



BERNICE AMES

Where the Light Bends

AND LATER POEMS · 1955-1974

EXTREMES AND MODERATIONS:
EARLY SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA POETRY

A TEXT-TECH PAPERS PROJECT

Extremes and Moderations

Early Southern California Poetry

Extremes and Moderations is a Text-Tech Papers project devoted to recovering poetry written, published, and circulated in Los Angeles and Southern California. Each volume brings neglected books and poems back into view through carefully prepared texts, archival images, biographical context, and a clear record of the surviving sources.

Edited by Brian Kim Stefans

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BERNICE AMES

*Where the Light Bends and
Later Poems*

A CRITICAL READING EDITION

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CONTENTS

Poems and editorial matter

Archival Images	7
Introduction	11
Biography	12
Editorial Note and Sources	18
Poems	19
<i>Where the Light Bends — I. Shadow of the Word</i>	20
<i>Where the Light Bends</i>	21
<i>Color</i>	22
<i>Why Has Yellow</i>	23
<i>You Said</i>	24
<i>Unknown Factor</i>	25
<i>Never Good-bye</i>	26
<i>The Constant Barb</i>	27
<i>You Have Loved Me</i>	28
<i>In a Dark Hour</i>	30
<i>Comfort</i>	31
<i>The Water Wheel</i>	32
<i>Sea Statue</i>	33
<i>Skywriter</i>	34
<i>Where the Light Bends — II. The Ripening Year</i>	35
<i>May Morning</i>	36
<i>In These Quiet Ways</i>	37
<i>The Turn of the Wheel</i>	38
<i>Rain Shadows</i>	39

<i>Bluebird on a Wire</i>	40
<i>The Swim</i>	41
<i>Prisoner of Darkness</i>	42
<i>Summer's End</i>	43
<i>Windlestraw</i>	44
<i>Amber on the Plains</i>	45
<i>Voices of Autumn</i>	46
<i>Song of the Sheaves</i>	47
<i>Vineyard Ghosts</i>	48
<i>After the Harvest</i>	49
<i>Campfire</i>	51
<i>Brooding Day</i>	52
<i>Lament of the Fallow Land</i>	53
<i>Pine Smoke</i>	54
<i>First Snowfall</i>	55
<i>Shape of the Snow</i>	56
<i>Frozen Thought</i>	57
<i>Query for Christmas</i>	58
<i>To a Christmas Tree</i>	59
<i>Mistletoe</i>	60

Where the Light Bends — III. With Pleasure Green 61

<i>With Pleasure Green</i>	62
<i>Black Label</i>	63
<i>Rare Moment</i>	64
<i>Kindergarten Days</i>	65
<i>Music Lesson</i>	66
<i>Roman Candle</i>	67
<i>To My Daughter, Grown</i>	68
<i>To a Kite-Flying Father</i>	69
<i>Tall Son</i>	70
<i>Little Grandmother</i>	71
<i>The Pinking Shears</i>	72
<i>Cathedral Guide</i>	73
<i>Sesquicentennial</i>	74

In Syllables of Stars — I. In the Shape of Morning 76

<i>In the Sun of a Glance</i>	77
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<i>Mountain Climber</i>	78
<i>Mockingbird</i>	79
<i>Wherever Water Gathers</i>	80
<i>The Children's Laughter</i>	81
<i>Teacher</i>	82
<i>Fog Horn</i>	83
<i>Camouflage</i>	84
<i>Forest Ranger</i>	85
<i>Through the Fever of Fire</i>	86
<i>On Hearing Auden</i>	87
<i>Good Angling Weather</i>	88
<i>Apple Country</i>	89
<i>The Shape of Your Voice</i>	90

In Syllables of Stars — II. At the Rim of Noon 91

<i>In Syllables of Stars</i>	92
<i>Mountain Meadow</i>	93
<i>Startle</i>	94
<i>Buffalo Jump</i>	95
<i>Rancher</i>	96
<i>On the Island of Sleep</i>	97
<i>Surface</i>	98
<i>To Stravinsky</i>	99
<i>Cable Car</i>	100
<i>The Color of the Wind</i>	101
<i>Even So the Adolescent</i>	102
<i>Acolyte</i>	103
<i>Medallion</i>	104
<i>To Laurie in College</i>	105
<i>Relentless as the Sea</i>	106
<i>Lines on Freedom</i>	107
<i>First Ride on a Bike</i>	108
<i>Sea Captain</i>	109

In Syllables of Stars — III. Figure at Evening 110

<i>Even as Pine-Shadow</i>	111
<i>On the Windless Water</i>	112
<i>Each Roof</i>	113

<i>Parcel Post Window</i>	114
<i>Fallen Timber</i>	115
<i>The Reader</i>	116
<i>The Man with a Pencil</i>	117
<i>Mountain Shadow</i>	118
<i>Bus Boy</i>	119
<i>Deeper Than Silence</i>	120
<i>Grazing</i>	121
<i>When You Kneel</i>	122
<i>Always the Line</i>	123
<i>Haystack</i>	124
<i>Leave as the Antelope</i>	125
<i>Figure at Evening</i>	126
 <i>Antelope Bread — The Natural World</i>	 127
<i>At the Edge of Seeing</i>	128
<i>Green Rock</i>	129
<i>Tunnel at Zion Park</i>	130
<i>Snap Hollibock</i>	131
<i>Picture a Magpie</i>	132
<i>Mono Craters</i>	133
<i>To a Bit of Jade</i>	134
<i>Footlight for a Palm Tree</i>	135
 <i>Antelope Bread — The Personal World</i>	 136
<i>A Power I Speak</i>	137
<i>Public World of Myself</i>	138
<i>Where the Rain-Puddled Pasture Began</i>	139
<i>How You Are Vine</i>	142
<i>Young Talisman</i>	143
<i>Sestina for Roger</i>	144
<i>Commencement</i>	146
<i>Hunger and Be Half Fed</i>	147
<i>In Middle Years</i>	148
<i>Windcut</i>	149
<i>Rescue Me, Nymphs</i>	150
<i>Carnival</i>	151

<i>Antelope Bread — The Temporal World</i>	156
<i>Sun Blackness</i>	157
<i>Navajo Weaver</i>	158
<i>Growing Cloth</i>	159
<i>Wedding</i>	160
<i>Tree of Heaven</i>	161
<i>News Picture from New Guinea</i>	162
<i>Surf Riders</i>	163
<i>Old Men on Upper Porches</i>	164
<i>On Viewing Van Gogh's Pen Sketch at Etten</i>	165
<i>Prickly Pear</i>	166
<i>For Kandinsky</i>	167
<i>Rocket Base</i>	168
<i>Vacation</i>	169
<i>In Bronze and Marble Spaces</i>	170
<i>Seed of the Sun</i>	171
 <i>Later and Uncollected Poems</i>	172
<i>If Matter Is Me</i>	173
<i>Living Stone</i>	174
<i>A Fragile Holding</i>	175
<i>She Leans from Herself</i>	176
<i>Lightning Stick</i>	178
<i>Tonto Ruins</i>	179
<i>Cave Pictures: Carlsbad Caverns</i>	180
<i>A Word from the Playwright</i>	181
 <i>Bibliography</i>	184
 <i>Works About the Author</i>	185
 <i>Additional Resources</i>	186
 <i>Rights and Textual Note</i>	187
 <i>Colophon</i>	188

ARCHIVAL IMAGES

College portrait and two major award records



Bernice Mayabelle Olds with her Wilson College class.

Writers' Club Member to Study Drama

SANTA MONICA—Miss Bernice Ames, past president of the Writers' Club, will fly to England Saturday, July 22, to study Elizabethan drama.

She is the winner of the \$300 James Joyce poetry award and a fellowship at Wroxton College, England, where she will study. The award and fellowship are sponsored by the American Poetry Society and Fairleigh Dickinson University, Rutherford, N.J.

As a bon voyage to Miss Ames, Mrs. Philip E. Moreton entertained at a tea at her home on San Vicente Blvd.

The Writers' Club was represented by its president, La Verne Green; Jeanne Barteaux, Virginia Bradley, Irene McDermott, Winifred Myers and Ted Tennenbaum, past presidents, and Bessie Collins, Anita R. Cook, Erna L. Hadra, Julia M.

A 1967 Los Angeles Times notice of Ames's James Joyce Award and Wroxton fellowship.

— Bernice Ames of Los Angeles won the \$300 Cecil Hemley Memorial award for her philosophical lyric poem, “Agrarian ”

The 1971 notice of Ames’s Cecil Hemley Memorial Award for “Agrarian.”

INTRODUCTION

Three books, a national magazine career, and the difficult art of seeing

Bernice Ames made poems by looking until ordinary things changed pressure: a deer half visible in trees, children's laughter felt as light, a palm caught in cold illumination, red rock holding a loop of sky. Her first two books move from rhyme and domestic occasion toward the more open, sharply cut forms of *Antelope Bread*, while the later magazine poems return to family landscape, Southwestern travel, and the strange work of seeing. The life behind them was active and public. Ames raised three children, published short fiction as well as poetry, led Southern California writers' groups and workshops, studied in England on a fellowship, and won the Poetry Society of America's James Joyce and Cecil Hemley awards. Her record has often been confused with those of other women named Bernice Ames; this edition restores her correct identity as Bernice Mayabelle Olds Ames. It resets all 133 titled poems and sequences in her three books and adds eight later or otherwise uncollected poems available in complete witnesses. Original book order, divisions, lineation, dedications, and poem sequences are retained; scan noise and unmistakable typographical damage are removed.

BIOGRAPHY

Poet, fiction writer, workshop leader, prizewinner, wife, and mother

Identity, family, and Corry

Bernice Mayabelle Olds was born on February 22, 1915, in Corry, Erie County, Pennsylvania. The California death index gives the same birth date and Pennsylvania birthplace and records her death as June 24, 1976, in Los Angeles. Family records identify her parents as Murray Raymond Olds (1890–1951) and Bernice Edwards Olds (1889–1969). She appears as their daughter in Corry in the 1920 and 1930 censuses and remained associated with the town through the middle 1930s.

This identification corrects a substantial error in the inherited research. The poet was not the Bernice Ames born in 1905 and buried at Los Gatos, not Onile or Onilee Bernice Ames of San Bernardino County, and not the Utah writer Bernice Busenbark Ames. Records and web pages attached to those women had been combined into a false biography. The secure chain is Bernice Mayabelle Olds of Corry, Wilson College graduate, wife of Eli Barlow Ames, mother of three children, Los Angeles poet, and California decedent in 1976.

Corry and the surrounding Pennsylvania country remained an imaginative source. The orchards, pastures, snow, harvests, animals, and family figures in the poems are not documentary transcripts, but they draw repeatedly on a northern rural childhood. “Crabapple Harvest,” published in *The Georgia Review* in 1971, revisits a dirt road, a storm-bent tree, childhood cruelty, and the belated recognition of another child’s strength.

Education, travel, marriage, and children

Ames earned a B.A. from Wilson College in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania. A 1974 contributor's note in *Southwest Review* supplies the degree, while travel records place her returning to New York from abroad on August 21, 1936. The surviving sources do not yet establish her major, graduation date, student publications, or whether the 1936 journey was connected with study.

She married Eli Barlow Ames on August 28, 1937. Eli, born in Buffalo on August 4, 1915, had also lived in Corry. In 1940 the couple lived in Tonawanda, New York. Their son Lauren Barlow Ames was born in Meadville in 1938; his obituary recalls a childhood mainly in Buffalo, a teenage move to Los Angeles, and later work as a chemical engineer. Contemporary contributor notes state that Bernice and Eli had three children. The other two children's names require firmer public documentation.

Passenger records place Bernice in Honolulu in July 1942. Later records show the family in Los Angeles by 1952, with Bernice in Santa Monica in 1954 and in the Westwood–Brentwood–Bel-Air area in 1956. Her mother died in Los Angeles in 1969, suggesting that the older generation also moved west. A 1962 *Poetry Northwest* note gives an unusually vivid household snapshot: Ames lived in Los Angeles with her husband, three children, two families of white rats, a parakeet, and a dog.

The first two books

Ames's first collection, *Where the Light Bends*, appeared in Los Angeles from Dion O'Donnol's Wagon & Star Press in 1955. A brief *Los Angeles Times* notice listed it among new verse books. The volume contains fifty poems in three divisions: "Shadow of the Word," "The Ripening Year," and "With Pleasure Green." Its rhymed sonnets, seasonal lyrics, love poems, and family poems already establish her central figure: light is not passive illumination but a force bent by thought, weather, water, glass, landscape, and relationship.

In Syllables of Stars followed from Golden Quill Press in Franconia, New Hampshire, in 1958. It contains forty-eight poems divided into "In the Shape of Morning," "At the Rim of Noon," and "Figure at Evening." The book is dedicated to Lauren. Its acknowledgments document circulation through magazines including *Epos*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, *Kansas*

Magazine, *The Lyric*, and *New Mexico Quarterly*. By 1960 a *Georgia Review* contributor's note could call Ames a Pennsylvania native living in Los Angeles and list a widening national publication record.

The second book loosens the more conventional architecture of the first. Poems such as "The Children's Laughter," "To Stravinsky," "Cable Car," and "Leave as the Antelope" favor short variable lines, rapid metaphoric turns, and an alertness to sound as a physical medium. The family poems are affectionate without becoming purely private; they examine education, adolescence, separation, and the changing work of parenthood.

Magazines, fiction, and literary community

Ames published steadily in literary journals, newspapers, religious magazines, and small magazines. Located appearances include *Poetry Northwest*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The Georgia Review*, *Southwest Review*, *Midwest Quarterly*, *University Review*, *Yankee*, *Arizona Quarterly*, *Kansas Quarterly*, *Literary Review*, *Improvement Era*, and the *Christian Science Monitor*. Syracuse University preserves three folders of published poems from 1954–1968 and published stories from 1957, 1959, and 1963–1968, evidence that her prose career was not incidental.

