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KILLING GEORGE WASHINGTON

A Project

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English and Comparative Literature

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

by

Anne Jennings Paris

May 2004

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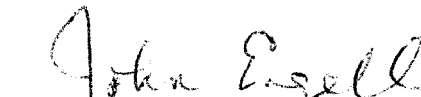
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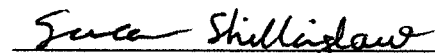
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ABSTRACT

KILLING GEORGE WASHINGTON

by Anne Jennings Paris

This collection of first-person narrative poems describes the American frontier as experienced and created by three historical figures: Lewis Wetzel, York, and Mary Colter. Wetzel, an Indian fighter who lived during the eighteenth century, recounts his experiences first as a victim of Indian abduction, and later as a convicted murderer of an Indian man. York, a slave belonging to William Clark, recounts his journey with the Lewis and Clark Expedition, as well as his attempts to adjust to life after returning from the Pacific. Mary Colter, a successful architect who lived during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, describes her experiences as a woman in a man's profession attempting to create her own vision of the West. Political themes include expansionism, slavery, Indian heritage, and women in the West. Literary themes include the impact of landscape on consciousness.

This project is dedicated to my husband, Marc Paris.

Acknowledgements

My husband Marc has supported me emotionally and financially while I worked toward my degree; more than anyone, he has my love, thanks, and appreciation. I thank the faculty, staff, and students of the San Jose State English Department for their support, guidance, and camaraderie. I also thank visiting professor Al Young, whose workshop fostered the earliest of these poems. My advisors Alan Soldofsky, John Engell, and Susan Shillinglaw deserve my special thanks, as does Kristen Iversen, who encouraged this project in its early stages. Many of my fellow students deserve a special thank-you: Tiffany Sprugasci, for making me do the work and listening to me talk about it; Robert James and E.D. “Sweeney” Schragg, for their ideas and inspiration; Eran Williams for his support and encouragement; and finally, Kate Evans, who was the first reader of many of these poems. Kate’s enthusiasm and thoughtful editing helped me create this project.

I owe inspiration to many authors, including poets Davis McCombs, Elizabeth Bishop, and Jane Kenyon.

Though I consulted many sources to compile these poetic histories, I relied most heavily on the following works: *That Dark and Bloody River* by Allan W. Eckert; *Recollections of Lewis Bonnett, Jr.* edited by Jared C. Lobdell; *In Search of York* by Robert B. Betts; *Lewis and Clark among the Indians* by James P. Ronda; *Undaunted Courage* by Stephen Ambrose; *The Harvey Girls* by Lesley Poling Kempes; and *Mary Colter: Builder upon the Red Earth* by Virginia L. Grattan. I am grateful to these authors and their careful research; indeed, anyone wishing to learn more about Lewis Wetzel, York, or Mary Colter would be well-served by these books.

Several institutions generously assisted my research for this project, including the West Virginia State Archives, the Ohio State Archives, the Jefferson Library at Monticello, and the Monticello Center for Historic Plants.

Many other family members, friends, instructors, and strangers have assisted me on the path to completion of this project—some through their interest, some through their actions. Though I cannot thank each one individually, I thank them collectively.

Table of Contents

Out of this World, A Legend: Project Report	Page 1
Introduction to the Poems	Page 19
Lewis Wetzel: A Rough History	Page 19
York: A Rough History	Page 21
Mary Elizabeth Jane Colter: A Rough History	Page 23
<u>Wetzel Poems</u>	Page 26
Breastbone	Page 27
The Raft	Page 29
Scalp	Page 30
Killing George Washington	Page 31
The Trial at Fort Washington	Page 32
Ohio	Page 34
The Huntsman after New Orleans	Page 35
At the Tavern	Page 36
Taste of Blood	Page 37
Le Vent de la Mort	Page 38
Lena Crow	Page 39
Deathwind	Page 40
Invocation	Page 41

<u>York Poems</u>	Page 43
Two-Self	Page 44
Juba	Page 45
Wintering in St. Louis	Page 46
What We Brought	Page 47
Captain Lewis Speaks	Page 48
The Bear	Page 49
Big Medicine	Page 50
White Pelicans	Page 51
Coyote	Page 52
My Name	Page 53
Megalonyx	Page 54
Walking-off Place	Page 55
Fort Clatsop	Page 56
Homefire	Page 57
Returned from a Far Country	Page 58
Hired-out	Page 59
First Wife	Page 60
<u>Mary Elizabeth Jane Colter Poems</u>	Page 61
La Posada	Page 62
In Praise of Mimbrenos	Page 63
Sewer Inspector's Daughter	Page 64

The Railroad	Page 65
The Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition	Page 66
Reading the News in Seattle	Page 67
The Architect	Page 68
Field Notes	Page 69
The World in Simplest Terms	Page 70
Three Buildings on the Canyon Rim	Page 71
Hopi's Sipapu	Page 73
Ifcroft	Page 74
Harvey Girls	Page 75
Secrets	Page 77

Out of This Land, A Legend: A Project Report

Each writer has his or her own obsessions. My primary obsession is land and landscape, the character of a place that shapes its people. As writers, we are drawn back again and again to our primal landscapes—to those places that shaped our consciousness and our aesthetic. This is why I am so interested in regional writing: what characteristics of the landscape emerge in the work of Southern poets, or Western poets, New England poets, or Midwestern poets? Robert Lowell, for example, is the consummate New England poet. Not only does the landscape emerge pictorially from his work, but also, the very nature of his writing—dense and weighed down by history—could be said to come from the landscape that formed him. And yet, even Lowell, for all his confessional poetry, felt the need to break out of his own landscape and try on something ‘other’ in his book *History*, in which he imagines Cleopatra, Alexander, Hitler, Atilla the Hun, and other figures who have lived not only in exotic landscapes of place, but also in exotic landscapes of time. This kind of boundary crossing allows a poet freedom of imagination, the ability to break away from himself. Thus, his work is transformed by the imagined landscape, and that landscape is transformed by the poet’s imagination. The term “landscape” encompasses more than geography, flora, and fauna; “landscape” may also refer to exotic time periods, and even to imagined psychological landscapes. My thesis work depends on all three of these understandings of landscape.

My collection of poetry, *Killing George Washington*, traces the American frontier as it progresses both in time and in space. The first section of the book begins in 1764 and covers the territory from West Virginia to New Orleans. The second section begins

in 1803 and travels from Louisville to St. Louis to Oregon and back. The third section begins in 1869 and moves from Minneapolis to the Grand Canyon to Los Angeles. My examination of these geographical and temporal landscapes depends upon my ability to imagine the psychological landscapes of the characters who act as our guides into the wilderness of the frontier. A key to this work is the understanding that a landscape of legend and myth co-exists alongside the “real” landscape. For me, the interest in this project stems from a desire to get under that landscape of myth and examine these characters and their places more fully. I want to take the reader to a familiar landscape and allow him to re-experience it through an unfamiliar voice. At a time when we, as a nation, are increasingly alienated from authentic locations, it is not the landscape alone that interests me, but rather the place’s importance to our national consciousness—the way that the landscape has shaped us as individuals and as a people.

Each section of my thesis contains a series of poems written from the point of view of a relatively unknown historical figure. Each of these characters represents a portion of the American frontier experience. The first is Lewis Wetzel, a so-called “Indian fighter” who lived in the Ohio River Valley during the second half of the eighteenth century. In his own lifetime, Wetzel was both revered as a hero and prosecuted (and convicted) as a murderer. Thomas Jefferson depended on Wetzel and others like him to open the frontier to settlers. Today, history books call Wetzel a serial killer. Wetzel’s portion of the book will examine his sense of being the “First American” to walk the land he covered. His own personal narrative will reveal the historical landscape of the period, a period reliant on men like Wetzel, yet uncomfortable with their

brutality. His monologues will also reveal the landscape of Wetzel's own psyche: the mind of a killer. In a time of stifling political correctness, Wetzel's story offers us a chance to understand the American historical landscape more fully.

