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EMPTY POCKETS: POEMS WITH
AN INTRODUCTION

THESIS

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This thesis is composed of a collection of thirty-four original poems with an introduction by the author. The introduction attempts to justify the collection by discussing common influences and techniques employed in its creation. The introduction also supplies background information on each poem and, on occasion, discusses the relation of a poem to the rest of the collection.

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INTRODUCTION

This collection of poetry attempts to distill the author's personal experiences while retaining their aesthetically nutritional value. Time, change of scenery, and curiosity financed the project. The author's pockets remain empty while he marvels at his returns.

Many poetic traditions were ignored during the writing of the collection, making the contents vulnerable to a predictable kind of criticism. I can only anticipate these reactions by shouting, as did Henry Miller at his obscenity trial:

"Guilty! Guilty on all counts!"¹ Although my poems treat sex with a contemporary frankness, they are not dependent upon a graphic sexuality. And if the present poetic trend is toward obscurity, these poems try not to cooperate with that tendency.

I began Empty Pockets as a songwriter, and then moved to poetry, with its greater complexity and its larger vocabulary. Unmusical polysyllables such as "inquisitional" and "heretical" ("Chapel") escape the confines of euphonious song lyrics. But such words also weaken the melodic structure of poetry and are used sparingly in the more recent poems. As a matter of fact, work on the collection alerted me to a pleasant similarity between my old songs and new poems. Syncopated rhythms need not be confined to ragtime; Edith Sitwell's work is a case in point. Notice the cadence in these lines from my poem,

"The Playground": "Vertigo's an old man Sitting on a bed pan/
Thrashing at the world With a jaundiced cane." Furthermore,
my poems are usually divided into stanzas, even though these
units vary in length more than do song stanzas. Finally,
verse containing tired usages of words such as "love" and
"heart" is just as anemic as a song lyric pivoting on those
saccharine old clichés. "Love," "heart," and their relatives
are either avoided or revitalized in Empty Pockets.

X. J. Kennedy tells us that "songs tend to be written in
language simple enough to be understood on first hearing."²
But this statement also applies to the poems of Ferlinghetti
and Brautigan, whom I have admired and emulated. Poetry need
not have abstruse meaning concealed behind cryptically esoteric
terminology. The poem can have simple language and, at the
same time, contain multiple levels of meaning. Whitman and
Blake are two practitioners of complexity couched in the
simplest of terms. A tangible image usually arises upon the
first reading of their work, while other meanings soak into
the reader more slowly.

William Carlos Williams influenced this collection with
his two major tenets: "no ideas but in things" and the found-
ing of poetry in "local conditions."³ Although Empty Pockets
is not a reaction against stereotypically romantic verse, it
is, I hope, unencumbered by the vague clichés that engulf Rod
McKuen fans in a sea of sentimentality. Maybe this denial of
the maudlin stems from an awareness of the poorest and most

obvious devices built into popular songs. The callowness of popular culture is a function of its eternal youth, and I get older every day. Unlike the successful musical charlatan who mixes his tested pabulum for the new nursery of consumers, the good songwriter and poet wrench meaning from unique "things" and "local conditions." Exciting songs and poems are anchored in space and time, and their vitality is not dependent upon facile generalization.

The quality of verse is not a result of the sophistication of the poet. His life in the world must alert him to the originality in each instant and not exhaust him into becoming condescendingly jaded. The poetic war against conditioning is waged wherever numbing routines are the rule. Unfortunately, the academic world constitutes a major theater of this war. Education prompted E. E. Cummings to remark, "Knowledge is a polite word for dead but not buried imagination . . . think twice before you think."⁴ Karl Shapiro agrees with Cummings when he says: "Poetry is innocent, not wise. It does not learn from experience because each poetic experience is unique."⁵ I try to deal with each of my poems as a separate organism. In so doing, I have noticed an increasing simplification of form and language rather than a complication built on practice. The singular tool which the poet is obliged to hone is his perception.

Many of the beat poets who came into prominence during the 1950's augmented their Western modes of perception with

Eastern thought. Since Ferlinghetti, Corso, and, to a lesser extent, Ginsberg were early influences on me, I began to share their fascination with the Oriental. In fact, any philosophical bent in the collection arose primarily from my interest in Zen Buddhism. Zen isolates forms of expectation such as dogma, habit, and prejudice, and then attempts to eliminate them, revealing a freer mental state. This awareness demands wonder of its owner. The resulting curiosity can only be satisfied by a metaphorical (religious, if you will) or poetic understanding of existence. Shapiro calls this "poetic knowledge," a knowledge which "puts us in the midst of experience; in the midst of particular experience. . . ." ⁶ The most conspicuous student of Zen among contemporary American poets is Gary Snyder. I try to use Snyder's uncomplicated tone to produce an immediate clarity which defies philosophical elucidation. ⁷

Although most of these poems were composed over a four-month period, they draw from experiences reaching back to the beginning of memory. The mind has its own chronology and chooses to arrange events according to frequency and intensity of recall. In determining the order of the poems in Empty Pockets, I have paid attention both to the sequence in which my memory presented its most polished stones, and to the effect that certain juxtapositions might have on the reader.