Her short story "New Shoes," published in the spring 1967 *Arizona Quarterly*, received that journal's short-story award for the year. The titles and texts of her other stories remain to be inventoried from the Syracuse clippings. Her papers also preserve five talks on craft and audience: "Helping Your Poem to Happen," "Poetry Is Fun," "A Back Door of the Poem," "The Platform of the Poem," and "From the Sea to the Shell." Together they show a writer who treated explanation, teaching, and public presentation as part of literary practice.

In Southern California she belonged to an interlocking network of workshops and clubs. Newspaper notices identify her as a past president and later parliamentarian of the Santa Monica Writers' Club, an officer of the Santa Monica branch of the National League of American Pen Women, a California Writers' Guild participant, a contest winner, and a workshop leader at Pasadena City College's Writers' Week. In 1971 the Evergreen Stage in Los Angeles advertised "Poetry in Concert" by Bernice Ames. In 1973 she was described as a Burbank lyric poet speaking on recent trends in poetry.

Antelope Bread and the mature poems

Alan Swallow published *Antelope Bread* in Denver in 1966, Library of Congress card 66-20102. The sixty-page collection has three divisions—"The Natural World," "The Personal World," and "The Temporal World"—and thirty-five titled poems or component sketches. A contemporary *Los Angeles Times* review praised its almost intangible world of things half seen: submerged rock, deer concealed by shade, people apprehended in ritual situations, and objects reached through groups of analogies.

The title comes from "Leave as the Antelope," first printed before the book and recast as a kind of *ars poetica*: alertness, movement, appetite, and escape from a fixed human enclosure. The new book includes tightly made visual arrangements, a sestina, the nine-part "Carnival," the three-part "Sun Blackness," and the grouped "Five Sketches." It moves through Zion, Mono, Navajo weaving, Kandinsky, rockets, Van Gogh, family ritual, and the camera's uncertain claim on perception.

Some poems crossed book and magazine boundaries. "Footlight for a Palm Tree" appeared in *Poetry Northwest* in 1964 before entering *Antelope Bread*; "Growing Cloth" and "Sun Blackness" also survive in periodical witnesses. This edition uses the book texts for collected poems and reserves the final section for works not otherwise represented in the three volumes.

Prizes and England

In 1967 Ames received the Poetry Society of America's \$300 James Joyce Award for a poem in a French form. The located newspaper account does not name the poem. At the same time she received a Wroxton fellowship, sponsored with Fairleigh Dickinson University, to study Elizabethan drama at Wroxton College in England. She flew from Los Angeles on July 22 and later showed slides of the trip to the Santa Monica Writers' Club.

In 1971 the Poetry Society of America awarded her the \$300 Cecil Hemley Memorial Award for the philosophical lyric "Agrarian." The text has not yet been recovered. By 1978 newspapers reported winners of a Bernice Ames Award, and Syracuse's finding aid states that the Poetry Society of America award is named for her. Its establishment, terms, funding, and complete recipient list are important remaining subjects for research.

Ames also tied for first in the Santa Monica Writers' Club's 1969 poetry contest and was a finalist in the 1972 Bitterroot lyric contest. Awards did not replace the workshop economy in which she worked; they amplified a career sustained by readings, local leadership, correspondence, small-press books, magazine publication, and teaching.

Arizona, later work, death, and archive

A 1974 *Southwest Review* note says Ames divided her time between Los Angeles and country near Flagstaff. The later poems confirm a deep engagement with Arizona and the desert Southwest: Tonto ruins, Carlsbad Caverns, lightning, red rock, ravens, cactus, and Native material culture. These poems can be exact and receptive, but their period language and generalized uses of "Indian" belief also require historical context.

Her late publications include "A Fragile Holding" (1969), "Crabapple Harvest" (1971), "Lightning Stick" and "Tonto Ruins" (1973), and "Cave Pictures: Carlsbad Caverns" and "A Word from the Playwright" (1974). No fourth poetry collection has been verified. Goodreads' treatment of *A Fragile Holding* as a distinct book appears to arise from a single-poem database record, not a located volume.

Ames died in Los Angeles on June 24, 1976, aged sixty-one. The California index records her as Bernice O. Ames, the middle initial representing her birth surname Olds. No obituary, funeral notice, burial record, probate file, or family remembrance has yet been located. Eli Ames lived until 2007. Their son Lauren's 2024 obituary is the clearest accessible family account and confirms the Buffalo childhood and Los Angeles move.

The Bernice W. Ames Papers at Syracuse University are the central archive. Donated by Ames in 1967 and 1969, the .75-linear-foot collection spans 1950–1968 and contains correspondence, poetry and speech manuscripts, reviews, photographs, workshop programs, clippings, published poems, and published stories. Named manuscripts include "Country of Conquest," "If Matter Is Me," "In the Center of the World," "The Open Door," "The Rustle of Silence," "She Leans from Herself," and "Wind Cut." The miscellaneous poems and correspondence likely contain further recoveries and biographical evidence.

Future work should begin with a full Syracuse inventory and permissions inquiry, Wilson College archives for yearbook and student records, Poetry Society of America records for the Joyce, Hemley, Wroxton, and Bernice Ames awards, and California newspapers for an obituary. Civil records should establish the names and careers of all three children and the family's exact addresses. Magazine work should search the still-unlocated prize poems "Agrarian" and the 1967 French-form poem.

EDITORIAL NOTE AND SOURCES

Three complete books and eight later or uncollected poems

This edition resets all fifty poems in *Where the Light Bends* (1955), all forty-eight poems in *In Syllables of Stars* (1958), and all thirty-five titled poems or component sketches in *Antelope Bread* (1966). Eight complete periodical poems not otherwise represented follow in chronological order.

The reading text is extracted page by page from complete source scans. Original book order, divisions, poem and sequence titles, stanza breaks, and verse lineation are retained. Running heads, folios, scanning marks, and obvious OCR damage are removed.

The two-column sestina “At the Edge of Seeing” is reconstructed in paired columns; other spatial arrangements are reset within the Extremes reading format. Readers studying exact spacing should consult the retained scans, which remain the authority. Uncertain readings are not silently rewritten.

The archive also preserves complete but damaged witnesses for “Crabapple Harvest” and collected poems in periodicals. “Crabapple Harvest” is documented in the bibliography but omitted from the reading text because the available scan crops words from several lines. “Agrarian” and the unnamed 1967 prize poem remain unlocated.

POEMS

The complete three-book corpus and later recoveries

WHERE THE LIGHT BENDS — **I. SHADOW OF THE WORD**

Complete source-book division

Where the Light Bends

The shift of thought, the shade of mood
From child to man to dust eternally depends
Upon the color's depth and finitude
Where the light bends.

No one can gauge emotions' pace
Nor which smooth-mirrored side a prism thought may turn;
Uninterrupted spears of light won't trace. . .
Where colors burn.

The void of heaven may be bright,
The seasons reach their pinnacle with pride and glow;
Unless there be a bending of the light
No one will know.

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan page 10.

Color

Color fuses through each day's dominion
Surging over fully formed. opinion,
Rules the tide of nature's every turning,
Purples winter shadows, flames fall, burning.

Color bends the stem of thought's beginning,
Waits where vision falls at random spinning.
Blue direction dips the day's descent.
Words wear color in their filament.

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan page 11.

Why Has Yellow

Why has yellow staggered on
Beneath the coat of cowardice
In time's stupendous marathon?
Earth barely nears the precipice
Of spring when slender daffodils
Thrust forth their yellow emphasis
Above the snow on seeping hills.
The color, deep or pale, belongs
With royal purple-Easter spills
This beauty on her Christian throngs
That come to praise the greatest deed
Of courage earth has known, with songs.
And sun, whose glory fills our need
Of strength yields only yellow seed.

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan page 12.

You Said

You said,
And tulips in your hand were dripping red,
“I’m sad to leave you for a little space.”
Dearest, can’t you read my open face?
You’ll never cleave the memory chained to me
Unless the naked waves divorce the sea.
Your presence loiters in this quiet room
As sweetness lingers after fine perfume
Is dead.

You said,
As I was darning socks with colored thread,
“I’m sorry that my conversation’s dim.”
Dearest, dancing on the very brim
Of mind you decorate my running thought.
Your Siamese twin, I am more closely caught
To you between the breaks of silence. Heard
And learned by heart is every single word
You said.

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan page 13.

Unknown Factor

The melting of winter
In the palm of the year
Dissolves a perfection,
Chiseled, sincere.

The sky is insolvent
And the bankrupt night
Is a vacuum of space
Inviting swift flight.

Your snow-margin love
Was a constant thing;
How can I trust
The variance of spring?

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan page 14.

Never Good-bye

Let no good-byes stretch taut between us, dear,
No termination of the flow of sound
That blends our thoughts together; let no bound
Of thinking drugged with time approach that near.
Regardless of the distance, you are here
Beside me on this tract of fertile ground
As long as no clipped ending can impound
The words you gave to my rejoicing ear.

Good-bye is stirred from shallow surface tone,
Is factory-turned to be a little sad,
Assumes a stilted final air at best;
But there is no necessity alone
For words to bear the endings we have had
Or cadenced voice to bring our thoughts to rest.

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan page 15.

The Constant Barb

Oh they have never loved who say that time
Will lessen pain, will banish every grief;
The multitude of days without him climb
In silence over me with no relief.
The hours bear his name, his wistful face,
The minutes drag away in grand pretense
Of weaving substance into yawning space,
Of filling emptiness now grown immense.

But when I hear a voice resembling his
Or read a word we used together then
No conjured amplitude of time there is
Can blur the anguish that I feel again.
I know there is no measure to my need;
With every breath I want him more indeed!

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan page 16.

You Have Loved Me

I.

Since you have loved me I can never live
A separate life from you, can never tear
Your shadow from my heart; I can lay bare
The fact, irrelevant and terse, you give
No presence of yourself affirmative
To me, yet I am painfully aware
Which dimple dips in teasing smile, which hair
Your comb just missed, that auburn fugitive.

I cannot measure day from darkness now
You never lean against the door's dim sill
Or stand with sun around you streamerwise
But when I see the wind-nudged apple bough
Complaining, shrug its shawl of leaves, and fill
With motion, I can see your dancing eyes.

2.

Your dancing eyes twirled havoc with my heart;
Your voice filled every channel of my ear
And rings there yet in all the sound I hear
Though time and space have chiseled us apart.
No chiding snarl of undertone to start
My flurried wrath, no liquid laughter near
The beat of joy to challenge, interfere
And catch along the path my daydreams chart.

The crash of hours against the day cascades
Upon me, sharp metallic tinkling tones
That shrill no melody but loneliness;
Yet in a shallow stream of silence wades
The clear sweet music of your voice that owns
A franchise on the quiet I possess.

3.

The quiet I possess stampedes the room
And jars the echoes loose that held your voice;
From every corner soundless waves rejoice
To follow attitudes that I assume.
Today the amaryllis dared to bloom

Across our path and, were you there, the choice
Of fern would all stand fresh; the same invoice
Of flowers spread for me their same perfume.

Unseen, unmoving through the mystic air
Your smile uncurls the tumult of my thought
And hovers where the moments shoved me;
Although we never meet again, somewhere
You move, a fragment of your spirit caught
Enmeshed with mine, for you have loved me.

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan pages 17–19.

In a Dark Hour

Oh I would be a slender reed
To bend and sway with wind and rain
While oozing marshes wet my feet
And overhead the crows complain.

Perhaps the wind will blow you strong
Against me for life's lonely hour,
Or tear you from me in its song
Of freedom, in its sweep of power.

No matter if my heart shall bleed
To find you gone-have sudden pain,
Still I would be a slender reed
To bend and sway with wind and rain.

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan page 20.

Comfort

When I would bend to grief
I shall remember palms
That prick with fronded leaf
The sun's sweet vesper psalms,
And offer paper-talk;
Majestic, unafraid
They hold above the walk
Their brittle fans of jade.

Theirs is a regal birth
To ink against the sun
A constant statue; earth
Pulls reverence from each one.
Thus rising out of sand
And coarse, unlovely grass
They clutch the shifting land
That hurricanes may pass.

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan page 21.

The Water Wheel

I.

Remember days of stretching for the sun
In crowded colonies of pine and fir?
Your beauty nestled then in merely one

Long sweep of slender wood. At night you were
A green-haired monster waiting in the dark,
Conspirator with wind—a rustle, blur

Of sound, then silence hanging on your bark.
Your lullaby an owl crooning low,
Your enemy a lonely, crimson spark.

Remember bathing in the sunset glow
And swinging, swaying forest birds to sleep
While ferns drank in your lacy shade below?

Were you content to watch far waters leap
And tease the curve of shore where mosses creep?

2.

Or will you sing of deeper joy today
Revolving in a perfect symmetry
And catching lazy water from the clay

To stir with life and toss again quite free?
Do you regret the farmer's axe that turned
Away your pleasant life of being a tree?

Your frame is weathered where the sun has burned
Its golden daydreams one by one until
By heart the carnal warmth of it is learned.

No matter if the water's steady spill
Is more or less, no alien spark of fire
Shall threaten you, though life is never still.

Do memories deepen now to make you tire
Of splashing out the power that men admire?

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan pages 22–23.

Sea Statue

Black against sunset the jetty leans
Straining for whispers of yielding waves,
Yearning for sea-talk this lover craves
The loved.

Sacred to beauty not hers she screens
Waste from the smooth, and compliant sands,
Splashing her form with the sea's demands,
Unmoved.

Never more lonely than when the moon
Pulls at the sea with her steady light,
Coaxing the water to flow from night's
Black stem;

The jetty abides while the distant tune
Sharpens the stillness that seems to mock
Waiting till waves with their burdened talk
Crash home.

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan page 24.

Skywriter

I.

What is heaven for the ivory gull
Who lifts the heart as through the deep blue space
He curves, with never a feather of sound to lace
The light with wings above a vessel's hull?
Is there an atmosphere too rare to dull
The fervor of free flight, that will erase
The pull of home? Windward he tilts to trace
Parabolas of pleasure over lull.