The second character/speaker of the thesis is York, William Clark's body servant/slave who accompanied the Lewis and Clark expedition to the Pacific and back. Unlike all of the other men who participated in the Lewis and Clark expedition, York received no land or compensation for his efforts as a member of the party. Upon return, York asked Clark for his freedom; Clark denied him. Reports differ about York's ultimate fate. Some say he died from cholera before he obtained his freedom. Some say Clark finally freed York. And some believe York escaped and was later sighted living among the Crow tribes as a chief. York's story grapples with the relationship between slave and slave owner and challenges conventional ideas about frontier heroes. This section presents both the slave and his owner as whole people, while opening up the experience of discovering the frontier landscape through York's eyes. Thus, I am dependent on my ability to tap into York's consciousness to create these poems. As I will discuss later, the poetry of Davis McCombs has inspired me to work beyond the illusion of gender or racial divides. By re-examining cultural icons and imagining complete lives for historical characters, I hope to challenge our understanding of the American frontier and the people who participated in "opening the wilderness."

The third speaker, Mary Colter, was one of the first, and only, women architects to achieve national recognition for her designs. She worked for the Fred Harvey Company (of Harvey Girl fame), creating the spaces that would house tourists and

travelers as they explored and settled the west. Her buildings became legendary along the Atchison, Topeka, and Sante Fe railroad line for their attention to indigenous detail and their creation of a sense of place. Mary Colter's buildings defined the landscape that houses the romantic ideal of the west we Americans carry in our collective subconscious.

Colter's section recognizes the role of women in opening the west, while exploring the isolation experienced by professional women in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Colter's life reflects an obsession with the land and the people who lived upon it. This obsession resulted in a determination that permeates all stories about western expansion and settlement. Her story also bridges the gap between the Wild West and our modern era. By viewing this span of time from the vantage point of one woman's working life, we can see how little time separates us from the historical figures we have constructed as legends.

To demonstrate where this collection fits into the poetic landscape, I will discuss the work of three poets: Davis McCombs, William Stafford, and, briefly, W.H. Auden. These writers have each tackled the subject of landscape and its role in forming consciousness. Both McCombs and Stafford have chosen to address this topic by looking through the eyes of historical personas.

Davis McCombs: *Ultima Thule*

The most direct inspiration for my thesis project came from Davis McCombs's 2000 book *Ultima Thule*, a poetic anatomy of Kentucky's Mammoth Caves, which includes a sonnet sequence written from the point of view of Stephen Bishop, a slave who

served as a guide in the caves. I was thrilled by McCombs's ability to create an entirely modern consciousness for Bishop, while preserving the particular elements of the historic landscape of Bishop's time and place. While the geological landscape was familiar to McCombs, who had worked as a ranger at Mammoth Cave before writing the book, McCombs chose to look at the place through the psychological landscape of a black slave from the nineteenth century, to understand both the cave and the legendary guide in a new way.

My favorite poem from the collection, "Candlewriting" (3), reveals the landscape of Stephen Bishop's childhood as McCombs imagines it. The poem is short enough to quote fully:

Childhood was a mapless country, a rough
terrain of sinks and outcrops. Not once
did I suspect the earth was hollow, lost
as I was among the fields and shanties.
I remember the wind and how the sounds
it carried were my name, meant me, *Stephen*. . .
called out over the cornfield where I hid.
There was no sound when candlesmoke
met limestone—just this: seven characters
I learned to write with a taper on a stick.
What have they to do with that boy in the weeds?
Am I the letters or the hand that made them?

A word I answer to and turn from, or the flame
that holds the shadows, for a time at least, at bay?

When McCombs, through Bishop's imagined voice, calls childhood a "mapless country," he acknowledges time as landscape, our own lives as a territory to be explored. Later, when Bishop becomes a guide in the caves, his identity comes into question—who is he? The boy slave of childhood or the man slave who maps the landscape under the land he knew as a boy. A new world has opened up to him and has simultaneously thrown his identity into question.

In the book's title poem, "Ultima Thule" (21), Bishop talks about his drive to continue exploring the cave. By now, he has achieved a level of fame because of his explorations and the famous cave map that he created. Bishop has mastered the landscape of the cave by discovering its features and mapping them. He is driven toward unknown Ultima Thule—the furthest distance from the cave's entrance:

I have felt the legend almost leave me.
Elbows, rucksack. No one has ever come
this far—a dusty, Hell-bent crawl, past pits
and keystones, to find myself deep in the ridge.
I was drawn to wonder, the margins of the map.
Breath and a heartbeat. A fading lamp. (8-13)

In this poem, we see that Bishop's identity—his legend—is tied to the landscape of the cave. In order to "find himself" he must move toward the "margins of the map" that he himself has created. This poem equates discovery of landscape with discovery of

self. One must move further from what is known, move beyond the edges of the map, to continue to create one's self and one's landscape.

Much inspiration for my thesis derives from McCombs's poems. This summer, I undertook a trip to the Ohio River Valley to walk in Wetzel's landscape and feel his presence in the land. I found his grave at the end of an unmarked road, and when I stood there in the quiet, overgrown cemetery, I felt a connection with Wetzel, just as McCombs must have felt Bishop's presence in Mammoth Cave. Wetzel's identity is a product of his landscape, and by being in that landscape, I discovered him.

William Stafford: *Stories That Could Be True*

There is much in Stafford's poetry that attracts me, not just in those poems that explore the foreign psychological landscape of a persona's voice, or those poems about the west, which, again, have a logical connection to my thesis, but also in his worldview, which seems to be summed up in "Believing What I know" (191):

Many things that were true
disappeared, grew up in grass,
and now hide from flowers that stare.

I learn from the land. Some day
like a field I may take the next thing
so well that whatever is will be me. (7-12)

This poem admits the possibility that the land shapes us, and yet, that the world we live in might suddenly swerve and become something else, transforming us as well, a belief that is the backbone of my poetry. Much of Stafford's poetry takes this stance. Even the book's title, *Stories That Could Be True*, is so hospitable to my own poetic vision, that even if I did not like his poetic style, I would find myself liking the worldview of these poems.

Stafford's sense of the world as creator and created runs through his poems even when he assumes a persona's voice. It is these poems that relate most directly to my thesis, for he animates frontier and western voices. In "Bi-Focal" (48), Stafford begins:

Sometimes up out of this land
a legend begins to move.

Is it a coming near
of something under love?

Love is of the earth only,
the surface, a map of roads
leading wherever go miles
or little bushes nod. (1-8).

We begin to read the world as surface, as map, and recognize legend as the subtext underlying the world—the "Story That Could Be True." In the closing lines, we are once again in the land, on it, and below it—simultaneously—

As fire burns the leaf
and out of the green appears
the vein in the center line
and the legend veins under there,

So, the world happens twice—
once what we see it as;
second it legends itself
deep, the way it is. (13-20)

This poem posits two worlds. The legendary world, the world created by our own telling, is the real world. The poem is reminiscent of Wallace Stevens's statement that:

If we say that the idea of God is merely a poetic idea, even if the supreme poetic idea, and that our notions of heaven and hell are merely poetry not so called, even if poetry that involves us vitally, the feeling of deliverance, of a release, of a perfection touched of a vocation so that all men may know the truth and that the truth may set them free—if we say these things and if we are able to see the poet who achieved God and placed Him in His seat in heaven in all His glory, the poet himself, still in the ecstasy of the poem that completely accomplished his purpose, would have seemed whether young or old, whether in rags or ceremonial robe, a man who needed what he had created, uttering the hymns of joy that followed his creation." (*Angel* 51)

In other words, the poetry of the world—the legends—create the world, and become the world experienced, the “real” or outer world.