The first poem in the collection, "Cage Eggs," is a treatise on the creative act. The eggs are cage eggs because of

the confinement necessary for the singlehanded struggle inherent in writing. The origin of inspiration is always mysterious. If its source were known and apprehensible, poetry would succumb to the assembly line and die in the process. Any creative person revels in the unpredictability of the experiment. The rules of the game congeal after the game begins, while the conventions of poetry offer only token assistance.

"Water Games" was drawn from an actual childhood experience with (if memory holds) my first girl friend. It concerns the awakening of childhood sexuality, a joyous separation and independence from the rest of the group. Onomatopoeitic words are used to imitate the rich complexity of sounds at the seashore.

"Spring Fever" follows as a representation of the next step in sexual awareness. Rejection of parental love accompanies the attempts children make at relating to each other sexually, especially when this type of early relationship is discouraged by adult society. Hostility between child and parent is aggravated by the physical manifestations of maturity.

The last of the parental dicta to fall out of favor with offspring is religion. In "Jesus Rose at Bible Camp," I have combined conventional meter and rhyme with an irreverent statement about an adolescent's brand of religious fervor. This poem marks the end of any desire to kindle a flame of orthodoxy. The fact that physical attraction to the girl was

considered divine inspiration attests to the relationship between sex and religion. I have altered the meter in the last stanza to suggest that something is missing. Clearly, an ambivalent adherence to institutional dogma and a concomitant awakening of carnal passion are symptomatic of the personal imbalance of the adolescent. The poem undertakes a simulation of that imbalance through meter, rhyme, and theme.

The purgatory of adolescence is now left behind, and a more recent event, "The Move," introduces a change of scenery. One reason for the simplification of patterns experienced by people moving from cities to towns is the decreased efficiency of the local phone company. An urbanite may have become so accustomed to his phone that he may rent one out of force of habit, even though most of his calls will be long distance. Incoming calls are completed only if the town phone has been adapted to a far more sophisticated network of wiring. The faulty phone in this situation symbolizes that interim necessary for adjustment.

Religion of the body is the subject of "Chapel." This poem recounts the first painful attempts of the overweight person to achieve instant health. Although he believes in what he is doing, he will need more than blind faith to insure his future regular chapel attendance. The ideal image of the effortless athlete "shimmers in another hemisphere," like Solomon's temple, while at the painful moment of exercise, the present state of health is all too apparent.

An early post-adolescent encounter with a girl friend is documented in the poem, "After the Movie." Actually, this occurred when I was a resident of a college dorm and was forced to confine my lovemaking to the all-purpose automobile. There is a euphoric aimlessness present in the poem, allowing the events to be instinctive, rather than motivated by the profits of the paper boy or the anticipation of further physical involvement. Because of this lack of anticipation, the participants are engaged in a natural and innocent activity complementing the makeshift environment provided by the car.

"Kesey" is a tribute to my generation's most talented novelist. The poem is modeled on an actual event. My respect for Kesey began in 1967 when I met him at an academic conference held for the students of Southern Methodist University. The morning after the usual party, Kesey and his Merry Pranksters had us clear away the breakfast tables and stand in the middle of the large banquet room. Then Kesey, strumming "Home on the Range" on his electric guitar, instructed us to become trees and streams. I was among those who giddily and then joyfully participated.

In "Horizontal Waterfall," birth images and kite images combine to depict a miscarriage. I wanted to capture the disillusionment occasionally resulting from overzealous enthusiasm. Simple attention to detail was employed as a means of evocative narration, a standard technique throughout my poetry.

The first song I wrote, "Good Deeds," is included in this collection. It was written after five or six years of working the dinner club circuit and singing requests. "Good Deeds" attempts to be both a song and a poem because it reacts against some of the unpoetic characteristics in popular songs. The chorus is not simply the repetition of a catch phrase; there is limited reference to emotion; the story told is a true one. The style of the music is ragtime, but this transfers to a syncopated reading, like the blues poems of Langston Hughes.⁸

Even though "'Petrofied'" is composed in standard meter and rhyme, the language used denies the musical idiom. For me, words like "Rommelian," "imbued," and "brandished" are strictly humorous when used in poetry. "'Petrofied'" is a simultaneous attempt at comedy and anxiety therapy.

The drive between Austin and Dallas is bisected by a truck stop and cafe which only the unimaginative traveler can ignore. Home-made pies broadcast their essence to all but the most congested noses in every vehicle within smelling distance. You would expect every waitress there to be fortyish and crowned with a beehive hairdo, and you would be right were it not for a new recruit. She has not been given her official permanent at the local salon. Her dress is from Sanger Harris, not Sears. Her accent recalls Gone With the Wind, not Giant. If you are expecting to be revived by the coffee, it will

become pleasantly unnecessary. "Coffee Stop" praises the uniqueness of this moment on a Texas highway.

