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Nigger

Bob Hicok

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with embryonic intensity, a life-form
evolving the attributes of consciousness
and spite. I could learn much
from the man who carries the day out
in a bucket. As he steps from his door,
another load of sunlight steaming
in his pail, he looks

happy, pleased by the pace
of his busy work, much as the woman
tying the devil to a pillow has a glow
of satisfaction, beams with the sense
of a job well done. And of course
I look up to the man who shoots arrows
through the roof. It's hard work
threading the shafts one after another
through the same tiny hole,
yet he rarely stops. When he does
it's to drag an arm across his face
and look toward the sea
as if he owns this country.
Even from here I'm stunned
by the militancy of this
shy boast.

NIGGER

It was a new word and as words went then
astonishing. After popping
in the air it fell like the silence of a sheet

snapped out over a bed. Reaching
the flanneled back
of a man leaving the store, it paralyzed him,

gripped his stride and the swing of his arms
in the cast
of a momentary statue. From the thicket

of belts I could see half-moon smiles
rise over the Sunday
stubbled chins of men huddled at the counter.

When the man had gone they laughed except
for my father
and one other, who set pliers, picture hooks

and nine volts on the counter and walked away.
Each head turned
to follow him as if blown by the same wind.

As he passed in front of the tube-tester,
someone shouted
exotic words which tore the air like a bike

skidding on gravel. The door opened magically
as he approached
and was closed some time before the owner

slammed the register drawer, releasing them
from the space
they'd been staring at, a bit of air bounded

by rakes and lawnmowers through which
they'd each soon pass
after paying what was asked for what was wanted.