

POETRY-IN-THE-ROUND: A FOLKLYRICAL WORKS
NARRATION AND POEMS BY GEORGE ABBE • FOLKWAYS RECORDS FI 9164



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POETRY-IN-THE-ROUND: A POETRY WORKSHOP

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POETRY IN THE ROUND

A Poetry Workshop



narration and poems by George Abbe

ABOUT MR. GEORGE ABBE

Winner of the Shelley Memorial Award and now Resident Poet-Novelist at Russell Sage College, Mr. Abbe has recorded his poetry for the Library of Congress and Harvard University, published five novels, one recommended by the Book-of-the-Month Club; five collections of verse; two critical works; a novella; and a verse drama; served on the staffs of writers' conferences in five states, Idaho, Texas, Ohio, Connecticut, and New Hampshire; and taught at Yale, Mt. Holyoke, Columbia, Wayne, the University of Maine, Springfield College, and the University of Iowa.

SIDE I, Band 1: POETRY-IN-THE-ROUND

If there is one thing we Americans need to overcome our anxieties, it is to cross into that half-world of the visionary and subconscious let-go, and be ourselves poetically and imaginatively now and then. Beyond the fixed and humdrum everyday, are those enormous sweeps of all-things-in-their-essential-being, where we may be released and purified. The importance of music and painting in the treatment of the mentally ill has universal acceptance. The therapeutic value of poetry, for everybody, deserves similar recognition. Of all the arts, it may have the greatest power to probe and release subconscious conflict.

Much of the best poetry from earliest times has been subconsciously, not consciously, written. Poets have expressed themselves under compulsion to relieve inner tension. If poetry has power to heal the poet, it can also heal the reader. To achieve this, however, the reader must do more than try to comprehend the poet's intended meaning. People often react to a poem with a simple, "I don't get it." Actually, the poem should "get the reader." This, though, for many people, opens a new dimension in poetry-reading. No two people have the same reaction to a painting, musical composition, or poem. The important thing is for everyone to free himself of restraint so that his own reaction can be full and deep, drawing upon his richest imaginative powers. The interpreters are the co-makers of the poem. Ten minds interpret a poem in ten different ways. "All criticism is individual taste," Stephen Benét once said; the keenest readers enjoy differently, each with his own reaction-truth and his right to it.

A poem is not made until it is responded to; there is no author without audience; the creative act is a reciprocal and simultaneous doing between the two. Each interpretation is essential, part of the creative making, reality, and being of the poem. We may refer to it as poetry-in-the-round. Without audience, or the co-maker, the work of art sounds in a vacuum.

There are as many poems in each composition as there are reactions to it. The so-called "author" merely triggers the cooperative process, the multiplicity of truth and meaning that adds up to the eventual unity of the poem - its place in society.

An eminent poet and critic once wrote me: "A poem like anything, is all the ways it can be seen, while it remains what it is. I should be interested in the co-existence of delicate slowness and delicate speed in a poem. There are in poems, picture and logic; there are ease and discontent. In the same way as human beings, when they feel understood, feel they are being seen in every way they can be seen, so if a poem were a person, it would look for an instantaneous and coherent diversity of being seen. This is hard to get at."

Poetry should require continuity, an enduring, yet developing relationship between author and audience.

We all know how Shakespeare means more to us at forty than he did at twenty. His work changes as we change. Thus I alter in respect to my own poetry, and my readers alter with me. The conditions of their lives shift, and if we could register their complete view of one poem every given minute for a week, we would find constant modification. Each of my poems changes every day, every hour. My audience makes their own poetry from mine; I from theirs; we grow together. Poetry becomes process. Poetry becomes organic, community experience.

In interpreting poetry, age makes little difference. Often, the younger the person, the more astonishing, profound, and exciting the response.

Let us take my poem, "The Book," and then present interpretations of it at different age-levels as recorded by teachers in one of my creative-writing workshops who used my Poetry-in-the-Round theories in their classrooms.

SIDE I, Band 2: a. THE BOOK

I came to the margin of yesterday;
I saw a girl on the edge of flowers.
There were birds on a steeple, and clouds as
high
as the stars of childhood in mystery's tower.
A gray stone library, red of roof,
stood by a sidewalk where people were small
but excessively kind, and their voices drew
the fish from the water, the fox from the hill.