When Stafford ventures into Western territory, he deals with many of the same legendary figures with whom my thesis characters have rubbed elbows. In “For the Grave of Daniel Boone” (142-143), Stafford imagines a time when the West was a giant house to live explore:

The farther he went the farther home grew.

Kentucky became another room;

the mansion arched over the Mississippi;

flowers were spread all over the floor.

He traced ahead a deepening home (1-5)

And later, “Leaving the snakeskin of place after place, / going on—after the trees” (7-8). Boone is a figure whose “picture freezes” as “a story-picture for children” (11-12). With this poem, Stafford places a stone on Boone’s grave, metaphorically and literally, a tribute to, and furthering of, his legend.

In a longer, four-part poem, “In Sublette’s Barn” (158), a third-person narrator tells us about the settler’s move west: “He camped there well but was afraid; once that place to the character / was found, the West had come; no one could undiscover it” (2; 6-7). Sublette recognizes his own role in the opening of the West, the way the land fell before discovery. The man’s life is heroism, though to him, “he had let one deed at a time take him; / then where he was was everywhere” (3; 17-18). My thesis grapples with this same idea: that a man is not a hero or villain so much as a man whose historical and

geographical landscapes lead him to his actions, and therefore, his legendary or historical status. In Sublette's case "he found and kept on finding himself the man / the land meant. It subsided and became a state" (30-31). The narrator links the man to the land. He is simultaneously conquered by and conqueror of the land. The land's will merges with the man's will and the result is a State—a conquered and ordered West. This idea of the world, or the land, constructing what a man's life becomes, can perhaps best be summed up by Stafford's short poem "The Stick in the Forest" (247), in which the speaker declares, "we are all gestures the world makes" (10).

W.H. Auden: *Selected Poems*

For this discussion, perhaps the most relevant example of Auden's use of landscape in his poetry is his series of "Bucolics." I particularly respond to "Lakes" (208) and "Islands" (210), which seem to serve as companion pieces, or inverses of each other. For me, the most interesting thing about these poems is the way that the speaker philosophizes about how a person is shaped by his landscape or reflects his landscape. Consider this passage from "Lakes":

No wonder Christendom did not get really started
Till, scarred by torture, white from caves and jails,
Her pensive chiefs converged on the Ascanian Lake
And by that stork-infested shore invented
The life of Godhead, making catholic the figure
Of three small fishes in a triangle. (13-18)

Auden suggests here that history is inhered in the landscape and cannot be separated from its shaping forces. Auden suggests we use geographical features to our advantage, saying of lakes:

Sly Foreign Ministers should always meet beside one,
For, whether they walk widdershins or deasil,
Its path will yolk their shoulders to one liquid center
Like two old donkeys pumping as they plod;
Such physical compassion may not guarantee
A marriage for their armies, but it helps. (19-24)

“Islands,” the witty companion piece of “Lakes,” relies on the jaunty rhymes of a mariner’s tale:

Beyond the long arm of the Law,
Close to a shipping road,
Pirates in their island lairs
Observe the pirate code. (5-8)

Here again, Auden suggests that geography determines society and law—or lack thereof. If one goes to an island, the poem seems to suggest, one should expect to encounter a certain type of person.

Whereas the Lake was a place for congregation and formation, the Island is the location of exile:

His continental damage done,
Laid on an island shelf,

Napoleon has five years more

To talk about himself.

How fascinating is that class

Whose only member is Me!

Sappho, Tiberius and I

Hold forth beside the sea. (17-24)

Auden's "Bucolics" are charming and mirthful, but they also fall into the overall pattern I have been discussing—the tendency of landscape to shape consciousness. As we conquer land, so are we conquered by it, and molded into its form.

About the Language of *Killing George Washington*

Now that I have discussed the inspiration for and influences on this collection, I would like to talk specifically about the language I have used to represent each of the three historical personas speaking in this work. Lewis Wetzel could not read or write. Most of the stories he would have told, and most of the stories told about him, come through oral tradition. Indeed, I first learned of Wetzel from my own parents, who hinted of a wild ancestor in our family's past. Thus, I have chosen to represent Wetzel in a mythic voice that relies upon the traditions of storytelling: his transitions are non-logical, lyrical. He sometimes sings, sometimes pontificates, sometimes speaks as an echo out of the past. Wetzel repeats himself; he is verbose; he exaggerates and bends the truth; he speaks in riddles and rhymes. Many of Wetzel's poems are based on a five-line stanza.

His cadence is “speechifying” more than poetic, though sometimes, his poems utilize formal rhyme for its oracular power.

York, on the other hand, though also unable to read or write, uses a very terse, imagistic language. He speaks in pictures and events, rarely attempting to raise his experience to a mythic level. Rather, he is simply a human voice wanting to be heard. Most of his poems focus on a single idea or event rather than a narrative. York is more observer and recorder than storyteller, just like his counterparts Lewis and Clark, who kept detailed journals of their expedition. Yet, we also learn York’s own inner story through this sequence of his experiences. York’s poems follow no formal rules. His lines are short; he does not employ formal rhyme. He uses few articles or modifiers, sticking as closely as possible to the actual, physical world and its immediate impact on his own consciousness.

Finally Mary Colter, the most educated and literate of the three historical personas, uses perhaps the starkest language of the three. As a visual artist, she is somewhat obsessive, driven to understand forms from every angle. Her poetic forms of choice, the sestina and the ghazal, explore selected words through multiple meanings and functions. Colter’s language is stripped down. Like York, she uses few articles or modifiers. But unlike York, she often transcends the physical world and begins to speak in abstractions. She is much more likely to connect ideas and images in nonlinear ways. She rarely speaks in narrative.

Each of these three personas has a very distinct voice. Together, these voices make up a collage of human experience on the American frontier.

Conclusion

This collection seeks to unearth the artifacts of three American lives, each distinct in its mission, but each essential and vital to the expansion of this country west. In a way, America's consciousness is inherently tied to western expansion and the myths that populate that temporal landscape. By examining these characters and revisioning legends as lives, I hope to reveal something about the current state of our union. Are we living in the America we wanted? And how does the act of creating legend—either good or evil—allow us to turn a blind eye to our own actions in the creation of history and national identity? If the reader asks this one question, I will be satisfied.

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Killing George Washington

Sometimes up out of this land

a legend begins to move.

—William Stafford

Introduction

I will not engage the age-old question truth in poetry. Instead, I will simply state that much of what the reader will encounter in these pages has its grounding in reported history, while much else is imagined by the poet. Any readers wishing to further dissect the matter may peruse the following rough histories about Lewis Wetzel, York, and Mary Colter. If inspired, those same readers may choose to conduct their own research.

Lewis Wetzel: A Rough History

Lewis Wetzel, a so-called “Indian fighter,” lived in the Ohio River Valley during the second half of the eighteenth century. In his own lifetime, Wetzel was both revered as a hero and prosecuted, and convicted, as a murderer. Thomas Jefferson depended on Wetzel and others like him to open the frontier to settlers. Wetzel’s physical characteristics—long black hair, ability to run through the forest and reload his gun without stopping—were part of the composite of frontiersmen’s characteristics that James Fenimore Cooper used as inspiration for his Deerslayer.

Lewis Wetzel was born in 1763, one of many children of a frontier family who moved to Wheeling Creek, in what is now West Virginia, when Lewis was only a year old. Lewis grew up learning how to be a master woodsman. At the age of 12, Lewis and his younger brother Jacob were working in the fields of their home when a party of Indians—possibly Wyandot—shot Lewis in the chest, then abducted both children. Lewis and Jacob were later able to escape, in spite of Lewis’s injury. Lewis vowed to

spend the rest of his life perfecting his fighting skills in order to ward off future dangers from Indian tribes.