"Gastric" came out of an experience with what is humorously referred to as atonal music. Fortunately the composition was an exception to the predominantly harmonious pieces in the concert. I believe in John Cage's right to sit at his piano for a few minutes and call that music. I believe in any musician's right to fling ink blots at the grand staff and have several instruments render an auditory interpretation. But when the effect of such a rendering paralyzes an entire audience, I believe in an individual's right to publicize his reaction.

Plautus, the Roman playwright whose comedies survived the Empire, furnished me with the title for the next poem in the collection, "The Rope." In this poem the rope represents directions, goals, and purposes, while the net symbolizes the safe irresponsibility of youth; the young are not held fully accountable for their errors. As I become increasingly aware of the adult need for a sense of direction, I realize that direction is less discernible up close than it was when I wanted to be a fireman in the sixth grade. In addition, changing your mind about a career gets less whimsical as you get older. Perhaps what should be cultivated is a versatile gymnast's sense of balance.

"A Sourdough Diary" tells of a return to a former hangout. I try to combine the old memories with the new moonlight and

create an alternative to pure nostalgia. The bread baking imagery stems from experience with hand-milled whole wheat flour and the regenerative benefits of kneading dough and then letting it rise. In the case of the poem, the starter had been stored long enough to give the evening a pleasantly aged flavor.

Solzhenitsyn's One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich inspired the writing of "Send Me My Sun," an imagined dialogue between a mother and her imprisoned boy. The participants disguise their actual living conditions because both seek to comfort each other by glorifying their isolation. The use of "sun" and "son" is perhaps questionable, since puns are not usually found in lamentations, but I have tried to combine both images in the last line so that they finally convey a unified meaning. This poem was actually first written as a song, but it is an example of a piece which may be both read and sung.

"Sixteen Penny Pockets" is another song/poem. I wrote it after a stay with some friends who had formed a commune on Greers' Ferry Lake in Arkansas. The Group Incorporated was not, however, a typical commune. They supported themselves and expanded by operating several businesses such as a dinner theater, a pizza parlor, and a construction company. My involvement in a housebuilding project inspired the song. Had I been there much longer than a few days, my view of the salubrity of carpentry might have dampened. But I did retain

a faith in The Group that was not shared by the local community. Several years after my visit, vigilantes threw torches into The Group's centrally air-conditioned living quarters. No one was hurt, but my friends left the next day. This song celebrates the effort expended by a community of friends and indirectly chastises the mentality that destroyed their dream.

From the spoiled utopia, the collection moves to the spoiling notion of male superiority. In fact, female chauvinism now exists, as evidenced in "Cow Girl." Perhaps women's liberation encourages this supposedly male attitude out of vengeance. Perhaps men deserve to be evaluated as primarily physical objects. Either way, I am relieved that we males no longer hold a monopoly on considering the opposite sex as fat stock. Being branded, poked, and weighed is a disturbingly educational experience for an auctioneer. "Cow Girl" describes such a role reversal from the man's point of view and expresses only a token resentment.

But contemporary bachelorhood has its distinct advantages as well. Consider, for instance, the trip to the supermarket. "I Am the Fearless" portrays a liberated man who exalts in his weekly safari to Kroger. The hunting instinct is still with us, as few husbands really know. For the modern man who stalks his own dinner, learning the game trails in the grocery store is less than half the battle. Brand selection might conceivably boggle an Einstein. Some bachelors resort to indiscriminate sniping while others feverishly calculate price per unit

"My Aspen" recalls another episode on this same Colorado trip. To the non-skier, Aspen appears as extravagant as Vegas does to the non-gambler. There are dozens of specialty stores dealing in the latest equipment and fashion. Aspen's suburbia is an outer ring of poorly insulated shops rented by the less established members of the community. Since my funds, too, were limited, I fell in with these folk for a couple of hours, and we watched the smartly dressed members of high society glide toward the purring lift.

The menace to natural beauty posed by ski resorts seems inconsequential compared to the threat to wildlife posed by organized hunting. Although hunting is not organized like military maneuvers, an innocent tourist has his doubts when, on the first day of the season, twenty or thirty jeeps filled with sportsmen converge on an area that has just been scanned by his own relatively benign eyes. The tourist is reminded of the deer he just saw. In "The Hunters," sportsmen are compared to berserk ants. The hunters want to "kill a new queen" because they have forgotten that she nourishes the colony and gives it purpose. Driving out of the area that inspired the poem, I followed a twelve-point buck strapped to the back of a new Corvette. I advise anyone interested in a satire on the unfairness of hunting to read Norman Mailer's Why Are We in Vietnam?⁹

Continuing my journey down through New Mexico, I happened upon a commune which contrasted significantly with The Group.