The girl on the edge of the flowers stood
deep,
so deep in the grass I saw only her head
and a bare arm held high. She looked rosy
and sweet.
Then I saw what she held - a book she had
read,
far down in the insects, the drowsing, the
pollen.
The words she had read shone like drops on
her brow
and glowed on her lips, and exquisitely shone
in eyes blue-eternal and grey here-and-now;

and from library windows, heads were thrust
out,
the steeple birds paused, and the clouds
swung low;
the fox raised his head, the fish made no
sound;
the flowers were diamonds from the darkest
unknown.

b. ANALYSIS

Here are two adult interpretations, the first by Joseph Segalla, a teacher in the workshop:

"'The Book' holds for me the stimulation of an impressionistic painting. One is attracted by its opening line, 'I came to the margin of yesterday,' which reminds us that the closest we can come to any yesterday is by way of thoughtful longing. The use of light upon the setting achieves clarity, a quiet and warm total effect. Part of the harmony lies in the choice of words such as 'gray stone library' - the internal silence of the building, implied but not stated.... Everything combines to produce a quickening, a realization of having experienced something similar, which becomes important to our later periods of reflection; but the real excitement comes about by seeing it recorded as you would like to have it told."

"In the past," another teacher in my workshop wrote after using the author-audience method, "poetry in the classroom has largely meant boring memorization of the works of the old masters. Instead of developing an appreciation and love for this medium of expression, pupils have responded with antipathy. They have felt no kinship, no stimulation, no self-realization. They have come to believe, as one ten-year-old boy expressed it when a teacher told him she was taking a course with a modern poet who was

interested in having youngsters like him write down their reactions to his verses:

"Why, I thought all poets were dead!"

"This author-audience method of interpretation offers an entirely new approach for teachers working with pupils of all ages. Here the student is allowed to tell in his own words how the poem makes him feel, what pictures he sees, what thoughts are aroused. He is creating as truly in his own way as the poet who wrote the poem. If some new thought, or idea, or remembrance, or dream is awakened in his mind, then the poem has achieved its purpose, a new dimension has been reached. In turn, the poet gains an enlarged perspective of his own work; he and his reader share a common experience from which each derives growth and new freedom."

Next, reactions to "The Book" by seventeen-year-olds. First, John Rodgers: "Men are uninformed about the world's mysteries. We are like the fish and the fox in our ignorance. It seems that the more we read and know, the more confounded we become." Another 17-year-old, George Romero, comments: "The girl struck me as having reached a turning point in her life, the change from adolescence to maturity. 'The margin of yesterday' I took as possibly meaning the termination of her childhood. Up to now she had lounged in ignorance of life, reading the book of learning until she could get up and face the world. Now, having learned enough, she rises out of the grass and is seen above the grass with her new knowledge written on her face as a sign of maturity."

Finally, a group of reactions by ten-year-old 6th graders:

Lloyd Frankenburg has said that "the child is the poet in each of us, the part that responds to vision." In these experiments, the teacher merely had the children read the poem, after reading it to them; then asked for the instantaneous effect it had on them; they were not allowed to communicate with each other or receive outside help. When asked to write down what she thought the poet was trying to say, one little girl protested: "But I thought you were supposed to tell us that!"

Karen Fuller, of Canton (Conn.) Elementary School, wrote: "The girl in the meadows was happy. She had just read a book on God's creation, and she was glad that she could be with what God had made. All these people were looking out of the library to see why the girl was so happy, as though they were part of the book. When the people did this, it made the meadow quiet. The animals knew they were in God's world, and they hushed so they could be sure that they were not doing wrong. The people on the sidewalk were small. They were not as big as God, but they were very kind. They made the fox and the fish draw near to hear them."

Paul Hudon, also of Canton, jotted down: "I thought of a man reminiscing of his hometown and the girl he loved. She was as beautiful as flowers, and was a girl who loved everyone and everything. Whatever she said, all people heard. The book meant that she was the spirit of knowledge, and through books he could learn about nature, the stars, and the kindness of people."

Gary Larsen, of Berlin, Connecticut, explained: "The girl in the garden is either small or the plants are very tall. And I think that the insects in the garden are quiet because they are watching the girl. When

the poem said, 'The words she had read shone like drops on her brow,' I think that it meant that what she had read she was thinking about over and over again."

