

I'm Sentimental for the Paleolithic

since I'm kind of a retro guy
who's never much liked the Neolithic,
or those neoconservatives with their guns,
bombs and money, telling me to get a job,
when I'd rather be reading Whitman or
Thoreau and sitting around
under a tree on a spring day in Lascaux,
 really—life was easy,
 plenty of leisure time and—
 as long as your flints were sharp—
enough food to go around,
we had time to paint,
enjoy a cup of Bordeaux,
eat roast trout and fresh strawberries—
 that Neolithic was too damned much work,
 growing grain 8-5 every day,
when we could be picking Chanterelles
and spearing goats in the woods—
oh they make fun of us now—
 savages, cave men
but we lived longer and stronger,
we Paleolithic men and women,
 yes, back then women had some power,
 and those cave paintings were damned good—
we had time to draw flowers, to watch stars,
we counted seasons by the night sky,
knew when solstice was coming,
then we'd make love all night;
 our world was empty then,
 yet so full of everything we needed—
wrap me in fur and take me back
to the Paleolithic any day.

Paleolithic

Skull in the passenger seat

of a '33 Dodge, its rusted metal worn smooth
by 80 years of blowing sand and dust
across the high Nevada desert.
A rancher with a sense of humor and art—
O'Keefe with a little Picasso and Warhol—
has set this steer's skull
atop a rusty drive shaft
sticking up where the brain used to be.
The steer stares east
(as least as well as a steer can stare
with only eye sockets and no brain)
out across the village of Baker
and east to the Great Basin of Utah.
Tourists on their way to the national park
stop to take photos of this macabre desert traveler—
a steer with no legs or hooves
in a car with no wheels.
Maybe we're fascinated because it's so stark—
like the high desert,
or maybe it's because we'll be there someday—
our own bleached skeletons
in silent cars rusting into desert,
prickly pear cacti poking through where once
there were wheels that could speed us anywhere,
skull sockets where once were eyes that could see
snow on mountains high above this desert.

Paleolithic

Nana Remembers

a frozen lake where she skated
under clear winter sky with pink clouds,
where chickadees called.
She felt free on ice,
and could glide forever into western light.

Nana tells of winters
when there was snow,
summers when a girl
could wade in ponds,
where painted turtles basked on logs.

It's one hundred ten at noon.
The sea laps eaves of cottages like a huge seal—
but seals are gone—
sun's hot by dawn as it rises purple
and orange over the Atlantic,
which chews away at seawalls and beach houses,
then washes its way inland to the lakes.

The future's begun, Nana said
that first year the big storms came.
She shows us her skates,
tells us of frozen lakes,
how she cut long lines,
and perfect figure eights.

Paleolithic

Ghost Dancers at Wounded Knee

Rifles crackled,
blood turned to ice on snow,
west wind blew knife-cold
out of Black Hills.
Ghost Dancers' shirts
embroidered with porcupine quills,
frayed by bullets,
still clothe their bones,
colors long-since faded
after a hundred twenty seven winters,
a hundred ninety seven Lakota
in a trench at Pine Ridge.
Silent except for echoes of rifles,
pleas of Hunkpapa and Miniconju ,
children's cold screams,
Ghost Dancers' voices on the wind.

Paleolithic

Liquidation

A shoe store at the mall,
which hasn't been doing enough business,
has a dozen signs plastered over its windows:
Liquidation 50% Off—End of Season Clearance
The manager unlocks a security gate,
the store is open; customers file in.

Piles of shoes: sneakers, sandals,
baby shoes, oxfords, loafers
running shoes, hiking boots, high heels
moccasins, yoga shoes, work boots
too many to shoes to count—
everything cut.

Liquidation:
to do away with especially by killing;
to convert (assets) into cash.

Treblinka, Bosnia, Guatemala, Rwanda,
a security gate is unlocked,
they are ordered to enter
single file for processing,
half to one side, half to the other,
eventually all will go.

Sand Creek, Warsaw, Katlyn Forest, Kosovo—
there's always a reason,
why all must go efficiently,
there's always a reason for liquidation, for clearance.
Afterwards:
piles of shoes.

Large shoes, baby shoes,
piled as though they might be worn again,
but other shoes lie forgotten
by the side of a dusty road somewhere,
too many shoes to count,
too many places to remember.

Paleolithic