

The Mapmaker's Legend

Life cannot be limited to the Compass Rose
And the scale and the symbols of demarcation,
hues presenting heights of apprehension
and lows of depression, places to stop
and get off if only to wheeze, appreciate.

All the careful study of the distances and graphs
will not prepare one to travel, and cannot describe
the years spent dwelling in a single dot
desperate and willing to depart.

The sun's face in the center of the Rose
will not shine in the valleys of loneliness
you will run your fingers through
like an imaginary woman's long hair, who sat before you
and was gone before you could see her face.

Only the symbol for railroad tracks will be true,
the lines with crosses that look like stitches
that run up and down over all terrains
seemingly holding the map together,
closing wounds and scratches and leaving scars
of remembrance, your head cracked open
by an inadvertent elbow at school,
the glass imbedded in your palm
when you smashed the glass hearing cancer,
the bypass for your heart broken once too often
that meant you no longer wanted to love,
the second set of stitches for your heart
because you couldn't live without loving.

Tribute for Phyllis

She punished the laundry, scraping the jeans of her boys
knuckles white against the washboard
flapped and snapped dishtowels and rags like a randy bully
in the high school shower against the butt of the basin
and clipped the clothespins with revenge to hold the sheets
that had been bleached and softened and breeze dried.
She could make shirts weep and undershirts cry
and boxers mourn as they pinned on the line.
disease flew from her ferocity, and comfort came
when she'd hold the swaddling clothes to her nose
and sniff and smile as if something holy had taken place.
When she walked down the river the rocks remembered
and the riprap still murmurs her praise.

History

The Greeks would jump and dance about
mawkish-faced and freaks afoot,
and Prospero the Roman had an ugly face
scourged by smallpox and missing an ear,
so was a natural for amusement between acts of play.
But Prospero the Roman had seen an egret
from the Nile stand on one leg peering into water
then slowly trade its balance to the other,
so in his pantomime he played the bird
to which crowds booed and threw things at him,
but several asked for a private performance,
so he followed storks and cranes in landings
and takings off, the slow circling head of a female swan
as she knew her young had died,
the nightingale with upturned throat
that sang until its voice exhausted,
and when his time for performance came
he mimicked the storks and cranes,
and did the egret to murmurs of appreciation,
and the crowd was pleased, left gasping,
and for his finale performed the nightingale in song
by stretching his neck upwards as if to God
with his arms like wings forcing out the last of his breath,
then the slow circling head of the swan
with his entire body, and left the audience hushed.
When he performed before the Emperor,
with executions and maulings of slaves on the fare,
he was whisked off stage after the act
and banished for life to a quarry outside of Rome.
But a thousand girls had the seen the mime,
and when brushing hair they would stand on one foot,
when walking down stairs would hold out their arms
as if cranes landing in a field, when imagining a lover
would strain their neck and appeal to God,
and when unrequited, slowly circle to the ground.

The Lost Pilot

Nestled in the far distances
my imagination had roamed
in the nether land,
still I am near to and nearing my home.
Frieda, my grandmotherly neighbor,
waves me in, the lost pilot
returning from the army air corps.
Yet after the fantasy recedes
its repercussions linger:
I step over a fence
and it rapidly disappears,
the steadily burgeoning sun
wades through formidable leaves,
air widens, and twilight shadows
fly over drought-shrivelled grass.
The paint on a primitive church shines
pudgy and white,
billowing like a parachute.
I smile, listen:
the wood is not laughing.
In the dry hot wind button-black susans
tango and rock,
dust waltzes
to unheard-of music, Frieda's wave
a metronome of my heart.

With each thing both fanciful
and real, how flat the imagining man,
a solid body with spirit
which cannot by any artifice
detach itself from flesh
and vanish in a vaporous ascension
to the promise of joy.
How, when we can believe
all the feather, bone
and beak of our existence was born

of a central egg, can
we not set the mind skyward,
free in its flight?
Like gravity the daily routines
pull down magnificent creations,
and it is one continuum
between fancy and fact,
the two ends of the pole
with which we balance
unaware of any safety net,
the tipping of one end too high
sure to flip us off the wire.

So I feel: it is hot.
While there are no limits
to the distance a dream may take,
the clock of my body yanks
me back to the small seam
of time I continually try
to rip--a far journey
in a short span.
And though reentry
to the war-torn fortress
of a common world is loss,
an unshielded burning,
the greater intensity
of rapid associations
reduced to a linear conversation,
it is the condensation,
the subsequent recalling
of the imagined event
which makes the fantasy desired.
The ether I once was
vanishes, and I reappear
glistening and whole, joy
rising to the surface of my face,
death and logic submersing
to become a sediment
from which I can only toss and swell above.

I am liquid, a lake,
and the trickle from the hose
is a river replenishing
my arid head,
and a beer is the storm
dousing the kiln
of my thinning throat.

Three Threads

In Mason jars the machine, the wood, the metal,
the button-head, slotted, crossed,
whorled, knurled, tipped to explode, bound,
locked, washered, starred, bolted, nutted,
used, saved, reclaimed from rust.
All these threads, mechanical stitches,
filling punched, drilled holes
to keep the world from falling apart.
I have not found a fastener
for the hole since you've departed.