Carol Pulcini, also of Berlin, commented: "It came to dusk or nightfall of yesterday. You saw a girl standing near the place where the flowers were. A steeple is high and clouds are high in the sky and you don't know what is in the child's mind. It's a mystery to everyone except the child. The reason why they say 'birds in the steeple and clouds high' is because they want you to think of something tall or maybe even bright. You don't really know the child in his or her mind. They use the expression, 'draw the fish from the water' and 'the fox from the hill,' to express the quality of their voices. They didn't actually draw the fish from the water and the fox from the hill. They wanted you to know that their voices were something worthwhile mentioning so they use those expressions. She wasn't really so deep in the grass that you only saw her head. This was to show her thought: it was a deep thought... Everything grew very quiet, for nightfall appeared, and it must have been a beautiful evening with stars shining brightly in the marvelous heavens above where mysteries still are."

Carol DeMarco, of Kensington (Conn.) Grammar School, said: "I think this poem means that years ago birds and the people and other things used to be peaceful and there was not so much racket. You used to see flowers that weren't trampled down. The girl was so quiet reading her book and the insects so drowsy resting so peacefully. Now everybody's running and jumping about. I think the author would like to go back to his childhood town."

Pamela Wallace, of the Willard School, Berlin: "My impression of this poem is that a person is getting older and he remembers his childhood sweetheart, the freshness of her youth blossoming more beautifully in his mind than the spring flowers. Her eyes were like stars, and her words shone like jewels in his memory...Then suddenly everything he had been thinking of seemed to shine very brightly, but all of a sudden everything seemed to stop; the birds no longer sang, the clouds swung low, the people stopped and looked. Suddenly he knew that it was an old picture in his mind dreaming of the past, and he knew that all the dreaming in the world would never let him live his childhood again."

One boy, apparently under the influence of the Chamber of Commerce, wrote: "Come to the town, meet a girl, and get married!"

Bill Eddy, also of Kensington, felt this: "The sun is turning pinkish red, on this late summer day. The flowers are glowing, the clouds are lowing. It is getting later now. A girl stands reading, in a yellow meadow. A fox starts howling from the green hills. The clouds are turning pink. The sun is backing away under the green hills. People are talking in the library...You can see the steeple birds pause and look. The fox stops howling, the girl stops reading, kind people stop reading in the library, and they start staring. Night has arrived."

Is it any wonder that I, who merely wrote down the words in the beginning, find the horizon of my poems widening with each new interpretation?

One can see now why I believe poetry should be shared, should become a part of community activity and enjoyment, like children at play.

No matter how varied, how extended or brief the thoughts and feelings in response to a poem may be,

they should be recorded as part of the history of the art; for all of them, exactly as much as the words the author put down, make the poem itself; they are the poem.

SIDE I, Band 3: UNDERGROUND

I entered a subway at bleeding noon.
Its waiting caves were ribbed with dust;
its sweating metal empty shone;
faintly its motors beat with remorse.

Four men entered, never known
in any country where I'd been.
The long cars started, as in pain;
the dark whirled by with ultimate haste.

And one cried: "No, I cannot stop!"
and dashed the windows through with fists;
another, bending through a trap,
let the fast wheels cut through his wrists.

Another, leaping to a seat,
stretched downward, holding to a strap;
of terror and repentance preached,
though nothing heard nor turned to wait.

And last, the fourth, lofty and hard,
with cheeks of basalt slashed by thought,
raced to the car-end, struck the door,
the steel that smoldered with friction's flame.

"O motorman! O name the track,
the station, and the usual fare!"

His hands clung; he could not pull back;
clothing and flesh broke open and streamed
against that sucking steel blown hot,
against that tiny window black
with tunnel coming, no human there.

SIDE I, Band 4: A FAT MAN DIES

I heard a woman soft with fat
cry out she saw her husband dead,
that he had risen from his bed
a certain way, and, just like that,
had fallen, and when they lifted him
his limbs were lard, his heart a crumb.

I saw her, gentle and piteous,
whose fleshiness had melted his,
torn from her dream, and there upon
tomorrow's white and icy screen
he rose, he fell, he died the same
as in that most meticulous dream.

And now, her softness, large and giving
yearned at his live obesity,
his kindness slow and darkly striving;
yet all her size could vainly do
was make his lips more certain gray;
with each caress his own fat grew;

till, sick, from their sad bed he rose,
and fell, and died as in her dream, -
with one thing added: he was so large
from life, from her, his burial mound,
big beyond custom, drew men's eyes
and gave them pause for miles around.