Many years later, Lewis's father John was killed by Indians on the Ohio River. One, and possibly two, of Lewis's brothers were similarly killed. Of course, these deaths were part of a two-way exchange of killings between the white settlers and the Indian tribes along the Ohio River. Though many of Lewis's heroic deeds are recorded, such as saving a young bride from abduction; defending a fort against a major attack; less well known is the exact number of people Lewis himself killed. Sometimes he killed in self-defense, but he also went in search of Indian parties to attack. Some people speculate that Wetzel killed more than 100 people in his lifetime, usually as the aggressor.

Today, history books call Wetzel a serial killer; during his own lifetime, Lewis was a popular figure, even though he was reportedly socially inept and preferred to talk to animals and children during community gatherings. However, his legendary abilities as a woodsman and "protector" of settlements made him a folk hero. Towards the end of his life, Wetzel was sentenced to death for murdering George Washington, a "tame" Indian who was an ally of the territorial governor, but due to extreme pressure from the general public, Lewis's death sentence was suspended on the condition that he leave the area, present day Marietta, Ohio and Cincinnati, Ohio.

In exile, Lewis traveled to New Orleans, where some accounts report he spent time in prison, possibly due to involvement in a counterfeit ring, though no definitive records exist about his life during this period. He later returned to his home in Wheeling Creek and continued to travel up and down the Ohio River and its territories before

finally succumbing to yellow fever in 1808 in Natchez, Mississippi. Wetzel was buried in Mississippi, but in the 1950s, a Wetzel enthusiast had Wetzel's body disinterred and buried in the McCreary Cemetery outside of Wheeling, West Virginia. The McCreary Cemetery is a quiet, peaceful place.

York: A Rough History

York was the slave and body servant of William Clark, famous co-captain of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. York was born a slave in the early 1770s, probably just a few years after William Clark was born in 1770. Likely, the young boys played together. When York was still a boy, he was chosen to become William's body servant, which meant he attended William morning, noon, and night. This was a relatively high position within the plantation slave community, affording such luxuries as better food and clothing.

During the Lewis and Clark expedition, York served as a full member of the Corps of Discovery; he hunted food, poled the keelboat along the Missouri River, carried his fair share during exhausting portages, even had his private parts nearly frozen off during a brutal winter in the Bitterroot Mountains. Unlike all of the other men who accompanied the Lewis and Clark Expedition, York received no land or compensation for his efforts as a member of the party. Upon the return from the Pacific Ocean, York asked Clark for his freedom; Clark denied him. Reports differ about York's ultimate fate. Some historians believe Clark kept York enslaved till his death from Cholera. Some say Clark finally freed York and set him up in a drayage business, at which York failed. (This

report largely stems from a sketch written by Washington Irving years later.) However, in 1832, one eyewitness reported seeing a black man who called himself York living as a chief among the Crow Indians. That man claimed to have traveled to the Pacific and back with Lewis and Clark and to have later escaped to freedom.

Little is known about York. He could not read or write, and therefore left no record of himself. Most of what is known about him comes from the journals and letters of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark themselves. Much of what Clark wrote incriminates himself: he resented York for seeking his freedom and planned to rent him out to a brutal master as punishment. It is likely York had been married before the expedition departed, and therefore was separated from his wife during the expedition. Later, he asked William Clark to assign him to a job near his wife, who was owned by another family, in Louisville. Soon, however, his wife was sold “down the river” to Mississippi, and it is likely York never saw her again.

We do know from his own writings that William Clark thought of York as an extension of himself and was very troubled by York’s repeated requests for freedom after returning from the expedition. It is interesting to speculate, after their lifelong closeness, what this rift between master and slave could have meant to the men on a personal level, and how William’s disquiet over the rift may shed light on the nature of their relationship up to that point.

Mary Elizabeth Jane Colter: A Rough History

Mary Colter was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1869. Her parents soon moved to Colorado and California before settling in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where Mary grew up. Mary was fascinated by art and design—especially native Indian drawings—from an early age. After Mary's father died, Mary convinced her mother to send her to art school in San Francisco so that she could eventually support the family. Her mother, Rebecca, agreed, and Mary, her older sister Harriet, and Rebecca moved to Oakland, California. Mary commuted to San Francisco for school. After graduation, Mary secured a teaching job back in Minneapolis.

Mary taught art and gave community lectures on architecture and design for almost 15 years before she finally caught the attention of restaurateur and hotelier Fred Harvey, who was famous for his hospitality up and down the Atchison, Topeka, and Sante Fe railroad. Harvey hired Mary to design the store at one of his hotels. Later, he hired her as the architect of a new building on the south rim of the Grand Canyon. The purpose of this building was to showcase the Indian art collection that belonged to the Fred Harvey Company, and to sell Indian-made souvenirs to Harvey customers. Mary designed Hopi House, based on the ruins of Hopi communities in Arizona. Harvey had no more work for her, so Mary secured a job in Seattle, working as a designer for the Frederick and Nelson department store.

Harriet and Rebecca moved to Seattle with Mary. During that year, Rebecca died of pernicious anemia. The following year, 1910, Mary was finally offered a full-time job with the Fred Harvey Company designing new buildings. Mary was forty-one.

For the rest of her life, Mary defined a new style of architecture, now called National Park Rustic, by designing buildings based on indigenous traditions. She often imagined histories for her buildings, which helped guide her to organic, idiosyncratic designs that looked as if they had existed for centuries. For one building, she even imported cobwebs to make the place look ancient and lived-in. Whether they knew it or not, travelers and visitors to the West experienced the land and culture as defined by Mary Colter's sensibility. Her designs dotted the railroad lines from Chicago to Los Angeles.

A small concentration of Mary Colter's designs still stands around the south rim of the Grand Canyon; this grouping includes Hopi House, Hermit's Rest, The Watchtower, The Look-Out, and Phantom Ranch. Her favorite project, a hotel called La Posada, has been restored and is open for guests in Topeka, Kansas.

Very little is known about Mary's personal life, except that she was devoted to her sister, Harriet. During her employment with the Fred Harvey Company, Mary divided her time between an apartment in Kansas City, Kansas, a house in Altadena, California, where Harriet lived, and later died, and the railroad. After she retired, Mary moved to Sante Fe, New Mexico, where she died in 1958 at the age of 88. I find it remarkable how little is remembered or written about Mary's personal, and more specifically, romantic life, especially given that she died less than fifty years prior to my writing. Even Wetzel reportedly had a sweetheart, and we know York had a wife, as well as many lovers among the Indian tribes he met during his journey west. Mary's forceful

personality and creative genius certainly would have attracted admirers. It is left to us to imagine who they might have been.

Lewis Wetzel

1764-1808



Indian Fighter

**Employed by: White settlers, including brother of U.S. president James Madison;
the United States Government; and himself.**

Breastbone

Who owns what is lost—God
or something darker? I've seen a devil
in the trees, his fingers stretch like roots
across the river valley. There's a war
and I don't know whose side I'm on.

I was a boy when Indians shot me
and dragged me to the wilderness.
The bullet took a piece of breastbone,
so I kept my hand upon the hole, afraid
I'd bleed to death, till sleep

caught me and I drifted into shadow.
My soul leapt from my chest
and danced around the fire, then ran
into the woods, straggly and thin,
only half a soul, really.

Anew, I sprang to life, whispered, "Jacob,
brother—let's steal on home.
We can make the Ohio by dawn, we just
got to make the River." On the bank
a snake was rubbing off his skin.