In "The New Commune of America," the atmosphere was temporary, with individuals and couples arriving and departing daily. The wish to be free and different withered slowly on an untended vine. These people had not adopted the beneficial aspects of capitalism as had The Group; it showed in the size and condition of their gardens, and in their eyes. I tried to capture this ambivalence toward self-imposed circumstance in the poem. Although I have not heard of the commune's demise, I suspect that it disintegrated soon after I left. If both communes failed, one failed because of suspicion from without, the other because of purposelessness from within.

"Ed and I" tells of a close friend who, with me, sought enlightenment in San Francisco. We expected too much of our pilgrimage, but Ed's disappointment was more lasting than mine. The poem begins with a stanza depicting mutual observations on the way to California; then there are comparisons which widen into substantial contrasts by the end. I did, however, aim for an ironic similarity in and between the final two contrasts.

A more fruitful attempt at mystical experience unfolds in "The Peak." Another friend shared this journey with me, and this time we had left unattainable goals behind. Pike's Peak can be climbed on foot or in a car, but the swiftness and ease of a motorized ascent made the choice simple. Even the car could not detract from the overwhelming natural beauty surrounding us as we climbed the twisting road. While the

air got thinner, my soul seemed to expand into the vast, impractical wilderness, and, catering to no human desire, it might have continued upward had it not been reminded of its corporeal limitation by a cup of coffee. For a moment, I had known the blithe spirit in Shelley's "To a Skylark."¹⁰ But such knowledge can only be imperfectly captured in verse because mystical experience can only be personal. For that reason, the poem and the poet return to a more conveyable reality by the end of the piece.

From the top of a mountain, the collection descends to the world of a prostitute. The song, "Dirt Road Mama," bemoans the fate of a rather unsuccessful lady of the evening. In the first stanza, the unidentified narrator consoles his subject with a list of her liabilities followed by an account of her assets. The remaining two stanzas repeat this general pattern, and each stanza touches home with the words, "this morning." The song focuses on the preliminaries and aftermaths common to the profession and allows the listener imagination to fill in the interim. Although moralizing finds no obvious place in the lyrics, the overall impact should be humorously instructive.

The tone changes to one of seriousness in the next poem, "Caught Dolphins," which concerns a species of intelligent life that is being prostituted for human pleasure. My interest in these amazing creatures began with the reading of

a book by John C. Lilly, The Mind of the Dolphin, an account of the hypothetical language transmitted among members of the porpoise and whale family.¹¹ After extended periods of confinement in large aquariums, dolphins have been known to kill themselves by diving to the bottom and refusing to rise to the surface for air. However, since their suicide rate is not demonstrably larger than ours, we continue to regard these statistics as tolerable. Humans refuse to explore the possibility of sharing the earth with beings which have at least equal intelligence. Instead, we exploit the superior strength and grace of such creatures by confining and displaying them. This poem picks at the condescending attitude which allows such cultivated ignorance to prevail. Notice the verbs used and their duality of meaning.

"The Frisco Renaissance" is a pastiche of experiences and musings following "Caught Dolphins" for comic relief. As much attention is paid to sound as to sense in the poem, although a linear plot of sorts develops. The characters do not conform to their literary identities, and, as a result, Hamlet takes Ophelia's plunge, after which Falstaff rescues him and revives his spirits. The last two stanzas hint at the inefficacy of Hamlet's patriotism, and in so doing, they try to accentuate San Francisco's (and the poem's) zany iconoclasm.

When imagination levitates a poet to alarming heights, he must subdue his acrophobia. Likewise, when spontaneity

disrupts inertia, there is a concomitant vertigo to be dealt with. In "The Playground," vertigo hinders childhood impulses to play and be creative, just as the ossifying regularity of a thermostatically-controlled environment retards our vital capacity for wonder. The ending of the poem is not meant merely to suggest that routine be vivified by spontaneity. Rather, it proposes an alternative to systematized confinement: a less confining system.

"Fish and Boys" contrasts the *modus operandi* of less intelligent creatures and man. The fish are deceived by the rain, and then by fishing lures. The boys perch like gods above the fish and pull them out of their medium into the killing air. What was a massacre for the fish has proven to be a harvest for the boys, and they return as victors. The poem is almost too simple in its diction and style, but the simplicity is meant to convey the relative ease with which man, armed with his mind and its technological extensions, has taken advantage of a waning natural abundance.

The rarefied air of a mountain top deters much of the destructive activity which continues below. Perhaps lama-series nestle in Himalayan mountain passes for this reason. "Pine Cones" tells of a personal Shangri-la in Yosemite, one which is uninhabited and undefiled by man. The spirituality of the place contributed to my depiction of the pine cones as uninfluenced by gravity. In the last line, the cones are

given the quality of being lighter than air with the phrase: "When I pulled them down [from the tree and to the cabin below]."