SIDE I, Band 5: THE HAND-CAR

Down railroad track,
pumping the hand-car,

I came with a lump
of sun in my pocket,
a boy's-camp medal
stiff on my chest.

The yeast of summer
had swollen the woods to a feast
of lustful, blazing leaves.
Fleeing from instructors
in camping and rowing, I rushed
down the rusted, long-abandoned track.

It veered through mountain rock.
The shock of a straight-away
laced me cold; I saw
the long-unused railroad station; and there
with a fur about her neck,
and sad, accusing eyes,
my mother, watching me.

Pumping, I passed,
not letting my gaze leave the track.
The black, rusted metal rails rushed
under the hand-car's wheels
that screamed with rust.

SIDE I, Band 6: THE GIANTS

There was a town without roof tops,
there was a town without towers,
and down between walls without cover
the sunlight tumbled pure;
and all through the bursting autumn
the wild leaves drifted their floors.

But winter! - their winter was wisdom;
their heroes grew quickly then:
they ate at ice-deep tables
with fists of frozen rain;
their eyes were the lightning of rivers
beneath storms of skating men.

And when they stood for conversing,
majestic and patient-browed,
snow-haired and frosty-templed,
they flexed like roots in ground,
and flashed their glances wide.

Till all their rooms were pygmied;
they leaned on the tops of walls,
looked down on the streets below them,
tiny and drifted and still,
and trembled the borealis
with their own, fierce, arctic yell.

SIDE I, Band 7: THE FIRST DREAM: THE GARAGE

I kept telephoning the repairman at the garage.
"Explain:
when will my car be ready?" And yet there,
staring out of a phone-booth, I stood, -- there
in the very garage I was telephoning to.

"My dog," I said. "My luggage. Are they
safe? Locked in? What was wrong. Why did I
leave the car?"
The garageman's voice, thin and far, cracked like
a celluloid
toy. I couldn't hear a word.

I hurried from the booth. The garage had
many levels.
I kept striding down, down, searching.
There were burning-black cables and ancient
cars being raised;

straining men held up cylinder-blocks.
I pushed through dangling cables and chains;
crazed, I sought everywhere, I ran.
But none was the repairman, none my car.
Wherever it stood, helpless and spent,
my dog was inside, all
my belongings.

I flung myself into another booth; my voice
boiled in the mouthpiece, under the close roof,
like scalding
water: "Which part
of the garage are you in?
Is it fixed? The dog, you say, is gone?
The luggage was never there?"

I stared through my sweat, past
the scratched and grimy phone-booth glass;
and tall
and horrifying hung cranes and chains and
cables,
a forest through which
the click of the repairman's voice seemed
to come,
humming into the phone over long wire, too
far,
too tired. "I can't tell you how to get
to this level. I don't know what's wrong
with your car.
The doors are unlocked and the luggage and
dog
are gone."

THE ANTIOCH REVIEW

SIDE II, Band 1: THE ICEHOUSE

I came through sun
to touch the icehouse door,
the lintel framed in majesty
of shadow, the threshold beam
so deep it shook my heart.

I felt the branding iron of mountain light
glide from my back; I stood
in the blue-fountained shadow of a world.

Now, vaguely powerful monoliths
swathed in the sleep of sawdust time;
now, rhyming blocks of Grecian stone
frozen in habitudes of dream,
free me of the familiar's heat and blindness;
let me
kneel upon the cold of all the rivered
unpossessed:

the crested pillars of that Roman doom
long rooming now in crumbled underworlds:
the petals of Egyptian flowers
bowered in Everests of stone, in chill
of lips seduced to artifice,
the ice wherein the mastodons of fury fell
all fully armed, and wrapped in mystic valor.

Now pallor of light
at high, dim window, ancient beams,
the clear and aching violet of shadow.

The sun, the sun is gone! Alone
in cold I kneel, secure; and fail, and fall,
and stand to gaze
on seas of Vikings and Balboa, over deeps
beyond the last subliminal, beyond
the town's last fence and faltering,
grassy rise.

O ice! O clothed in particles of wood
bled out of time,
your timeless is my mood,
your unfamiliar all my recognition and
companionship.

SIDE II, Band 2: THE VIOLATION

Hard by my window, under the frost
of the last shadow of night,
a late and patient iris nung,
whose hope was my rootscep, whose only star
the fair hand of my mercy that might permit her
to endure.

