ROBERT PENN WARREN

CHIEF JOSEPH

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AUTHOR'S CORRECTED GALLEYS

Please return this set with your corrections.

Robert Penn Warren

20—GRAPHIC REVIEW—11-13 x 28 Janson—(7) . . . . . MCK

Robert Penn Warren

Chief Joseph

I.

The Land of the Winding Waters, Wallowa,
The Land of the *In-an-toin-mi*,
Their land, the land in the ages given,
By the Chief-in-the-Sky. Their ponies, crossed
With the strong blood of horses, well-bred, graze
Richly the green blade. Boys, bare-back, ride naked,
Leap on, shout, "Ai-yah!" Shout, "Ai-yee!"—
In unbridled glory. Eaglewing catches sun.
Gleams white. Boys plunge into water, gay as
The otter at gambol, with flat hands slap water
Like beaver-tails slapped in warning, then dive,
Beaverlike, to depth, toes leaving the shimmer,
Uncoiling upward, of bubbles. On sandbars
Boys lie, and sun dries the skin.
It glints golden, red, bronze. Each year
They go where from seaward surge salmon, infatuate,
Unfailing at falls-leap, leap stones, leap the foaming
Rigor of current—seeking, seeking,
In blind compulsion, like fate, the spawn-
Pool that blood remembers. ~~What does our blood,~~
~~In arteries deep, heaving with pulse-thrust,~~
~~In its eternal midnight, remember?~~
~~We stir in sleep. We, too, belong~~
~~To the world, and it is spread for our eyes.~~

The salmon leaps, and is the Sky-Chief's blessing.
The Sky-Power blessed the Nimpau
And blessed them, too, with
The camas-root, good to the tongue, in abundance.

> *Their honesty is immaculate and their purity of purpose and their observance of the rules of their religion are most uniform and remarkable. They are certainly more like a nation of saints than a horde of savages.*
> —Jean Baptiste Le Moyen de Bienville

It is their land, and the bones of their fathers
Yet love them, and in that darkness, lynx-like,
See how their sons still thrive without fear,
Not lying, not speaking with the forked tongue.
Men know, in night-darkness, what wisdom is theirs.

By campfire at night old chiefs tell boys
How first the "crowned ones," white men with head covered,
Had come, and their great war-chief, with honor,
Clean hands and medals and gifts, had sat
On the blanket with chiefs, and Chief Twisted-Hair
Had drawn on white elk-hide the way west
Where boomed the Great Water Ill-Tasted, at land's end,
Though none had been there. Yet all men knew
How storms, winter-long, strode those waters, with might.

The white chief went. Returning, said, yes.

> *A tremendous wind from the S. W. about 3 Oclock this morning with Lightening and hard claps of Thunder, and hail which continued until 6 Oclock a.m. when it became suddenly darkened by a black cloud.*
> — The *Journals* of Lewis and Clark

"I was born at the time of snow. My name—
It was Miats Ta-weet Tu-eka-kas,
The son of my father Tu-eka-kas.
But not my true name. Only after ten snows
Was I, a boy, ready to climb
Alone to the mountain, to lie with no motion
Upon the stone-bed, no food, no water, heart open
To vision. To float as in vision and see
At last, at last, my Guardian Spirit
Come to protect me and give forth my true name.
Three days I lay on the mountain, heart open.
All day stared into bright blue. All night
Into darkening air. Then vision, it came.
Came by day, clear. An old man, he stood
And he gave me a name. I learned it to say.

"I went down the mountain. ~~My father~~ I could not
Let tell. But when the new-named ones, they danced,
Each dancing his new name, I danced. I leaped,
Skyward pointing, exclaiming, *Hin-mah-too-yah-lak-kekht*—
The-Thunder-that-strikes-up-from-Water. That
Was my name. That made my medicine true.

"My father—Old Joseph whites called him—had heard
Of the New Book of Heaven the whites had brought
To Lapwai—the Place of the Butterflies—
And how it gave the heart brightness. So went there.
Then Lapwai was reservation for many—
But not for us who sold not the sacred
Bones of their fathers for white-man money,
And food-scraps. Then fire-water came there. The killing.

"So back to the Winding Waters, my father,
He fled. Yet carried the New Book of Heaven,
New in our tongue writ, ~~but forgot not~~
The bones of his fathers, and the Old Wisdom.
Nor eyes of the fathers that watch from darkness.

"New 'crowned heads,' they came, the makers of treaties.
~~They came with their hats on~~, with paper, and ink."

[stanza #]

"They sought out my father in friendship,

light for a short time, then the heavens became

For the South Nez Perces; commencing where the southern tributary of the Palouse River flows from spurs of Bitter Root Mountains; thence down said tributary to the mouth of Ti-nat-pan-up Creek, thence southerly to the crossing of the Snake ten miles below the mouth of the Alpowa River; thence to the source of Alpowa River in the Blue Mountains; thence to the crossing of Grande Rond River, midway along the divide between the waters Wol-low-how and Powder Rivers; thence to the crossing of the Snake River fifteen miles below mouth of Powder River; thence Salmon River fifty miles above crossing; then along spurs of Bitter Root Mountains to the place of beginning.

–Nez Perces Session, 1855

"I, a boy, stood and watched my father.
His hand reached out. It made the name-mark.
And why not? Not once had we shed white blood
Since the great war-chief on the blanket had sat
With Twisted-Hair, and this called the land ours, always.
Now in ink was promised the Winding Waters forever,
Where sacred bones lay, and we knew them sacred.
We were promised also our land fit for snow-time.

"*Promises, promises*–but our sacred land
They trod. They spat on our earth as though
They spat on our faces. I, then a boy,
I felt the spit on my face. New treaties
They draw up to bind us with thongs. But only
The false Nimpau signed, those who already
Had gone to Lapwai and reservation–
Lapwai, the Place of the Butterfly–
To eat, like a beggar, stale bread of white men.
Yes, they–only they–would sign. No! No!
Not ever my father. Never. Nor I."

In my opinion the non-treaty Nez Perces cannot in law be regarded as bound by the treaty of 1863 and in so far as attempts to deprive them of a right to occupancy of any land in its provisions are null and void.

–Major H. Clay Wood, Adjutant
to General O. O. Howard

"How far away, and wavering
Like mist in dawn wind, was the law! You have seen
How mist in creek-bottoms to nothing burns
When the sun-blaze strikes. How far away
Sat the Great White Father! He burns like the sun,
And we heard how goodness in his heart holds.
But only that word, like mist came to us, not fact."

Executive Mansion, June 16, 1873

It is hereby ordered that the tract of country described Nez Perces Session, 1855 be withheld from entry and settlement as public lands and that the same be set apart as a reservation for the roaming Nez Perces, as recommended by the Secretary of Interior and the Commissioner of Indian Affairs.

–U. S. Grant

II.

"But what is a piece of white paper, ink on it?
What if the Father, though Great, is fed
On lies only, and seeks not to know what
Truth is, or cannot tell Truth from Lie?
So tears up the paper of Truth, and the liars,
Behind their hands, grin, while he writes a big Lie?

"Yes, what is a piece of white paper with black
Marks? And what is a face, white,
With lips tight shut to hide the forkèd tongue?
Too late, too late, we knew what was the white spot
In distance–white cover of cloth, hide-tough,
On wagons that gleamed, like white clouds adrift
Afar, far off, over ridges in sunlight:
This knowledge, like lead, sagged heavy in flesh,
Healed over, but there. It ached in the night."

But no recollection of former services could stand before the white man's greed.

–Major J. C. Trimble

"My father held my hand, and he died.
Dying, said: 'Think always of your country.
Your father has never sold your country.
Has never touched white man's money that they
Should say they have bought the land you now stand on.
You must never sell the bones of your fathers.' "

I think it a great mistake to take from Joseph and his band of Nez Perces Indians that valley [Wallowa].

–General O. O. Howard

"Into a dark place my father had gone.
You know how the hunter, at dawn, waits,
String notched, where the buck comes to drink. Waits,
While first light gilds highest spruce bough, eyes slitted
Like knife wounds, breath with no motion. My father
Waits thus in his dark place. Waiting, see all.
Sees the green worm on green leaf stir. Sees
The shadow of thought in my heart–the lie
The heel must crush. Before action, sees
The deed of my hand. My hope is his Wisdom.

"Oh, open Great Spirit, my ears, my heart,
To his sky-cry as though from a snow-peak of distance!"

It cannot be expected that Indians . . . will . . . submit without any equivalent to be deprived of their homes and possessions or to be driven off to some other locality where they cannot find their usual means of subsistence. . . . It . . . is repugnant to the dictates of humanity and the principles of natural justice.

–Oregon Superintendent of Indian Affairs

"Does a grain of gold, in the dark ground, lie
Like a seed-sprout? What color of bloom
Will it bear? What cunning has it to make
Men rive raw rock where it hides like a murderous secret?
What cunning to lie in innocent brightness
Like wet sand in water? In water what dives
The deepest—deep, deeper than the lead pellet?

"For all things live, and live in their nature.
But what is the nature of gold? We know not.

"In the deepest dark what vision may find it?
On its stone-bed of vision what secret name be divulged?
If it could dance in the name-dance what
Name would be danced? Would it be
~~Keyox-hipaca-? iske-? ilaka-? win-~~
~~Death that in darkness comes smiling~~?

'Death that in darkness comes smiling —
Keyox=hipaca=? iske=? ilaka=? win' ?

"Or is it man's nature this thing not to know?"