His vibrant pinions multishaded white
And underneath as fragile as a cloud
Reflect his journey's shape: the ocean's spray,
The wet sand's glistening; they gather light
At dusk above tall palms, the furrows ploughed,
And rocks where wave-talk splashed and ebbed away.

2.

If heaven means where peace and beauty hold
Their own, the gull wheels heavenward to fly,
For he translates to earth the very sky,
Returning with the breath of freedom cold
Beneath his outspread wings, with spattered gold
Of sun indelible to bill; the dry
Impartial sand receives his mood; no cry
Of rapture deepens loveliness he scrolled.

Forever free above the wave's wild crest
And rinsed with color from the sky's deep crock,
He scales the breast of breeze at evening's rim,
Then glides to ground devoutly facing west,
A statue, sleek with freedom, curved to lock
The glory of the flight wing-close to him.

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan pages 25–26.

WHERE THE LIGHT BENDS — *II. THE RIPENING YEAR*

Complete source-book division

May Morning

Yes, here upon stiff-bristled broom I lean,
The shelves hang heavy with film-covered things,
While gold dust dances through the open screen
And out of doors a lusty robin sings.
My thoughts are gay balloons string-slipped to rise
Above the clutter of this man-made room
Beyond the clouded vision of tired eyes
Out over fields where pink May apples bloom.
My shoes are brushing tender violet heads
Absorbing sweetness from the fragrant air,
The regal trillium stirs in moss-damp beds,
Above the trees a crow flies, solitaire.
My thoughts abide where breezes turn and twist
While a dusty broom directs my calloused fist.

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan page 30.

In These Quiet Ways

In these quiet, breathless ways the springtime spoke
To me: of beauty and the ecstasies
Of night when tufts of cloud slipped up to seize
The moon and thinly wisp away like smoke;
Of fountains running till their bubbles broke
In myriad drops and lifted on the breeze;
Of one white swan, seen through the waking trees,
To stir confusion green with even stroke.

Yet I can answer only in my heart;
Pure words are gone from me like wind with rain
Upon its breath, unable to impart
Its gustiness. For I can only bring
My restive mind tipped with its curl of pain
To the edge of dawn where gates of color swing.

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan page 31.

The Turn of the Wheel

Here at the rim of sobering dusk
Lies ground just slipped from under the husk
Of protective snow; here in this earth
Where the senses quicken and have rebirth
Is the stir of another season, hurled
By the pressure of wind on a waking world.
The round, young furrows have cradled the gold
Amassed by the sun while earth was cold.
Since twilight slowed the pulse of day
Even the birds have winged away;
Yet here in these fresh, even ridges you feel
The passion of plough, the turn of the wheel.

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan page 32.

Rain Shadows

A gentle rain transfigures city streets
As traffic, slow-pulsed with muted sound,
Becomes a blur of black and gray and sheets
Of mist-spray spank the asphalt-covered ground.
The corkscrew poles unwind to greater length
As you approach; the cars are shadows squat
Between two blotted tracks, and sudden strength
Of flame burns either end with a crimson dot.
The traffic signals spill their red and green
To melt and run in corners where great crowds
Of drops hold fluid talk, wind-rippled, clean,
To mirror buildings tall among bright clouds.
The definitions of this water world
Impose their beauty on streets satin-pearled.

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan page 33.

Bluebird on a Wire

A clarion scrap of song usurps the wire
That needles through his tightly woven claws;
No casual commentator draws such fire
Of melody except to get applause
And having won his point, to fly away!
But this small troubadour has sharp designs
On my attention, pulls my gaze today
Up where a golden sun, unstinted, shines,
Where silver gleam on unencumbered wing
Points toward the freedom of a spacious sky;
If I could punctuate a line and swing
Above dissension how my song would fly!
No wire with birdlike comma could augment
My reasoning or challenge my intent.

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan page 34.

The Swim

Let me recover my soul in an inland lake
Where waters shatter fresh and cool above me,
And rubber-covered ears intone the quake
Of heels that thud where slippery rafters shove me.
Thunder out the myriad sounds of beach
And cup the quiet to my needful head
With only lapping waves and distant screech
Of gulls in flight to stir my liquid bed.
A million broken pieces of the sky
Support my drifting shape. My feet alone
Seem pulled through weeds a mile away, and I
Am loath to bare my body's satin cone
Of amber light, now dripping water jewels,
For heat and dust and scrutiny of fools.

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan page 35.

Prisoner of Darkness

The night is a shell tossed up from the sea,
A beautiful thing to hold in my hand,
But hollow and lonely, now tenant-free—
Elliptical darkness over the land.

The night filled with silence is eloquent;
With nobody's voice to soften my need
Her vacuous hours have no sure intent
Beyond the deft sowing of restless seed.

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan page 36.

Summer's End

I wish a thousand sounds would sweep the night
Of silence, layer on layer of happy noise—
The whirr of pigeon wings in startled flight
And the muffled scrape of corduroy on boys.
Too long has summer hung her quiet where
The stillness deafened him who stopped to listen;
I grow impatient for the lively air
That rubs the apple cheeks until they glisten.
I'm lonesome for the wind's bright harvest tones,
For leaves in sudden splash of cheerful sound,
And when the restless oak leans back and groans,
When maples shake their brittle hair aground
I'll welcome all the noise, invite it in
And heap my ears just like an apple bin.

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan page 37.

Windlestraw

Wind over meadow
Sun under cover
Rain is a shadow
Where breezes hover.

This is the harvest,
End of the growing;
Gather the fairest
Seeds of your sowing.

Wind, as you linger
Cool in the rushes
Busy each finger
Weaving dry sashes.

Ribbons gleam golden
Patient with waiting—
Tangle them not; take
Care in your plaiting.

Make of this beauty
Sweet lengths of rope
Stronger than duty
Brighter with hope.

Dry grasses curing
Sunned and wind-blown;
Rope is maturing
For markets unknown.

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan pages 38–39.

Amber on the Plains

Barren are the aching hills
And shabby now with rotted leaves.
Quiet is the rain-soaked earth,
Each tree holds knotted limbs and grieves.

But sun is amber on the plains,
The air is driven cold and clear
And pulsing through the planet drains
The strength for waiting out the year.

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan page 40.

Voices of Autumn

The wild and boisterous winds of autumn stutter,
Breathing through the trees a lingual chatter,
Shaking out their bright October litter
Over every gutter.

Teasing winds make aspens quake and quiver,
Stroke the slender elm that hardly ever
Weakens to their humor. Beeches waver
Dizzy, leaning over.
Saddened willows bending softly flutter,
Dropping saffron tears upon the water.
Near them maples talk together, scatter
Crimson jewels later.

The russet oaks give tambourinelike clamor
In a lilting way. The pine boughs murmur
Soothing snatches while the birches shimmer,
Dreaming of the summer.

In their piquant conversation pieces
The host of trees dissolves the silent spaces
Splashing shallow sound among their voices
Soon stilled with snowy courses.

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan page 41.

Song of the Sheaves

Sift the thick night of its sibilant sighs,
Drain out the thunder from ebony skies,
Sprinkle your fear into children's cries,
 But sing through me, October wind!

Finger the keyboards of fences and trees,
Trumpet through bushes that tangle your breeze,
Rattle the pumpkin with flatulent ease,
 But sing through me, October wind!

Gone is the present of food from my hand,
Stripped are the ribbons of green on the land,
Hallow these old brittle bones as they stand,
 But sing through me, October wind!

Regal in death now I must entreat:
Render my cycle of living complete,
Counsel me not that I am effete,
 But sing through me, October wind!

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan page 42.

Vineyard Ghosts

I flee the vineyard, shivering
Because of brittle bones that sing
Against the wires, because the vine,
A skeleton, looms serpentine;
And I am chilled to hear the clack
Of rattled leaves behind my back.

The hollow beat of a cricket's call
Accents the stealth of each footfall
And all the atmosphere vibrates
As if a person stalks these gates,
A person vigorous and young
Who'd laugh to see old autumn hung.

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan page 43.

After the Harvest

I.

Behold these stoic vines have bled their fruit,
Released their beauty on recumbent earth
And wear in abject poverty a dearth
Of loveliness. Long-fingered sleep will loot
The cyclic vigor and ascend the root
To reach the spread of branches, round the girth
Of foliage, will smother stirs of birth
That whispered once within each dormant shoot.

The awful neatness of a vineyard cleaned
Of all its issue, robbed of every grace
Assails the combed decorum of its aisles;
And strong decisive rains have intervened
To tear the leaves and muddy weed-grown space
Where purple grapes once lay in crated piles.

2.

Conversion from the war of growth to peace
Is gradual, but to the unaccustomed eye
It happens overnight. Black spiders spy
How shrunk tendrils lose their hold, release
The few forgotten clusters through caprice
Of wind and rain and hang their web to dry.
The brilliance of the sun has seared the sky
Till evening cool shall mingle and increase.
The bleakness crumbles into quiet, signs
Of struggle fade. No fragrance cries at all,
No purple heaviness detains the hand
And bends the vine. Above, two charcoaled lines
Divide the cobalt blue, their crow-harsh call
Thinned into space, wing shadow over land.

3.

Yes, there is beauty in a simple line,
A lovely order in the vineyard now
That everything is green or brown. A vow
The vision feeds upon a single vine
Until a play of intellect shall shine

And furnish further beauty. Dreams allow
Imagination depth beyond the bough
Of grapes translated in the eye to wine.

Wild asters lick with purple tongues the wires
Stretched naked row on row and weeds run free
Along the lanes unshadowed now with fruit.
This contrapuntal quickening inspires
An apathy amid the snarled debris
Till spring shall stir desire within the root.

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan pages 44–46.

Campfire

Come with your fagot and help the fire
To nibble at darkness with warm desire.
Our cameo faces on velvet black
Hang jeweled in a circle, empty of back,
While the trees stand guard and the tin-foil sky
Is a gleam of horizon against the eye.
In flickering half-light are silhouettes—
A shadow remembers and forgets—
Reaching for wind and leaning on wood
The flame cements our brotherhood.

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan page 47.

Brooding Day

The sky, long suffering, shares its mood
With the skull of the mountain, bends to brood
Over houses and trees that sentence the street
And draw up their shadows in quiet retreat.
With the wind against them the clouds divulge
Strong currents of threat in their massive bulge.
They dapple the rock with color of lead,
Holding the weight of a grief unsaid.
Fretting together, in a sociable way
The mountains and heavens commune today
Till comforted, far leans the strengthening sky
Tattered with blue, unbelievably high.
And color creeps back again to the rock,
A pulse returning to a land in shock.

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan page 48.

Lament of the Fallow Land

I listened for the stamp of hoofs on me,
The iron ring dispelling bitterness;
No steamy breath invokes the memory
Of horses straining and the plough's caress.
I yearn for thirsty growing roots to own,
That plunge with eager reach where ridges guide;
But here I lie untended and alone
In careless furrows dry, unsatisfied.
Well, I shall grieve and sleep until the spring
Stirs in the shifting loam and there are veins
Of green upon the hills. Then I shall sing
With stone and click of blade and gentle rains.
No other autumn months shall I withstand
The negligence of every farmer's hand.

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan page 49.

Pine Smoke

Now everything this rugged pine became
Surrenders to the reign of fluid fire:
A tabernacle for a feathered choir,
Against the deepened light of day, a frame,
A pinnacle of green above the shame
Of rubble on a stormy land; this pyre
Holds centuries of wood, will not retire
To ash without the glory of bright flame.

And in the fire a music, pure, wind-toned,
The crackle of a gale trapped in the bark,
The brittle sun-warped split of burning beam,
The steady cadence of spring rains that droned
Along the rigid trunk, with sigh of dark
Descending last where needles lose their gleam.

2.

Where needles lose their gleam the tree becomes
A miracle of light, a shadow's greed,
With sharp rebuttal faces tempest's need
And bears the pounding sleet's persistent drums.
This pine stands witness to the song man hums,
His earthly struggle, to the forest's creed
And sputters with the energy to feed
The room with warmth in fragrant pitch-filled crumbs.

Whatever failed to weld the wood with strength
Or shone on bark with brilliance less than stars
The yellow flicker eats, the flames revoke;
For in this final hour through the length
Of mighty pine the beauty and the scars
Release their forest wisdom thinned in smoke.

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan pages 50–51.

First Snowfall

Purple beauty rests where snow has fallen
Over country hill and meadow site
Where nature deftly scatters winter pollen
Shaken from the flower-clouds at night.
Shadows spread uneven where a certain
Tree is standing, arms extended, bare,
And sleeping grapevines drape their lacy curtain
Near the footprint code of varying hare.

The city is a picture, charcoal-drawn,
Its gutters strewn with mounds of displaced snow,
And here and there a patch of muddy lawn
Where running feet had hoped a sled would go.
The city in disgust shakes off the white;
The country wears the garment with delight.

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan page 52.

Shape of the Snow

The snow attacks, belligerent
Against the ebony of night;
Its fury, needle-sharp is spent
Upon the face of glassbound light.

Again, the snow has sympathy
And faints to wetness on my coat,
In soft and mystic symmetry
Dissolves the longing in my throat.

But shifting, piling, drifting, blowing,
In country or metropolis
I want to walk when it is snowing,
To feel each fresh staccato kiss.

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan page 53.

Frozen Thought

What is an iceberg but
A broken end of crystal snow
Amassed with jut on jut
Of danger lurking deep below
The frigid water's flow,
An end of glacier tumbled down
From some discriminating mountain's crown?

It wears not beauty's face
Without the sun to make it glow
Or waters lapping base
With black on white. No one shall know
In what sea garden icebergs grow.
These floating perils wrapped in mist
Have only cruel reason to exist.

What is a prejudice
But a little iceberg of the mind?

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan page 54.

