

Uprooting

In the blue-gray evening,
the moon is a lens lying on its back,
Venus a jagged spot of white,
and crickets sing to the gravity of April.

We wrap each dish in old news,
and divide the years
into keep and throw away.

We feel the tearing of a root
wedged deep in the silence between us,
and the new-mown grass scents the evening
with the blood of a new season.

Near the Crossroads

Near the crossroads we dug caves
where we sat in candlelight and earth smell
talking about Hitler, comparing fathers,
and eating walnuts and tangerines.

On other days, my friend's grandmother
scolded in Japanese
when he brought cull watermelons
to our foxhole between rows
of his father's grapes,
within hearing of the workers
whistling and cursing in the plums.
While we waited for doves
to drop into a crossfire of clods and BB's, we broke
the melons and filled our hands
with their warm hearts.

Almost all year a short detour
would take a boy to some tree
or vine where he could eat.
But there were reminders, too,
of what could go wrong.
My friend's little brother
forgot fear one foggy morning
and pedaled in front of a car

rushing toward Sequoia.
 I could never see the dark stain
 on the pavement that others swore to.

On a fall afternoon I headed
 home, downhill with no hands,
 listening to the hum
 of the tires and the wind,
 past Mrs. Atteberry's cellar
 where she held eggs to the light
 looking for spots of blood,
 under olive trees,
 pulling off the hard green fruit . . .
 until a big sedan turned off Kings Canyon,
 drifted toward me, and slowed.
 "How do I get to Fresno?"
 When I went to his window to answer,
 his eyes led mine down
 to the slow movement
 of his hand kneading the flesh
 that rose from his splayed open pants.

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Near the crossroads
 of a highway to the Sequoias
 and a slow road beside palms,
 overhung with olives,
 and lined with harvests,
 the pavement still melts
 into soft swells in July,
 heat waves are seas
 that are always in the distance,
 and the dark current
 roars over the weirs in the canal.

The plums fill with the whistled melodies
 and longing of mariachis
 and the green water rolls
 out of the standpipes into the orchards.
 The olives ripen and the pavement
 is mottled with black stains.
 Children pass through that crossroads
 trying to remember to look both ways,
 sure they are about to do something
 so wrong it can never be taken back,

stealing fruit anyway,
digging in the earth,
being afraid,
learning.

Second Hand Smoke

Irene Price (Cole, Casteel, Pelegrino, Applegate)
1906 - 1978

Good night Irene. *I have* seen you in my dreams,
that girl standing barefoot in the cruel Colorado sun
watching her five brothers take turns dragging
the carcass of a rattlesnake between tumbleweeds.

And then that flame of auburn hair that made
those Pall Mall and Lucky Strike men
who came into the Tip Top cafe on Belmont
drop a nickel in the jukebox so Hank Williams

could ask it for them: "Hey good lookin', what'ya got cookin'?"
How's about cookin' somethin' up with me?"
And you brought them a slice of pie piled
impossibly high with ringlets of meringue.

But they didn't know how cold you'd grown
"to the love" any love "that used to be."
All you kept from the first was my father
and then the second left his smiling Navy portrait

and Greyhound good driving citations
in that little wooden box in your closet,
and the third, the Italian whose station wagon
was loaded down with thick plumbing catalogues,

waited until his roses along the side of your house
had stems as big as his thumb before he left
skid marks on the street squealing off to anywhere else,
and the fourth who was riding his bicycle to pump gas

at the Shell let you bring him home and tried to make you happy
pulling a trailer of beauty supplies up and down '99
until he too looked at you through the curtain of his Camel smoke
and saw the porcelain statue of disdain with dark holes for eyes.

You breathed their smoke

until it filled your lungs with a fluid as thick
 as the buttermilk and corn bread you liked to blend in a glass
 and that left it's sticky patina for you grandchildren to wonder at.

Then the therapist came to beat an electric rhythm on your chest
 where you lay in the back bedroom of your only child's house,
 and finally to the dying room across the street from the hospital
 where all six of your great grandchildren were born.

There, the smoke that began with your father
 finally blew so thick over your dreams
 that you couldn't reach high enough
 to grasp the nicotine yellowed fingers of another salvation.

The Map Back

She watched the ceiling recede,
 and counted the stars in a single window pane.
 She had perfected near nonsense
 as her method of resolution.
 She had her irises and camellias,
 and she knew gods
 had little to do with the mundane,
 and that they had never made
 the promises they were accused of.
 She was starting to understand
 that she'd be gone before
 what the birds prophesied would be done,
 so she tasted just the skin of a plum
 that was so deeply red it was black
 and she found her map back through memory
 in the latticework of the widow's web.

Tuolumne Campfire

Phil brings his paintings,
 the one from today of the bridge
 beginning to dissolve into
 a scarlet tinged darkness,
 and the one of a mountain
 that becomes a nude woman
 emerging from the landscape,

and his song books from the Santa Cruz
 ukulele society
 where we wander among Willie Nelson,
 Sarah Vaughn, the Beatles, Johnny Cash, the Mamas and Poppas
 but can't get Janis Joplin's Bobby McGee to untangle itself
 so pause while Phil's friend with the wooden flutes
 tells of being in line to audition for Big Brother and the Holding Company
 until Janis's hungry heart made any other voice immaterial.
 Tells how she wandered in and out of the house where he slept,
 an ephemera that like the woman in Phil's painting
 was on her way to outgrowing this world,
 says he went on to sing in hashish informed tongues
 for a trio of sitars.

We go on to King of the Road,
 Peggy Sue, You Are My Sunshine,
 until the fire dies to a pile of bright nuggets,
 and we turn off the lights we needed for music,
 see that the camps around us are all dark,
 tell a few more stories in near whispers,
 and then dissolve into each his and her own room of this night.