. . . to attempt to restrain miners would be like attempting to restrain the whirlwind.
—S. H. Hale, Superintendent of Indian Affairs for Washington Territory

"Years fled. But with heart grown small, as from fear,
What man forever can live? True,
We had long back made the promise of peace.
We had sworn no white blood to shed, our tongue was not forkèd.
But now we breathed the stink of the wind of Time,
As when wind comes bad from the death of peace—
As when on the big plain downwind taint comes
From the age-dead old buffalo cow that rots in the sun.
You wake at night, not believing the dream's stink.
You try to think: 'I lie here as always,
In my own tepee, at peace with all men.'

"But think of your father's eyes in his darkness.

"The sun rises up. No end to the dream's stink."

I call him [the Indian] a savage, and I call a savage something wholly desirable to be civilized off the face of the earth.
—Charles Dickens

"You stand in the sun. You think. 'Am I Joseph?'
You find yourself watching the white man's horse-soldiers,
How they ride two-by-two, four-by-four, how they swing
Into line, charge or stop, dismount.
How the holders of horses fall back, with others
Forming for skirmish. Or deploying for cover.

"The white horse-soldiers, they mount from the left.
We from right. Can that be a difference?
Still as a stone, I stand watching, then suddenly know
How the young men watch me. Tears come to my eyes,
For I think how bodies, dead, shine in moonlight.
I watch how the horse-soldiers wheel into line.
The young men watch me. One finger I touch
To my brow. Trace lines there. Then lay
A hand to my breast. It is hard to stand
And not know what self you have lived with, all years.
Oh, how can two Truths kiss in your heart?

"For now you know what a treaty is—
Black marks on white paper, black smoke in the air.
For the greatest white war-chief—they call him Chief One-Arm—
Chief Howard—now in a loud voice he calls.
At a council of those who would take us away
From our land forever, at last I stood.

"In my weakness, tongue dry to the arch of my mouth,
I stood. And my people waited. They waited
For words, for wisdom, to pass my lips—
Lips drier than dust. Before me, I saw
All the blue coats, the buttons of gold, the black
Coats buttoned up tight over bellies that bulged,
White and sweaty you knew, under that cloth,
And softer than dough. My words could not come,
I saw their lips curl. I saw them,
Behind hands held up, in secret sneer.
'Oh, who will speak!' cried my heart in my bosom.
'For the Nimpau, ~~will~~ speak and speak Truth!'

"But then, my heart, it heard
My father's voice, like a great sky-cry
From snow-peaks in sunlight, and my voice
Was saying the Truth that no
White man can know, how once the Great Spirit
~~That~~ made the earth but had drawn no lines
Of separation upon it, and all
Must remain as He made, for to each man
Earth is the Mother and Nurse, and to that spot
Where he was nursed, he must, in love, cling."

The earth, my mother and nurse, is very sacred to me: too sacred to be valued, or sold for gold or for silver . . . and my bands have suffered wrong rather than done wrong.
—Chief Joseph to the Commissioners of The Treaty of 1876

"~~Howard~~ Could Howard understand understood not. He showed us the rifle.
The rifle is not what is spoken in peace-talk.
He says we must leave the Winding Waters
Forever, forever—or come the horse-soldiers.
We must live afar with a shrunk-little heart,
And dig in the ground like a squaw—at Lapwai,
The Place of the Butterflies—how pretty
That name for a reservation to puke on!
Far from the fatherly eyes that stare in darkness.
Far from my father's words—and my promise!
So my chin to my chest dug deep. For I knew
One-Arm's numbers, and all those behind him.
I knew the strange gun that spits bullets like ~~vomit.~~ hail.
It sits on its wheels and spits bullets like ~~vomit.~~ hail.

"Worse—thirty days only to leave Winding Waters,
With horses and herds, our old, young, and sick.
Horses and herds, they swam, though the Snake
Was in thaw-flood and snatched off weak colts and calves,
And whites stole the rest that we left with poor guard.
In our round boats of buffalo hide, the people
Already were over, four strong horses and riders
To swim with each boat, and push for the shore.

"Even so, our young braves, they swallowed their rage,
Like bile that burns in the belly, and waits.
No, not ours it was, who brought the grief,
But ~~the~~ young men of Chief Kicking Bird.
They fled, burned houses, soaked earth with blood."

III.

"But on *our* trail the horse-soldiers came, and in darkness
And hope to surprise us. Fools—
With gear-jangle and horse-fart. Though we needed not that.
At the heart of the night we heard what we heard,
The wailful howl of the sad coyote.
But no coyote! It was our scout.
He lay there in darkness, owl-eyed, deer-eared.
At dawn they came to surprise us.
Surprise!—It was theirs. end of stanza
We, who wanted no blood-spill, we sent a white flag.
But we knew not their heart, so our young men
Were stripping for battle. Ponies
Tossed head. Though many braves snored yet. Snored
From fire-water the killers had stolen, then sneaked in
For refuge. Like hogs they snored. Vomit flecked lips.

"So what had we? Had only
Some three score, and poor-armed, old trade guns
You load at death-lip, old shot guns, or Winchesters
Fewer than ten. The rest held bows—but bows
With love worked from the horn of wild sheep,
And backed with sheep tendon, and I have seen,
In the thundering chase, a young hunter set
His flèche feather-deep to probe the heart
Of the running buffalo bull, and the bull
Stumble. Our young men, like shadows
Were gone now, some left, some right, to cover
The draw's depth. To wait peace or war.

"The horse-soldiers stood. The white flag approached,
With the heart's true invitation. But what peace
Can be when a shot is the only answer?
A man in a white hat, no soldier, fired it.
But how could we know? Soldiers died. From every crevasse,
Ledge, sage-clump, death peered, death came.
Thirsty are sands of the canyon—oh, thirsty!
Death came with the whispering slyness of arrows.
Came with the whistling nag of hot lead.
On a prong-stick you prop your barrel, aim steady.
Not *bang-bang* like soldiers. You ~~must~~ husband your powder.

"Then bursts the charge of the braves on their ponies—
The war-whoop, the *whang* of arrows at short-range.
The last of the battle formation is shattered
Like fool buffalo stampeded at cliff-edge.
The sands redder go. Like old women, some soldiers
Lose mounts. Flee on foot. In blind corners die.
All flee. Miles we chase them. Coats, weapons, we take.
Scalps never. We touch not the locks of the brave dead.
Now rifles we have, sixty-three by our count.
Now braves break their bows. Now rifles they have!
And pistols. Ah, the white friend is kind!"

Before you to the westward lies the historic battle ground of the Nez Perce Indian War in which 34 men gave their lives in service for their country.
–Marker on White Bird Battlefield

"Yes, rifles we had now. But men so few.
And white men, they swirl down like snowflakes in winter.
Hope had we of the great Looking Glass, puma
A war-chief with paw of ~~grizzly~~, and cunning
Of fox. We sent word. For he of our blood was.
But no, but no, he dreamed he might live
In peace. But soon knew it only
A dream. For to his village, horse-soldiers, they came.
They called for surrender. But Looking Glass answered
He was not at war. So a white man fired.
Killed only a baby.
So Looking Glass, the wise, the brave,
Came to sit in our council of chiefs, the great war-chief!
White fools, they gave him to us, like a present.

"Chief Howard, Great One-Arm—his hundreds now come,
With big-bellied belch gun and those that spit pellets.
Across the flood-Salmon, we teased them, we lured them."

A safer position was unchoosable, nor one more puzzling and obstructive.
–General O. O. Howard

[stanza #]

"Across the flood-Salmon, ~~the fools~~ thoughtless, they came
With all their fool tangle of cables and ferries,
Into our mountains, the trails mud-slick,
Roped pack-mules plunging down cliffside, the forest
In darkness at sun-height. Then we, easy,
Cross over the river. Cross back. On the plain ~~were~~ are free
To meet soldiers, scout parties. We met, and they died.
And in the dark mountains the War-Chief-Who-Prays
Now prayed for supplies. Cut off for three days,
With bellies growling, guts flat, he at last
Made the river with all ~~their~~ fool tackle and gear.
At Clearwater, then, we fought them. We held.
For three days we held them, locked in their circle,
While old, young, women, and sick, by travois escaped.
But, oh, not back to the Winding Waters!"

MS spelling = travois

The Indians fought like devils and were brave as lions.
—Captain Bancroft (wounded, from
hospital at Lapwai)

"We tried to be brave like men, we tried
To cleanse hearts. To make acceptable medicine.
But the Great Spirit turned his face away
From the land of the Winding Waters we loved.

"Did he turn his face because of my heart-pride?
Because I was proud to sit in the council
With war-chiefs, the great ones, adept at blood skills?
They knew cunning deceits but never knew soul-fear.
I was proud to sit there, and always my ears
Pricked forward for wisdom, as prick wolf-ears
At a rustle on soft wind,
For I stored all I heard for the heart's lonely thought,
To be ready, be strong, when the moment came.
Sometimes in battle I took care of those
Too old, too young, or too sick. To give them
Their safety. My Guardian Spirit, it told me.
But I, too, down the length of the death-tube have peered,
Squeezed trigger, seen blood spurt, have rallied
My braves. I know the joy of the clamor.
I strove to be named the name of a man.

"I have even dreamed of a death-trap and spoken
In council. And first one nodded. Then all."

The Great Spirit puts it into the heart and head of man to know how to defend himself.
—Chief Joseph

"But later, ah, later, when men named that war
With my name, my heart in my bosom would tighten.
Would shrink. What praise does man want but his manhood?
We all had manhood, we showed at Clearwater."