Query for Christmas

Where is the star in the legions of light
That hung o'er the manger that first Christmas night?
Has it collided great light-years away
With a migrating cluster of bodies at play
And sprinkled its pulverized meteor dust
Furbishing thankless new planets with rust?
Or has it recovered its wonderful gleam
Swirling away from the earth in a stream,
Hallowed eternally, further than eye
Ever will pierce the far confines of sky?

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan page 55.

To a Christmas Tree

For this you braced your tender roots and stood,
A slender green-fringed stick in seas of wood,
Enduring years of savage wind and storm,
Monotony about your beaten form:
To dominate this narrow, man-made room,
And lift your head through myriads of bloom,
Through tinsel, frosted glass, and colored light,
To spill your fragrance in a corner, bright.
You heaped your patient years, a tower
For this one consecrated hour.

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan page 56.

Mistletoe

The mistletoe has never known the ground.
It clings to branches of an apple tree,
Requiring upraised eyes whenever found,
To see its vernal strength, to cut it free.
And from the pinnacle of drawing room
It still commands a high exalted space
To witness little happenings that bloom
At Christmas time and spread from face to face.
It matters not that the apple tree is dead
Because tenacious vines have sapped its blood.
The sprig of ashen berries overhead
Awaits another kind of life to bud.
A turn of heart inspires this parasite
To whittle down a wrong into a right.

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan page 57.

WHERE THE LIGHT BENDS — **III. WITH PLEASURE GREEN**

Complete source-book division

With Pleasure Green

The farmer coaxes from the soil
Reincarnation every spring;
His anxious care, incessant toil
Anticipate the burgeoning.
His watchful interest never palls;
In rows of wheat he sows concern
For quality. No season falls
Beyond the patience he will burn.

Just like the farmer! observe
The seedlings of my household grow;
The sturdy limb and filling curve,
The probing mind, the overflow
Of energy. Each mystic phase
Presents a problem unforeseen
To challenge me in many ways
And yet to stir my pleasure green.

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan page 60.

Black Label

A little boy is never free from mud;
And though adventure streaks from genial mien
The love for dirt inhabits root, not bud,
Wills him an allergy to being clean.
When he is young and given piles of sand
With copious do's and don't's and can's and can't's
He'll mold a modern map of sea and land
And wear the index on his short knee pants.
Then later with the sandpile days outgrown
He spurns the grass, as too conventional,
And heads for any out-of-boundary zone
Where culture's mark is unintentional.
When manhood reaches him your thankful sigh
Is answered with a toast, "here's mud in your eye."

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan page 61.

Rare Moment

A boy is seldom quiet while he grows,
Can seldom pause to let you plumb his deep
Unless you catch that rare and sudden pose
The memory of which you always keep.
He jumps in air to catch a high-thrown ball,
His legs make revolutions with his wheel,
His hands, gun-frantic as he plays, and all
Of him is motion as he eats his meal.
But stretch his wonder with a birthday gift,
Binoculars to bring enchantment near,
And suddenly activity will lift
And contemplation carve his features clear.
While new horizons for him telescope
Your memory fills with freshly minted hope.

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan page 62.

Kindergarten Days

Joyous, lilting steps that will never hurry
Tuned to chirping crickets and wind's small fury,
Dancing, pausing, will-o'-the-wisp steps carry
Him to school early.

Rhythm flowing, stemmed from his growing wonder,
Music singing, swaying his body slender,
Beauty carving worldliness for him under
Years of such wander.

Fresh and strong his memory does not waver
Dealing thoughts his smile cannot hope to cover,
Turning back to look at the leaves fall over
There by the river.

Wishing I could capture his carefree laughter
On a record-play it in moments after.
Capture too his eider-down spirit, softer
Far than a feather.

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan page 63.

Music Lesson

Although his warming smile is lyrical
And rhythm regulates his easy stride
How will his fingers pull the miracle
Of melody from ivories gently plied?
How can he conquer eight years' slant of pride?

For hands that ache to feel a ball and bat,
To press the trigger of a cowboy gun
Can Liszt or Brahms find natural habitat,
Intrude in softened touch? Can there be one
Impelling teacher for my restless son?

Can deft persuasion teach his fingers well
To travel dulce over yielding keys
Three-quarter time, in polka, tarantelle,
To play legato with a studied ease?
Will music's silver harness free his melodies!

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan page 64.

Roman Candle

When twilight dimmed the beach the small boy stood
Rehearsing patience, trying to be good,
Till he could touch with miracle of fire
The paper cone that held this day's desire;
Till he could make his own exultant light
To pierce the dark dimensions of the night.
His expectation burned a brighter hue
Than any candle in his hand could do.

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan page 65.

To My Daughter, Grown

This silver bubble ribboned to the bough
Of Norway pine has held your face before
(When small it was and angel-bright) but now
Your hands have tied it there and I must pour

My Santa-sentiment on other things,
Accept with grace the change each Christmas brings;
With luck this silver ornament will be
A rotund mirror for your progeny.

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan page 66.

To a Kite-Flying Father

Was it a dream you pinioned to paper
And loosed to the wind's inviolate caper
With only a string to grasp in your hand
Controlling the destiny which you planned?

Or was it a hand-wrought labor of love
To gladden the son you're so proud of,
Unlicensed to drift in the blue domain
Where only the birds will dare to complain?

Dream or fulfillment, lengthen the string
And make of the flight a remembered thing.
Dip in the breeze and wiggle the tail
Like polliwogs spiraling in a pail.

The world with its touch of freedom, complete
Can never soar nearer your own muddy feet.

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan page 67.

Tall Son

As saplings stretch from shadow into light
Just so my son has stretched away from me
Until no meagre thing will have the right
To pull his mind, enlist his loyalty.
The dawn of older reason for each truth
He never questioned floods his vision's rim
And each enthusiasm of the youth
He's shedding nearly loses hold of him.
His eyes, now wider, mirror a constant thirst
Of broader skill, impatient of detail
And yet the little boy that he was first
Still longs for kites and minnows in a pail.
His height bears no relation to his size;
He's measured by esteem within my eyes.

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan page 68.

Little Grandmother

The argument as always found her chair
And swirled, its vortex at her well-crossed feet;
Invectives splashed against her even heat
To snap resilience of the wisdom there.
No difficulty ever could impair
The core of her composure, shake the sweet
And frugal folding of her hands, the neat
Old-fashioned way she wore her thinning hair.

She simply rocked in silence through a storm
And saved her meagre words for peaceful time,
Though wind increased and lesser sails grew weak;
She smoothed her apron, pulled erect her form
And in the rhythm of the rocker's climb
Her shiny buttoned shoes began to squeak.

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan page 69.

The Pinking Shears

The seamstress sits all day in shabby clothes
Before her window looking out at life,
Her hands in needled slavery for those
Who pay her well; and time seems like a knife
Dissecting days and glances from the street
Where dreams cocoon and happenings are rife.
Her little room, meticulously neat,
Her bobbin full, how fast the needles travel
With nests of basting thread about her feet,
And seldom any stitches to unravel.
She might have cut the pattern of her years
With fullness, color, cloth enough to ravel;
But contemplating future without tears
She snipped her very life with pinking shears.

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan page 70.

Cathedral Guide

Although her words footnote this masterpiece
Of masonry, this sculptured marble crypt,
I hear their hollow ring for they have clipped
The wholeness of my worship; I shall cease
To listen till the organ's holy breath
Renews the power of my soul to rise, unfold
To beauty's shoreless deeps, to her stronghold.
I see the glory of Elizabeth
Through shafts of fractured sapphire light until
Laconic phrases waken me again
To follow her. The padding feet of men
Disturb perception of the laced iron grille,
The quiet dignity of wood; the march
Of souls is fleet beneath each Gothic arch
Where God will stand for centuries in stone
And I can only briefly pause alone.

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan page 71.

Sesquicentennial

I.

Come, look at this nostalgic view—an age
So long digested by our present men
They have no thought of its parade again.
But for a moment turn the yellowed page
And mingle modern wisdom with the sage
Of long ago. Allow this humble pen
A record of prevailing spirit then
When woman's diligence was common wage.

How ravaged every attic here must be,
How cleaned of pantaloons and stovepipe hats,
Of copper kettles, comforters for cold,
Of spindle rockers, settles for hot tea,
Of old high button shoes and fancy spats—
And all to web the new with film of old.

2.

Let each portrayer of those rugged men
Who carved the very image of this town
Think well before he wears his borrowed gown
And combs his pampered beard yet once again;
Think of the strength that hollowed out this glen
Enough to plant a town, think of the brown,
Victorian conscience dragging them, nor clown
Because the style of living differed then.

But actors, being what they are, will slip
The chains of character and then look back
At fellow actors marching in parade,
Return and fit their spirits on to trip
With trial and error down the center track
Like oxen yoked and unaware of trade.

3.

The town itself is like a growing lad
In outgrown clothes, uncomfortable for play.
The pulsing stream, clear-voiced for freedom's way,
Is harnessed to the chant of mill, half-mad
In headlong crash against the dam; this sad

Submission slowed its journey. Trees today
Have lost their old abundant look; the array
Of new brick buildings steals the space they had.

The stores in numbers stand, a clumsy thumb,
And point attention to man-cultured growth.
Now corseted, the narrow wagon track
Lies under tar and gravel. Streetcars come
Where horse hoofs used to thump; the town has both
Directions stretched and sprawled and settled back.

4.

What has this journey through the past availed,
This pageant of yesterday so smoothed to slide
Through thoughts of dwellers on this land with pride
For firm foundations, structures strongly nailed?
Here understanding spreads new roots impaled
By resurrection of the buried side
Of village past; these staged events provide
Awareness where the skirts of history trailed.

Within all minds lives admiration, new,
For all that has endured the blight of time.
The pleasure deepens; there is strong appeal
To bring the bygone days again to view,
To act a part in something great, to climb
A tiny spoke in centuries' mammoth wheel.

Publication. *Where the Light Bends* (1955), scan pages 72–75.

IN SYLLABLES OF STARS — I. *IN THE SHAPE OF MORNING*

Complete source-book division

In the Sun of a Glance

In the sun of a glance,
(across the stubble
of many hands
reaching for every scrap
of this shattered moment)
the years melt away.

Suddenly the days of those years
as grains of sand in an hour glass
reach bottom—
are nothing in this shaft of light.
The room alone spreads space
between two pairs of eyes
locked in a glance.

Time was
time will be again
but now is forever.

Publication. *In Syllables of Stars* (1958), scan page 12.

Mountain Climber

With balance the sweet elixir
flowing your veins, crying conquer,
with shouting blood easy in upward stride,
and beauty, vain beauty the magnet;
consider the slippery surface less glazed
than a shiny glass,
brimming with natural chemicals,
raised for a century to challenge.

Into the wheel of your blood
spins the fragrance of new horizons,
determination's walls pushed out for remodeling,
no ceiling within sight
Your body sings upward in progressive music,
failure forgotten in exhilaration of wonder.

Publication. *In Syllables of Stars* (1958), scan page 13.

Mockingbird

Over light's sheer steeples
through rich folds of rest
into canyons of thought
floods the sparkling song.

No love as delirious
no repertoire as boundless,
this bantam buffoon
courts dawn into dusk into dawn.

Drilled awake
I walk through symphonic downpour
knowing bird-song
will measure each movement.

Publication. *In Syllables of Stars* (1958), scan page 14.

Wherever Water Gathers

Wherever water gathers
in gutters where fat pigeons wade,
their steps stitching the street's rough seam,
in mudhole commas of construction,

at the lip of a pitcher
balanced and sliding,
at the rim of the faucet
held in mirror tension

light wades in, fearless,
and shadow;
shimmer and balance spread a surface.

Wherever water gathers
air plumes with promise
and motion breeds music.

Publication. *In Syllables of Stars* (1958), scan page 15.

The Children's Laughter

gathers in clusters of tone
like bunches of succulent grapes
sweet before tasting, and sweeter after;

bearing glints of light to a lower darkness,
rubs the surface of mellow harmonics
to a radiance long forgotten.

Another dimension of light for the ear
ascending fresh as morning's first scale
scooped from the top of the consciousness,

translucent as rising bubbles
and buoyant enough to bear your weight
across deep currents of day.

Can you be deaf to the crystal lacing of several laughs
pure and opalescent as honey
and the bee's deep feeling for clover?

Listen to the splash and crest
the spirit's fragile foam,
pearls with matchless lustre.

Publication. *In Syllables of Stars* (1958), scan page 16.

Teacher

With challenge your perfect gift
and a voice never toppling our foam of questions
words, sliding the slow curve of your smile
never fasten a subject.

From your two globes of reason shines a warning
of sealing any moment with immediate horizons.

Our hungers flow in one current—
toward you and your fountain of giving
where refreshment blows cooler
than the astringent spray of truth.

Publication. *In Syllables of Stars* (1958), scan page 17.

Fog Horn

Too shallow for dreaming
in the sudden shoals of heart
treacherous rock
where the wash of too many longings
has riven bright worlds apart.

Too humid for hope to bloom
with the land in shock
from the tremble of thunder
the steam-heavy wonder
and the sea a spray of doom.

Too hollow for meaning
yet cupped in the circular hold
whirls into shadow moon-black
phrases of music gonging
the mind with hidden gold.

Publication. *In Syllables of Stars* (1958), scan page 18.

Camouflage

Motionless as mist the deer
resembles fallen timber
as he leans against the land,
fretful in the wind of fear
a moving twig, a pose less limber
will betray his statued stand.

Our conversation brims with caution
smoulders on familiar ground—
the fragrant grass, the wind's long drink
of evening, stepping over mention
of ourselves, afraid of sound
revealing what we really think.

Publication. *In Syllables of Stars* (1958), scan page 19.

Forest Ranger

Free as a condor in endless stretches of air currents
you shepherd your green flock
with wisdom your staff
and unchallenged thought your companion.

Down from your steeple of rock
you are a fish beached and gasping.
Wary of motion you tighten
under the static darkness of sentinel trees—
you who have memorized the flippancy of cloud-shadow

and learned the brief flicker of hawk-wings.
Your glance blackens toward friendly green arms
looming large before you who gather forests in one eyeful.