I said, "Jacob, that's an omen
if I ever seen one." Then the Ohio
was running with blood, and I said,
"Jacob, that there's the apocalypse."
"Lewis," he says, "you gone crazy

with delirium." Jacob saw the hand
on the wounded chest. He didn't see
the snake and he didn't see the blood,
and he didn't see the shriveled soul
watching on the shore.

Now he's out, the poor devil can't get back in.
Stalking 'round my campfires.
I know what he's looking for.
He drifts behind the trees. When I sleep
he hovers over me, scrapes at the scar.

If I wake, he hops and kicks
and scuttles toward the woods.
Some nights I yell, "Scat, demon!"
Other nights, I'm lonesome, and damn
if he don't seem like good company.

He's looking for the breastbone,
that butterfly over the heart, that piece
torn from me. All this time, I don't tell him
he's looking in the wrong place:
they shot me in the cornfield.

Certain rains, before a storm, any burden
I have to carry, the rifle's recoil, all these
remind me of what's missing. All these echo
in the hollow place where the hole opened up
and my soul leapt out.

The Raft

At dawn with Jacob,
on the branches and the logs
we cobbled together, I drifted
face down, catching glimpses
of my own eye between the cracks.

Blood seeped through my sassafrassed heart,
one drop and the river turned incarnadine,
sweet and calm and full of killing.
I heard the calling of the morning bird
across the water's edge

and I said, "Yes, I'm crossing over."
Then I cared not for Virginia,
or the corn or constant gloom
of forests, for the river was my bride,
and I was not afraid.

Scalp

Settlement men talk of peace, but my gun
points its finger toward the wilderness.
What I have witnessed must be atoned for:
my father gunned down in the border war,
his body a sack of bullet holes.

That day, a pact was sealed between us.
I have honed my body into an instrument
of terror—muscles tighten like ropes
against a straining animal;
the weapon I carry is my own heart;

if I strike them in their camps
will they not hunt me in numbers?
My hair grows longer every year, drying
by the river's bank, the pelt of a sleek animal,
I become what they want to kill.

Killing George Washington

When Harmar called for red men
to make peace where the rivers join,
I answered my own call,
what I'd sworn to, lived by, a day
no different from any other.

And the night before the killing
neither was it what you'd call unusual,
no stars with tails, no blotting of the moon,
all the rivers ran the right direction,
and the sun was courteous in its coming.

I waited by the roadside not wondering who.
Didn't matter to me, just doing my part,
as the sun did by rising, as the river by flowing,
as the blood did by spilling.
All God's servants worked together.

Kill Devil bucked in my hands like a colt at the gate;
the Indian fell from his horse.
Tomahawk leapt forward for his prize,
and I took the scalp for my belt to do Him honor.
But the bastard didn't die, not at first.

Someone called Harmar and he ran from the fort,
knelt beside this breathing corpse. Harmar said,
"George Washington, who was it killed you?"
I knew something was wrong then, if a red beast
was wearing a great man's name.

George was a long-winded bastard. But his breath
and my name were the same: *Le Vent de la Mort*.
Then death did his part. You see how it went wrong,
how mostly the killing was the same, but this time
the white men turned and called it murder.

The Trial at Fort Washington

John Cleeves Symmes was a fine-looking man
But I found his aspect the worried kind,
like he feared a hant or spirit coming up behind.
He had a new coat, and a knotted tie, but skin

redder than an apple. That's how I knew
he was part of this country, of a sort
to do right. I spoke in the man's court,
tried to make him see what was true.

*"You say this Indian came for peace,
calling himself George Washington.
Then say I've done not murder, but treason,
for if all a red man needs to call peace*

*in this Ohio territory
is to take the name of his enemy, why then,
I have killed all our upper statesmen.
Declare war against me.*

*They say I murdered the Indian.
If so, Judge, then say I murdered
not one brutal beast but one hundred.
I'm a hunter, not a subtle man.*

*Explain the finer points of peace and war.
Five Indians round a campfire: If I pass on
and tomorrow, they kill your woman,
who will comfort you? General Harmar?*

*What does he offer that satisfies?
A paper treaty? A fort protected by the slow
muddy Muskingum, and the mighty Ohio?
I've watched the rivers run into your territories.*

*I know what waits there for your people.
Go once into that wilderness alone
And bring with you your woman,
your sons in their light cradles.*

*In the night what god will you pray to?
Will you hope the cradles turn to coffins?
Or that the savage hearts will soften,
take your boys, and raise them up to slay you?*

*Then maybe you'll begin to understand
the arrowhead pointed at my breast
since I first drank mother's milk. Rest?
There's none. Killing, that's the price of land."*

Ohio

During dry spells you could walk across her.
My feet knew the stones by heart.
She was my river, and I drank her, slept beside her,
bled into her. I started to feel

the river was in me somehow, blue
under my skin. Then I knew, ain't enough
to have the start of a river, nor the middle neither.
You got to know the ending too.

So I followed her. When I'd meet a man,
He'd say, "Where you headed?"
"Ohio River," I'd say. Man liked telling me,
"This 'eres the Mississippi. Ya'll done missed it."

Some folks like to say you done wrong
and some folks think naming a thing makes it so.
I knew my river by the taste of her,
the taste of my brother and father too.

Man don't forget his own blood,
just cause it goes around calling itself some other name.
Where her water sings, that's where I'm found.
She whispers my way down, Natchez, New Orleans,

Ocean-bound—When I saw her spilling
to the sea like that, I wondered did she run
the whole world round? Ohio, if I fell into your arms
would you carry me home?

The Huntsman after New Orleans

I was confused by city talk, the ladies
turning heads was something I could hardly see
for what it was, small gold coins in tiny hands;
I didn't know the ways.

(He never takes his hand from the barrel of the gun.)

Do you want me to say I lived like a dog?
It was worse, naked, two years on the black stone
of the jail. Say it was women, or dirty money.
In truth, I got lost without my, my—

(He's disoriented, scratches at a scar on his chest.)

hatred will spur a man beyond love,
the one the birthing of the other,
a marriage if you want to call it that.
I loved so that I hated, and I hated
so that I lived.

(He drinks.)

After I was freed, I never moved the same,
I don't mean the outside, mind, though I was weak,
but the inside engine that powered the will,
the hunger, had been left like a fire
through the night, untended.

(He leans forward, teeth rotted, neck tight and knotted.)

I waited for the taste to rise again.
I waited and I watched the empty woods, the shadows
our mouths had made, and I moved through trees
wondering what had become of my prey,
what had become of me.

At the Tavern

First, there's a rising wind—
like a scream—before a killing.
I use a flintlock rifle, a tomahawk,
a scalp knife, or nothing
more than my bare hands.

Once, to get a hundred dollar bounty,
I walked 200 miles for one kill.
Some say I carried a good thing too far.
From inside the settlement wall
there's a lot folks can say.

Most times, I wait till they're on me,
close, then shoot. Mind, I don't sit there
like an old cow waiting for an arrow.
I'm in the trees, taking my measure,
using my wit. That's why God made a tree.

In the summer, the whole world turns forest,
and mine's the first foot on a place.
I'm the first American, I get to thinkin'.
That's peace—not a treaty in a stranger's fist.

I never knew that Indian, see,
doesn't mean I didn't hate him. Fear—
yours, I mean, that's why I'm here, son.
You're the damned reason I'm here.
Think about that while sipping your whiskey.

Taste of Blood

Once I was careless and captured.
An old man begged them let me go—
seems he forgot the taste of blood.
The young ones hollered and kicked him
till he crept like a dog to the trees.

The men fixed up the stake
while women gathered firewood,
and I asked my god for a swift end.
All was as it should be.