I do not think that I had to exercise more thorough generalship during the Civil War than I did in the march to the battlefield and the ensuing battle with Joseph and his Indians on the banks of the Clearwater.
—General O. O. Howard

"But what was the good of our sweated blood?—
Howard behind us, the mountain-wall eastward.
From Howard no peace terms, and eastward only
Pass Lolo, which crawled up in cloud-heights,
And we knew that Howard would try to cut Lolo.
For me, I would stand, fight, and die, if only
In dream of my sacred land, but the chiefs
In council said *no*. Looking Glass said *no*.
And I heeded their wisdom. What right had I
To die—to leave sick, old, young, squaws—to flatter
My heart's pride? For a true chief no self has. So up,
Up Lolo, track ragged and rocky, crag-dark,
Belabored by deadfall, but with hope
To find at the end of the long travail Sitting Bull,
Who now sat safe by the 'skirts of the Old Lady Queen,'
Far northward. For he would know us as men.

"Howard ~~,~~ we raced him. Won. But eastward
New soldiers had forts to trap us. Now under
White flag we held pow-wow for peace. Meanwhile,
Our scouts smelled a way. Hard and bitter it was.
But the east turns red with dawn—and ho!—
Here only coals dying and pony turds dew-damp
Until the sun hits them. We had flung out a screen
Of braves behind ledges, rim-rock, tree-growth,
So they dared not leave that ~~fool~~ fort they had built.
Some tried, but not living to hear the gray hornet's song.
Fort Fizzle, they called it. Fort Fizzle it was.
But no way to get to the 'Old Lady's Skirts.'

"So up Butternut, friendly with settlements,
Trading with farmers, for guns, ammunition,
Not killing, laughing together. Then southward,
Toward grass of the buffalo land, and high sky.
Peace-thinking ~~fooled~~ deceived us. We thought we were free."

IV.

"At dawn they struck us, new horse-soldiers. Shot
Into tepees. Squaws, children, old died.
Some mothers might stand in the river's cold coil
And hold up the infant and sweep, and cry mercy.
What heart beneath blue coat has fruited in mercy?
When the slug plugged her bosom, unfooting her
To the current's swirl and last darkness, what last
Did she hear? It was, of course, laughter.

MS spelling = teepees

[Stanza #]

"And we, we were blind, blind in the bushes,
Rage-blind, hearts burning, hides naked except for
Snatched bandoliers, rifles foolish in hand–but then!
Then the great voice of Looking Glass, White Bird's war-whoop,
It's terrible quaver! We heard, turned,
Saw horse-soldiers laughing, milling in firelight.
And, sudden, we knew our darkness a blessing. Few
Laughed longer. Few from the light escaped. Those few to high cover.
Dug holes in the ground. But our rifles
Found any that stirred. And light filled the canyon.

"We took their big-bellied gun that belched. We broke it.
New rifles we had, new boots, new coats–
From bodies then white humps gleaming in sunshine,
Clutching earth as though they had loved her.

"Few laughed as they lay there. Our own hearts
Were swollen with rage, with rage like great joy.
And gratefulness. The Chief-in-the-Sky–
He had seen our need. He smiled on us.
He said: 'Know now you are men. Be men!'

"With his help we were men. And our scouts always out."

> *I could smell white people, the soldiers, a long way. . . . My Guardian Spirit instructed that I scout mostly alone. None of the enemies had appeared coming on our last sun's trail. . . . I watched if antelope acted curious. It might be danger. If prairie birds flew up in distance, it might be buffalo stampeding . . . the unexpected shadow against a big rock.*
>
> –Yellow Wolf, scout of the Nez Perces

"Yes, never again did the sunrise come
Without, at first light, a far shadow on ridge-spine
To wheel, wave blanket, ho! At night had that scout
Snaked nearer and nearer a campfire? The sleeper
Breathed steady. A throat might be slit, and the sleeper
With no breath to moan. For a hand lay on mouth.
And scouts at distance knew how to direct
The far anger of Enfield, or Spencer, or Sharp's.
Men have fallen from saddle before echo came.
Men have fallen face-down in a skillet when cooking.

"All night white men knew that eyes would be watching.

"All night scouts wore wolf-skins. In darkness wolves called.

"Past lava, past schist, past desert and sand–
A strange land we wandered to eastern horizons
Where blueness of mountains swam in their blue–
In blue beyond name. The hawk hung high.
Gleamed white. A sign. It gleamed like a word in the sky.
Cleanse hearts and pray. Pray to know what the Sky-Chief
Would now lean to tell. To the pure heart, Truth speaks.

"We dreamed to enter the pass they name Tachee,
The land where Evil Spirits may dwell,
Where water may stink, and a river stink evil,
And the ulcerous earth boils foul.
But we trusted the will of the Sky-Chief to lead us,
To lead us the way of silence and shadow.
We dreamed of the mountain where one drop of dew
At noon yet hangs at the pine-needle tip
And speaks back to no sun. We dreamed
But no. Not yet.

"To your belly the plant of the camas is kind.
Squaws gather the root on the camas prairies.
It is a gift from our Great Earth Mother–
But only for us. The white man spits on it,
Blaspheming. And to the white man it gave back,
At last, one word. And Death was the word.
On Camas Meadows we found him. In moon-dark,
In columns of two, as though soldier-saddles we rode.
We sat up as soldiers, as though the friendly
Patrol returning. We knew a patrol out.
We rode in close. Challenge, at last! Then war-whoop, the blaze,
Tents tettered by bullets, the death-scream, the mule train
Stampeding after the bell of the lead-mare
Now rung by a brave who had crept in to steal it
And now dashed onward, and on,
Into darkness and distance. Thus
It began. Some run from their weapons."

> NARRATION: *Some were crying. They ran, and one voice called loudly for them to come back to their guns.*
>
> QUERY: *Where were the guns of the soldiers who were standing guard?*
>
> NARRATION: *The guns were stacked.*
>
> QUERY: *You did not really hear the soldiers crying, did you?*
>
> NARRATION: *I heard them cry like babies. They were bad scared.*
>
> –Interview with Indian Warrior

"Then Tachee, the door to the friendship of mountains,
And the world of the foot-soundless shadow. Ah, there–
There the mountains of Yellowstone, and the silence,
The secret recesses. There the wolf-call
Could be but a wolf in wolf-darkness, calling.
You turn on your side. You sleep. Sleep till dawn.

"What days, what nights, had we come in our harriment?
Long, long the summer, but dawn-ice now blue.
Remember your dead now lonely under
Stars with no name. Snow comes soon. Awake.
In new mountains you stare up to see, bright as steel,
Stars wheel in unfamiliar formations. You know not
That sky. Nor that land, nor where foot leads.

[Stanza #]

"But there was one with us, of white and red blood
Together, but red was his heart, Poker Joe, and he knew
All the sly trails, deceits of the passes. In
That land of mountainous nightmare, he scented in darkness,
He tasted the air. We trusted. He knew
The names of the mountains, in darkness
Their whisper he heard.

"And Howard's poor half-wits, with compass and maps,
Had traveled more than their thousand
Miles, steel of horseshoes thin-splitting, leather
Of boots no longer saving the callous
From blood-scrape of razor-edge lava, or granite,
Coats threadbare for blasts northward ~~now nourished~~, the belly
Already growling in hunger's anxiety."

As it had been a severer tax upon the energies of officers and men than any period in the late Civil War, surely some method must be found to encourage and properly reward such gallantry and service hardly ever before excelled.

–General O. O. Howard, Report

"But we, our hearts leaned toward the mountains!
We could never starve in the Sky-Chief's goodness.

"Into that mare's nest of chasms and peaks,
We plunged. But no mare's nest for Joe! How soft
Is the pine-needle padding to foot-arch stone-strained,
Lava-cut! How gentle the silence as when
You wake, and the loving boughs lean! What if
Old One-Arm should come, as sure, in the end?
With new men, new supplies, new spit-guns, new boots?
And we guessed, before word of scouts, that eastward,
Where eye-into-eye mountains see sun come,
Already horse-soldiers were freshly counted
To grind us between mortar and pestle."

Where east, and north, the mountain wall broke,
Stone fingers, with nails, stretched out at the plain,
And in between fingers were passes that westward
Became a gut-tangle of canyons, ravines, crevasses,
And cliff-sided slits no roots could clutch, or bear claw,
And if you looked up, day was only a sky streak.
From high west to high east ran spine-ridges with
Peaks stabbing high beyond the darkness
And clamber and shag of conifers. Who,
North or south, could make way that way? Yes,
Poker, ~~yes~~, Joseph, his people, ~~they could~~.

And Howard,
In blunder and bumble–yes, he was tough.
Would winch wagons–unwheeled front or rear–two hundred
Feet up, or worse. Then down. Then days
Later find he had cut
Across his own trail. Was sometimes, in fact,
As baffled as any fool kitten that tangles
Himself in a ball of sock-wool, or a trot-line.

The only scouts Howard had out not later found dead
Were those with news Poker wanted Howard to hear
As he staggered through the insane Absarokas–
That saber-jagged, murderous nightmare of mountains
And stream-yelling canyons where every
Direction is a lie–hoping
To pin Joseph ~~at last~~ against Colonel Sturgis,
Who horse-held the plain, waiting, waiting.
For Sturgis, a son dead with Custer, was mad for revenge.

Yes, it would be
An operation brilliant in textbooks,
A nut-cracker action–depending, of course,
On information and timing. But Howard,
His scouts all found dead, hung ignorantly north,
Near Clark Fork headwaters, waiting to strike.
While Sturgis, in hot haste and heat of revenge, was tricked
South, up the stinking Shoshone, and into the mountains,
Pursuing Joseph and Joe, signs ~~carefully~~ clear,
To a well-trampled spot, a spot
Where ponies outward had circled and circled
To hide all trail thence, or generously give
Too God-damned many–but, ah, plainsward
Sturgis spied dust rise–the bands, of course!
Dust rose, swelling slow in the pale pink of dawn-shine.