Return to your tower
windowed by telescope
strafed with bright sun
where sound is a far away greed
never consuming all of silence.

Publication. *In Syllables of Stars* (1958), scan page 20.

Through the Fever of Fire

When fire was the fever this forest suffered
and water lay trapped in the gully unknowing,
these trees, adolescent with new green hope,
blackened and withered in their moment of glory.
Yellow flame pinioned their daring,
vetoed their triumph at the world's rim
as they pointed with blurring green dots to cloud-scudding sky.

Over the barren years
purpling mountains deepened,
cushioned the splendid starkness of charcoal splinters,
sheltered these brothers of boulder and cold blunted rock.

Now in the dream-blue distance
heaven catches on prongs of dead tree-tops.
Propped like a galleon in dry dock
the skeleton staves
are hidden potentials
wedged between splendor that was and splendor to be
when earth, recovered,
shall speak again through new green wood.

Publication. In *Syllables of Stars* (1958), scan page 21.

On Hearing Auden

You speak
and I can feel the wind from a distant hill,
the beat of foreign sun.

Your words
like wild spring horses
pulling at the bit, breathe fire
impatient for the brighter climb
to look below where worlds revolve
in their appointed places.

Confusion paves our city streets
and men, leaning close to earth,
can see only part way around the truth.

This breath of distance is fresh;
this cosmic glance
discerning the weather that other races move in
is a wind to brace us for the future
while our glasses steam with present mist.

Publication. *In Syllables of Stars* (1958), scan page 22.

Good Angling Weather

In the core of cloud
grooves a pier's long queue
stubbled with fishermen wrapped in mist
rubber boots on face of cement.

Soft and wet as the mood of tears
frayed edges of light fuse into vapor
losing human detail;
thin lines blur and hew the shape of oblivion.

From a world in focus
into dew-white folds of cloud
the booted men move
pinched from light and lost in morning ooze.

Publication. *In Syllables of Stars* (1958), scan page 23.

Apple Country

Come where the land is an apple sliced through the core
with the red sun a stain at the rim.

Come where wind courses in sweet juice
through fruit veins
where brown-brindle seeds grow into jubilant trees
in stout hearted disregard of the weather.

Come where people cling like fruit
on a busy limb
their cheeks polished by apple winds
their arms stretched welcome-far
gathering windfalls, encouraging trees. . .
For you they will unwrap clear words from a winter bin.

Publication. *In Syllables of Stars* (1958), scan page 24.

The Shape of Your Voice

Out of the star-tide in me
that glistens your name
whirls a comet of sound.

Your voice, in the shape of morning
dew-clean as the uncurled leaf,
hushed as dawn in a crowd of redwoods
stirs experimental song in my throat.

Careful as air
climbing a spider's staircase
with crystal step
the sound of your voice enters my hope
taking permanent residence there,

shakes me with verity,
a gentle wind of light
waiting for words
to clutch and free again.

Publication. In *Syllables of Stars* (1958), scan page 25.

IN SYLLABLES OF STARS — II. *AT THE RIM OF NOON*

Complete source-book division

In Syllables of Stars

Beyond the red mist of Mars
beyond Saturn's circling moons
higher than Altair's blue-white silence
a freedom waits.

Man searches bright trackless space,
the lens of his wandering eye
trained to bring in the distance
collapsed to the depth of his understanding.

But aeons of whirling mist
only polish the immaculate truth:
the power unleashing Jupiter's wings,
the light lifting Arcturus through space
speaks in him as surely
as the blood's declaration,
a wisdom written in syllables of stars.

Publication. *In Syllables of Stars* (1958), scan page 28.

Mountain Meadow

When we have climbed to the rim of noon
bathed in an impartial light
with the breathlessness of morning behind us,

when we discover a rim of peace
where native ideas gleam
with the polish of contemplation;

our world stretches awake
before comprehension's pool
holding logic unrippled on the surface,

and I, stretching between yesterday and tomorrow,
smell the fragrance of midday
steaming from warm flower-cups.

Without these level meadows for rest
the sun could never pool its power
nor the struggling air relax in reason;

and, winded, we could never perceive
our purpose in climbing
or rejoice in the shadowless noon.

Publication. *In Syllables of Stars* (1958), scan page 29.

Startle

Burst from night's pocket
a seam of white light
wedges the crouching trees
discovering a fawn for the eye's oval stare,
expecting the phantom to tremble.

Moments hollowed for listening freeze
waiting for underbrush crackle.
More than sound the light stills the senses
of watcher and watched.

Slam on the nerves
burning with the breathless odor of hurry.
There in blue flowing mist
half in the memory, half in the forest
three fawns shrink into shadow
on a carpet of brittling leaves.

Sudden light threatens
the direction of leap.

Publication. In *Syllables of Stars* (1958), scan page 30.

Buffalo Jump

A moment before, a peace ranged the silent grass
the sudden cliff verged by a windless sky
and slow as the roll of thunder
the drone of buffalo comes
a growing bubbling swell of black
skirled in auroras of dust
looming like ink to blot the brash blue sky.

The undulation of shaggy backs
the menacing thrust of heads with eyes folded under
charging through time and reason, forging a future;
and over this gloom stilettos of fire
leaping Indian eyes, streaming pony-nostrils
igniting shrieks to scratch with their pitch
the deafening volume of thunder.

Faster yet faster to whip-lash
thudding hoofs speed the shrinking space
stampeding to the jagged cliff's edge,
in panic fogging over,
their mass of movement a single motion.

Under the precipice a circle of tepees where squaw-women
squat stirring their stone-ringed fires
awaiting the sputter of wild meat cooking.

Over dry plains of time
always the track with no deviation,
the sudden cliff
and later the litter of bones.

Publication. *In Syllables of Stars* (1958), scan page 31.

Rancher

A man can tower toward the sun
as tall as any weed
can slant his shadow on the land
where there is arid need.

A man can thunder with his heels,
with windy voice proclaim
his passionate purpose to the hills
that are his strength, his frame.

With hat worn crooked as his smile
and boots of giant stride
a man can show his lonely soul
centered in his pride.

Publication. In *Syllables of Stars* (1958), scan page 32.

On the Island of Sleep

Winnow in wheat wind
and turn my dreams on their other side
with weaving heads intermingled
and no strings whirring a hollow gong.

Edge me into a minor key
easy for plunging the pebbled stream
breathing clear rhythm in moon-wash
glistening a peace of sharp dream.

Reason my going with deep-weed longing
whirling the current of your nervous pulse
in refrain like the rain of your breathing:
echo me minor, murmur of water.

Publication. *In Syllables of Stars* (1958), scan page 33.

Surface

Soft and porous
the sponge of me lies
under the current of your remarks.
My thoughts submarine
unnoticed in the waving water grasses
where other fish weave
their bright comet-tails in a water world.
Sight that tunneled my eyes
and sound on the nautilus stairway of ear
fall note by note harmonically
to a deep music in my soul.
Your tide-tilting syllables
in moving currents cool, ceaseless,
comb my consciousness, climb above me,
till growing, measure after measure,
there is melody in me.

Publication. *In Syllables of Stars* (1958), scan page 34.

To Stravinsky

Together we are poised
on the precipice of experience—
you veer to one side of my musical fervor
side step my knowledge of harmony,
your touch on my emotions not warm, not elated
but strange.

You persuade many snatches of melody
to flow in several currents together
separate as oil on water
toward no resolution in my comprehension.
Your music is clean as a willow wand
wafting away all expletives
yet curved with no shape of my knowing.

Together we are poised:
one false twist of baton
would skid your whole notes into usual harmony;
one moment of unguarded listening
would tumble my thoughts into confusion.
We tilt on the tight-rope of time.

Publication. *In Syllables of Stars* (1958), scan page 35.

Cable Car

There may be a way to harness time
yesterday's desire to tomorrow's dream
with vibrations lessened to quiver
and momentum diminished
for riding the back of a moment.

There may be a way to dim the light
the glitter of whirling jeweled streets
the blaze of asking eyes
so the blindness pooled on a plateau
(where climbing comes to a halt)
will flicker and fade.

Curve and jostle, there are always summits
where clouds boil over
always sheer impossible hills
and breathless wonder crowding out hesitation.

Publication. *In Syllables of Stars* (1958), scan page 36.

The Color of the Wind

Look to the sky's deep harbor
and listen for the words of the wind;
their color will touch you like moon-drift
will quicken within you.

What if wind wears the silver of silence
cold from syllables of stars
or caught in the web of night
weeps anythist. . .
What if wind brown-blown on steeples of town
moves morose over marshes and moors
or whipping sand and rain
leaps heather-high. . .

When wind is suddenly strong
straining into shafts of air
supporting snow-clouds with sun-shapen arm
there is wisdom for you.

When wind tears green from the fisted bud
or amber from tossing heads of grain. . .
When wind is water blue over wasteland
or cupped in curves of cumulus cloud
hums ivory
there is reason for pause.

Look to the sky's deep harbor
and match your motion with wind-color.

Publication. *In Syllables of Stars* (1958), scan page 37.

Even So the Adolescent

The wind blows the grasses the way of its will,
flattens their yellowing tassels until
the strength of assertion toughens each stalk
and the grass won't accept the wind's glib talk.
No more of obeisance, no longer humble,
rising in stature while the breezes grumble,
the stouthearted reeds, erect and sure,
affirm creation, become mature.

Publication. *In Syllables of Stars* (1958), scan page 38.

Acolyte

Fingers of organ music
square his shoulders.
Litany lingers
in his solemn stride

as he nears the shadowless cross
red-robed and sure
with reverence to reach
his taper to candle.

A closer moth to the light
than we who fear the heat,
who withdraw into shadows
he serves with simple gesture.

His lifted face, one with the flame,
burns a slow even beauty;
clear to his toes runs the wick
of peace.

Publication. *In Syllables of Stars* (1958), scan page 39.

Medallion

Hope, embered with eternal fire
and hung on a luminous chain of patience,
swings through Cathedral of bone
a growing lustrous curve.

Who wears it becomes jewelled with radiance
not easily shaken in this moment of life,
builds a balance of coming and going
to buffet the pressure of any gale
the heat of any breathless calm.

Your voice strikes like flint
word-shaping the pendulum's groove;
desire thunders in the inner ear
hammers in the pulses for freedom;
blood tips like a canoe in rapids spilling its cargo.

Hope, discounting the tumbling senses
rides out the passion
like a shaft of sun on a shifting sea.

Publication. *In Syllables of Stars* (1958), scan page 40.

To Laurie in College

Burn with the force of your inner voice
leaning on wood you have always known,
your eyes toward the spark of a distant star
leaving the rumors of wind alone.

Let other flames choke in their greed for air,
thicken and spread to crackle and blaze;
too soon their moment of light will flare
then sputter and smoulder in a smoky haze.

Furl free from your origin up and up
your spiral of growing strongly willed
that beauty follow you into ember
the spark contained, the flame fulfilled.

Publication. *In Syllables of Stars* (1958), scan page 41.

Relentless as the Sea

You are the sea in all her turbulence
and I the shore you constantly reach with fluid arms.
Together we lie geographically, yet
share no parallel of thought.
Though you constantly lave me with blue bits of yourself,
running inward with foaming chatter
hurling up your fathomless wisdom
I am reluctant to hold you.

Strewn with the weeds of your experience
I accomplish nothing; that infuriates you
who would move one country nearer another,
pour your salted plenty
into dry hollows to even things up.

Silent under your battery of rebuke
I wonder how you can worry my edges,
crumble my composure, carve your changes
into the smooth surface of my satisfaction.

You trespass and the fault is mine
knowing no way of restraint.
You are the surging sea
and I the bowl of reluctant shore.

Publication. *In Syllables of Stars* (1958), scan page 42.

Lines on Freedom

If you look into the distance toward freedom,
your own wings clipped,
the focus blurs even in the brilliance of desire.
In your heart's wild beating
the lanes of the wind lean only your way.
Dreaming this flight leaves you giddy.

Yet when freedom falls at your feet
like manna from heaven
what blankness chokes you into blackout,
you of the wishful wide wings?
What force
stuns the thought you have hoarded this long?

Publication. *In Syllables of Stars* (1958), scan page 43.

First Ride on a Bike

The cobble stones stare
coldly distant and impudent
if you try to dispute their justice.

The handle bars snare
all of your weight into your shoulders
Leaving your flying feet helpless.

But the revolutions
of the conversational spokes,
the roundness of your journey!

Feel what a missile you are.
Not even skates or skis or a skimming boat
accomplishes such powerful motion!

Publication. *In Syllables of Stars* (1958), scan page 44.

Sea Captain

I watched him leave his boat berthed in the quay
with slow and listing walk,
saw his glance swerve upward,
bump against the blur of leafy green
and fall like a caged canary hunting stars.

I saw his difficulty with the grey unyielding ground
the phlegmatic face of grass,
the cool indifference of cement
where turbulence is all a mood of wind
on land locked tight with rock and stone.

His listing walk, elastic
to the whip of wind and wash of waves
is ineffectual here.
He leans against the languorous land
and charts his patient course.

No conversation of a docile sea
no slapping, stinging wind
that breeds silence in a man
can quell his growing discontent.

I watched his weaving path adhere to land
allowing for unmoving hillocks
and knew him stoic,
impatient for a churning channel.

Publication. *In Syllables of Stars* (1958), scan page 45.

IN SYLLABLES OF STARS — III. FIGURE AT EVENING

Complete source-book division

Even as Pine-Shadow

I will hug my shadow
in the noon of your gaze
open to light from every direction

like the renitent pine
flattered by the lake at its feet.
stretching each arm toward the glance of the sun.

When your eyes shift their light
with the thought of me in their pin-dark center
my shadow will drift your way,

as the evening lake surrenders the sun's last touch
to cover the tree
even as pine-shadow falls to quiet the water.

Publication. *In Syllables of Stars* (1958), scan page 48.