Then the old dog came creeping
from the forest to my feet.
He led me to the river on his horse.
Who ever heard of a dog on a horse?
When he freed me, I shot him.

Le Vent de la Mort

If I had a hound dog, I'd call him Shawnee
But this here Kill Devil makes fine company.
Yes I got me a gun instead, my boy,
I got me a gun instead.

*O where, where is Black Betty?
I want to kiss her sweet lips.*

Preacher says Vengeance belongs to the Lord,
But God's up in heaven and I'm in this world,
So I go to kill in His stead, my boy,
I go to kill in His stead.

*O fetch me a glass of Black Betty!
I want to kiss her sweet lips.*

Some say I've been marked since the day I was born,
And some say when I'm dead I'll still scream from my tomb,
'Cause I'm *le vent de la mort*, my boy,
I am *le vent de la mort*.

*So drink, drink to Black Betty!
I'm dying to kiss her sweet lips.*

Lena Crow

I been saving this story for a time when I might feel something by it. Four girls lay sleeping. Come morning only one woke, the others bludgeoned in their beds. Folks found Lena hiding out among the corn crib, gone mute.

This, in a time when I still felt something at the sight of a crushed skull, the bits of bone and blood that mingled with the girls' long hair, the black of the crow.

After the peace, some Indians came calling begging for food. Lena, her tongue restored, recognized her sisters' bridegrooms. Her brothers did what was right.

Some might say a man like me has no faith. I got *only* faith, the justice I believe in, the sanctity of death, the right to die for your sins.

You believe what you will. I'm tired of telling stories, the captors, victims all the same. All were saved, all died. What else is there to tell?

My mother tried to teach me language but the longer I live, the stranger words feel on my tongue, and it's the company of men that fills me with a certain fear.

My knife, my gun, the tomahawk speak for me, and I wish they spoke a looser tongue, could whisper to women, the scent on their hands, the curve of their backs the way a woman moves like a language unto itself unspoken, untranslatable.

Deathwind

For forty years, I carried death close to me—
the bullet in my chest returned
with the tides and the blood from my gun
flooded the banks of the Ohio.
Then the fever come.

Now they whisper my name to babies
who suckle at red breasts.
I am the lullaby that rocks them to sleep—
my gun, the report of the thundercloud,
my bullet, the lightning's flash.

I run through the trees in the night,
calling to the living, calling to the dead:
I am the wind that rides at the warrior's back,
the ghost of the Empire, the great white wave—
I am the death that comes for the red man.

Invocation

You want my stories to come out songs,
I'd rather fiddle while you dance
than sing another word. History wants
to leave me, lose me, plain unspeak me.

(Let his story fit my breath—)

If I had a song, I'd sing the river, the words
for stones, I'd sing the trees, the words for trees,
the ways of trees, I'd hold the trees
in my mouth like a word,

(Let there be a haunting refrain—)

hold the river in my mouth like a word,
hold my brother in my mouth like a word,
hold my father in my mouth like a word,
my mother, my mouth, my word.

(Look to the grave, the grassy stones—)

You wonder where the mystery lies, or maybe
you said my story lies. Let this be a book of death,
and let's record each act of killing, a history
worthy of recalling each man, each eye,

(He's ranting now, or does he glorify?)

each final breath 'neath fallen tree.
I offered everything to death
I gave back childhood, speaking less,
feeling more, turned animal.

(Write that. Animal. No don't. He's—)

Now I'm the one the animal fears. What is the word
for what I am? I live by cycles of the moon, I fit
the hardness of the earth. I haven't been invented yet.
Don't ask again. I'm tired of talking, listen—

(A wind is rattling the bones—)

Let's get to fiddling now, I'll play the song,
the one you like with the little boy,
where everybody ends up dead.
You make the words, I'll be the tune,
and I'll be moving in the trees.

York

1770s-1834 (?)



Slave

Employed by: William Clark

Two-Self

Before I was Big Medicine
I was William's boy.
I danced for the mistress,
turning cartwheels by the big house
to be chosen.

After that I wore a full suit
of tow linen and talked like him
until in the dark, you couldn't tell
where William ended and I began.

When he told me to, I danced
for the Arikara, my shirt off
in the firelight.
They touched me, my skin,
after so many months alone
among the white men.

When he hunts the river's edge,
I carry his gun. The buffalo
we carry home together.
Nights, I swim to the sandy bar
to pick watercress for his dinner.

How many times have I held
the razor to his throat?
How many times has he called me
his boy? Some twenty summers,
I have kept his body;
he belongs to me, and I him.

Juba

My sister raised her fist
when she was born,
and rejected the breast,
her gums like tiny teeth.
Monday's child,
they named her Juba.
I haven't seen her
near twenty years.

My mother told
of an African King,
his infancy
a trophy of war.
Raised among Caesars,
he shone, a jewel
in white marble,
He learned to read
and write, returned
to rule, a slave king.

I can't put pen to paper,
but I know what it means
to sleep in the master's house,
to dream my sister's sharp
white teeth, her full-grown fist.

Wintering in St. Louis

Collins got drunk and Hall
with him, tapping whiskey
he was meant to guard.
The men did the flogging,
gleeful, drunk themselves
on the feel of leather.

I watched from the hut
as the lash struck skin,
a hundred for Collins,
fifty for Hall.

The dog, Seaman,
crouched by Lewis,
his whimpering veiled
by the shrieks of white men.

At first, he barked
till he tired of his own pleading
and surrendered to the blood,
his head bent
against the leg of his master.

What We Brought

We stowed the promise of trade
in canvas sacks, stacked
on the bottom of the keelboat.
Each sack bore the markings of a tribe,
a name we called them by.
Our coming meant yards
of red flannel, mirrors, awls,
brass kettles, and ivory combs.
What they wanted—rifles,
powder, balls—we did not bring;
instead, we showed our own.

Captain Lewis Speaks

“Children,” he called them, “Children,
your New White Father will provide for you.”
From a sack he pulled pointed hats
and coats of red lace.
Then he passed out coins,
Jefferson on one side, two hands
clasped on the other.
The chiefs talked, their heads bent
under the weight of the hats,
coins flashing in their hands.
Then they turned and asked for whiskey.

The Bear

Around Indian fires,
children ran from me,
so I charged to make them shriek
and fall down laughing.

William cried, "Bear, I tame you,"
so I came to his seat and lay
under his power, my body
bent to his will.

We had played this as boys
dreaming of what lay beyond our farm.
The land felt large to us then,
the horizon a kingdom
for other princes.

But I find him lord of me
here as well, the rivers,
mountains, the lines he draws
on maps, do not break
his sovereign will or might.

At noon he surveys the sun,
at night the moon, king even
of their coming and going.
And he it is who names the star,
the bright fixed point
we move against.

Big Medicine

They'd never seen a skin so black,
even among my own people.
A squaw led me to her lodge
while the husband kept watch.
He too wanted good fortune,
big medicine.

She tasted my skin, tried to rub
the blackness from me. If wanting
could have washed me clean,
I'd have been white since boyhood;
I'd have saved myself in the icy cricks
of Virginia and risen from the waters
freezing, free.

White Pelicans

August, a blanket of white
embraced the water
till we floated soundless
on its soft breast. A bend
in the river revealed
thousands of them,
preening and grooming
with extravagant beaks.
They fluttered and breathed
on the sandbar, a sea
of white, till Lewis
aimed his rifle at the center
and fired, and they lifted
to the air, a mass of wings
and feathers, a particulate angel
confused by thunder
on a cloudless day.

Coyote

He watched me from the shore
and together we saw the August moon
dipping herself into the waters of the Missouri.
His fur went nearly white in the darkness
and I was afraid when he called me brother.

The next day, he trailed us and I saw him
rolling in the tall grass beside the river.
William called the Captain when he spied him,
saying, "Something for your specimen collection."