So "Halloo!" shouts Sturgis, hell-bent for the spooks,
~~And~~ spooks they were. Dust settles, and nothing
Is there but ripped pine boughs and sage-clumps left
By braves now galloping north, and coiling their lariats,
~~But taking time for their laughter~~.

Back now–back at the circle of trampled confusion
Devised by the wicked cunning of Joe or
The instinct of Joseph–or whose?–Sturgis found
The tell-tale spot where no dew seemed shaken from shyest leaf,
Where no pebble ~~too perfectly~~ showed no streak of mud.
And that, of course, was the route of escape, the magic
Of red men. It gave
On a knife-slice of canyon as dark as a tunnel,
And needle-narrow, and fading back north,
It faded north, reversing the track of Sturgis's revenge.
Northward, it led Joseph to enter
The mystic path, past Howard, to
Clark's Ford and freedom.

Now the last dash! The Great Spirit had smiled
On those who knew to endure or die,
And those who knew the joy of expending man's strength
That others might laugh in sunshine, and sing.

If you were the eyes of the Eagle of eagles,
And from vast height looked down on the bruised
Thumb-hump of the Little Bear Paw Mountains, then southward,
You'd see a tangle of canyon and coulee
Where water, long back, had sliced at the high plain,
And south, then plains of great grass curried
By wind-comb, or lying gray-green in its slickness
Of windless autumn sunlight, or worn down
By buffalo hoof or tooth-edge to earth's
Inner redness, and dust-devils rising in idle
Swirl, or the white-streaked poison of
Alkali flats, standing stakes of poplars long dead,
And farther, more canyons and coulees black
With shadow as sun saddens westward, and low.
Then worn down by ages and ice-grind, the Little
Rockies, and eastward crawling the glitter
Of rivers, first the Missouri, then
Plains again, lounging and lazy, or plagued by dust-devils.
More mountains, the Moccasins reaching north-south,
The Judiths east-curving, and likewise the Big
Snowy Mountains, and farther some eighty miles,
Another glitter of river, slow, idle, eastward,
The Yellowstone, and from that level,
The Bulge, the hump, the leap of the Great
Granite Peak, from which all earth away falls
Past glacier, precipice, past rocks ripped
Like wounds from a grizzly's claws. –And there,
Two hundred miles off, slow, slow, in distance,
Almost invisible, even to Your eternal Eye, the advancing
Riffle of dust. They come.
Northward they move.
They move from the Land of the Evil Spirits unharmed.

But dimmer by distance, almost transparent
In late light, unformed as a thumb-smear, blue blur
On the sky's autumnal yellowness: Howard.

Old One-Arm, dogged, devout, knowing
Himself snared in God's ambiguity of justice,
He stirs in the saddle. His heart is military.
Is inflamed with love of glory and
Vanity wounded. He is the butt
Of every newspaper. Like foxfire,
At night in his dream, his quarry flickers, sardonic
Before him. Does
He hear distant laughter in dream? By God,
Pursue! He will! The old wound
Aches. He thinks of ~~Antietam~~. Well,
Let the last leather split, let feet bleed, the last
Horse-shoe be cast. Man
Is born to suffer. He is born to God's will.

But a stern chase, by land or sea,
Is a long chase. He knows that much.
His heart is iron. He has seen much blood. But
Against his will, his ambition, the heart
Melts in his breast. It
Suffers a flame of logic that
Vindictively flares through the straw
Of ambition, and he, in heart-pain, admits
That from Fort McKoegh, northeast, Colonel Miles
Might, upward and west, strike a long angle
Of interception.

And receive surrender!

Nausea burns his throat. Acid of bile. What
Then for him, for Howard! For his
Long struggle, unflinching over a thousand miles,
For anguish, defeats, his dead lying under
Unloving stars? His heart splits in prayer.
He has stood before his regiments on Sunday morning
To pray. Now in darkness, he prays.

His heart splits,
Like a stone, red-hot, into snow cast.

If Thou wilt grant my request, do so, I beseech Thee, even at the expense of another's receiving credit of the expedition.
–General O. O. Howard

He thinks of Miles. He thinks what all men know:
A grovelling hem-kisser of the draggled skirts of glory.
He thinks of him. But,
Suddenly, with sad pity.

Orders, identical, go out. One by
Horse, one by boat. –And the heart of Miles at McKoegh
Flares like a rocket. A general once–
But only of state militia. Now only
A colonel–reduced. His head goes dizzy
Like a drunkard's whose fingers close on the bottle.
In the infinite black firmament inside
His skull, a star, in explosion, blazes, bursts
In the birth of worlds. He knows now that
God loves him! Bugles blare.
Blare here! Blare there! Distance is nothing.

. . . *something of a glory-chase, like Custer* . . .
–Major Lewis Merrill

As Joseph drew northward, Howard drew on.
Joseph knew only one word: north. And northward
The Yellowstone flowed, backed westward by yellow-
Gray rim-rock and shortening sunsets. Joseph,
His sick, his old, his young are now driven onward
Like wraiths in Joseph's iron dream.

Sturgis has his own blood-drenched dream.
His scouts feed his dream.

Only once, westward, the bulwark of rim-rock
Breaks where a creek flows in, and in
That narrowness, flanked by crevasses,
Flange rock, and rubble, one man is twenty–
Is fifty–if powder holds out. So Joseph
Drives on. Oh, for an opening wide
That suddenly, like a lethal noose,
Tightens. He hacks at his scouts.

There it is, and the incompetent
Are huddled up-canyon. A few braves
Are set at the opening for bait–and Sturgis,
Gave thanks to God, and struck! The bait
Faded before him into the narrowing throttlement.
Poor Sturgis! He never could learn, and now crowded
His horsemen in until suddenly from
Flanges, rim-rocks, ledges, sage-clumps,
The unhived lead hummed honeyward.

With Joseph long gone up the death-sweet canyon,
Howard arrived to survey the scene.
From saddle, he slowly surveyed it with more than
Professional eye:

> *It was the most horrible of places–sage-brush and dirt, and only alkaline water, and very little of that! Dead horses were strewn around, and other relics of the battlefield! A few wounded and dead were there. To all this admixture of disagreeable things was added a cold, raw wind, that, unobstructed, swept over the country. Surely, if anything was needed to make us hate war such after-battle scenes come into play.*

Yes, Joseph again gone, Sturgis
Outfought in spite of men and equipment,
And pursuers unable to breach the bulwark of rim-rock.
Now on the northern horizon, the dust
Of Joseph was lost. Southward three armies,
In the rugged Ansarokas had, breath-bated, lain
In wait, but Joseph's people, like water,
Like air, like ghosts, had slipped through the clutch of fingers.

But Joseph knew not of Miles, and his star.

Miles curses the cavalry, infantry, forward
To follow the flare of that star. In his saddle
Miles reels. The thought–it was ghastly! What if
Howard comes to find Miles merely holding Joseph at bay?
Then all–all–for naught. For Howard, outranking,
Receives the surrender. Miles shuts his eyes. Sees
In darkness the glare of newspaper headlines,
Far off, in New York. In Washington, too.
Then the masonry of the news story.
Tears come to his eyes. He curses his laggards. And Howard.

On the western shore of the mountains, Joseph
Moves north four days, but slower, slower,
For Howard, in cunning, relaxes his pressure
That Miles, unknown, on the eastern slope
May drive on past, then strike a hook southward.

Joseph, at last, to the Little Bear Paws comes.
He believes himself safe by the Old Lady's skirts.

> *I sat down in a fat and beautiful country. I had won my freedom and the freedom of my people. There were many empty places in the lodges and the council, but we were in a land where we could not be forced to live in a place we did not want.*

Clearly defensible, in the alluvial gulch
Of Snake Creek, beside good water, they
Set themselves down, protected from wind
By bluffs, farther by mountains, tepees now set
In a circle, good hunting handy. Squaws
Could here dry winter meat, and livestock
Graze widely. But in precaution at each
Tepee a mount was staked. No scouts out, however.
For this was a land of peace. They had peace.

In dawn light this was the pastoral scene Miles saw–
And saw, or thought he saw, how the slope,
Wide, rolling, slightly atilt,
Invited cavalry's thunder. No Howard!
His heart leaped. One charge–and the star!

But Fate, the slut, is flirtatious. What
Miles, in his hypnotic passion, did not
See was a network of small, brush-grown coulees,
And a great coulee, moat-like, east and west,
Draining down to the Snake, the growth
At its top with the look of the levelling plain.
This Miles could not see, but clear to his sight,
If not to his brain, there was
A long ridge overlooking the village, behind it,
Now brown with autumn-bit sage that gave
Perfect deception for braves to lie in,
Barrel steady, finger looped, eye squinting.
What made Miles here blind? But did see the horse herd,
And brilliantly thought how he would,
With second-rate cavalry, strike a stampede there,
While wings of infantry closed on the flanks of the village.

How calm the plain looked. In saintly peace
Miles stood in God's love. He knew that God loved him.
For at the debouchment of Bear Paws there was
No perspective to show, in that dip, swell and dip,
The last ridge, which on his, the south, side, looked easy–
The easiest yet, for eastward sinking. (and level)
It sinks. Ah, how in his dream could he know
That on the far side it dropped sharp

— NO 7 —

The mirror of distance behind you, far,
And the mirror Time that brings you both here,
And will, in time, part you forever.