On the Windless Water

Tonight I followed the hem of the lake
to find where the full moon
leaned her arm on the liquid cushion.

I missed her conceit on the windless water.
Too young the air, impatient the watcher.
Later she leaned over the patina of pine boughs
loving the image she loaned another planet.

I cast a stone at her smugness;
the hit was direct.
Silver splinters streamed silken and beautiful.
Stone after stone cut her cameo
dividing her oneness
into fragments of many candles.

I lingered heaping silence around me
till she moved away from the mirror.
I watched her shifting shower of light
leave my riddled darkness
and the shadows deepen.

Publication. *In Syllables of Stars* (1958), scan page 49.

Each Roof

From the crest of the hill
stutters a sentence of roof tops
guttural, punctuated by shrubs
vine-tied to the green of earth.

Each word codes a family living
the slope of the roof a character hint
tipped with pride to slant the wind and stipple the rain
or slashed with a greed for sun.

Even as a word conceals, portrays
exists with a personal music
does the roof pad the shock
between man and world
pushing inward to a concentration of self
while the chimney, a stem of inner fires,
pulls the mind toward God.

From the summit of hill
the sentence is long
crowding the breath with its beauty.

Publication. *In Syllables of Stars* (1958), scan page 50.

Parcel Post Window

A package pulls them
to this window that swallows human desires
hugged in brown paper, criss-crossed with string
and wished on their way to far places.
Pulled from the street's quick pulse
they stand in geometry of gesture:
a queue of people waiting
head-circles tipped on an axis of apathy,
feet based to support each triangle of being.
Curiosity falls obliquely near the window
on the second in line
with ears atilt for the mention of contents.

The package is fragile. Handle with care.
The hand stamp thumps from ink pad to wrapping;
red stamps slipped from wet sponge
smack the paper awry.

An oblong package, home-wrapped and awkward
but marked for immediate delivery
and mailed in personal faith
from this square window corrugated with the hurry of people.

Publication. In *Syllables of Stars* (1958), scan page 51.

Fallen Timber

These are the riches a forest will hold
and guard with strong green fingers
like mounds of gold sun-drifted;
the recumbent old, like venerable men
with reaching and yearning cold in their veins,
with the journey of stars, the pulse of shifting seasons
no longer nudging their roots.
Their shaggy bark like wrinkled old skin around them
in a reasonable peace,
they surrender to the destiny curled in their seed,
fulfillment their glory
and reverence for an earth eternally warm.

This is the final punctuation in an aged sentence
once a declaration of strength
that might have helped a voice span continents,
or ridden flame in an offer of heat,
that might have formed a shell to hold back the weather
or divided one kingdom from another;
now short phrases of wisdom to nourish young roots.
And nature, on low syllables of wind,
bends her soft inflection,
giving in the silence of falling snow
a cover, a blessing.

These are the riches a forest will hold:
for every ending a greater beginning
from the love of the recumbent old.

Publication. *In Syllables of Stars* (1958), scan page 52.

The Reader

Transfigured there among the books I saw him
moving in a nimbus of silence
so recently stepped from the shadow of towering shelves.
He wore the last few hours in his bearing
his eyes with their pupils spread
from their wandering
through the centuries.

When his eyes dropped anchor in secret depths
I knew he had discovered
the leap to the goal of his yearning,
a channel to peace,
a match to spark the weathered timber of mind.

He carried with reverence
the seeds of his transfiguration,
with their worn words spun of fire.

Transfigured so
I fastened him against my eyelids;
no other shadow
no other silence
could blur his meaning for me.

Publication. *In Syllables of Stars* (1958), scan page 53.

The Man with a Pencil

veins the bloodless face of paper
with tendrils of thought and symbol
webbing himself with the future
and other men.

Chained to a discipline of lead
his fingers curl with pain of small space
his wrist barely moving to quicken
a forgotten truth, a centuried beauty.

From his heart uncoded urgency
yet its central beat beat beat
translates him like a clock
in a prison of rhythm.

Walled by body, barred by brain
his wisdom can only flatter the paper
in fragments and glance the window
like brittle leaves in a persistent wind.

Publication. *In Syllables of Stars* (1958), scan page 54.

Mountain Shadow

I saw you this morning
asleep on the river upside down
and I carried your composure with me all day.

Looking down at your height
I watched your blue distance deepen
holding your secrets in silence.

All day every voice that brushed me
like the wind on your shoulders
lift me unmoved.

Words plunging my surface
pulled sound in with them
to plumb my thinking.

At twilight I saw you again
dusty with stars and still sleeping.
Your wisdom was with me all night.

Publication. In *Syllables of Stars* (1958), scan page 55.

Bus Boy

In the Rembrandt darkness
from ebony crinkles you roll your eyes
and move in ripples like a laughing river
among flower faces and tendrils of smoke;
the growing black stem of your arm
from its white starched sleeve supports a tray
drifting like a cloud across the room.

In the depths of this mine
strident with laughter and drumbeat
brittle with clinking glasses
the sun of your service rubs me over
dimming blatant sound with soft “yes sah”.

Supple swift symbol of continuity
tempered in a blaze of shattered harmonics,
oh musical interlude
between want and plenty, clutter and order
your rich onyx grin, buffed to high gleam
maps the ease of your cloud drift,
the buoyant journey of night.

Publication. *In Syllables of Stars* (1958), scan page 56.

Deeper Than Silence

Into the canyons of your countenance I dip and wing
searching deeps for the secret of your loveliness,
testing the plateau light pouring over them.

Into your soul's cave, into your eye's well
I rush like the voluble sea and flounder
unsure of my footing.

Deeper than rock, deeper than silence under sound
waits the reason of your flame.

But the inevitable backrush of the moment's tide
levels the hollows of meaning
seals them with a slow smile
like sun through clouds
feeling for rock that is certainly there.

Publication. *In Syllables of Stars* (1958), scan page 57.

Grazing

Where is the noble earth revealed
more vitally than a fenced-in field
where cattle wander circumspect
and ponder? Bovine intellect
accepts the warm and greening loam
with quiet grace.

Who better garners energy for need
than munching cows or transmigrating seed
where a sense of waiting on this plane
grows strong in wind and green in rain?
Affection for a tranquil home
emblazons space.

Publication. *In Syllables of Stars* (1958), scan page 58.

When You Kneel

Though you stand at the world's bright rim
uncurved by a single passion
some moment will bend you,
shake you as shifting land until you kneel
and kneeling find an altar.
Shored to the soul's wide reach
through mist of sorrow, fog of fear
its shape will loom before you.

Though you enter the orchard way
the size of your footsteps shall not matter,
gliding in deer-haste
or plunging from the rolling way of a wave.
The many-tongued wind keening against you
cannot change your color
nor chill you with power.
In sunlight or shadow
at ebb tide or washed in the fullness of high-reaching water
time will hollow a place for your knees.

To bend a knee once rigid
is more than a graceful gesture.
To veer from the rutted path of your thinking
toward the promise of light
is a growing vital as air.

Publication. In *Syllables of Stars* (1958), scan page 59.

Always the Line

Always the line
leaning through life
dividing the dawn from darkness.

Call it horizon
severing the known from wonder
where nearness deepens into day
impaled on an azure summit.

Call it laughter
spraying from pleasure
rising to fall a thousand waterfall ways
and none of them as cool again.

Sea solves this demarcation
to froth over sand
her fluid motion meeting immobile rock.
Here footprints bleed with water.

Always the line
locking intangibles
breathing from the safety of now
on the cold glass of never.

Publication. *In Syllables of Stars* (1958), scan page 60.

Haystack

At the yellow turn of the year
old ideas sweeten
harvested in mounds
drenching their own stubbled plains in shadow.

Rooted, there was wealthy chance for green
weaving to the song of winds;
but this sun-gilded heap only blends old greens.

If ever the fusion of endings
weighs to lightness, tempers to mellow
it is now in the open.

At the yellow turn of the year
old ideas settle sleepily
collecting strength to push
new shoots of hope into a reasonable season.

Publication. *In Syllables of Stars* (1958), scan page 61.

Leave as the Antelope

Wary and watchful of a wink of motion
sensing the slightest maneuvering breeze
you statue silence with devotion
like winter trees.

Freed from inertia by the smallest sound—
a cloud of quail from grass where you knelt—
as easy as breathing you leave the ground
and ripple the veldt.

Flecking the plains in stillness of duty
and leaning the wind-way grasses are blowing
the truest translation of your beauty
was your sudden going.

Publication. *In Syllables of Stars* (1958), scan page 62.

Figure at Evening

When years grew green in the stem of you
the wind of your voice
ruffled my thoughts like wheatheads;
now your shadow inks out the sun
the smallest sound of your sighing
shudders my roots.

When you moved in the rhythm of hurry
to the kneeling mountain, to the finger of moon
I ran breathless beside you;
now your patience grows thicker than grass
and your eyes, globes of reason
still me with wonder.

When your day stumbled into midnight
and a stipple of distant stars
I welcomed the darkness;
now time, moving in circles of light
stuns me with the truth that you wedge
my grass and sky apart.

Publication. In *Syllables of Stars* (1958), scan page 63.

ANTELOPE BREAD — THE NATURAL WORLD

Complete source-book division

At the Edge of Seeing

To seize from shadow
where the sudden road bends
in a grove of trees
two young mule deer
their shoulders touching
a branch of leaves

is the hope that leaves
me wild. Woodshadow
deepens, touching
where eagerness bends,
my eyes forming deer
among aspen trees

and oak. The trees
were real in gold leaves
to hide the deer
and mine was the shadow
where thinking bends,
the dark thoughts touching.

What memory touching
those fallen trees
springs up and bends
to the shape of leaves
sleeping in shadow
that might be deer?

Two driven deer
may have been touching
for comfort in shadow
of the yellow trees.
To moving leaves
my vision bends

as a fallen branch bends
under startled deer.
Freckled on leaves
late light is touching
the canyon trees
nibbling shadow.

*Sprite shadow bends
a spell of trees. Deer
touching, grow leaves.*

Publication. *Antelope Bread* (1966), scan page 10.

Green Rock

How green my rock
its bizon back furred with moss
and ruffed in a rhythm of water.
How green
and seagulled in wind.

Near a fisherman's worn-away
leaning stone my rock
thins the blue distance
to sudden shelter
on a wink of sand.

The over air hurried clean
with pelican flap and gull-cry
greens my rock
which in laughing high spray
anchors the blur of things half seen.

Publication. *Antelope Bread* (1966), scan page II.

Tunnel at Zion Park

This sudden mountain
this red ring of rock
hoarding darkness
covers a channel.

To enter, dripping with light,
is to lose the world.
The blessing of loss
gathers you like the shadows.

To leave, wound in silence
is to gain direction,
the rock curving unmoved
into the lighter world.

This darkness that catches
a pure sift of weather
remains a vault
of enduring composure.

Publication. *Antelope Bread* (1966), scan page 12.

Snap Hollihock

For the last impression on my film
why hollihock tilting shadow
on a white brick wall? No talent for fragrance.
It could never move far without scissors.
Something else. Something flower it had to say.

Shape cornucopias out to me
each blossom the cone of an ear
open to my least rush of breath.
Eloquent pink measured like buttons on a coat
holding out cold at strategic intervals.

A step behind me and someone laughs.
The lenses shift to take in the sound
but my eyes record the other
a picture to blast any city:
a slow pink finger tapping white brick.

Publication. *Antelope Bread* (1966), scan page 13.

Picture a Magpie

This bird will not chatter.
His reputation drags
unstopped by my shutter

though his trail of absence
pulls my camera along
miles of running barbed fence.

I plot glossy black
in a swoop over hay.
He joins a tamarack

(subversive maneuver) .
In the road I wait
to miss when he leaves cover.

Did he fly away from or toward
the picture's sun-edge?
Only the mind records.

Publication. *Antelope Bread* (1966), scan page 14.

Mono Craters

If death is not final
in twenty cones you will return
to the husk of your fury
mute in the senseless drift of sand.

Hoarder of shadow and sunlight
you will return to astonish
the silent egress of green
the ponderosas withdrawn
from the bloodless plain.

Cowled monks, drab in your habits
you will burn again, your feet flower
and the lake beside you, choked
with fallen sky will fill
with moiling fish, will pull wings
from the air and chant fresh water.

Publication. *Antelope Bread* (1966), scan page 15.

To a Bit of Jade

Rounded with travel and a sense of yourself
rolling eye in this beast earth
let no tool pock you
to charm the vain.

If centuries spoke
in thunder and earthquake
you never listened.
Sound does not trouble you.

How color happened, blending into cloud
where shape lingered
leaning on change
you were a witness, filling with light.

Rolling over yet over
in the motion of world
let no man stay you,
rub you to his green image.

Publication. *Antelope Bread* (1966), scan page 16.

Footlight for a Palm Tree

Cold light brittles its way up
the shaggy trunk where green fronds
stiffen to long endure it.
A ranch house behind, dwindles
in the flowering darkness.
Unmoving in each bluster
of sand convulsed by desert
winds the marked tree leans graceless.

Forfeiting night's protection
and renewal, the palm, bare
as protruding bone, sunders
driven shadows. It utters
no wind nor sleepy sparrow,
bending into splintered air
that darkens around the wound.

Publication. *Antelope Bread* (1966), scan page 17.

ANTELOPE BREAD — THE PERSONAL WORLD

Complete source-book division

A Power I Speak

Today blooms a white thought
in my pulse
saying sun is blue
and cold with no magnetism.
Sun is a power I speak
imagining tomorrow.

In the ground a fallen star
trembles my notions
through every least dendrite
into song.

In the air sun filaments
jolt me free
from this dance of molecules jailing me
free to a flowing of minds.

And I, microcosmic I,
move in white thought.

Publication. *Antelope Bread* (1966), scan page 20.