The collection ends with "The Mind Flows," a poem describing the functions and dysfunctions of memory. "The mind flows over old ground with new water" because it is remembering the past in the context of the present. Those experiences recalled most frequently circle in the backwashes provided for them. When those recollections begin to dominate consciousness, the sky (or outside world) is distorted and will conform to expectations imposed by the past. Man may avoid the loss of clear vision by steering for deep water, but he can only find the safe current by observing the sloughs.

Empty Pockets, then, is my attempt at moving past memories and, at the same time, incorporating them into a system of values. The diversity of the poems and songs attests to a variety of events which combine to form my experience. In binding these items together, I am recognizing a redeeming unity in the diversity of a single life.

like distance and elevation for a field piece. While it takes less leg work to flush out a dinner these days, modern man (especially single man) is faced with the alternative of deciding what not to eat.

"The Wreck" juxtaposes an unsuccessful love affair and a traffic accident. The traffic accident becomes a means for resolving frustration about the affair. Only a handful of major American highways remain two-lane, and it is unusual for traffic to be completely halted by a single collision. So it is with American love, where the alternatives to an unfortunate relationship would appear to be innumerable. If one can "ferret out a side road," one need not be thwarted for long. And the ideal time to find such an option is in the soft light before a sunrise.

While camping in Colorado, I pitched my tent at the base of an enormous cliff. It was as if I were seeking refuge next to a sleeping giant. The precipice would not have been so mysterious had I been surrounded by mountains, but since I was so close, it dwarfed the higher peaks on the horizon. "The Cliff" describes the spirit of that edifice as I saw it. The pun in the last line of the poem is calculated to amuse, but a certain amount of reverence mixes with the humor and discloses my attitude toward the Deity. Perhaps the only visible remains of our ancient God to many agnostics is "a huge, dumb sentinel / Dependable but blind."

NOTES

- ¹Karl Shapiro, To Abolish Children (Chicago, 1968) p. 277.
- ²X. J. Kennedy, An Introduction to Poetry, third ed., (Boston, 1974), p. 103.
- ³Richard Ellman, editor, The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry (New York, 1973), p. 286.
- ⁴Ellman, op. cit., p. 527.
- ⁵Karl Shapiro, A Primer for Poets (Lincoln, 1953), p. 23.
- ⁶Shapiro, Primer, p. 24.
- ⁷See Gary Snyder's "A Walk" in Ellman, op. cit., p. 1264.
- ⁸See Langston Hughes' "Morning After" and "50-50" in Ellman, op. cit., p. 638.
- ⁹Norman Mailer, Why Are We in Vietnam? (New York, 1967).
- ¹⁰See also "The Cloud" and "Ode to the West Wind" in The Best of Shelley, Newman I. White, editor (New York, 1932), p. 338 and p. 341.
- ¹¹John Cunningham Lilly, The Mind of the Dolphin: A Nonhuman Intelligence (New York, 1969).

EMPTY POCKETS

Cage Eggs

I use cage eggs, not yard eggs.
The egg has been cracked for this omelet.
Its shell is a midway booby prize,
Cargoless and lost in a dusty closet bin.

The pale masses hanging in a plastic bowl.
I puncture and twirl them with my fork.
The mixture is coaxed onto a blank skillet
And stirred with the same fork.

Each egg takes a different temperature and time
Depending upon the altitude.
My kitchen is in an elevator.
I cook by ear-pops.
This egg is most likely done.

Water Games

One ocean afternoon,
Teacher lemminged us
To the beach.

We squeaked and hopped,
Splaying sand down to where
Foam would polish out our
Potholes.

Then Jean and I played
Tag below the water
With our salty little lips.
We were "it" for some time.

The rest weren't wading in
This deep,
And would not hear
The songs the bubbles gurgled.

Spring Fever

Of my spring, I climbed down
 Mother's cold high chair,
Having picked its pap lock.

I took to the fields, where
 Plump-bottomed playmates
Giggled alto giggles.

Mothers sought to lock
 Spring fruit in
Gauzy, numbing cups,
But such plums beg to be displayed
Above fertile earth.

Licking each other's butter threats,
We branded ourselves with hickies.
Ownership was a little blood brought to the
Surface by a sucking mouth.

Jesus Rose at Bible Camp

Jesus rose at Bible Camp
Behind my girlfriend's smile.
Gospel verses plinked a vamp
While we loved puerile.

Missionaries' manifests
Grew longer with our pledge;
Two celebrants of Eucharist
Beneath the Holy Hedge.

Consumed with new religion, we
Epiphanously grinned,
And classmates deemed us burden-free
While we devoutly sinned.

Our faith matured in tandem,
Without a single doubt.
We sung its praise at random,
Until the camp let out.

The Move

I have moved to Denton for the
Duration,
Turning in my radials for resoles,
My shifts for steps,
And my pushbutton phone for a dialer
Which jingles like pinball when used.
For a while, it didn't play when people tried
To reach me.
It was an omen to them that I was here for the
Duration,
And probably detained by some scholastic skirmish
Or other,
Or just enjoying the reduction of scale my world
Had undergone, when I may actually have been in my
Room with the phone dog-whistling, the Dallasite
Signaling but the Dentonite
Not receiving, lost in pedestrian reverie, and
Wonderfully bored.