Frozen, you stand in that moment of final assessment.

He is famous now. Great men have come
To shake his hand in his poverty.
Generals who chased him, ten to one,
With their fancy equipment, Gatling guns,
Artillery. Histories named him a genius.
And even Sherman, who never had fought him
But gave more death than ever his generals—
Yes, the slime-green waters of Leavenworth—wrote:

> *The Indians throughout displayed a courage and skill that elicited universal praise; they abstained from scalping; let captive women go free; and did not commit indiscriminate murders of peaceful families; . . . they fought with almost scientific skill.*

Frontiersmen, land-grabbers, gold-panners were dead.
Veterans of the long chase skull-grinned in darkness.
Railroad Barons now swayed the West
And those of their soft-handed ilk. They founded
Dynasties, universities, libraries, shuffled
Stocks, and to the last drop milked
The Treasury of the United States,
Not to mention each other. They slick-fucked a land.

But as their wealth grew, so Joseph's fame.
As the President's guest, in the White House,
He had shaken Roosevelt's hand. With Miles,
No longer a mere brigadier, he broke
Bread among crystal and silver. Back West
Artists came to commemorate for the future
That noble head. In bronze it was cast:

> *In gallery 224 of the American Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, accession number 06.313, may be found the bronze portrait of "Joseph, Chief of the Nez Perce Indians. His Indian name, Tim-mah-too-yah-let-lekht, is said to mean Thunder Rolling in the Mountains. . . . This medallion was taken from life in 1889. Bronze, diameter 17-½ in. Signed Olin L. Warner. . . ."*
> —American Sculpture Catalogue of the Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, p. 42.

Great honor came, for it came to pass
That to praise the redman was the way
Best adapted to expunge all, all, in the mist
Of bloodless myth. And in the predictably obscene
Procession to dedicate Grant's Tomb, which grandeur
Was now to hold the poor, noble dust of Appomattox,
Joseph, whose people had never taken
A scalp, rode beside Buffalo Bill—
Who had once sent his wife a yet-bloody scalp
He himself had sliced from the pate
Of a redman who'd missed him. Joseph rode
Beside Buffalo Bill, who broke clay pigeons—
One-two-three-four-five—just like that.

Joseph rode by the clown, the magician who could transform
For howling patriots, or royalty,
The blood of history into red ketchup,
A favorite American condiment. By his side
Joseph rode. Did Joseph know
Of the bloody scalp in love's envelope, know
That dead Grant once in the White House had,
In his own hand, certified the land
Of the Winding Waters to Joseph's people—
"Forever"—until some patriot shit
Jerked him by the nose, like a bull with a brass
Ring there for control? Not right, not left,
Joseph looked as the hoofs on the cobbles clacked
In the dolor of that procession. He
Was only himself, and the distances
He stared into were only himself.

After all the years, back at Nespelem,
No right to move without written permission,
He wore the poor dress of his people. The great
War-bonnet, whose eagle feathers had once gleamed in
Ceremonial grandeur, grander than life,
Lay locked in a box. Only once
Permission was given him to go to the Winding Waters.

"The grave of my father now lay in a land now tilled
By the white man who owned it, but had something human of heart.
No plowshare had wounded the earth where my father slept,
And the mercy of stones was piled to forbid.
I gazed at the stones. My eyes were dim.
I lifted my eyes that they might be washed
In the purity of the distance of mountains.
I thought of the purity of that poor man's heart."

Back at Nespelem, by the campfire did
Joseph wonder if the gaze of Old Joseph
Yet fixed on him?

At least, no sacred land had he ever sold.

At last, he said: "I shall see
But one more snow." Face painted, the body,
Adorned for its rank, awaited the shaman
To rise and speak, and lay the tall ghost.

The earthly possessions among friends were scattered.

But this not the end:
Next year at the second death-feast, Yellow Bull,
Now forking the dead warrior's war-horse, rehearses
The tale and its greatness. The coffin
Was opened, and that face for the last time seen
By the Real People. But only by them. It was shut,
And thrust beneath the expensive monument
Of white generosity—that seizes all in the end.

Oh, the giver and his generosity!—he
Was a hero of railroads, valiant in stock deals,
A warrior who opened wider the New West
But never with need to squeeze any trigger.
A fountain pen was the only tube required
To make him rich enough to afford himself that honor.

More than twenty years passed before the people
Of In-an-toin-mu dug up what was left
Of Old Joseph still in the cornfield, and took it
To a shore of the Winding Waters, and there
Set up, in sight of snowy peaks, their stone. It was theirs.

This much was all that remained them,
After Little Bear Paws and Snake Creek's bitter waters.

VIII.

To Snake Creek, a century later, I came.

La Guardia to O'Hare, American Air Lines, October 9, 1981, Ticket 704 982 1454 4, Chicago. By Northwest to Great Falls. Met by two friends, Stuart Wright and David Quammen.

Out of Great Falls, north, in the Honda,
Out on the swell of infinite plains
By washboard coulees here and there slashed,
Vacant of cattle, horse, or man, the color
Gray-brown, the season October, not yet
Snowfall. Low ramparts of cloud, dark blue,
Hug the horizon westward like
A mountain range shrunken in distance,
Solid, supporting the arch of the sky.
Correspondingly eastward, the dark blue rampart
Is topped by an edging of pale, pale gold,
Where sun lay in wait. Sprang forth, and distance
In all directions fled, devouring
The scraggle of villages dropped by history on
Route 87. Far off, a gold clump
Of cottonwood shows ranchstead or waterhole.
Sky shudders from blue to the apex of near-white. We plunge on.

Plunge on, northeast, but in our minds see
Only our small black dot creeping slow
Across a large map outspread. Next morning,
At a map-point called Chinook, southward we turn.
Tires now grind gravel. Left, west,
Plains swell to the sweep of arrogant skyline.
Now southwest, the skyline begins to heave,
To darken. There, at last, are
The Little Bear Paw Mountains, mostly
In curves dulled by ages, but some, a few yet,
Snag angrily skyward, snow-smeared. Then eastward
They swing, suck the plain up in blueness. This
Is the ridge that once had hidden Miles.

We turn left at the sign. There
Are the modest monuments. First,
A bronze plate, in stone set, and
In relief, a soldier (presumably Miles), and before him
An Indian, tall, naked, one arm lifted skyward,
And beneath, the words of Joseph:
"From where the sun now stands I fight
No more forever."

There is the map,
Large, enamel on metal, weatherproof:
Analysis of the action. And then,
The large bronze plate on granite propped
By the Republic to honor the name
Of every trooper who, in glory, had died here.

But the troopers who died here, and died
For the ego of Miles, did not rot here. Their rotting
That process was achieved with those who in Custer's
Dream died, when, by the Little Big Horn,
He at last salted the tail of
That idiot phantasm of immortality.

The map shows too a mass grave
Where, no doubt, red flesh had rotted.
But not all red flesh, for when the siege-line
Was tightened, and shells began lobbing in,
The Indians tried to dig caves for children,
The women, the old. And shells spared the later
Spade-work from blue-backs.
You see the heaved earth, now mollified.

Snake Creek loops away, is hidden in thickets
Of last leaves of wild rose, now dusty crimson of leaf,
Branches studded with red hips. You tear through briars
Shoulder-high. Snake Creek is near dry, only
A string of mossy-green puddles where Joseph
Had once found water fresh for people and horse-herd.

Beyond is the raised alluvial flat
Where tepees stood. There, southward, a steel pipe,

With marker screwed on, defines the location
Of the tepee of Joseph.

If you climb the slope, say south a mile and a half,
Or two, to the point where Miles must first
Have debouched from the Bear Paws, and look north,
You see what he saw–or what years have left.
Did he send his Cheyennes
To scout the lay, or did his star dance
In its passionate certainty? Northward,
You see what you guess he saw
In his manic snatch for glory–the village,
The downward plainsweep, swell and dip, swell and dip,
Cunt-open and panting, inviting the picture-book cavalry stroke.

Now if you wander sage you will find
Steel pipes thrust in where each man died–
If he was white or of any consequence.
There are markers screwed on with a name: *Poker Joe*,
Who knew the tricks of the Yellowstone,
Ollocot, brother and warrior peerless,
And *Looking Glass*, war-chief and cunning in council.
And names of the troopers, including the jokester
Captain Hale, who died in such weather.
And you find the spot marked where the buffalo robe
Once lay black on the snow, and Howard, with what
Compassion or irony gestured to Miles.

Alone on that last spot I stood, my friends,
Now prowling and far, on the high land. No snow
Now on brown grass or red leaf
Or black buffalo robe ceremonially swept
To its blackness. All
Now only a picture in my head–

and there
He stands, the gray shawl showing
The four bullet holes, and hoofprints seen
Backward in that hypothetical
Snow marking the way he had come. I,
In fanatic imagination, saw–
No, see–the old weapon
Out-thrust, firm in a hand that does not
Tremble. I see lips move, but
No sound hear.

See him who in what midnights
Had stood–what seasons–while the susurrus
Of tribal sleep dies toward what stars,
While he, eyes fixed on what strange stars, knew
That eyes were fixed on him, eyes of
Those fathers that incessantly, with
The accuracy of that old Winchester, rifled
Through all, through darkness, distance, Time,
To know if he had proved a man, and being
A man, would make all those
Who now there slept know
Their own manhood. This, even though
He, standing there, might well, in midnight, have foreknown
The end. But could not know that, after
The end, his own manhood might, burnished
Only in glow of his endless pity, shine.