I drew the fragrance from her soul, I drained
the clear ardor of her skin,
and chilled my own impatience with the ice
of her wise meditation; and step by step I took
the good of her thought, the tincture of her
flesh
and crushed her into withering with my want.

The frost of shadow covers again
the pain of day. I look to see
the gleam of iris for my sleeping.
Deep to the sands of absence she has gone,
brought under by my love, thrust down
by my lean and terrible desire
for the pure.

What tender wish could be defiled
with viler atavism? What trust broken
with grosser lust? Abandoned I sleep,
and dream of one betrayed
who rages beautiful as a leopard beyond
the wall where she shall face me when I die.

SIDE II, Band 3: I SAW AN ARMY

I saw an army coming against the sun.
Its men were faceless and its banners dead.
No cheering voice was lifted -- no, not one.
The broken flesh of wounds forgot to bleed.

Upon their shields they bore their children's
limbs
Seared in the oven of atomic glare;
Their belts were fission; and their armor
gleam
The dust of blasts beyond the stratosphere.

Pricked was their skin and threaded white with
steel;
The flame of rockets writhed along their thighs;
A chemistry of missiles bent the knee
And clothed the sorrowing mouth, the darkened
eye.

Yet in their ranks they marched upon the sun,
With hands hung weaponless, with cindered cheek,
And spectral footstep faint as desert wind
That fails before it finds the strength to
speak.

From death, the burning core of light, I
watched,
And cried with soundless throat, "Beware!
Beware!"
But deaf they moved, straight to what I had
sought:
The fire of mastery, the target of power.

SIDE II, Band 4: THE ANIMAL

That March had a neck like an animal;
its pussy-willow eyes watched me
approaching.
O the snow in the tops of my boots,
the melting water
cold through the rubber to my shins!
I think the taste of sky was threads
of scarlet
cut round my body like glittering
fever;
and I was breaking out my bones like steel
to reach and rake the last ice out of
hills.

Over, over the meadows hiding their hair
under death till the whipping wind of June,
alone I dashed, approaching the wood I
knew.
And there was that different animal,
March,
meek with its pussy-willow eyes,
its neck of alder brown outstretched
to ask me to be merciful. I took
fewer than my sister had told me to.
I hate
to break the body of March, to kill the
living.

SIDE II, Band 5: THE LONE, IMMORTAL CAR

Take, now, the lone, immortal car;
bar from all roads the rest;
press holy foot to pedal, shock forward far
to west, to sliding south,
dry-mouthed, and springing flame on head.

Can you see, alone, the country is more
sane?
The rain of heaven beats upon your dust;
love is the rising fir, and motor hush,
roads shorn
of mortal, staring
with bare eternal evenness
of speech. For here the empty
teaches, and the eye can search
time's work within the wheel of here,
fearless with God's care.

Burn the white gas of pensive speed.
Agree. Agree to be singular and fleeing
and at rest
with the vast, barren road.
Goad the late heart with steel-precision
hurry
that carries the one car, mortal-redeemed,
to verge of grace.
And trace, O trace your fine tires in the
endless dust!

SIDE II, Band 6: TRAFFIC QUINCE

When you see the traffic light
brighten with red, and reach
the clear thorn of warning far,
starring the city air, - then there,
there is the quince bush within whose flare
the tired driver plunges flesh
the mesh of Christ, no less, the love
swung forth from wires and poles of grace.
No face of Jesus rose more clear
to bare the fault, to still the weary.
He cared for traveller whose eyes looked up.
Ah trust of beauty and discipline,

win me to wait, leaning on wheel
till feel of distance, cosmic rest
bursts from that bush of traffic glow.
Know how the driven, flagging hate,
the lateness, panic, haste to be foiled,
in soil of patient moment fades,
to raise red quince of heaven's bush
in hush before the traffic moves.

SIDE II, Band 7: HORIZON THONG

Go back now; pause to mark
that hill town cut in two:
one half, green summer's charm,
the other, chasmed in snow.
Horizon, a thong of red
knotted by smoldering sun;
wind, the wind in the drifts,
and crystal blossoms flung
downward - so near, so warm -
to where orchards bend and lift.

And father, - father who kneels
to pull snowshoes from his back,
looks down to the shining field
where his son runs, easy and fast;

he must follow, follow to save,
but the snowshoes will not free;
they are rooted to shoulder blade,
they are flesh of paternity.

Only a quick run down,
but helpless he kneels in cold,
watches his young boy run
over meadows lyric and full
towards woods, a wood of his own.