Chapel

The chubby novice trudged to worship at eight
And began skeptically holy-rolling
Round the sacred ellipse,
His body not yet a part of his brain-embraced salvation;
Once round elicited sufficient inquisitional pain
From the mind's heretical appendage.

Indulgences would not be tolerated HERE and
Another round would underscore today's catechism.

Again the world lumbered by and the ground shook
As the funneled air seared the impurities,
And repentance rasped out in constricted wheezes
While the monastery shimmered in another hemisphere.

After the Movie

After the movie,
Breath steamed out of warmed bodies
Into a refrigerated night whose edges
Were lacquered with stars.
Our cheeks kindled coals against
The numb air.

The car cradled us
In its cool lap,
And my drowsy hands
Hibernated under her sweater.

A paper boy would be
Conjuring such hand warmers
When the alarm clock evicted him,
But I had no route,
And this was no dream.

Kesey

Kesey threw ping-pong balls at critics from left field,
Having caught high flies there which they hadn't noticed.
He was simply placing a skin around his reply
In order that its impact might be direct and
Exclusively personal to each questioner.

Q: Why is Chief Bromden depicted as mute?

A: 0

Q: Does your defense of the family logging business
Connote a dislike for organized labor?

A: 0, 0

The critics' lexicon stumbled over the spherical responses
Which necessitated a considered ejection of the pitcher,
But he had signed a contract which they understood
Well enough, and was permitted to complete his literary pogrom.

Horizontal Waterfall

A horizontal waterfall
Confined the kite to a whirlpool
Close to the jagged ground,
Its cord scoring red lines
In my hand.

The distended bag burst and flapped,
A wind-warning flag
To its unborne curled relatives.

The cord wound,
The sticks were flipped onto the back seat
And driven somberly to
The rattling trashcan.

Good Deeds

I know a girl who's simply satisfied;
My kind of music's all she needs.
We sit around together
And we fake a lot of tunes;
We never play any leads.

She doesn't argue
About which note is right;
I don't complain about her beat,
But when the moon is shining
And we're three quarters tight
We can sing for supper out on any street.

We take an old guitar
And a couple of spoons
And a beat up two-bit kazoo.
And while I'm picking madly on a ragtime tune
The street light's bouncing off her shufflin shoes.

The people throw their change while gathered round;
Those quarters clink away our blues,
And several hours later when we're headin uptown,
We got places to find
And money to lose.
And when our profits turn to loss again,
We know exactly what to do,
Grab my old guitar and a bottle and then
That lady slips on down into her dancing shoes,

And then we go downtown with a couple of spoons
And a beat up two bit kazoo.
And while I'm picking madly on a ragtime tune
The streetlight's bouncin off her shuffling shoes.

I know a girl who's simply satisfied
In being happy she succeeds
And when my beer is icy and my chicken's nicely fried,
it's another one of her good Deeds.

We take an old guitar
And a couple of spoons
And a beat up two-bit kazoo.
And while i'm picking madly on a ragtime tune
The street light's bouncing off her shufflin shoes.

"Petrofied"

The blindered nation unaware
Of pinched Rommelian tanks,
The sheiks surrounded Enco's lair
And ransomed Wall Street's banks.
The common market was imbued
With rumored threats of war,
Recameled bandits brandished crude
Like liquid scimitar.
The customers were unimpressed,
Inclined to disbelieve:
"The profiteers are still obsessed,
We know what's up their sleeve.
Despite the news at six we say
The situations smells."
And even Walter Cronkite they
Mistook for Orson Welles.
But fact or fable, prices rose,
Are rising, all en masse,
And doubtless will defy attempts
Of all who pass the gas.

Coffee Stop

I always stopped there for coffee
Two-thirds of the way home
When my right foot got as numb as
A star in my peripheral vision.

That night, a new young waitress
Invaded the diphthonged turf
Of the veterans,
Plowing the fallow air with her presence.

I said, "I'm from Jupiter."
"Yes, I recognize the shape of your body.
I'm from Waco. You on a puddle jump?"

Soon, I was shackled to my accelerator,
The conversation becoming a part of my belief
In extra-terrestrial visitation.

Gastric

The brass ensemble arranged itself,
Awaiting the conductor.

The audience applauded his entrance,
Hoping for the best.

The preliminary wave evoked
Groans from the instruments,
Possessed with decomposition.
A turgid tuba released bayous of
Swamp gas which hung about
A gaggle of cornets gripped in fits
Of flatulence.

The flute wooed a dismembered owl;
The piccolo squealed, a foetal pig
Ripped from an unripe womb.

The audience whispered Rolaid hexes,
Having been glued to their seats.

A custodial intermission followed.