I saw
Vastness of plains lifting in twilight for
Winter's cold kiss, its absoluteness. Thought
Of the squirming myriads far at
My back. I thought of the mayor of
Spokane–whoever the hell he may have been.

But suddenly knew that for those sound
Of heart there is no ultimate
Irony. There is only
Process, which is one name for history. Often
Pitiful. But, sometimes, under
The scrutinizing glass of Time,
Triumphant.

I heard shouts of friends, closer.
Now soon they would go back, I too,
Into the squirming throng, faceless to facelessness,
And under a lower sky. But wondered,
Even so, if when the traffic light
Rings green, some stranger may pause and thus miss
His own mob's rush to go where the light
Says go, and pausing, may look,
Not into a deepening shade of canyon now,
Nor head up, toward ice peak in moonlight white,
But, standing paralyzed in this momentary eternity, into
His heart look, while he asks
From what undefinable distance, years, and direction,
Eyes of the fathers are suddenly fixed on him. To know.

I turned to my friend Quammen, the nearer. Called:
"It's getting night, and a hell of a way
To go." We went,
And did not talk much on the way.

END

For Robert Penn Warren

35–GRAPHIC REVIEW–11-13 x 28 Janson–(7) . . . . . MCK
David Farrell

An Interview with Robert Penn Warren

Did your parents or family encourage any artistic interests in you?

I started out to be a painter–as a twelve-year-old. One summer my father tried to get me a teacher, and the only teacher he could locate (though she wasn't very good) was Sister Mary Luke, a nun at St. Cecilia's Academy in Nashville. So I stayed with a family who knew my mother, and I went out to St. Cecilia's every morning on the 8 o'clock bus and painted all day with Sister Mary Luke. I was mad to paint animals; this is what coincided with my interest in the woods–the boy naturalist, you see. You know, many boys have that phase.

Were you particularly fond of birds?

Well, I was very keen about birds, but animals even more so, even snakes which I captured and kept around.

A sort of boy Audubon? Did you capture animals to paint from life?

Sometimes I did, but most of the animals I did that summer with Sister Mary Luke (when I began to get a little technique–God knows I was no good, as I quickly discovered) were animals in Glendale Park Zoo. She would go with me and, poor old lady, she'd lie on her back and snore like an elephant in her robes–you know, with her little black kid shoes pointed skyward–while I would paint a lion or something. I painted the whole damned zoo, practically. And she'd snore and then wake up, then we'd eat all this great delicious feast that the nuns had sent out with us. They all took an interest in me. I was the only male in the whole academy. I came only in the morning and went back out at night. I painted in the studio with her sometimes, too. Sweet old thing; I called on her years later when she was a very old lady still in the nunnery, and we talked over old times.

Was she a trained artist?

She had taken first prize in watercolor at the Chicago World's Fair. She had that much of a reputation, whatever that means; I don't know. She had some talent; she knew a lot of technical things.

You worked primarily in watercolor?

Yes. And she knew a lot about watercolor, about the application of watercolor. I didn't. That's the last I ever painted except when I went to California. Everytime I got to California I'd want to paint.

Why?

It's such a paintable land out there. I was there in graduate school and during the summers in the 'thirties. And one summer I spent painting, partly with the wife of a couple who were visiting us up in deep, wild country. She was a rather good painter, in fact, but somehow it didn't seem quite appropriate to my then-wife when I'd [illegible] off to the mountains with another painter, so it sort of broke down.

This was in northern California?

Yes, where there are the great yellow hills and mountains, wonderful yellow hills and live oak, and the sky–all full of colors. But I never pursued painting elsewhere. I haven't touched a brush in years and I never will again. I know I'm no painter, but I had the impulse to get the images of landscape down whenever I was in California. I can understand what's behind the landscape painter's impulse–the link with nature, I mean.

I heard that you made some paintings inspired by The Waste Land *when you were an undergraduate at Vanderbilt.*

Well, "paintings" is not the word for it.

What were they?

Well, this goes back to the little room in Wesley Hall, the Divinity School at Vanderbilt, which I shared my sophomore year with Allen Tate, William Cobb (a graduate student who later became a textbook editor at Houghton Miffin), and Ridley Wills. Wills had fought in World War I and published a novel before I knew him. Now, while finishing college, he was also an editorial writer on a local paper. Wills asked me to come room with him, and I was greatly flattered; he was a most amusing man, wonderfully witty and friendly, and he knew a lot and read a lot.

So there were four of us in two double-deckers in a tiny room. The room was filled with dirty shirts, cigarette butts, filth to the waist, and empty bottles. Gangs of people would come there to argue poetry and read aloud. Tate would hold forth and Wills would hold forth on some poet, and so I contributed by decorating the walls with episodes from *The Waste Land* and *The Triumph of the Egg* and God knows what else.

What did you draw with?

Well, the walls were so dirty I simply drew on them with art gum. They were comic representations. I discovered that by using an eraser you'd get back to a pale yellow, a perfect line. Then the University wanted to make me pay for the damage, and I said, "Well, if you'd clean the walls properly you wouldn't have any damage. I was simply getting part of the dirt from your walls; it's your job to do the rest." And I got by with that.

How did you end up at Vanderbilt in the first place?

My father got me an appointment to Annapolis (in those days a congressman could make an appointment). But I had an accident that badly impaired the vision of one eye, so I couldn't go. So I decided on Vanderbilt, but I couldn't go there immediately because I was only fifteen. Here I am uncertain about the exact chronology. It seems to me that the letter from the congressman [R. Y. Thomas] saying he had made the appointment must have come awhile after the accident. So I went to school for a year in Clarksville, Tennessee, and took some courses there I couldn't get at the Guthrie high school. At Clarksville I made a couple of good friends who ceased to be friends later for various reasons–one got killed and one just had a different kind of life. But at Vanderbilt the next year, for practically the first time in my life, I fell in with some people who became lifelong friends.

Tate, Ransom, Davidson, of course . . .

Yes, and several others. I became a chemist for about three weeks, then I changed my major when I found myself in, God knows, a grammar class of John Crowe Ransom. But he made grammar fascinating. In his class we had to do some writing, and at the end of the term he asked me to come into another class of his, an advanced writing course. The only

thing approaching "creative writing" was this three months, one term, course in advanced writing; thank God there was no other creative writing course. I studied literature the rest of my time there, and philosophy.

Speaking of friends, there was the miracle of people like Donald Davidson, who in sophomore English would allow you to write imitations instead of the biweekly critique. You could write a new episode for *Beowulf*, keeping all the form–not in Old English, of course, but keeping all the alliterative form. Or Chaucer: we could write a new Chaucerian episode. Every two weeks I always chose, or nearly always chose, to do an imitation, unless it was somebody like Lamb whom I wouldn't be caught dead imitating.

But you should realize that at Vanderbilt then there was a vast interest–I say "vast" in comparison with what I have later encountered among undergraduates–in poetry. I mean, even an All-Southern football center wrote nice little Housman-like lyrics. His brother, years later, betrayed him to me by showing me the poems. This ruffian, this powerful, *famous* center, wrote poems–and the Southeast Conference was a very tough conference!

What was his name?

I won't tell you–it might embarrass him now.

So you began writing by writing imitations?

Well, it was not a deliberate intention, but the thing was there, I can see now, looking back on it. And there were poetry societies; there were formal ones and there was an informal one. And one friend somewhat older, who was expert in French, gave what amounted to a seminar many a night from about 9 o'clock until 4 in the morning on Baudelaire or Rimbaud; he had a big collection already of such things and later had one of the great Baudelaire collections which is now in the Vanderbilt library.

How did this influence your writing at the time?

Well, I just know it did. Rimbaud–how much? I don't know. It was, you know, some booze (in reasonable quantities) and Baudelaire; this fellow, W. T. Bandy, started Tate on Baudelaire translations. Bandy created a one-man Left Bank on West Side Row. And then there was the new type of poetry. Ransom was never very hot on Hart Crane or on T. S. Eliot, but I was deeply impressed by them both and by Ezra Pound.

Then in junior year I had a brilliant teacher of Shakespeare, Walter Clyde Curry, and then I salted away the Elizabethans as well as I could to go with the Shakespeare–here Tate and other friends being guides. And I didn't even go to see the Scopes trial or the cave where Floyd Collins was caught because I was too busy with John Donne or the later Elizabethans.

That came later to me–the whole interest in the South. I was soaked in the South. I knew all about it, but it never occurred to me as a thing to think about, you see. It was a life I knew. And the imitations of the poetry later wound up in poems of mine like "Bearded Oaks," which has a touch of the Marvellian, or "The Garden" which is definitely a Marvell imitation.

Under a maple tree on a blanket, on a weekend visit to Guthrie, John Ransom read some Hardy to some other guests and me one afternoon, and I was never the same. I thought, this is the real thing, and I still think it is. He's the greatest poet after Wordsworth up to . . . I don't know who or where you should stop. I used to say, to Eliot, and I still think Eliot's a very great poet. But somehow I like Hardy more; he was somehow a writer I felt closer to. And I first saw in Ransom's poetry–the first book, *Poems About God*–a world I could feel some recognition of. You see, I could feel *his* experience, not mine; I could feel experience, human experience, through his work. Ransom made me see potry in the common light I saw around me every day, in the country. Hardy did the same thing for me. Of course, he's a very massive, much more massive, poet than Ransom; a much bigger poet. Ransom was more polished, more classical and literary, less ambitious, a more nearly "perfect" poet. Ransom was mad for Hardy, as a matter of fact.

Was Whitman in Ransom's pantheon?