Wrenching, and wet with pain,
the father downward bows;
the village of homes and men
grows faint in the blizzard's glow.

The boy flashes under trees
and fades. The horizon mark
binds throat of man on his knees;
the sun-knot tightens to dark.

SIDE II, Band 8: FROM THE MOTIONLESS TWIG

This wisdom I learned from the motionless twig:
there is no place to go, and haste is illusion.
The things I would fashion from small into big
are already as large as my heart could have
chosen.

And what I believed I could master was there,
precisely achieved in the act of my prayer.

Why fear? Why reach out?
I am here. I am done.
For movement means only a doubt.
The world I will shape to my resting:
no light will fly out from the sun;
no petal will blow from the bough;
the storm will drive not the cloud,
will be always arresting.

There is nothing but now,
and whatever's begun is through,
and each hope I enlisted has won.

SIDE II, Band 9: BLUEBERRY GIRL

The air grieved and the island
died at the edge of sun.
From the clubhouse the wealthy swam
toward the mountain's blue fan,
toward its shade and its dim.

Spring water shocked their blood:
in the channels of cold they slowed;
they recalled words like "should";
from underground years there flowed
forgotten torrents of good.

A girl with a blueberry pail
strapped to a belt of fire
came out of a brushland trail
her blue-smeared mouth and hair
coarse with the bayberry smell
and the taste of the deep-earth choir.

Her breasts were circles of garnet
budded to green speech,
the down of her hand a linnet
bending the harp of the birch,
and out of her eyes and flesh
she sent the moth of her kiss.

The men broken by golf course,
skewered on heat of court,
waited with eyes like a dead purse
opened to show their hurt;
their swimming died at its source,
between boredom's better and worse,
their wet arms fixed to doubt.

Now bright to the listening water
she came where mountain shadow
blurred her to fairer and better,
and the curve of her throat was a cello
plucked in the twilight gather,

and when she bent to fill
the sharp white of her pail,
the swimmers felt fear still,
felt coldness temper and fail.

Her garnet breasts drank light
as her blueberry mouth drew wet;
the swimmers' hearts turned hot,
their eyes and the drinker's met;

and rage of the blueberry noontime,
the temples of mountain fir,
the sawdust ant and the bee chime
came stinging out of her.

They sank, and sinking heard
her innocent murmuring lips -
lost bell from the clubhouse deck
calling them back to the church
of their comfort, their profiting work.

SIDE II, Band 10: NEW YORK CITY

Flying in plane's rib,
cribbed and yearning for earth-touch birth,
watching, down-reaching, I saw worlds below
that intransigent city adrift by night,
bright-pulsed, flung-upward, flamed with
silver,
white-fountained, love-finned, embossed by
tumult.

The plane leaned, the city grew, rose to
ensnare
brain's eye, blood's finger-tip, all desert
hope.

Yet lovely far, yet hung like rose,
yet known to thirsty and the proud,
suspended out of time, ungeared
from mesh of soil and flesh and metal,

released, as was the angel from stone,
flown, out-flung as virtue's rocket
locked in God's dream, wistful as man.

SIDE II, Band 11: THE EXPIATION

Where I lectured, the platform was ankle-deep in
water.

The crowded stadium soared, dimming from view.
The people read programs, laughed, played cards,
ignored me.

Down the center aisle, ankle-deep water flowed;
the shoes of latecomers descending made no splash;
through diamond liquid, brown and black leather
glowed.

My notes slid down into wet; I bent and shook them.
Knew suddenly this was wrong lecture, crowd, and place.
Leaving by the center aisle, my shoes made no sound.
Down long meadows of shallow water I hurried,
recalling
my love. I had betrayed her; but how and where?
Here, in the winters of youth, we had skied.
Was this water that melted world? Had she passed
this way, fearing?

Now a dam, hissing, and thunder; but under it,
canyons of dryness.
I walked far. I was naked on a vast beach.
There was no horizon, no water anywhere; I burned
with invisible sun. Then in that void of yearning
I felt arms about me. They were hers. But when I
turned,
she kept at my back, behind me always.
Violent,
I twisted, revolved; but always the soft arms
clung;
she was there, but evaded. I stood on the sand,
the expanding and limitless beach, the wind cool;
but I could not
face her, or ever draw her to where I could
see.
There was no horizon; only wind without variation.