The Rope
(With Apologies to Plautus)

Today I am twenty seven
And a half,
A high wire act
Between twenty five and
Thirty.

My ballasted body
Wiggles above the line
Which, drunk, weaves
Under my feet.

I often fell
Into the net
Before twenty five.
I was drunk and
The rope sober.

Now the rope has
Stolen all my booze;
The net is laid out
Flat on the ground.

A Sourdough Diary

We brought mildewed memories
Back to the pub,
Airing them in the gravelled moonlight.

The beer that had once primed
The laugh pumps of countless friends
(Faceless now)
Settled in our stomachs,
A sourdough starter
For penny loaves,
Rising and baking
Under the element of a quiet moon,
Brushed with muzzles of butter,
And then carried home
For a midnight snack.

Send Me My Sun

(son) The stars are my chandelier burning;
The snow is the rug on my floor.
I've so many rooms in my mansion,
And so many friends at the door.
We sit down to supper together,
And talk of the things that we've done.
There's just one thing wrong with the weather;
If you could, please send me the sun.

(mother) I am taking it easy this winter,
And my friends and I talk in the square
By the wall that is studded with diamonds
While the snow turns to pearls in the air.
We all share the paper each evening;
The news never tells me of one
Who darkened the day with his leaving
If you could, please send me my son.

(dialog) The stars are my chandelier burning,
And my friends and I talk in the square.
I've so many rooms in my mansion,
While the snow turns to pearls in the air.
We sit down to supper together;
The news never tells me of one.
There's just one thing wrong with the weather;
If you could, please send me my sun.

Sixteen Penny Pockets

Sixteen penny pockets,
Concrete covered boots,
Take my tie and lock it downtown
With my suits.

Sunshine for my ceiling,
Dirt road for my floor,
Now I know the feeling
Of looking out a brand new door so--

Come on you two speed pickup,
Take me to my view.
Fight after the sun's up
My boots'll be slippin on the morning dew.

I gave up my desk job
Just to look outside.
Told me someone robbed and it
Told me someone lied.

Dupont plastic raincoats
Won't keep away the rain,
And although it's sunny
Soon we'll be headin for a weather change
so

Come on you two speed pickup,
Take me to my view.
Fight after the sun's up
My boots'll be slippin on the morning dew.

Cow Girl

I have been a horse to a cow-girl,
Five feet of barrel racer,
Depending on me to loop-the-loop.

Though the night-lit alarm clock
Was my only visible contender,
The others were corralled inside her,
Splintering their confines
Around the edge of the arena
As she and I rode,
Not missing a gyration,
Slapping and puffing
Harmoniously,
Beating the clock.
I took her home,
To them, afterwards,
Since she did not allow herself
To sleep in the stables.

I Am the Fearless

I am the fearless stalker
Of the supermarket.
Frozen limas are no match for
My cunning.
While reaping rows of packaged radishes,
I zero in on fresh heads of lettuce
And pinch the tomatoes,
Capturing their essence in my
Calculator.
The loaves of bread graze by the bundts,
Ignorant of my hungry hands.
I scoop fish out barehanded
And flip them into my basket.
A half gallon of vanilla hibernates
Innocently beside an equally naive pie.
My all-purpose ammunition
Mows them down.

The Wreck

Two cars had wedged themselves
Into a narrow bridge
Like two fat men plugging a door.
The trickle of predawn traffic
Bunched and swelled calmly,
Backing up to me.

I had proven useless
To an ex-fiance
And was coming back
Across the bottom land alone.
It was a chance to be useful
To strangers.

As light began to reveal
The quilted fields,
I ferreted out a side road and
Directed diesels and pickups
Around the wreck.
Then I followed them
Into the sunrise.

The Cliff

The cliff glowed red until dark,
A witness to the sun's last rays.
Unmoved by night, he took up half the sky
With his blank bulk.

Stars too thick to chart
Outlined a silhouetted void,
A huge, dumb sentinel,
Dependable but blind,
Blotting out the eastern vault,
Granite-brained and willed,
God offal.

My Aspen

Aspen issued parking tickets
Beyond a half hour to keep
Autos from becoming more derelicts
Than the town already had.

Browsing among the tiny A-frame stores
Which ringed the elite ski shops,
My nose was hooked by fresh doughnuts
Breathing hot, sweet smells into the
Chilly morning.

I bought and ate three. Then the kindly,
Clever owner passed a joint to his patrons.
I ate and bought three more.

I returned to my ticketed car
With the satisfaction that a
Borderline pauper has of not being
Able to afford a serious sample of skidom,
But of at least riding the lift.

The Hunters

The hunters are coming!
The hunters are coming!
Dayglo orange-capped legions
Jeep swarthily toward
What is left.

Thousands of malignant metal feelers
Dangle off the edge of the
Four-wheel-driven carapaces
Topped with orange caps
Throbbing with gut fetish.

The colony wants to kill
A new queen.