No, I don't think he ever mentioned Whitman. But, mentioning pantheons, don't let's make Ransome's taste the point here. "Ransom and his disciples"–that phrase would have appalled him. There were people with violent divisions in the Fugitive Group; I mean, Tate and Ransom almost had a breaking of friendship over *The Waste Land*. And there was no church, as it were, of principle. They had a common passion in poetry and a common background in the world and a mutual respect; but there was usually a finger-shaking quality as much as a *bruderschaft*.

Like many families, a range of tastes?

Yes, like a family. You can't make any school out of their poetry, you see; many had totally different views, violently different views. They hung together because they were all crazy about poetry.

Whom did you know at Vanderbilt besides members of the Fugitives?

Well, I had another set of friends who were different people entirely.

At the same time you were learning about literature?

At the same time. They didn't even know each other. The last three years at Vanderbilt I was rooming with poets but I had other friends, too. Some were journalists; some were ruffians.

Students?

Graduate students, mostly.

Were they of a more scholarly bent than the creative ones you knew?

They weren't scholarly at all; they were able to do their work, but none too seriously. Most of them never amounted to anything as far as I know. The ones I was closest to who *did* amount to something were Charles Moss (a young poet who later, however, was editor of the *Nashville Banner*); Ralph McGill who started out as a sportswriter (out of Vanderbilt) for *The Atlanta Constitution* and wound up as an editor and then publisher with a national column; and Brainard Cheney, who knows more about Tennessee politics than any living man, still a close friend, wonderful company. He helped me a great deal when I was writing *All the King's Men*. These three were a constant source of information, pornography, and friendship. We remained friends all our lives. Only Cheney still lives. Ralph was a man of great wit and courage who helped me when I was writing *Who Speaks for the Negro?*

You know, it almost dropped out of my mind until now, the memory of that first period of poetry. It was so different from what I had set my life up to be; I mean, being a naval officer and all of that. But the poetry

became so extraordinarily important to me. The reading of it and the trying to write it became simply matters of life and death to me.

During the Vanderbilt years?

Yes. And part of it was the influence of the people I knew and the Fugitive Group. I absorbed so much from them. But there was something else, too, involved in it, I think–now that I look back on it. This real sort of passion I got for poetry may have been due in large part to my fear of going blind at that time. I had been told that the injury to the first eye somehow would affect the other eye, you see; nobody understood why, so far as I know.

Your physicians thought that the injury to the first eye might transfer to the second eye?

That's right; you could get sympathetic blindness. So I was watching for this and for a while using glasses on the other eye to protect it. And I got fits of depression during that period. I felt myself going blind. I was sort of, you know, watching, watching, watching . . . always aware of it. And my refuge became in a way the study of poetry and the writing of poetry.

So you had all the pleasure and excitement of new friends and the discovery of poetry, but at the same time you were terribly anxious about your physical handicap?

That's right. I was sometimes–God knows, not always–in a state of depression, and I'd fight it by work and by the passion I had for poetry and by the natural pursuits of youth. I don't mean anything ever was said, but the fact is that certain friends, a few of them, took a real interest in helping me. I didn't realize it at the time, no, but I must have sensed it.

And this was a great support to me, though I loathe the word "support." I had these fits of depression, one of which actually led to a suicide attempt. I would never do that again; I would never *have* done it because it was so wicked, as the results would have been for other people.

Did your friends know about your depression or your suicide attempt?

I never talked about it. They were bound to know about the attempt, yes. That was bound to be known, and for a while it was misinterpreted by various people. I never tried to explain it to anyone.

How could it have been misinterpreted?

I mean the reason for it, which was that I was quite sure at that time–I had talked myself into the notion–that I really was going blind. I was watching every day, you see, and it was a constant obsession.

Did you consult doctors to get a medical opinion?

No, I didn't; I was afraid to face it. I just worried about it; I never discussed it with anybody.

When did the fear finally leave you?

Well, it remained a long time, but I never got that down again with it, you see. Later on, the doctors began to get certain of the effect on the other eye, so they removed the bad eye (which by then was completely blind). This was in 1932 or 1933 when I was teaching at Vanderbilt.

What were your feelings about the handicap itself?

Well, I felt maimed. One thing was the purely psychological effect of *feeling* maimed.

Even though it wasn't apparent?

Even though it wasn't; still, it gave a sense of somehow feeling disqualified . . . or maimed, you know. It's something that one sensible talk with one sensible person might have changed; but I never had a sensible talk with a sensible person about it.

You had sensible people around you.

But we never discussed it. It was never mentioned.

Not even to your parents? Or to Ransom?

No, I never talked about anything with my parents, not seriously. I mean, I was totally aware of their affection and concern for me, but we never had any talks. Meanwhile I was leading a perfectly normal college-boy life; I mean, going to parties and dances, and had girl friends and all the rest of it, you know. And in the summers I'd get jobs of hard physical work. When seventeen I toted a Springfield rifle around Fort Knox in the ROTC camp. The next summer, to stay in Nashville where I had friends and a girl, I drove a truck for American Express. And I once worked on the highway; pick and shovel work. I liked that. But it was all a façade.

Consciously a façade?

Yes. Well, no–only at times. This life had its real interest. But it was a way of trying to distract myself, you see, and the poetry was the thing that was a real, passionate concern with me. It was a way of talking to somebody or of talking to yourself; it was kind of like taking dope.

Do you think this anxiety came out in those early poems?

I don't know; I never thought of that. That's the natural thing to think about but I never did. Now I see that wanting to be a poet gave some direction to my life which was lacking in the first year or so in college.

Did it make you feel special; I mean, other than feeling maimed? Did you feel your injury gave you a special outlook?

No, I've never had that sense about it at all. I don't have any sense of the poet as a special person in any sense at all. He's a man who has a special interest in life, yes–but no more than a lot of other people do, no more than a man in the Pacific fleet might have.

But there are, obviously, digerences between the poet's outlook and the sailor's.

Obvious differences yes; but none that mattered for me at that point. Poetry then was a refuge, it was something to do, it was (and is) simply something I got a great emotional bang out of. And fear of blindness was a chief factor in those years, but it's so far away I had almost forgotten it. I think of those times now without even thinking of that.

Since Vanderbilt, your professions have been writing and teaching, and you've seen a lot of the world. I wonder about your life in Italy–just to pick more or less randomly among experiences that have greatly influenced you. Why did you go to Italy?

Well, I like living in a foreign country where you're forced to see things in new ways. It wasn't until I got away from the South, you see, and away from Kentucky, that I began to understand what that experience–the Southern experience–was about, and began to write about it.

Why Italy?

Well, I've always been interested in the Elizabethans; I took my graduate work chiefly in Elizabethan literature. And I had an interest in Italian history from that; a lot of things take one back to Italy. For instance, you can't understand Thomas Wyatt without knowing what he did with Petrarch. I once did a complete comparison of Wyatt and Petrarch–line by line–but got no impulse to publish it. And of Aretino, too.

So I got reading Italian, and later all those things flowed into the novel *All the King's Men*. Machiavelli and Italian history flowed into that, too; the whole case of the man of power, the man of virtu and the world about him, flowed into the novel (along with William James and American history). They all tied back to my learning to read Italian and then coming to Italy as some sort of vague . . . what? You can't explain these things.

You taught Elizabethan literature, didn't you?

I taught Shakespeare, and for years I taught a graduate course in nondramatic Elizabethan literature. I was soaked in Shakespeare from the years I'd taught it. In fact, the great regret of my whole academic career is that I went to teach Shakespeare at Minnesota because their Shakespeare man had retired and then it didn't work out. I would still be with the Elizabethans if I had had my way.

Why didn't you get to teach Shakespeare at Minnesota?

Well, it was never in print, ". . . Our old professor of Shakespeare is retiring; will you take his place?" But I'd come somehow to understand that this was the case. When I got there, however, I found out there was a guy on the spot–older than me, with a Ph.D. from Harvard in Elizabethan literature–who so badly wanted it, and he was just gifted for it, obviously. I didn't want to make any fuss about it; I just extended my education in another direction.

And once at Yale it was offered to me, but by then it was too much. It would have meant two or three years of hard work to catch up on the scholarship. But I always had planned in old age to write a book on Shakespeare as poet, a very special kind of book. There isn't one like it even yet. I don't mean just the sonnets and lyrics; I mean the plays, too.

When did you first go to Italy?

I was there in Perugia and Umbria in the summer of '38. Then at Sirmione. In fact, I began writing the verse play, "All the King's Men" there, in a wheat field near Perugia, sitting under an olive tree. And I wound up towards Christmas in Rome, in '39, hearing the boot heels of the Fascist troops on the cobblestones.

Did you see Mussolini?

Oh, yes; speaking in front of the Palazzo Venezia.

Did you meet Pound in Rome?

No; I had known Pound slightly in Paris in 1928 or 1929 when I was an Oxford graduate student. But I didn't look him up in Italy. By that time I was thinking he was a crazy man–though a great poet, which I still think.

That same year I was writing a great deal of poetry, and I finished the basic version of "All the King's Men" at Christmas. Then I went back to *At Heaven's Gate* during the winter of 1939–1940. At one point I became stuck. Then I had typhus with a good deal of fever. In a delirium one night my problem was suddenly solved. I had the most vivid dreams during this fever and went through the whole story of the mountaineer coming down the river and into Nashville and his torch blowing the thing up. That all began with a dream.

A dream, or a series of dreams?

I'm not sure; it seemed continuous. The fever had breaks and would begin again and break and begin again, you see. The fever was up to a hundred and four or five.

Were you in a hospital?

