also the “star dust”
buzz of seventy four, a theory not heard

round these parts in the first 1957 report.
“We are made of Stardust” read the Bloomfield
Democrat. “Stardust?” people asked. These houses,
streets, these towering cottonwoods tottering

like civil war vets with their lost and gangrenous
limbs? Star dust? “Let me try to explain,”
said a science teacher from Bloomfield High.
“A star consumes itself from the inside,

collapsing, condensing lighter elements
into heavier matter when running
out of fuel, then emitting a quiet burp
or a supernova spew. It’s like a house

exploding from the inside, from the ignition
of natural gas. In the first millisecond
the charge punches out the windows, then the walls,
unhinged, in a shower of plaster and lathe,

bursts in all directions. The roof tossed in air
like a shingled hat, falling to the ground
through its vanished members. But let's be clear,
a house not dozed, collapsed or hove-to

but ex-ploded is but a pica-nova,
a pop of bubble wrap on the moon,
a trillionth of a stellar charge, a 10^{-12}
in cosmic brilliance, quite opposite from

a stellar nucleosynthesis. But perhaps
they both die bright, that's true, and a house
is not a home when the heavier elements
compress us to a wither, or reach that

tipping point of plosive conflagration,
when all that carbon, iron, manganese,
whatever the direction, are blown into
us, or out of our once quiet neighborhood."

Black Water

Below, the stream runs incalculable.
Body ruptured; we say “give us your
hand” to an arm rising, reaching for sol.
This sheen, surge, an unscrupulous armor

that crushes and wallows, picks the teeth
of the wind with trees, rafters, telephone poles
then lies blankly open-eyed, in turgid relief,
bubbling putrefaction, degassing of souls.

Blue tarpaulins bloom as hosanna’s horns
sound but distant bleats under brine. The pumps
stop beating, and quiet goes the muffled chorus.
Overdone arms acquiesce from their stumps,

while eyes, like nets cast, can’t hear the pleas;
black in bile-green, all the Big Easy seas.

Upholstered

The text you are about to study is not based upon theory or opinion, but is an actual record of the practical and successful working methods which I personally have been using and which have helped me to attain and maintain a reputation in the field as a top tufting expert.

“Tufting Secrets” by Charles C. Quick

The Seats and backs
are padded
with springs and synthetic fiber-fills.
In earlier years
with straw, hogshair, and cotton –
whip-stitched together.

Beneath the porch
the earth's gleaned raw– woods, metals, fibers, oils,
reburied under tuft.
Rails of skeletal woods, shaped and numbered –
animals stewed for glues – hot brushed dowels joined,
arms and legs clamped tight
into position.

Tufts are segregate flesh – first formed under muslin,
then beneath our outer skin,
rising welts in the shapes of biscuits, diamonds, and buns.

*You will find the text written in plain, everyday language.
I know that the men reading and testing these techniques
are plain, honest working people, like myself.*

Built on backs of coarse burlaps –
photographs of jute bales on steaming wharves –
muslin mounds pen-marked and fingered, ice-picked, pregnant,
holes marking the wounds.

*With this type of surface we have our little problems too...
tufting is a dirt catcher, a suture never tied –
feel how the humps lay – tufted lumps, little tombs.*

Tower Hill – Wisconsin

I'm here for the hammering, the slow
methodical, pounding on wood,
the sound like a dowel driven
into a knothole in an oaken hollow.

From below the cliff face, the sound
runs through the swamp oak and river elm;
the bottomland still echoes
the antebellum boom, the of town Helena.

From a shelf on the bluff,
boots grit against grey-green sandstone
moss smooth as grease against
a bracing hand, lean over the shaft
of the abandoned shot tower.

With pick ax, and steady strokes,
borers tolled inch by inch, one hundred
twenty feet through vertical stone,
then burrowed ninety in from river.

As the smelting tower rose above
the shaft, trees fell to the pounding axes,
the forest birds retreated, boardwalks
and shacks covered the river loam;
smoke spires signaled the birth of Helena.

Local oak stoked the smelting fires,
smoke poured from the scaffolding,
the furnace melting metal pigs,
ladling dollops of lead, free falling molten
spheres soft and steaming to the core,
shocked hard into shot in the subterian pool.

The rounds were wheeled from the cavern—
Minnie balls for the muzzle (with black powder)
Lead for the flash of flint and hammer.

But during the Civil War, the railroad
bypassed the village, the river recoiled,
overwhelming Helena's abandoned
breastworks. With the forest,
returned the pileated, again hammering
rap rap rap over the river marl.

Leaning over the bore, the cool river
draft, smelling an arkosic blend of water
and stone, vents up through the shaft
as if a leak has sprung from the bottomland—
above my shoulder, a prothonatory
warbler alights on a buttonbush.

The Funeral Season

Iowa winter-dry, rumpled like a soiled
bed sheet, demarked not by time but geography—
this is the landscape of the funeral season.

Returning to the rural hamlet of Jerome
I feel a curious affinity
as if belonging were a life-long sentence,

an emptiness ever pleasing. Barren,
coal-fired under skin, the cornrow stubble
is earth-packed, limed white by descent

of dust, ash from the air of a patient
Herculaneum. Disquiet, a muffled
consort, accompanies comfort here—

a natural connection with the broken,
the dusty, the mundane. Jerome was not
stillborn but exhausted at birth, a calf

dropped in the cold, unable to rise and feed
quickly enough to keep from freezing.
Saturday night, high school kids drive rings

around the courthouse—for a lifetime they
have driven this way—clockwise on the inner
ring, counter on the outer—spinning round

this axle tower—an illusory time
frozen, a clock movement recycling youth
sloughing off dead into the countryside.

Notes

Autumn Sleep

The phrase “half in love of easeful death” is from John Keats *Ode to a Nightingale*.

America My Beautiful

Quotations from Jane Mayer’s “Outsourcing Torture: The secret history of America’s ‘extraordinary rendition’ program.” The New Yorker, February 14, 2005, p. 106-121.