"That prairie wolf," I said,
"He don't aim to get killed tonight."
"That so?" said William. "Well, I aim to kill him.
Only one of us will come away satisfied."

We took to shore, my gun in the lead.
I walked heavy in my boots and rustled my arms
against the tall grasses. Coyote ran
into the deep prairie, laughing between his teeth.

My Name

On the river they named places
for each other, for the dog,
for me. *York's Eight Islands,*
York's River, the first ownership
I'd been allowed. To own so much
at once! My mouth tightened
around the sounds of possession.

Megalonyx

All day, as we polled the keelboat
through churning water,
Captain Lewis combed the shores
for specimens, suspending
leaf and bird, the *petit chien*,
in boxes to be carried back
to Jefferson.

When I met him, the President
took from the shelf a heavy book
and turned to the skeleton
of an ancient beast, raised
on its haunches.

Megalonyx, he called it,
that name his own invention.
“Who knows what we may find
across the prairies?” he said.
“A mountain of salt
along Missouri’s banks.
Volcanoes in the Badlands.”

I watched Lewis turn powder
to ink and scratch his notes
on two kinds of paper,
a thousand words
for the head of a bird.

But I collected nameless
wind across the grasses, the space
between land and sky
that could not be catalogued,
its bones laid open to the great man.

Walking-off Place

The west is a walking-off place.
Whole villages move
with the river, with the weather.
They leave their ghosts in empty towns.

Our own man Shannon went missing.
Three days the Captain worried
till we found him on the shore
waiting to rejoin his kind.

Up where the waters divide
we wandered, skins withering on bone.
I feared I'd stagger
off the rocky, bitter teeth.

Then I got such a notion
that freedom must feel this way,
a single choice: walk on
or drop into the sky.

Fort Clatsop

I woke from slavery to a dream
of winter, the eternal rain
the rushing of waves against the shore
with hardly any whiskey left to share.
Still the redskins offered women
to keep us warm, and by the heat of their skin,
I measured my being.

One man taught me
to make a drum from elk's hide.
How we tired of elk!
Elk and rain. I longed
for the Mandan corn,
the blue fields of quamash
that rippled like an oasis
in brown valleys.

One day a great fish
washed onshore. I ran
past the salt-making hut
to see the beast lie black
and still against the sand.
I'd imagined him with scales
like the beasts I'd seen
on William's maps.

But he was soft,
skin covered in whiskers,
barnacles, and rime.
One man kicked him,
others cut the flesh with knives.
Seabirds pecked in the eddies
of his body. He seemed to breathe.
His eye bulged, dangerous and wet.

Homefire

I must have looked changed to them,
body hardened by the Bitterroots,
muscles fed on the flesh of buffalo,
the pink rush of salmon.
But could they see beneath my skin
the strange new self I carried
to my mother's hearth—that I had been
three years a man, and nothing more?
While women hurried to prepare a feast,
I told my tales around the fire, tongue
tripping on freedom. They crowded me
like ghosts from another life, black faces
feeding on a sudden terror.

Returned from a Far Country

We met a woman by that name.
If I'd known her language,
I'd have caught her behind a tree
saying, "How will I come home again?
Now the spray of the Pacific
has salted this skin."

In the heart of the Bitterroots,
I named myself Source of All Rivers—
I had straddled the divide,
the water of two worlds in my veins.
I walked behind my master yet I chose it.
His skin sagged like mine around his bones,
and the cold cut us both the same.

When I returned to the homeplace,
I named myself The River's Secret
for I knew the distant riddle
of Missouri's source, freedom
won and lost when I looked
from the top of the world.

But when I pass over Jordan
who shall I be then?
When my body drops to bones,
will I feel the terrible bite of freedom,
and will I slip alone into God's wilderness?
Tell me, how will I go home,
and what will my name be when I die?

Hired-out

Captain Lewis is dead.
I heard through stories
how he cut himself with razors
after bullets failed, and said,
“I am so strong; it is so hard to die,”
the world he found not enough to fill him.

Emptiness welcomed each of us home.
I grieved for William, his great heart
still beating. Today we are so far apart,
I think we may not be reconciled,
and two will be two forever. Friend,
in death, I wonder, will you meet him
somewhere beyond the Pacific?
And will I meet you?

First Wife

I dream her body some nights, the curve of her
stolen and held against me, a stranger.
She has gone to Natchez and won't be back
this lifetime. I wonder what she carried
in her womb and what new husband she found
in that dark, deep country.
What is freedom, now she is gone?
A vast ocean, discovered, unrevealing,
I think only of the way home, a familiar bed.
She is not the only woman, nor I the only man.

Mary Elizabeth Jane Colter

1869-1958



Architect

Employed by: The Fred Harvey Company

La Posada

Now I am old, my false teeth click
in rumbling automobiles.
Young men glare at me on dirt roads.

I put myself to bed with milk
and whiskey and hide empty bottles
in the neighbors' dust bin.

Bodies of soldiers litter Europe.
I built a house for their dreams,
but they have chosen dreamless sleep.

Surrounded by the art of my life
I beg my own sleep. La Posada dwindles
into finite pieces of desert sand.

Gods who dwell beneath the earth,
take me where each form holds meaning.
Accept the sand painting of my life,

the patterns have tried to worship you.
Who will come? Who will rub
the sands of my life into this loose flesh?

In Praise of Mimbrenos

Like the Sioux drawings I hid in childhood
to spare them from my mother's cleansing
wrath against the smallpox.

I feared the death of desire more—
the breath each creature held, the stark horse
against white paper, the clustered

women in bright wraps.

Wild hare riding a crescent in air:

I praise you for your arched back,

the figure against the ground of childhood
defined form in space
landscape given meaning by your lithe power.

Sewer Inspector's Daughter

Beneath the city, I draw caverns that form and serve the earth
we are defined by empty spaces
useful rock, layered
art
a second city ghosts the city,
the parts of us we flush away, water
from a leaving storm, flows, converges, toward cataracts

we walk above the charneled tunnels—arched, miracled
absolute forms of darkness
stone wall drips of
water
vanishing point of
This Great Country Of Ours,
catacombs of stone, home cradled in the earth, Father,

Mother irons your clothes as a way of mourning
your absence leaves a space
I walk into your echo
life
underweaves
the continent I want to make
our way from Minneapolis opens west without you

The Railroad

Atchison, Topeka, and Sante Fe, the railroad
ricocheted against the tongue, a rhythm railroad.
In youth, I hungered West, sang the railroad
whistle clatter over land; I had to ride the railroad

toward the Indian drawings I kept under my bed.
How many nights I fell asleep, lamp still burning,
for one last look. *Why* were they? Mother scolded,
but she feared me, feared losing me to the railroad.

Born in Pittsburgh, how could I not have building
at my core, the smell of cut wood, coughed up
smoke of coke and ore, steel, source of the West.
Instead of blood, my veins ran fast with railroad.

I longed for life uncluttered by man's artifice.
But San Francisco, perched on the land's thumb, offended me;
her houses pranced like showgirls dressed in finery.
Nights, my strained head pounded like the railroad.

I learned from the hurt, and looked for things I loved:
discrete green trees scattered summer's golden grasses.
Winter fog rolled over coastal ranges, inevitable
slow flood, terrifying like the thrill of the railroad.

When I first saw the Canyon, I heard her whisper
what she wanted, how to build her kivas (though
I didn't know the word yet). She said every man,
every *thing* had led to our meeting, even the railroad.

The Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition

I watch from the windows of Frederick and Nelson
captivity of glass and dress forms, furniture;
Indians barter on the steps of the department store.
Across the road, men are making a building; stone—

from twenty floors up, pressing down on workers
below—dropped on the earth by an unkind god,
forcing wind into gusty channels. Bowls, totems, blood
seen from the inside out. Rushing nowhere.

