

CHAPTER 1

NAME AND PLACE

1.

Balak in Hebrew (devastator)—King of Moab
son of Zippor (sparrow), meaning he who was always running away
into the desert as the Israelites were fast on his back.

Angry, humiliated, full of vinegar and sap,
looking for the diviner.

2.

Balak (in Turkish, eccentric variant) meaning baby buffalo—
something forging Anatolian rivers,
Armenian fossil of the word, flushed downstream.

3.

Who drowned wading in the reeds of the Ararat plain?
There the sky is cochineal.
There the chapel windows open to raw umber and twisted goats.
There the obsidian glistens and the hawks eat out your eyes.

4.

If you thought of diaspora, you were thinking of emerald stones.
If you thought of the marshes of snails and magenta bugs,
you were wading in the reeds.

Ur: like rolling a good Merlot on the palate till it runnels up the nose.
Ah: breath of the unknown.
Tu: also, everything, self and side of mountain.

The soul sweats. The blue knifes the canyon.

In a cave, a man lived on herbs and water;
the sky's grisaille was a visitation;
the leaves were out of toot sin Jants;
the angels were alpha and omega—

5.

This road goes north—
no need to ask where you are,
sentimental pop songs are stuck in the CD shuffle
there's a valley, a river, a smoking something—
if you ask what color is the sky
can anyone say—cloudless, clotted, open?

PUEBLO 1, NEW MEXICO

Between mud walls and the kiva

wind off the mesa broke his phrases,
as we walked with Billy of the Parrot Clan

and with others. The windows
melting into blowing snow and the ripped-
off split-level doors jammed on the adobes.

Out of fleeting blue, then white,
we caught bites
about the time of killing Spaniards

under the full moon,
after the medicine men were hanged
by Hernando de Ugarte y la Concha

and everyone was smashed between the mesa
and the hardened lava of the caldera,
and the Spaniards ate dogs

and roasted cowhides
till they died of black blood.
Through loud wind we heard how
a ventriloquist convinced the natives
the cross of the mission was speaking:

walk into the bullets—
and they walked into the fanatical air
where the Cruzobs ate wood

until the Virgin was cursed and let go—
and that was the beginning, and the beginning
was 1680 in the year of the friars,

the year the squash grew
out of the trellised sanctuary
where a dozen Christs were bleeding

and the after-stink of heads
rotted into the ground.

Billy said parrots were smuggled
across the Rio Grande
and then froze on the plateau

and the clan kept the name
because of the spirit-brother
of the blazing eyes.

A kid in a Broncos T-shirt
wanted a picture taken
in front of his iced-over window;

the blue-corn girls kept coming
and going as we stood there

in the snow that obscured the mission wall
and the Christmas lights

winding around the sagging turquoise
mullions of the dented windows
where the men left their marks.

The snow blanked the straw-mud walls
as we slid down the molten cliff steps

to the street where the Christmas luminaria
burned into the fissures of tumbleweed.

Nothing is written down in our culture,
Billy said. Even if imagination
is a shard of history, am I defiling it

the way the polymorphism of those birds
mimicked us with their thick tongues.
Greek soldiers carried them to war,

their wings rimed Tang pots,
the rococo ceilings of Dresden
bore their manic green.

If the parrots followed Geronimo
from Guadalupe in a dream
could we imagine that frantic air now

where Route 66 Casino rises on
red pylons that hold up the skittering dice
and the breeze of the shuffle

as we drive into the wager and stakes
of high limits, the wheels of fortune
spinning, the cash-out buttons popping,

simulacra of feathers,
silver, beads, the blur of pots
in the rearview mirror.

PUEBLO 2, NEW MEXICO

1.

The Chief said, you can't see what's beyond the mountain,
as I watched the blue shimmer-light rise
over the tables of silver and turquoise on the square.

(Plato said the soul is in balance when reason
slices appetite into a wing.)

The Chief was a woman guide, a leather-worn
native who lived without running water to live here.

2.

I was here the day after Christmas with some money,

the sky of central New York in my coat,

I was kicking up dust and bonfire ash and pine sap
in the tracks of the square where last night

the procession carried the dais under the billowing canopy,
and candles lit the Madonna's face as the hills
disappeared in the shadows of the acolytes.

(Buddha said the self is in constant movement,
suffering is necessary, social security is negligible—but useful.)

3.

I passed a gruesome painted
Jesus nailed to the pine slab church door.

The Chief said there was more to see beyond the mountain.
I could see a sky over formations of rock,

light hammering the kiva where the heads of slain bears were washed—
the Chief said a shaman could suck a quill from the heart,

Montezuma was killed by the stones of his own people,
an apparition of the Virgin led to a trail south of the Rio Grande.

4.

By noon shadows returned to their crevices,
a chief's blanket folded into a cliff;

I was lost in the blue veins and scree.
I rubbed my hands on fossil bones.

The horizon was turquoise, fractured blue, copper dust.

5.

I left Jesus and Montezuma mingling in the Rio Grande
and saw the sun carry its mask across the sky.

The Chief stared at me as I wrote in my notebook
until I stopped, stuffed it in my satchel, and kept walking

through the scalp houses, caves, and kiva niches—
I took in the air of stinging pine,

saw a man hang over a roof ledge
and puke to cleanse his soul.

PUEBLO, CHRISTMAS DANCE

1.

I took a wrong turn into a sun mask
on mud, into straw-glue and smashed yucca.

If you saw them rub feathers on their arms,
if the claws of bear wrapped them,

if the porcupine and badger were sewn to the skin,
if gusts of God flew into lightning-riven wood.

All morning I drove out of one life into another,
through no water and empty self;

I saw the coordinates of a masthead of a wrecked car.