Inscribed Among the Books on Religion in the Harvard Lamont Library

Our Lady of Guadalupe
 Is hop scotching down
The Streets of Glory
From Judgment to Passion
 And sketching with sidewalk chalk
 The difference between
Pacifism and the Just War
 And pointing out
The Stony Road We Trod
 Toward *Material Christianity*
Melding Greek Myths and Christian Mystery
 Toward the *Jesus Legend*
 Posing as *Liberation Theology*
 Dusted off by *The Biblical Archeologist*
 Sweating through the *Strenuous Commands*
 Stretched even to include *Christianity and Ecology*
 But who eventually *Souled Out*
 To *Earthly Powers*
 That have so recently published *Eve: A Biography*

To dramatize the objectification of *Religion*
 and the *Decline of Magic*
 Leaving *The Faith Factor* to *Fathers and Heretics*
 On their knees before *The Madonna of 115th Street*
 Whose song of *Public Virtue*
 Pacifies both *Christians and Pagans*
 And whose sermon to bongos explains
How the Bible Became a Book
 And commentaries on *Sex and the Single Savior*
 Point the way to a *Righteous Empire*
 Where *Holy Mavericks* consult *The Lost Bible*
 On the shortest route away from the *Twisted Cross*
 That has heretofore promised *Just War and Jihad*
 And denied *The Survival of the Pagan Gods*
 Who promoted *Godwrestling* matches
 That culminated in the sweat-drenched
 Declaration *See Me Naked*
 Which didn't detract from reformed Sufis
 reading of *The Kabbalah: A Guide for the Perplexed*
 and discovering *The Old Testament in Byzantium*
 With those *Lost Scriptures of the War of Gods*
 Further outlining *The Politics of Heaven*
 Orchestrated by the *God of the Oppressed*
 Who always hits the *Cosmic Jackpot*
 After outlawing *Christian Divorce*
 And programs *Psychohistory and Religion*
 According to the architecture of *St. Augustine's Bones*
 Whispering "*You Shall Be As Gods*"
 To the Blues riffs of *Our Lady of Fatima*
 Who serenades those *Divided by Faith*
 With amendments to *The Godless Constitution*
 That deny *The Acts of the Apostles*
 And the *Irony in the Old Testament*
 Reeking of *The Word Made Flesh*
 Until *The Very Stones Cry Out*
 With the mantra of *The New Testament and Mythology*
 That swirls with *The Symbolism of Evil*
 Worn on T-shirts by those *Becoming Sinners*
 And composing their *Texts of Terror*
About the Fire in My Bones
That exploded in Vietnam and Armageddon
 Until *The Great Awakening*
 Of *The Powers of the Holy*
 Resurrected *The Babylonian Genesis*
 Illuminated by *Womanhood in Radical Protestantism*
 Beseeking *The Faithful Shepherd*

For *Bread Not Stone*

As they peruse *The Sex Lives of Saints*
 And ascend to *An Awareness of What is Missing*
 From the profile of *The Perfect Martyr*
 Who will arise from among *White Protestant Americans*
 Proclaiming *The Power of God Against the Guns of Government*
 Just as *When Jesus Came to Harvard*
 That is *Jesus the Magician*
 He so confounded *The Uneasy Center*
 That *God's Secretaries* reversed the definitions
Of Genesis and Geology in their offices above the *The Secular City*
 That a cowboy saint once called *My Penitent Land*
 As he crooned over the one celestial network
 In eternally repeated episodes of *The Concert of Dread*

The New Alchemy

How many shapes can water take. . .or air?
 And what is earned by wanting even less
 than what you have? And why are angels' wings
 like birds'? And wind through leaves a kind of prayer?

At first you won't believe that light can speak
 or shadows shifting under trees can sing,
 but where the single syllables of crows
 are stitching closed the evening's last blue wounds

and sparrows ride the leaning yarrow stalk,
 a way to rearrange what can't be known
 will thread itself through dream on strands
 no law or logic has the strength to break.

Begin with nothing you could buy or steal
 and take your place beneath the bloom of sky
 where milkweed seeds on parachutes of silk
 show how to navigate without intent.

Believe what you believe as if a breeze
 pronounced the syllables a god exhales,
 and learn to make of nothing nothing more
 to hold the dark departure leaves behind.

Remember, though, those priests who killed the girl
 who brought them fire because it burned their hands,
 and if a shape you've found might serve some use,

begin again with even less resolve.

The best of what we are is what we're not.

The Eve of Womanhood

The story is sung
in a cave of leaves
and dark branches
by an old woman
who is long past
all of her other uses.
She tells of a girl
who has gone to the place
of smoke and sage and sweat
on the eve of her womanhood
and is spoken to by a white bird
whose eyes are universes
into which the girl falls.
She drifts there listening
to the stories of the bear star
and the maiden carrying water
back from the clouds
and the hunter who has slain
the silver stag.
The girl can choose
either to go back among
her people and serve
her purposes there
or to become the new,
brightest star in the crown
of the northern princess.

When they go to look for her
on the mountain, they find
a mound of ash so white
its light burns
their eyes to tears.

The Next World

What will it be?
How will it come about?
Where will it lead?

Who will mark the way?
And when we arrive,
what will make a difference?
Will we have to vote,
or will we consult a god
someone among us has devised?
Will we rename the stars,
since they will seem so changed
from that so different angle?
Will we think to multiply,
or will we know we are enough?
Will we realize how far from what we were
we are?
What will matter?
Will nothing be the same?
Will we have time
to gather up our history
and bring along regret,
or will we want to keep forgetting
until everything
we are becoming
seems something lovely and new?