I Bring My Traveler's Checks
To The New Commune of America
And Hide Them In My Earth Shoe

The commune is represented by
A barefoot gingham-dressed New York Gypsy
Who allows herself to be taken
To a vegetarian restaurant.

She befriends me and invites me to
Stay in the New Commune of America,
Where city kids coerce wilted plants
Out of an unprepared soil.

They are all broke and proud and beaten,
Except for the gingham girl and her entourage,
Who are, like me, just passing through.

A legit masseuse sells me her services;
I thank her when she reaches my crotch
Not wanting to feel like I owe the place a living.

We slip into our separate nights.

Ed and I

Ed and I joked our way to
San Francisco, and logged all
Significant events en route.
We noted weather and waitress changes
And topographical similarities,
And charted two sunsets and several
Gas prices.

Ed was destined for zen institutes,
I for places to sing:
We were both seeking.

Ed walked into a telephone pole,
I into too many auditions.

Ed is in a sanitarium,
I am in graduate school.

The Peak

My wrinkled VW
Didn't lose its tirehold
On the avalanchable gravel,
But it coughed in the thin air,
So I let it convalesce by the lodge.
We had looked over our shoulders
Into a sky-colored lake, and
not seen our reflection.
Everything was
Clear.
Something
In me wanted
To keep going up,
But we were at the top
Of Pike's Peak. I needed
To drink coffee to feel my stomach.
I threw in a couple of extra doughnuts,
And felt solid enough to roll back
Down to the bottom without the
Old car squeaking around us.
Just us again. The car
would trundle us
Back to the
Valley.

Dirt Road Mama

Dirt road mama with an unwashed face
And a neck where lace has never been,
Wearing goodwill dresses and repossessed shoes
Your perfume is half-pint gin.
There ain't a single man's worries
'Bout the trouble he's in,
You can't stop and start all over again,
And later on convince him that he owes
You a ten
This morning.

Wild cat woman, you've been padding around
Never making a sound it seems.
Ending up in front of a lonely man's eyes
And causing him to choke on his dreams.
And then you clear his throat
With a pat on the back,
I know a place where we can get you back on the track,
And later there'll be headaches
But the coffee's black
This morning.

Caught Dolphins

Caught Dolphins click and whistle
An ancient, scratchy tune
Which keeps, when immersed
In oceanarium brine.

They wriggle around in their jars,
Mammalian pickles on display,
Souring and playing,
Always within view,
Always within reach,
Donald-Ducking Disneyland dialects
For us,
Their gray clay mouths frozen into smiles
For us,
Their jumps through fiery hoops learned
For us,
Their walking on the water performed
For us,
Their dive to the quiet sleep at the bottom executed
For us.

The Frisco Renaissance

I would have played Falstaff to her
Ophelia in Frisco,
Had we been properly miscast.

Oh, I was Falstaff enough,
Waggishly side-stepping
Hamlet's cable car
On my way to the pub
Across the street.

She was on it,
Gliding sideways by,
Flashing a properly indented navel,
Turning me into The Portrait of Balzac

She got off before the end of the line
And watched Hamlet spirit his car into the bay.
George Washington not Crossing the Delaware.

He floated by fisherman's wharf humming patriotic ditties,
But she was too busy taking up with a crab salesman to salute.
I fished Hamlet out of one drink and into another,
And all was almost forgotten.

The Playground

The playground calls

Over there.

Squeaking seesaws and

Chirping merrygorounds

Giggle like munchkins

Peeking from tulips.

Vertigo's an old man

Sitting on a bedpan

Thrashing at the world

With a jaundiced cane.

He pokes you in the stomach

When you swing

To keep the ground from rocking.

He rubs his heels down the slide each time

So you can't leave the top behind.

He stomps your fingers at the monkey bars

So he can sit back down upon his business.

Drag his ass to the sandpile,

And cover his remains with castles.

Fish and Boys

Fish: It is raining

Water worms.

Eat the sky!

Boys: It is raining.

We should go back.

Start the motor

Fish: This worm

Is connected to the sky.

It pulls me toward the clouds.

Boys: The fish are feeding!

Hook their hunger.

Can them.

Fish: This cloud is

So hard. It will not

Rain me down.

Boys: Thirty-seven!

We should go back.

Start the motor.

Pine Cones

The pine cones grew
Eighteen inches long
2,000 feet above.

Gravity couldn't make them small.

Below, I sweated through an ague
Of books and Brylcreem
During my climb.

The trail was
One tennis shoe wide,
Then one bare foot wide,
Then gone.

The trees
Accepted me.

They let me find
A marble tub
Of crackling water.

I fell back
Into the healing womb
And heard my birth song again.

The cones would tell my family
When I pulled them down.

The Mind Flows

The mind flows over old ground
With new water,
Whirling into eddies those things
Which it will keep,
Forever spinning them
Before a jut of land,
Beneath a humid willow.

Turning and flashing in the wet light,
Mostly on the other side of air,
They hypnotize the sky.