Public World of Myself

I stand two fields distant to watch
what must be my grandmother
rise into the image
you, friends, hold of me.
As an apple blossom
laid on the moving air
light laughter escapes my lips
touching your phrases.
A wind rises tearing the petals
and fragrance is gone.
Only the great weed of an issue flowers
and I count myself as leaf to cling
on one side of the stalk.
I watch the weed grow
to the only green in the field
and my bloom wither, crackle
and blow away in your wind.
That which is my grandmother
holds me rooted two fields distant.

Publication. *Antelope Bread* (1966), scan page 21.

Where the Rain-Puddled Pasture Began

I remember my first black dress. . .
black sateen with red and yellow tulips
grown from my mother's quick needle
stretching up like morning from the hem.
I walked inside the flowers
proud as a small Dutch garden,
on my first real errand alone
to where Beecher's house stopped the town
and the rain-puddled pasture began.

All alone I would see Jersey Bess, Beecher's cow.
"Mrs. Beecher will give you back two pennies."
Mother slipped a cold dime into a folded note
and into my Sunday purse
leaning from her bed, her long hair caught
in the ruffled cap she wore when Daddy was gone.
"Remember to hold the pail steady like a big girl."
She tied my sash and buckled my patent leather maryjanes.

"Swing, swing the birds will sing" I chanted,
Hippety-hopping on only one foot
past the silent red brick school
past the sleeping houses with their eyelids down.
I hoped the going-to-school twins would see me.
They were always stuffed into tie-straggled middies
like Hallowe'en shocks.

Looking both ways twice
I crossed the dirt road to the Beechers.

Jersey Bess struggled up from her knees and stared
over the fence munching timothy and clover,
her lower jaw on a swivel.
I walked as close as I dared
to listen for grass turning milk.

The wooden steps of Beecher's stoop
creaked when I stopped to sneeze as my mother would,
at the rusty clump of dahlias that dawdled over the railing,
because of their pollen she said.
The doorscreen complained in Mrs. Beecher's hand.
Her upper lip, furred like grass in cracks of cement,

glistened with a personal dew as she crossed
where sunlight fell on the wide-board floor.
“Yer mother sick? Ain’t that too bad,”
and she handed me a scalloped molasses cookie
bigger than the flowers on my dress.
I pulled off the raisin, so like the button
holding a brown-eyed susan together,
to save for later.

Mrs. Beecher poured warm milk in my pail
and tightened the lid with a stuffing of paper.
She held the pail steady in her long bony fingers
and I gripped the handle both hands in the middle.
“Watch out for cars. Don’t splash yer dress.”

I walked flat-footed and slow, rounding my shoulders
to hold the pail even, unswinging.
Part way down the block I saw prickly burrs—
doll furniture kind at the sand heap
where Danny Moyer’s father made cement.
I parked the pail leaning over to pick
and my purse fell open. One penny and the raisin
trickled out, plopped into the sand.
I poked a finger each hand
wading in wrist deep and swirling slowly.
I remember touching something slippery.
At the same moment with a muffled buzz
out staggered a black bee, reeling
and soared dizzily close to my ear.
I must have screamed and covered my mouth
then shuddering wiped my hand
across my dress again and again.

A half-eaten apple lay at my feet
and some of its brown rotten core
smeared my new dress.
Tears came then streaking my face and splashed
where the tulips were already damp.
I struggled up from my dirty knees
as clumsy as Jersey Bess and lifted the pail again.

At the back screen door I saw the mud
on my maryjanes and scrubbed one at a time
against dry clumps of grass

before running to mother's room.

"You're back safely," she said
as she reached out to hug me
and I saw her face smooth out.
She didn't even scold so I must have smiled.
"Thank you for taking my place," she said. "Thank you."
and closed her eyes leaning back on the pillow.

Down in the kitchen I shook
a penny from my piggy bank
and her words filled my thoughts
as timothy milk filled the pail.
I had taken her place, she said.

Publication. *Antelope Bread* (1966), scan pages 22–25.

How You Are Vine

How you are vine and tendril
and all sweet meaning of coil
with morning glory grip on the fence
sun-open, stretching
your silence in leaves!
How you travel with green haste
into my tangle of nerves
webbing each thought
tilting your shadow at fact!

In deer-light you hold
the world like a blossom
swinging in wind.

I shall never know how you are veins
in every leaf of my pleasure
reaching with supple wrists
the stem of my need.

Publication. *Antelope Bread* (1966), scan page 26.

Young Talisman

Sitting arranged like a rose in a vase
light curving up from the stem
she graces the room with a separateness.

Moments mist around her
brush a radiance over her stillness
barely stir the air for growing.

Stem-slender, mute with questions
she bends into the drift of voices
cupping impressions like folded petals.

You want to move her from your laughter
to an alcove unshadowed
to an island of time.

But the moment for flower
will come unaided, unabated
the fragrance lift above this temporal room.

Publication. *Antelope Bread* (1966), scan page 27.

Sestina for Roger

Yes, you are sound and shadow, entirely free
but enslaving me, as splitting my silence with joy
you enter my thinking at a precarious edge
like a backward wind rushing to forward places.
I am prepared to be unprepared watching
you move in the only logic belonging to a child.

Move into me pure dream of my own, the child
I wanted to be but never dared. Set me free,
string-slipped in time. How will I guess you, watching
in loop after loop of water the net of your joy
ensnaring me slowly, slowly? Where are your places
of darkness and wonder involving your sky's blown edge?

Monet might have turned your light to the warmest edge
stroking from the blur of you some secret of child
that changes moment by moment from shadowy places
with the sun held down, and the wind ready to free
you from being boy. His brush of joy
might pull you from waver into focus for watching.

You are a lily pool where I stand watching
the weave of light flicker the water's edge
the blue gaze above sinking to surface in joy,
the gleaming gathered to deepen and squall into child.
A green of your growing hints blue. Flower your free
color in me, unanchored in water places.

Stravinsky might have found atonal places
for your exuberances, found a scale by watching
the avalanche of your noise in space, how free
your laughter falls, how near the crystal edge
your epic stridence strikes. In being child
you deafen the unprotected with your joy.

From master of shade or master of sound your joy
translates you more than words in cogent places;
in my wildest use of them I cannot guess you, child.
Dashed on the rocks of your conversation, watching
the light and shadow sink and rise to the edge
of your wonder I cannot discover how you are free.

You with the palette of joy in all colors watching a world
of places with sound brimming the edge,
how can you bind me, child, yourself being free?

Publication. *Antelope Bread* (1966), scan pages 28–29.

Commencement

The years in him
make their sudden accumulation
under the tassel, under the robe
and he is ready to face a beginning
which grows from this small ending.
The ceremony,
a gesture our eyes accept,
conditions the empty space
as he removes his need of us
though we try to hold him on film.

“Let no commerce
interfere with conscience, amen.”
Words of other men grow in him
as he rises into
the challenge scrolled on paper.

Publication. *Antelope Bread* (1966), scan page 30.

Hunger and Be Half Fed

Hunger and be half fed
with scalded dream, with antelope bread.

Brimming measure pools
the stagnant image of corpulent fools.

Wander and be half led
through bracken of praises, withering, dead,
to the lost sea half of you
waving with weed, shell-broken in two.

Cherish the hunger, the looking
for the width of its waters, meanwhile brooking
the inner reaches of night
with a heron rising through a tweed of light.

Publication. *Antelope Bread* (1966), scan page 31.

In Middle Years

Now with the road under construction
and a constant vigil for soft shoulders
I train my eyes ahead, my hands on the wheel.

And the wheel has always journeyed
has never stopped. But around what curves
did I floor the accelerator?

Slowed by the smell of tar I notice
the landscape seems to wait while I consider.
Trees rise up in new name and vegetation quivers.

Hills happen too often
and I hesitate. Could I have gone
the other way and this car held together?

Lights blink far away and roadside stands
hurtle past with their last fruit
of the season, their withering intentions.

Publication. *Antelope Bread* (1966), scan page 32.

Windcut

In our morning room cicadas shrill
where your breath misted a moment ago
and my arms warm with your leaving belong
to you yet. I struggle to reclaim them.

Before smoothing the sheet in rearranging air
I read the signature of your bones
as muslin hollows flood with sun.
Nothing explains you more than your fresh

scent of hurry (a fragrance used by the sea)
your vital gathering (as a rock unbending
to water yet tabling each impulse of sun).
The white intaglio is faintly warm

as if you have left and have not left.
The wind finally thieves what I cannot hold.
In the hollow hours though you slip through my fingers
your going and coming belongs to me wholly.

Publication. *Antelope Bread* (1966), scan page 33.

Rescue Me, Nymphs

When you walked away from me in the wrong room
Monet suffered a stroke. I lost my footing
fell into his coil of lilies and took root.

Tangled in silence, purpled with the same water
over time's changing stream of walls
I stretched like the stems that must be there

to sudden my surface, to bring up a light
Monet had overlooked; but blurred pigment
reached everywhere, puddled inside of me

till, anchored yet floating
among white becomings, I guessed the sky
and was glad to be in Giverny,

glad it was not Mt. Kalsaas in fog
white-wishing a world fatigued in snow.
I could breathe my own blizzard.

Spreading green hands on hobbles of water
I tried for shadow in museum glare
but somehow I violated the distance Monet demands

and was discovered—by an organdy girl
waving yellow ribbons she must have picked
from WISTERIA three frames away.

From leaf loop and straggle I cried French blue
but you and the girl had your own conversation.
I eased from the light by rising lily!

Publication. *Antelope Bread* (1966), scan page 34.

Carnival

I

Ruptured from a dream of alarm
with too many toes in my shoe
I groped for a weather cock's arm
to find direction. Callow dawn
scalded my hilltop, blanched my sky.
You and the cove of night were gone.
Perhaps the calliope frayed
my sleep or the hyena's screams;
for the yearly carnival played
our town, gates easy for entry,
the meadow astonished with wheels,
and daylight the only sentry.
I entered as into a snare
surrounded with such garish ids
the hidden me opened to air.

II

With spongy tones the Barker first
wheedled me from myself touting
miraculous cures for a thirst
I didn't have. He pried my mind
for shadows to lighten, secrets
to shout. He slouched before, behind
my every step, dressing my guilt
with his own importance to smash
any bulwark painfully built.
Now honey, now bitters, his voice
poured over my dream, drenched and shook
the moment of all other choice,
but his wily persistence sent
me layers below the loud reach
to find roots for my argument.

III

Circling me, a bareback rider
balanced on a nodding-yes horse,
leaned to pull me up beside her.

Uncanny to slip off and on,
her legs were a flow of muscle.
My equilibrium was gone.

Her horse, continually driven
to measure the fringe of the ring
the sure return of the given,

held her erect. With supple feet
gripping his hide she kept her course.
His mane rippled like winded wheat.

Then around and around we grooved;
the monotony was crowded.
It was only the tent that moved.

IV

Near the canvas roof a thin rope
of precarious highway stretched;
an acrobat tilted my hope.

His feet on invisible wire
quick-stepped, almost missed their mooring
and hoisted my terror higher.

His smile, a wide scar on his face
hinted of shallow perfection.
Was it unconcern with this place?

Held there by the force of all eyes
his motions precisely rehearsed
seemed shrunken to miniature size.

All gestures were balanced and yet
mistrusting his spread of feathers
I stood below him with my net.

V

Giraffe-tall a sword-eater stood
bending, polishing the weapon
that yielded his lean livelihood.

Though the rapid motions he made
wouldn't upset your calm regard
I shuddered to see the long blade

wondering if the metal might
thrill his tongue as well as open
apertures in his burly night.

Was this danger enough to give
him journey and far horizons?
With any less skill could he live?

I watched him and withered inside.
He swallowed the steel and severed
what I know had never been tied.

VI

Above me on swinging trapeze
a small figure quickened the space
to make crimson spirals with ease.

Her body scrolled the humid air
prying freedom from involvement;
behind her, flowing ash bright hair

completed her picture of charm
yet I cowered the more to know
under the sheath of poise lurked harm.

Her circle, consuming its tail
yet burning no larger for me
could slow in momentum, could fail.

In the slippery balance I knew
she leaned against my excitement
to steady the cipher she flew.

VII

To see them, I needed your skill
in watching a play. Their danger
seized my fear, honed it sharp to drill

any pleasure from pantomime.
Their spectacle, their daring show
reached pinnacles I couldn't climb.

I found it hard to breathe and fled
seeking a way to lose myself.
I noticed the gallery ahead,

picked up a gun, aimed at a duck
but lacked the nerve of a hunter.
I was no believer in luck.

You would have known the fast talker
who followed me there and ruined
my aim was the tightrope walker.

VIII

I merged with the people again.
Beside me walked a shabby clown
amalgamating salvaged men.

Avalanched with layers of clothes
he shuffled in absent wander
to clutch an artificial rose

and beltless pants he feared to lose.
His painted smile fit someone else
and wrinkles ran from face to shoes.

The counter value of his cheer
like popcorn, peanuts, crackerjack
was priced to cover any fear.

His re-used laughter, haunting, asked
some corner of my self to know.
Was this the bareback rider, masked?

IX

Frantic to lose myself for good
I turned in terror through the crowd.
You smiled. . . somehow I knew you would. . .

and took my arm as if the earth
that rooted me held only you
who grew beside me from your birth.

Lion roars, calliope steam,
the dumb-show to parody life
and love. . . churned in my savage dream,

and forced another candor out:
in running from myself I found
the shallow wisdom in a shout.

In silence, we, who would not wait,
gathered most of ourselves again
and locked the show behind the gate.

Publication. *Antelope Bread* (1966), scan pages 35–41.

ANTELOPE BREAD — THE TEMPORAL WORLD

Complete source-book division

Sun Blackness

I

Fleshless trees
hold the bullion weight of brightness
sparing no shade.

Brightness
shrills from wires
clanging the shield of earth.

Haggard land
under heat's heavy heel
murmurs dust.

II

A man and woman, shadowless
grow out of the land
and bend toward each other.

The man, pulled taut
with sun on all sides
and the woman, driven in
to a shaft of silence
stand doric
in ruins of broken thought.

III

It is late
and the ground unsettled
under these temples of the same silence.