SIDE II, Band 12: LAST PATCH OF SNOW

I'm not sure why I touched it.
A crocus-tip can be more dazzling,
and a boy would rather throw dice
or marbles than be soft-hearted.

But the snow was the last,
in a corner between tree and wall.
The far crowd answered things I had never
asked,
and the wind, nearly April, moved
the buds. I almost remembered what I'd felt
in the long blizzard; I nearly recalled
the power of my legs driving the skis.

Or was it the thought of a kitten, white,
who slept under earth I'd turned
myself in spring, a corner of the garden
withdrawn and secret, where, shaken,
the white wild cherry blossom fell?

I cannot tell. But I knelt
as I did when told, in older people's prayer,
and taking the snow upon my palm,
saw the warmth of sun turn it to water,
the shudder and tremble, a tingling light.
I heard the crow, crying toward the river land,
the corn to fall, the hot suns of tomorrow;
and sorrow older than my memory flowed
from the fierce cold into my palm's blood.

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SIDE II, Band 13: THIRST, AND A DOG RUNNING

Open the pure door of that summer air
and see again gold dog loping through heat,
past blueberry bush and orange-paintbrush fur
toward aegis of desire, the depthless lake.

Tempered with sadness, slanted on turquoise sky,
ready to yield the soul to summer thunder,
grave animal, long-nosed, lank, and too-sharp-thighed,
racing the ball of sun, the dry earth's tinder,
brushing the grass whose cool touch is a dream,
fighting for breath where rocky hill-tops steam . . .

Did you ever reach that water? Did I ever learn
what God-ordained content is in a thirst slaked?
My blood stretched with your running gold to where
light burned
incredibly like Arthur's shield on hammered lake.

You paled from sight. Only when ice hung sharp
its coat-of-mail upon the lake's side,
did I, dead spent from skating swift and far,
bend to the hole cut by fisherman's pike,
and in the fury cold of water aching the throat,
welling dark against my grateful lips.
see all that you had found, whether gaining or lost,
whether reaching water or carried on hopeless ships
beyond your summer's thirst, and death's frost.
Seeking or finding, prayer is the self made quick.

SIDE II, Band 14: CHANGED

I saw a man turned into money:
His head became a bank vault door

in which the wheels were seen to hurry,
the valves were heard to quaintly purr.

The breast was soft as brown purse leather
in which the bones were solid coin.
The bullion heart, held fast forever,
fed stocks and bonds through copper veins.

Lithe arms of greenbacks wound to cable
clasped lover and tomb and mortal tower;
with special joy reached to inveigle
the tender child with twist of power.

And looking down, I saw, amazed,
that the reproductive organs set
in wax and most conspicuously placed,
were nothing more than cancelled checks.

SIDE II, Band 15: THE INVADERS

The birches slash at the shadow
with the pure white of joy;
the dark fir pour upward
to stain the mountain.

Out of the rocks come shouting,
immense, hospitable people,
hands like slabs of laughter,
hearts as gentle as moss.

To right and left they shower
all the coin in the world;
it lies like slag in the foothills,
like lustreless ash.

Up icy streams they stride,
breaking trout in their fists,
bugling to thrush and sparrow:
"No money! Not ever again!"

And out of the village doorways,
drunken and blazing with mirth,
shining like metal with glory,
the people pour to greet them,

no purse, no past, no guile;
only an open tumbling
caught and buried in bigness
illimitable.

THE NEW MEXICO QUARTERLY REVIEW

The following poems have appeared in:

The Book
Underground
A Fat Man Dies
The Hand-Car
The Giants
The First Dream: The Garage
The Ice-House
The Violation
I Saw An Army
The Animal
The Lone, Immortal Car
Traffic Quince

Horizon Thong
From The Motionless Twig
Blueberry Girl
New York City
The Expiation
Last Patch of Snow
Thirst, and a Dog Running
Changed
The Invaders

The Poet (Glasgow)
The New Orleans Poetry Journal
The Saturday Review
The Saturday Review
Atlantic Monthly
Antioch Review
Atlantic Monthly
The Southwest Review
The Ladies' Home Journal
Atlantic Monthly
Quicksilver
Poetry, The Great Therapy
(an extended essay I published)
The Atlantic Monthly
New Orleans Poetry Journal
The Saturday Review
New York Herald-Tribune
The Saturday Review
Prismatic Voices (an anthology)
American Poetry Magazine
The Sparrow
The New Mexico Quarterly Review