My car took the curve of a curve
just past the exit to Los Alamos

where Oppenheimer said the infinite imploded finite space—
though he couldn't have imagined

the atom pressed into the cave inside the mesa
that opened into the buffalo

who could turn into a bear,
who could be the beast.

2.

She was carried between the horns of the animal.

The grass brushed the sky.
She drank from the horn.

The hill swallowed the dirt,
which became a horn of water.

The horn of water was passed among many.
Many drank while a chief blew yellow powder

through an eagle-winged bone;

space dissolved into a gourd-rattle
that made me feel the heart-shake.

In the dry cold, in the catapult past Jesus
where the bones and kernels

shook in the dry skin, there was relief.
Euclidian infinity dissolved.

I could hear the end of history
in the teeth rattling inside a gourd;

for a second, blue spears
of lightning shot over three women sleeping

under the canopy of a mud house.
The sun poured on all of us.

JOE LOUIS'S FIST

1.

After the sun rose into rust between gravel and horizon,
after the scent of you oxidized the steel of my car going
into the lidocaine of the morning air as the highway slid

into northeast Detroit past Chill & Mingle,
I did a double take and took a wrong turn at Rim Repair.
(Long ago my father said I should see the fist.)

No one spoke Swahili on 12th Street, still rubble
after the blind pigs folded up.
It was a cliché of the image of itself but it was, it was

like nothing, the vacant burned-out bungalows, car parts, metal scraps,
arson jobs, abandoned homes, barbed wire playgrounds,
shacks pummeled along Six Mile Road—derelict since '67.

2.

My father said when Louis won the radio static was a wave
of sound that stayed all night like the riots blocks away in Harlem,
as the scent of lilac and gin wafted down Broadway to his window

across from the Columbia gates where the sounds of
Fletcher Henderson and Dizzy buzzed the air,
where the mock Nazi salutes were shadows over the

granite lions and snake dancing. Car horns
banged the tar and busted windshields;
even coffee shops south of 116th were looted.

3.

It came back in fragments—through the gauze
of the summer of love, through Lucy in the Sky
and other amnesias; streets of burnt-out buildings,

paratroopers bivouacked in high schools with gas and bayonets.
By 6:00 a.m. July 23 national guard were walking
in the rain of black cinder and pillars of smoke—

a black body hanging from a fence of an auto-part yard,
whisky-faced boys shooting through the fire
as torn bags of loot trailed the streets.

Prostitutes used pool cues to defend themselves.
Booze and cartridge smoke ate their skin.
One trooper said it looked like Berlin in '45.

4.

Samson, David, and Elijah in one left hook,
my father said (6/22/38), upbraided Neville Chamberlain,

liberated Austria and Sudetenland,

knocked the lights out in Berlin—
sent Polish Jews into the boulevards
for one night of phantasmal liberation.

Because Hitler banned jazz, because Black Moses led
crowds and crowds to the marvelous, inscrutable, overwhelming
balked dreams of revenge, millions seeped out of doorways, alleys, tenements—

dreaming of the diamond pots, Chrysler heaven,
the golden girls of Hollywood; Shirley Temple
rubbed some salt into his hands for luck.

Untermensch from Alabama—
sucker for the right hand—the other side of Haile Selassie;
black men howled to him from their electric chairs.

5.

When I drove past Berry Gordy, Jr. Boulevard
and *Hitsville USA* on the studio house,
the lights were out and I could only

imagine the snake pit where Smokey Robinson
spun into vinyl, where "Heat Wave"
came as sweet blackmail in the beach air of '64,

where the Funkbrothers and Martha Reeves
took the mini opera and dumped it on its head.

By the time I hit Jefferson and Woodward
the sun was glaring on the high windows,
and then it hit me—spinning the light—

horizontal two-foot arm smashing the blue
through the empty pyramid holding it up
in the glare of skyscraper glass: molten

bronze-hand, hypotenuse of history,
displaced knuckles—

the smooth casting over the gouged-out wounds—
the naked, beloved, half-known forms.

HART CRANE IN LA, 1927

We sat in leather chairs
around cocktail tables and the candidates

came and went with badges on their jackets, proud and scared,
full of knowledge and uncertainty.

Everyone was animated as the conversation
drifted toward an idea of the idea of the text.

One colleague pointed out in an interview that it was here
right in this room under this chandelier that a poet

once came for a while in uncertainty and fear,
and that he rode into LA's great pink vacuum of

sunsets and spewed Rimbaud out on the Boulevard.
The candidates kept coming and going,

other colleagues dropped over to say hi or to chat about
the menu at the other hotel, and someone else said

that the poet loved this place and that we should stay here
where he had come to devour paté and lobster,

where Ivor Winters met him for old-fashioned cocktails
and noted later that his hands looked

like a seasoned pugilist's, his face like bad road.
Another colleague said you couldn't understand Crane's big poem

without context, the other said you couldn't understand
context without the poem. Another said, listen to the

strange sound the words make when you let the silence in.

The first colleague said the words were so clotted and glued
that it was impossible to decipher meaning, real meaning.

But someone else reminded the others that the poet
was so desperate he pawned his grandmother's watch

and then wrote to Gide, "No Paris ever yielded such as this."

Later when things got worse, when the houses
turned the color of stale mayonnaise,

he went down to the beach to read Hopkins
and claimed the drawling mockingbirds drowned out the spondees.

The first colleague said his idea of the poem was
too big for any life to carry and so the end was inevitable.

Then the waiter appeared, slightly harassed, and everyone
ordered a lobster club and a diet coke, before the next candidate arrived
as another colleague repeated, with an edge in her voice, "Inevitable?"