The city architects work toward the great expo.
La Renaissance Française, straight from New York.
Domed paeans to Europe, combed walkways fork
through crystal palaces with pools. An Eskimo

village in the amusement park. It troubles me:
way of life frozen in an igloo, museum piece
up for sale. Down in Arizona, my Hopi House
on the Canyon's rim offers a similar curiosity.

I, too, have built what's coming. I pace
behind my window dressing. Model Ts, identical,
rut the tortured roads, insects swarming from their hill.
A mountain in the distance sometimes shows its face.

Reading the News in Seattle

This year, I watch the sunless sky sap life from mother's skin
as she withers like fruit, left too long in the bowl. My own skin
grows lined and creased, country to seek refuge from, strata of skin
on skin, sky on sky. Seattle's rain, a constant assault on skin,

becomes its own kind of desert. For the first time, I am old,
while China crowns a three-year-old Emperor. Poor boy,
condemned by blood. As I grow orphaned, I grow free;
rivers flow from me, like Vesuvius shattering its skin.

Blind men see what they want—I reel with Picasso,
while critics decry *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, whores
in African masks. Help me see from every way at once.
Help me drink the bodies through my skin.

When metal, wood, and stone are not enough, when blood
drains from the buildings we make, we'll build ghost cities
with ghostly breath. Newspapers hail the end
of reliance on God's earth. Plastic, they say, is smooth as skin.

The Architect

Has my life been so small, crisscrossing this West?
The architect plans a city in Persia. Atavistic ruins.

The architect builds the way a man will build:
recreating himself, scattering women in ruins.

His edges cut like razor into rock;
societies fawn over one man's ruins.

My students lionize the architect with mimicry.
Mary, I whisper, look past them to Oraibi, Arizona's desert ruins.

Field Notes

Forms found in rock:

A woman in a bright-hued skirt
blows upon a horned flute—
she is betrothed to a stone god

on the far wall of the canyon,
with a bird-beaked nose
(his life longer than flesh)—

the canyon's their unhappy bed.
Also note: footprints of a three-toed man,
the small mouth of a fish,

ridges in rock like petals,
like water, like my lover's hair,
the swirl of breasts,

marriage of stone on stone,
eye meets eye, lip lip,
arm encircles back, gathers

cascades of stone hair.
Stone bellies expel stone breath.
Centuries of upswelling,

terrifying depth of rock, strata,
form, the apparition of,
the tyranny of, surfaces,

and in the distance comes
the bright boat of crescent moon
the sound of wild hare laughing.

The World in Simplest Terms

Stark
outline—
one bird
on red
stone.

Three Buildings on the Canyon Rim

A lantern shows the way to Hermit's Rest—
rough arch (how carefully I chose the stones),
uneven wall (I made the men tear down the straight),
mission bell (authentically cracked),
its tone deadened (imperfection that aches to be satisfied),
miles of cobweb (imported to signify age).

I made a spirit live there, a kind of mage
who left the world to find his rest
in the canyon's wind and solitude. He satisfied
himself through rough handiwork. His stones
formed a crooked chimney; fingers, cracked
from cold and prayer, could not make it straight.

"The Watchtower ain't built straight."
Men laughed at my design on the page;
Only I had flown the far desert, cracked
open secret places of the Hopi, pressed
my cheek against their weathered stones.
I understood their gods, what satisfied.

Upward reaching fist, aren't you satisfied?
I made the earth yearn upward, straight
to sky. I made secrets hide beneath your stones
and prayers sleep upon the sacred stage
of your history. Within each kiva circle rests
the next mystery waiting to be cracked.

I planted weeds on the Lookout roof, cracked
and gullied with myriad rock. I was satisfied
when a woman couldn't tell my walls from the rest
of the world. Most days, you could see straight
across the canyon, or down—from that vantage
travelers on burros looked small as stones.

Sometimes I see apparitions in the stones—
a figure draped in gray shadow, face cracked.
Sometimes memory conspires with age
and the old love comes back to be satisfied.
I mistake the fog for smoke and can't see straight;
I want to throw myself against the canyon's breast.

But I must build until the stones are satisfied.
The cracked bell of my body works against the straight
line of age. Until all forms are unified, I cannot rest.

Hopi's Sipapu

Canyon birthed the people from a red womb,
small opening in deepest Earth.
When I am old, I will find the canyon's secret
and rejoin her Spirit.

My bones will form upswellings
of new rock

as I break into form and function
beyond human mind,
a spirit dwelling,
pure architecture, Canyon's offspring of stone and light.

Ifcroft

Ifcroft, my Altadena home, sits like an empty bowl
now you are dead, sister. Someone sent a bowl
of camellias for comfort. Your life was the china bowl
I formed myself against; I turned into a Mimbres bowl,

stark and useful, an outline of myself. In the Kodak
of you and me your face is blurred behind mine.
I remember you that way, not like you were in life,
sharp-boned and drawn, your body a cracked bowl

that let the water seep out. Now I see I built
homes for imaginary lives. Real lives do not last.
Even Gable and Lombard will die like the Indians
they come to gawk at. Mimbres buried their bowls

beneath the floor with their dead. Pottery for company,
useful in the afterworld. Artifacts become history.
Everything you made was light and useless, Harriet.
Should I bury you with your ribbons and bowls

of beads, your fingers lost in millenary? Nonsense
to believe an artifact reflects a people. Rather, see
one woman, lost in the lines and arcs of inner life,
her head bowed over the work of a bowl.

Harvey Girls

Between trains, Kansas air stood still
as if a tornado had just blown through,
then left the whole world in silhouette:
Topeka flattened against deepening blue.
On my days off, I walked. "Hello, Miss,"
the Harvey girls waved, dressed sweet

in Sunday clothes, swimming in wheat
with farm boys. Off-duty, unpinned, still
a good Harvey Girl played the perfect miss,
even entertaining workmen passing through,
but only just enough. At night, she blew
a kiss to distant love, a windowed silhouette.

One girl, Lucy, had a flat-nosed silhouette
and wore her hair in sheaves like wheat
or twisted snakes. I wanted to touch the blue
veins inside her wrist, lie near her, just lie still.
But she stayed formal, through and through—
Harvey girls knew their place and called me *Miss*

Colter. They didn't want to be dismissed.
But when Katie came, I watched her silhouette
against stars—she, the dark no light shone through.
She broke rules, took my hands in hers, sweet
with love; my skin rough and hardened by age. Still
she kept me. For my eyes, she called me Liza-blue.

I watched her marry in her best dress, pale blue
with lace at the neck. Her brakeman said, "Miss,"
and tipped his hat goodbye to me. For a time, still,
when I saw a girl on the last car, in silhouette,
her face a dark spot against the twilight wheat,
I waved like a fool at the train roaring through.

In the desert, I think love might be through
with me. I am an old woman, just a tableau
really, of flesh on bone on sand. Now wheat
is just another color for stone. All my promise
spent on the Sante Fe line, walled silhouettes
expended. Night in the desert is so still.

The stars shoot holes through sky. I reach, miss.
Listen: rocks jut upward in blue silhouette.
In Kansas, wheat is waving, waving, then still.

Secrets

In the Watchtower, I left a hollow space beneath one stone. A dancer's feet could play it like a drum. Balolookong Rock hung from the outer wall, casting his spell. I saw men carry something in their ribs that stirred and writhed like a snake—left by their fathers, awakened by war. Dancer, it's too late to raise the dead. No one comes to find the hollow place anymore, and the country has a serpent sleeping at its center. I died alone and dropped through levels of the Canyon to sleep there patient as the rock.