Untouching pillars
against impregnable air,
they stiffen to waiting.

Until the earth quakes
opening their locked desires
they will blacken with light.

Publication. *Antelope Bread* (1966), scan pages 44–45.

Navajo Weaver

In warm bright wool with geometric grace
she anchors motion to my quiet floor.
Brown fingers ripple with the shuttle, score
her own sheep's wool on warp and into place.

The threat of storm that bruises distant space
darkens into a thunderbird to soar
in warm bright wool with geometric grace.
She anchors motion to my quiet floor.

A shadow drops across her weathered face.
A crow swoops sudden-up, black semaphore
where red rock staggers down. Three boys explore
the roiling dust two skittering chipmunk's chase.
In warm bright wool with geometric grace
she anchors motion to my quiet floor.

Publication. *Antelope Bread* (1966), scan page 46.

Growing Cloth

This hesitant moment
nearly yields to sound
that would ease between us

but holds
baring no fruit
on the stalk of waiting.

Outside is a field of cotton
ripe for plucking
the bolls held in by fringed bracts.

The words uttered
could shatter a future.
Silence is cloth.

Publication. *Antelope Bread* (1966), scan page 47.

Wedding

The small church fills
with waves of the invited
light in the darkness
seaweed blurring a grotto.

The drama begins as
two by two the maids advance
their faces scaled to smile
and fingers tangled in leafy bouquets.

The assembled turn in one current
to watch the immaculate progress
watch the dolphin-sleek groom appear
to stand by the netted bride.

Words sink barbs
like hooks in this sonorous circle
of man giving woman to man,
and waters close over choice.

Out from the grotto
on stems of sea music
the guests flourish to follow
the bound escape.

Publication. *Antelope Bread* (1966), scan page 48.

Tree of Heaven

Up from the brownstone court
through a whirr of used air
the tree lifts a shelter
for flower and child
leaning down when the wind is wild.

Resident robins chirrup song
where clusters of fruit belong.

You rise through the words you are
holding branches of shelter
like the tree, shaking leaves
into shadow as deep
as the silence of robins asleep.

You father a spiritual child
leaning down when the wind is wild.

Publication. *Antelope Bread* (1966), scan page 49.

News Picture from New Guinea

This picture was focused
to rescue from blur. . .
Ferns bend ghostly vertebrae
over black rotted earth
over fetid sacrifice at the door
of a tribal spirit house.
A potion of sweet smelling leaves
wafts away illness in coils of smoke.
Some of its blackness absorbs
the lurking tendency to blur.
Mounded with produce
an Asaro woman walks out of the corner
carrying her garden into the village.

Publication. *Antelope Bread* (1966), scan page 50.

Surf Riders

Buddhas, gongs for the sun,
they squat on boards waiting
for waves to declare themselves.
Then tall for balance in sudden swell
to glide and recover
they rise with the wave
braced for the long slope down.

No cry against water.
From tilt to topple
then one with foam.

Publication. *Antelope Bread* (1966), scan page 51.

Old Men on Upper Porches

Under shaking tree shadows
under leaves shuffling their secrets
in a deck of dry seasons
they tilt and creak in ladderback rockers
these snow-crowned men fanning and reading
listening to music thinned by distance
in the dark direction of the orchestra shell.
Shadows drift over the wooden porches
the bright air closing on hinges of locusts
maple bark rung with scuttling squirrel.
They fade back from travel
fanning the stillness, fanning the music
as the rockers creak.

Publication. *Antelope Bread* (1966), scan page 52.

On Viewing Van Gogh's Pen Sketch at Etten

Look behind the safe places, the houses,
to a flow of radiance
a lightening to quicken
with travel
the thin tongue of the gutter.

Only backward glances have ever sullied
the raw polish of wind here;
but the pen tells the lost passion of trees,
water with unmistakable intent,
a sky approving.

Publication. *Antelope Bread* (1966), scan page 53.

Prickly Pear

Stagestruck
on the wide desert,
Opuntia stares
at the lens of sun

stares while rain
hisses and rushes
and the wind exhibits
a program of fury,

holding innocence
under the, needles:
a quiet production
of nubby pink fruit.

Publication. *Antelope Bread* (1966), scan page 54.

For Kandinsky

What pressures of life
crucified you
that you give us explosions of Easter—
color forced in to its matrix
blazing with control.
From the rainbow of your wrist
sunbursts escape, grow bones
and stand alone.
Circle and square
explore each other
and atoms break from a heavy mass.
Squeezed to the utmost there is no laughter
but resurrection lifts
every inch of your canvas.

Publication. *Antelope Bread* (1966), scan page 55.

Rocket Base

Peace broods here
where sand sprawls, tented with sage;
and purple verbena, like warriors on Indian ponies
bobbing in the wind,
rushes the ground swells.

Quiet bulges till seams of light
split song from mockingbird throats.
White primroses stare under wavers of wing
under scallops of jump as the grasshopper searches
every hillock and dry wash
for a hidden fuse.

Peace broods,
a tall candle flower,
waiting to ripen, droop
and petal by petal
plume into dust.

Publication. *Antelope Bread* (1966), scan page 56.

Vacation

In the year's saved hours I went away
to exchange the mechanical wink
of red and green, the sudden screeching brakes
for rolling meadows nubbed with cattle,
but a brown weed of worry went with me.

There was no way to walk free in the pasture,
bare feet aching against last year's stubble,
no promising tick to the watchful sun.

I came home wild and unweeded,
dark to my journey
and I smiled when they asked about country weather.
Now in the steam heat hours of my winter room
I travel and travel into the green interior.

Publication. *Antelope Bread* (1966), scan page 57.

In Bronze and Marble Spaces

I have never come here before
yet the bronze and the marble move
into me, own me. I awaken
in their yield of muscle
their slant of bone.

I grow in the excited air
between Rodin's marble limbs,
assume the magnificent risk
of Henry Moore allowing his woman
to recline in three pieces.

Consider how love
is caught in this substance
and shaped to idea as I
who dream myself human
and sway in my skin uncontained.

Publication. *Antelope Bread* (1966), scan page 58.

Seed of the Sun

There is no way to lean in the sun
without shadow
black thrust of warm flesh
dark movement for rooted white stone.

Sun and the memory of sun
push all things down
to white silence
forcing blackness to flower

to hold. . . and release
the burden of light.
Hinged to earth
there is no way to shake the sun.

Publication. *Antelope Bread* (1966), scan page 59.

LATER AND UNCOLLECTED POEMS

Eight poems recovered from complete periodical witnesses

If Matter Is Me

Today blooms a white thought
in the pulse
saying the sun is blue
and cold with no magnetism;
the sun is a power I speak
into light and heat.

In the ground a fallen star
trembles my notions
through every least dendrite
into song
for I am a transformer.

In the air sun filaments
lift me free
from this dance of molecules jailing me,
free to a flowing of minds.

And I, the microcosmic I,
move in white thought
imagining tomorrow.

Publication. *Southwest Review* 46.4 (Autumn 1961), 310.

Living Stone

(a succulent)

One round living stone
gardened where others grow
holds the temper of sun
moving so subtly slow
air weighs on leather skin.

One giving-in, one smile
yielding division or birth
accents the curve, the need
to push through husk of earth
a cycle driven from seed.

Node unshaped to shadow
smooth against all noise
holds the colors that gather.
Nowhere grows greater poise
than stone in every weather.

Publication. *Poetry Northwest* 3.1 (Spring 1962), 40.

A Fragile Holding

Under the sag of corpulent heat
where nothing moves but a lizard
and the shadow lowered by a hawk
we struggle to climb slowly up.
Red dust shimmers and pulls
at the skin of our eyes.

Tongues have gone thick and furry.
The view is sudden:
red rock bearing
the blue hump of sky alone.
Hung in the burning air
a loop of stone
draws the land
into new alignment.

The rock worn open
with clutching blown earth
crooks like the brittle bones
of old people keeping
their learned years together.
Eyes, locked in the glare
ache with the burden of seeing.
We descend from our search
and light drains from the stone.
With the gale of vivid years
blowing through us
we who make ourselves
real through words
cling to the place we must hold.

Publication. *University Review* (Summer 1969), 9.

She Leans from Herself

Soon to be woman
she leans from herself
as light from the moon
looking into a river,
a river of water
arranging new shores.

Hesitation shores
her longing toward woman.
Running clear as water
over weeds of herself
she searches the river
that holds the moon.

A turning moon
pulls narrow shores
into the river.
Between girl and woman
she gathers herself
a tide of slow water.

Low on the water
by the sliding moon
she sees herself
with irregular shores
and no peace for a woman:
land cut by a river.

Bound by the river
two lands beside water
she struggles toward woman
by a lonely moon
with hostile shores
to harbor herself.

Using all of herself
to deepen the river
so brimming with water
she rushes old shores
over stones into woman
on the arm of the moon.

Nearly moon herself
she is woman: a river
that shores vivid water.

Publication. *Prairie Schooner* 43.3 (Fall 1969), 314–15.

Lightning Stick

A seer of direction, our weathervane
says it will storm. Glad for a mixture
in weather to stir up the good
we still quake to remember the pine
struck by lightning and when it exploded
splinters hanging in far away trees
and the broken stump burning, burning to char.

Now there is a turquoise stick with feathers above
the stairs, a fetish worn by our redwood panels
and our ascent and descent is Indian.

What have we carved out of prayer
shaped by hope and softened with breath?
Protect this house in a forest of trees.
We respect the pulse at the throat of a storm.

Publication. *Southwest Review* 58.3 (Summer 1973), 225.

Tonto Ruins

I

Sun borrows shine from the road
slaps it in our faces as we climb
between hillocks on the buckled path
through jimson weed, caltrop, barrel cactus.
Of a sudden the hung air blackens.
Beating, flapping everywhere ravens
lift the scorched day in great pieces
a wild rising of charred crusts
up, up to hood the sun,
ravens crumbling into distance
at the impossible task.
We believe in movement, seeing saguaro
in every direction nail the deserted land
and sky the free form, the continual change.

II

Breathless we reach the high mountain cave
like the crack in an overdone loaf of bread
to stand in the earthen rooms
as the Indians must have stood 600 years ago
cooled by the fold of the mountain
and proud of the spreading valley below.
We try to imagine them cooking in barrel cactus
with hot stones, boiling ocotillo roots, eating
cholla buds and saguaro fruit, drinking jonoba.
Even beyond the drought that drove them away
their time of fulfillment reaches out to us now:
the stories shared at their council fire.
We watch bees cluster on the blackened ceiling
and buzz where the burning once crackled.

Publication. *Prairie Schooner* 47.1 (Spring 1973), 64.

Cave Pictures: Carlsbad Caverns

Two cameras threaten
this brooding in a great gasp of earth.
One, carefully placed
where stalagmites are labeled
flashes brightness with a litter of bulbs.

The other, hesitant,
polar-bear paces
the small choice of angle.
Thinking infinity and taking f5.6
leaves cavernous room for distortion.

Loneliness snuffs the last light.
Soon bats will rise like smoke
from the mouth of the cave,
dragging dusk over darkness.
The only escape is into the lens.

Publication. *Southwest Review* 59.4 (Autumn 1974), 507.

A Word from the Playwright

To Set the Stage

a throughway of open windows.
A breeze flutters in, sinks into pillows
then rouses to the dance of its own ego
lifting everything to edges
ready for possible flight.
Somewhere windchimes, deserted shells
tell of currents not weighted with water.
The smell of wind, or the raw sea
plunges the peace with an absence.
A small sound in the distance
deepens the waiting.

One Character

enters the room as a lobby
where only elevators add and subtract.
His step holds the tread of thick carpets.
Experiencing people he waits
for their weather to blow small
before his closed eyes.
Prudent silence saves him
the detour from thought to word
the need to alter his pleasant smile.
Some inner music plays him
between appointed chords.

Another Character

walks in arranging the angle of sun
the bunched grass, like a golfer
to his best advantage.
Collecting spaces
between friends and time and love
he discovers anything capable of rebirth.
Some ridge pole of spirit
holds him happy though searching
wastes of living that clog the air
and a country path to avoid them.

She

comes upon them
dressed in a short hesitation,
yoked for two conversations at once.
There is the distant din of friends
she left on the other street
strung together by the bells of her laughter.
Whatever she offers will cast its own sun,
her voice a collection of other voices.
You wonder where she gathered them
England, France, the Balkans?
Three times she has watched love murdered
and once she was ill a long, long year
dragged down by the slow acceptance
of things as they can only be.
A distant view lives in her eyes
and will enchant those awed by history.
When the dusky sun drags at a stone facade
she sees through apartment walls
the silver fillings in a smile
approaching a Gibson glass.
Now she considers two men
of unknown cultural persuasion
and the waves of her guesses
are only sleepy ripples.

The Action

born in their veins
has already happened somewhere else
and will occur to you
hearing them breathe
though you may blunder
to expect their involvement.
To play out an impulse
they may wait for crossing lights
in the heavy traffic, in the strain of the race.
All of them feel the drama in waiting.

The first one to trample sensibilities
may exit first, and re-enter.
But be forewarned:
none of them will take direction.

Publication. *Mississippi Review* 3.3 (1974), 13–14.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Open scans, discovery routes, and saved research

Bernice W. Ames Papers, Syracuse University

Collection-level guide to correspondence, manuscripts, speeches, reviews, photographs, workshop programs, poems, and stories, 1950–1968.

Poetry Northwest, Spring 1962

Complete issue containing “Living Stone” and a contributor note describing Ames’s Los Angeles household and two books.

Poetry Northwest, Spring 1964

Complete issue containing two poems, including “Footlight for a Palm Tree.”

Poetry Northwest, Summer 1966

Complete issue with a contributor note announcing *Antelope Bread*.

Midwest Quarterly 10.1

Issue record and contributor note documenting Ames’s 1967 prizes and the award to “New Shoes.”

Prairie Schooner: She Leans from Herself

Complete online text and original publication citation.

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