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Eight Poems

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EIGHT POEMS

THE WHITE BIRD

High from the hill where the hound hunts with curious paw
 Comes the white bird, lying dead here on the sward,
 Its plumage marred
 By the dog's slaving jaw.

Doomed to disintegration, the red feet bent,
 The body lost, the feathers blown like snow,
 Where will you rest your sole,
 Oh bird that Noah sent?

The crowding clouds consume the earth's perimeter,
 Season of fog, where can the bow be set?
 The white dove is dead.
 I go to bury her.

FOREST

No windshield now to intercept the wood
 Where like a swimmer, foreign in a sea,
 I push the forest tangle from the way,
 Am sensible of broken twig and trail.
 The thicket-leaning trees, stunted by shade,
 Grow ominous and shadow out the day.
 The trembling trout shift in the dark pool.
 Watch warily! What follows with fierce claw?
 The alien element of scent and stir
 Encompasses the trespasser.

BUILDING THE KETCH

By the careful chisel hewed
 The stem emerges from the wood
 And sure and sculpturing hands lay bare
 The living arcs grown secret there.
 Daphne disclosed within the wood
 Yearns for the fathering river god,
 While on sawdust eddies float
 The thick keel timbers of the boat.

Following artfully the line
 That square and calipers define
 We test with reckoning, while we carve,
 Sureness of grain and strength of scarf,
 Like unproved policy, wondering whether
 They will betray us in rough weather.
 Stem, forekeel, keel, knee, deadwood, stern,
 Rigidly spiked with our concern
 Into their places formed entice
 The opening, billowing dream to rise
 Full canvas into summer skies.

As for a moment travelers turn
 To scan the long road they have been
 And calculate that still to come,
 We see entire and then resume
 The interrupted fashioning.
 The mallet and chisel ring.
 Although the vision perfect stands,
 Error employs the surest hands.
 The yacht's enduring quality
 Accepts the judgment of the sea.
 Pragmatic waves evaluate
 The principle that we create
 Which from its earthy womb is sent
 To birth in the watery element.

THE FLOOD

Now in a cloudburst, calumnies descend
 Distracting reason, driving friend from friend,
 And epithets, though false and meaningless,
 Haste through the gutters of the public press.
 Crisis on crisis passes on to gloom
 With other crises pushing them for room.
 Men who cry *Wait!* are openly suspect
 Lest others stop their reading to reflect.

Afloat on flooding waters, profits rise;
 Malevolence vended brings the highest price.
 It buys protectorates in foreign lands
 Where servile princes welcome the demands
 Of those who would with lead and steel restore
 Peace to the rumbling bellies of the poor.
 The greedy glorify their liberty
 And dare all other peoples to be free.

The martial, growing stronger in the state,
 Fortifies classic bases for its hate.
 In their starched gorgets and with golden blades
 The oilmen armor for the new crusades.
 There is loose talk of war, which if it came
 Already has its parties, cause, and name
 And populations being groomed to fight.
 The cause of fear is made the cause of right.

Self-criticism shows strange limitation
 Which, good in man, is traitorous in a nation,
 And those who would enforce conformity
 Are those with whom the present times agree.
 When fools have power, let wiser men beware;
 To acquiesce in evil is to share.
 The great who set the oily flood on fire
 Must with their fellow citizens expire.

THE BULLDOZER

The deer, coyote, and the snake
 Slowly retreat up higher chaparral.
 (I saw three deer stand by the road to graze
 They watched the hills cut off like wedding cake.)

Brown blood of clod trickles into the gorge.
 Bulldozer bites into curvaceous breasts.
 There are nice profits where, by death of oaks
 And mountainous torsion, level lots emerge.

Forerunning cities, thunderous of power,
Ruthless ambassador, the scything blade
Admits no wilderness it cannot change,
Nor any altitude it cannot lower.

EVER IN CHILDHOOD

“But from this childhood’s heaven issues forth”

Frederic Prokosch

Ever in childhood heaven was a loud
Well lighted, empty, dull, and pompous place
Offering only that I should not cease.
Yet it was long before that light went out.
Old ladies in falsetto from the choir
Rasped through the chorus of eternal love,
And there were memory verses learned to prove
A certain secret that I have no more.

Heaven was unpropitious as the hall
On an ugly street in a suburban village.
The fields and hills were scarred and cut with tillage;
The world returned to ashes in the fall;
Beauty was blackened like an evil pleasure.
Had I been sure, or sure I could not choose,
Or kept, or never had what I could lose,
Richness of light, the only heavenly treasure!
Fever of night and earthly flesh grown cold,
Issue from heaven. Spirit dissoluble,
Emergent from a dissipating fable,
I groped in darkness for the thing I held
Sorting out tomes and terrors, finding land
A tangible touchstone underneath the tread,
Transient as paradise, whence I was led
To leave a heritage at God’s right hand.

JOURNEY BY RAIL

Cottonwoods bound the limbo of the train.
 Run westward, sleeping in the cubicles,
 Heads engineward, toes to the east,
 We wound in ritual between cedar trees.

We saw the mountain range attenuate,
 Fragile as smoke, and turned to Joshuas
 And then to horse and meadow, grazing, green;
 And tilted past a valley like a cup.

We slept through stations where the lights hung down
 On dreary platforms huddled by the rails,
 Arched bones of towns descended from the world
 Mourning the nightly funeral of the train.

We slept, selective of a better land,
 Resisted heat, divided distances,
 Aircooled, uncomfortable, thinking of home,
 Jolted as in a coffin over stone.

And cleansed and resurrected in the dawn
 We rushed from trainshed tunnels into air
 Through jostlings, tears, renewedly contrite,
 Blinking up Orphic entrances to light.

THE PEACH HARVEST

The fruit, the bee, were underfoot.
 Peaches decaying into wine
 Littered the shadows and the tree.
 Discoverers of summer loot,
 We ate the red and sweeter sides
 With an impassioned gluttony.

The parsimonious years preserve
 All the rank fragrance of decay
 The ripening and the harvesters.
 Still seasonal the branches curve
 Returning what the earth has lent
 And hungers lapse to discontent.

ANN STANFORD