I was at home with a nurse, and the nurse would put her feet on the pillow by my face at night and she would snore. God, what a nurse! She knew nothing about nursing, for sure, but those feet and that snoring! Anyway, that was a dream; but the typhus and the feet weren't dreams. And, God, the fool Fascist doctor! He didn't even know it was typhus. I got that diagnosis back home from a record of the symptoms. And when I got well enough to write I had the novel practically written.

Dreams come up in a lot of your work, especially in recent poems.

Well, I dream a lot. I love dreams, especially funny dreams; funny, elaborate dreams. I'll tell you one. I'm in a barroom that somehow is like a fake barroom scene in the Far West; but clearly fake–as if it had canvas walls or something. There's a big bar, a lot of high-heeled gunmen around with Stetsons–ranchers and cowhands and so forth–and everybody's drinking. A man leaps on the bar. He's a man of some importance, a rancher, and he has a gun in each hand, and he says, "Everybody knows I know how to use a pistol." He waves them around and he says, "Somebody here's betrayed my daughter. Now, I never shot a man down without warning. I'm going to give him the count of ten to declare himself." And he begins, "One . . ." and he shoots out a light. But it doesn't make a boom; it makes a "ping"! Then, "Two . . . three . . ." He got to nine and then, "Ha, ha, ha!"–a burst of laughter comes in sudden blackness and a big explosion, and offstage a voice says, "And he fell with sixty bullet holes in his body!"

What was your role in this dream?

I'm an observer.

Not the man who's betrayed the daughter?

No. I wish I had been, but I can't say that I was.

Is this a recurring dream?

No; it just happened once. And I often dream poems.

Whole poems? And you wake up and write them down?

No, I've never done that in my life except once: a short poem. The dream may come back when I'm writing later, or it may not. But mostly

my dreams are comic; I often awaken laughing. But I have to say, I've sort of had my quota of vague anxiety dreams, too–nagging anxiety dreams. I don't remember those very well. I'm a pretty heavy sleeper, and I don't awaken much unless my wife kicks me for snoring. Then I go in the next room and sulk.

What took you both back to Italy in the 1950's when you were writing Promises?

I had spent a year there just after the War, on a second Guggenheim. But in 1954, when I went back, the summer I began *Promises*, I had recently married Eleanor, and we had a baby. Italy meant a lot to my wife and to me. She had spent a lot of time there in childhood. Several years before, one Sunday, we had once gone to Cosa on the Tuscan coast, where Frank Brown, who was a Yale professor, was supervising a dig. Eleanor pointed to a castle on a hill across the bay and said, "I'm going over there tomorrow, and I'm going to live there." And she worked it out. She found the old lady who owned the fortress, and she got a big section of it.

Did you move in then?

No, *she* moved in; we weren't married yet. Much later we got better acquainted. Anyway, that's the reason we were there in Italy; but there were so many factors. There was a whole new life, and a first child. It was a new life with wonderful swimming, and so forth. And Italian friends. And it was a new approach to poetry, because for ten years I'd gotten off the track of poetry, even though I had written *Brother to Dragons* in that period. Living in a sixteenth-century fortress looking over the sea there in Italy, that's where the poems started again.

The poems that became Promises?

Yes. They were all written there over two summers and revised in the winters. In this great fortress by the sea–in Argentario, which had been the Borgia's hunting ground at one time. But the fortress was not begun until 1559, by Philip II of Spain. It's a blood-drenched place and an incredible, beautiful place as well. And we had a pretty, yellow-haired baby girl, a baby of a year, and next door was an idiot child and a saintly older sister of twelve or so who kept trying to teach the child to say one thing, to say "ciao," the Italian greeting.

What was your apartment like?

Well, we rented a big quadrangle of the fortress. The apartment had a tremendous living room about seventy feet long–it had been a stable when the Spanish were there–a big stone room with a stone floor and beamed ceiling and a built-in stove at one end. We had a marvelous cook and oleanders blooming around and dust and storms and sea in every direction. Across the quadrangle there were some regular rooms which we used as bedrooms, and we had a sort of reception room close to the big room where we occasionally entertained guests while the cooking was going on.

Then we had, way high up, the *vedetta*, a lookout house. It had two rooms and a hall between and a toilet to share; so Eleanor had one room for her study and I had the other for my study. But I worked outdoors chiefly. And there were moats seventy feet deep on each side of the castle–all a most elaborate piece of Renaissance military architecture, extraordinarily elaborate. And beautiful.

The poems came like a flood that summer, and I rewrote them later. A whole change of life, a changed attitude toward life, occurred there. I can't explain it, but poetry again became something very immediate and different for me. So, every time Eleanor and I went to Italy, it was poems, poems, poems. It's a magic country; crazy, crazy, crazy. It was magic.

And the poems that resulted were a combination of my childhood and my early world and the country and the European world. They played back and forth, intermingled. Not autobiography–that would have been too easy–but a psychological penetration. From that time on, poetry never ceased again. That book, *Promises*, came out; it took all the prizes; was a fresh start.

While we're on the subject of writing a successful collection of poems, what would you say the profession of poet means to you?

Well, there's something I can say about it. I would say poetry is a way of life, ultimately–not a kind of performance, not something you do on Saturday or Easter morning or Christmas morning or something like that. It's a way of being open to the world, a way of being open to experience. I would say, open to *your* experience, insofar as you can see it or at least feel it as a unit with all its contradictions and confusions. Poetry, for me, is not something you do after you get it fixed in your mind. Poetry is a way of thinking or a way of feeling; a way of exploring.

Can it be summed up in your phrase, one that goes something like ". . . [it's] a way to love God"?

Well, yes; I think so. It's a way to accept, to deal with the world. A way to love God?–yes, I think it is. If you want to put it that way. The only way some people can live is by assuming that life is worth being interested in. It's worth giving yourself to; and giving the best you can. I would also say that poetry is not like a profession, but a way of life. These are two quite different things.

A profession isn't a way of life?

Not often; not usually; not necessarily. Very infrequently you find a devoted family doctor or somebody to whom his profession is a way of life. It can be a way of life, but I'm saying that poetry damn well *better* be a way of life, because it's something quite different. It's a way of existing meaningfully as much of your time as possible. And that's never much.

Are you distinguishing between poetry and prose?

No; I wouldn't set poetry apart from prose here. I think this would be perfectly true of a novelist or a dramatist. I'm really talking about literary art–or any art. But since we were talking about poetry I kept it to poetry.

Are you still writing prose?

I've sworn off all expository prose. I'm not going to write any more lectures and I'm not going to write explanations or criticism.

Short stories?

Short stories kill poems.

How about novels?

I started to write a novel a summer or two ago; I owe Random House a novel. And for a week or ten days—or more, a month—I started every morning at 9:30 and put a pad on my knees and picked up my pen and started to write a novel. And after an hour or so, I had not written a line of a novel, but way down in the corner I had started a poem. So, despite my good intentions, I gave it up. I felt very good about the novel, and I wanted to write it, but the poetry was just too demanding.

It seems like you feel almost in harness, almost gripped, by the poetic urge.

For now, yes. The future will take care of itself, and I'll write the novel if I can. I just don't believe in making something a job that doesn't have to be a job.

You're enjoying good fortune with poetry now; you're writing more than ever.

Well, I've got more time than ever before. I do a lot of gardening, and I do a lot of extra things, but I stay home a lot.

Would you have written much more in the past if you'd had more free time?

I would have put time into poetry, if I'd been freer; but, you see, I enjoyed teaching so much. Teaching is also a social life. I was teaching so little, anyway; I was teaching two or three days a week; one term a year at the most. I liked it, knowing the young. They're stimulating; they have ideas; they are a different world, and your own children don't make up for it. In one way you know more about other people's children than you know about your own. My own I know in a different and deeper way.

Some readers of your work have remarked that you're drawing more, and more consciously, on memory now, late in life.

Yes; I'm drawing more and more on memory. Memory reinterpreted, of course; not memory taken literally. It has a strange liability; I feel like I'm using up stock, capital. You know, there are so many things that happen that you don't know the meaning of at the time; they acquire meaning only after a long time. They *may* acquire meaning after a time. I'd have to say there's an apprension, too, at this late stage. One thinks about the day when it won't come.

Of course, that's always been true. One day it won't come.

Sure, it's always been true, but nobody ever liked it!

You feel a lot closer, then? It's around the corner . . .

Right; not ten miles down the pike, you see.

Do you feel pressure about that, a sense of urgency?

No, I don't feel that way at all. I feel more leisurely, in fact; I can take all day with a line, then throw it away. That's how I live—with that limitation. And one thing one has to realize is that there's no virtue in writing a poem if it isn't good. Just writing a poem doesn't mean a goddam thing. Anybody can write a sort of poem.

Well, your poems are finding publication readily in a variety of journals; critics like them; people think they're very good.

That's something you can't know, really. Let's hope so . . . But, you know the breaking point's approaching—you're bound to know that. The thing to know is to know when you've hit that line and try not to force it.

How are you going to know?

God's got to tell you. Just trust God—whatever God is.

So, for the present, you're writing and you're pleased enough with what you're writing. Do you think your writing is as good as it's ever been?

I've done some of my best poems in the last few years, and I've thrown away a lot of poems I didn't think were. Quite a few I've thrown away. I'll just say that it's the best I can do. Ultimate judgments are just not to be had, you know. The whole history of literature or art shows us that painting something to one generation means nothing to another generation.

Are you working every day?

Not every day. I've been doing a lot of hot, physical work for the past month. I haven't written a poem in a month. I've been using a pick and shovel in the yard!

That's another kind of vigor remarkable for a seventy-five-year-old . . .

Yes, six hours a day of it. If you don't believe it, look around the place.

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