

Manuscript Title: Five Poems

ON A PHOTOGRAPH TAKEN IN NEWARK, 1920'S

I imagine he was bored. His job, taking pictures
of auto wrecks for an insurance firm.

He paused a moment here, let vision
of the row of buildings blur in the nimbus

of his cigarette. When it cleared
the alley between tenements

blocked by a slumped fence caught his eye.
Someone wanting in or out had pushed or pulled

then tramped the wooden pickets down.
The fence bears plastered-on advertisements

for entertainments, modern products pitched
to the idle or the curious passerby.

No soul in sight, a thought flashed
in the black box of his head: before

I built a fence ... He set up his tripod,
fixed the vanquished barrier in his view,

pickets splayed like whales' ribs on a beach,
the soot-dark alley brooding like the sea.

He held his breath and flung the shutter open:
the flash he made was lightning with no rain.

Before his shrouded face the scene
came into sudden focus and the secret

coded in these appearances
fossilized upon a copper plate.

Manuscript Title: Five Poems

BROWN CREEPER

Below the plate glass ramparts,
on the simple sidewalk, no tree near,
lay a mouse-sized clump of feathers.
Out-of-context bird, what whispered word
for *forest* brought you here? What lust
for space enticed you past your borders
into this mirror of the sky. You crashed
into our reality, you paragon of drab,
you match for bark and shadows.
I lift you by your spiked tail feathers,
good for hitching up trunks,
admire your bill's curve, perfect
for probing crevices for spiders -
what else could you expect here in this city
but sudden death? For an exile
like you, brown alien, mesmerized
by mere reflection, where is real?
What refuge from sun-dazzle,
tumult, glass, and steel?

I bear you through these Newark streets
till I can lay you in a concrete
urn with pansies. Forget the crude
jest of a citizen of this rough place
hollered as we passed: "Who's got
two slices of bread for that?"
Best melt into the soil of this planter,
dream your way back to leaf-
filtered light. Your body, intact,
pressed into the day, has made a shell
to tilt up to my ear: I listen
past the city's screaming haste to hear
your lilt, your forest song.

Manuscript Title: Five Poems

MENTOR

Outside my morning window spills a wren's
song, like a waterfall. No – effervescent –
like a spring that bubbles
from an unseen source.

Maybe I never really heard till Art King,
understated, most unwrenlike man,
pointed in the song's direction, touched
a finger to his ear before he named the singer.

So many others, more accomplished:
orioles, tanagers, grosbeaks, and of course
the thrush – we first heard, then tried sighting
like augurers, scanning treetops for a sign.

Ready to retire Art King knew each bird
by its song, but hearing failed him in the upper
ranges: one of us young teachers, when we touched
an ear and pointed, might just get a shrug

from Art in answer. One such impossible note
he might or might not hear belonged to the tiny
Blackburnian warbler Art King called "the firethroat."
The bird glimpsed was a match struck

in the leaves, a shock of orange flame
that blazes in the brain's deep folds
four decades later. After those walks we each
went off to teach our classes – but enkindled,

as though we cupped a secret candle
against the wind all day. This morning
I salute the plain brown wren, though I can't see him
answer with a tail flick from his thicket.

Manuscript Title: Five Poems

TRIUMPHAL

Master of nonchalance, the mockingbird
now stays through our northern winters

as if to say, we have entered the new
dispensation, the age of extremes,

when even this endless winter
bears the seeds of endless summer

like acorns under the snowdrifts.
The mockingbird goes for suet,

Leaves sunflower seeds to yankees, pine
siskins flashing sun-yellow from streaked wings.

The mockingbird's hollow bones remember
the sultry south, where Spanish moss

beards the live oaks. He pours the honey
of his song into thick air, milk of moonlight.

Silent today, he bides his time,
can afford to, for the altered world

suits him fine: never mind those icy
blasts, it's clear how things are going.

He's been assigned to call out creatures
in endless mimicry, a roll call of the vanishing.,

The rests in his rollicking aria attest
to the mostly silent: tortoises, polar bears.

Growing up in the city's outskirts I recall
his nonstop tour-de-force on summer nights.

Our bird-loving father feared the wrath
of neighbors kept awake might stop his mouth.

Manuscript Title: Five Poems

Fat chance. From his rooftop aerial pulpit
the revivalist preacher in his long gray coat

sang out and declared his own redemption:
here I am, here I am, singing, singing,
whose world, whose world, whose world

is it now?

Manuscript Title: Five Poems

THE HONEY SEEKER

Sheathed in mesh mask, white suit, gloves, even high white rubber boots, I kindled dry leaves and sumac berries to a smoldering burn in the smoker. Working the bellows, I pumped gray clouds of smoke around the hive before I dared to lift a frame away. Mobbed by a posse of bees, I watched their city with its capped wax cells filled up with slumbering larvae

rouse to repel the siege. I checked for dead or ailing citizens, signs of mites, found none - left them in the peace of their amber hoard, their throbbing, multitudinous life. That day I took no honey, felt no sting, but was a gazer only, witness to a bounty past my grasping, distilled from the humming field, the crucible of flowers.

Six millennia have past since I went naked to scale the limestone cliff to reach this womb. On the cave wall, in red ochre, see my legs, my long arm dangling, basket clutched in one hand while the other plumbs the niche. I am stung and stung but hang on, reaping, fool and thief and angel. I was chosen.