Ten Poems

A. R. AMMONS

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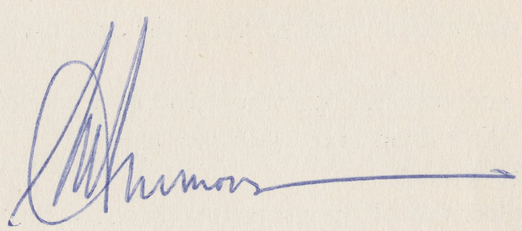

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Silver

I thought Silver must have snaked logs
when young
She couldn't stand to have the line brush her lower hind leg
In blinded halter she couldn't tell what had loosened behind her
and was coming
as downhill
to rush into her crippling her to the ground

And when she almost went to sleep, me dreaming at the slow plow,
I would
at dream's end turning over the mind to a new chapter
let the line drop and touch her leg
and she would
bring the plow out of the ground with speed but wisely
fall soon again into the slow requirements of our dreams
How we turned at the ends of rows without sense to new furrows
and went back
flicked by
cornblades and hearing the circling in
the cornblades of horseflies in pursuit

I hitch up early, the raw spot on Silver's shoulder
sore to the collar,
get a wrench and change the plow's bull-tongue for a sweep,
and go out, wrench in my hip pocket for later adjustments,
down the ditch-path
by the white-bloomed briars, wet crabgrass, cattails,
and rusting ferns,
riding the plow handles down,
keeping the sweep's point from the ground,
the smooth bar under the plow gliding,
the traces loose, the raw spot wearing its soreness out
in the gentle movement to the fields

When snake-bitten in the spring pasture grass
Silver came up to the gate and stood head-down enchanted
in her fate
I found her sorrowful eyes by accident and knew
Nevertheless the doctor could not keep her from all
the consequences, rolls in the sand, the blank extension
of limbs,
head thrown back in the dust,
useless unfocusing eyes, belly swollen
wide as I was tall
and I went out in the night and saw her in the solitude
of her wildness

But she lived and one day half got up
and looking round at the sober world took me back
into her eyes
and then got up and walked and plowed again,
mornings her swollen snake-bitten leg wept bright as dew
and dried to streaks of salt leaked white from the hair

Prospecting

Coming to cottonwoods, an
orange rockshelf,
and in the gully
an edging of stream willows,

I made camp
and turned my mule loose
to graze in the dark
evening of the mountain.

Drowzed over the coals
and my loneliness
like an inner image went
out and shook
hands with the willows,

and running up the black scarp
tugged the heavy moon
up and over into light,

and on a hill-thorn of sage
called with the coyotes
and told ghost stories to
a night-circle of lizards.
Tipping on its handle
the Dipper unobtrusively
poured out the night.

At dawn returning, wet
to the hips with meetings,
my loneliness woke me up
and we merged refreshed into
the breaking of camp and day.

Jersey Cedars

The wind inclines the cedars and lets
snow riding in
bow them
swaying weepers
on the hedgerows of
open fields

black-green branches stubby fans under snow
bent spires dipping at the ground

Oh said the cedars will spring let us rise
and I said rain
will thawing
unburden you
and will
they said

we stand again green-cone arrows at the sun
The forces I said are already set up

but they splintering in that deep soft day
could not herd
their moans
into my quiet speech
and I bent
over arms

dangling loose to wind and snow to be
with them assailing the earth with moans

Bourn

When I got past relevance
the singing shores
told me to turn back

but I took the outward gray
to be
some meaning of foreign light

trying to get through and
when I looked back I saw
the shores were dancing

willows of grief and
from willows it was not far to
look back on waves

So I came to
the decimal of being
entered and was gone

What light there
no tongue turns to tell
to willow and calling shore

though willows weep and shores sing always

Canto 1:

you cannot come to unity and remain material:
in that perception is no perceiver:
when you arrive
you have gone too far:
at the Source you are in the mouth of Death:

you cannot
turn around in
the Absolute: there are no entrances or exits
no precipitations of forms
to use like tongs against the formless:
no freedom to choose:

to be
you have to stop not-being and break
off from *is* to *flowing* and
this is the sin you weep and praise:
origin is your original sin:
the return you long for will ease your guilt
and you will have your longing:

the wind that is my guide said this: it
should know having
given up everything to eternal being but
direction:

how I said can I be glad and sad: but a man goes
from one foot to the other:
wisdom wisdom:
to be glad and sad at once is also unity
and death:
wisdom wisdom: a peachblossom blooms on a particular
tree on a particular day:
unity cannot do anything in particular:

are these the thoughts you want me to think I said but
the wind was gone and there was no more knowledge then

Canto 7:

here are some pretty things picked for you:

1) dry thunder
rustling like water
down the sky's eaves

is summer locust
in dogfennel weed

2) the fieldwild
yellow daisy
focusing dawn

inaugurates
the cosmos

3) the universe comes
to bear
on a willow-slip; and
you cannot unwind
a pebble
from its constellations

4) chill frog-gibber
from grass
or loose stone
is

crucial as fieldwild
yellow daisy:

such propositions!
each thing boundless in its effect,
eternal in the working out
of its effect: each brush
of beetle-bristle against a twig
and the whole
shifts, compensates, realigns:
the crawl of a slug
on the sea's floor

quivers the moon to a new dimension:
bright philosophy,
  shake us all! here on the
bottom of an ocean of space
we babble words recorded
  in waves
of sound that
cannot fully disappear,
  washing up
like fossils on the shores
of unknown worlds:

  nevertheless, taking our identities,
  we accept destruction:

  a tree, committed as a tree,
  cannot in a flood
    turn fish,
  sprout gills (leaves are
  a tree's gills) and fins:
    the molluscs
  dug out of mountain peaks
  are all dead:

Oh I will be addled and easy and move
over this prairie in the wind's keep,
long-lying sierras blue-low in the distance:
I will glide and say little
(what would you have me say? I know nothing;
still, I cannot help singing)
and after much grace
I will pause
and break cactus water for your lips:

identity's strict confinement! a risk
  and possibility,
granted by mercy:
in your death is the mercy of your granted life:
  do not quibble:

  dry thunder in the locust weed!
  the supple willow-slip leafless in winter!
  the chill gibber of the frog
  stilled in nightsnake's foraging thrust!
  how ridiculous!
grim:
  enchanting:

repeating mid night these songs for these divisions

Canto 8:

        every evening, down into the hardweed
going,
the slop bucket, heavy, held-out, wire handle
freezing in the hand, put it down a minute, the jerky
smooth, unspilling levelness of the knees,
        meditation of a bucket rim,
lest the wheat meal,
floating on clear greasewater, spill,
down the grown-up path:

        don't forget to slop the hogs,
        feed the chickens,
        water the mule,
        cut the kindling,
        build the fire,
        call up the cow:

        supper is over, it's starting to get
dark early,
better get the scraps together, mix a little meal in,
nothing but swill.

The dead-purple woods hover on the west.
I know those woods.
Under the tall, ceiling-solid pines, beyond the edge of
field and brush, where the wild myrtle grows,
I let my jo-reet loose.
A jo-reet is a bird. Nine weeks of summer he
sat on the well-bench in a screened box,
a stick inside to walk on,
"Jo-reet," he said, "jo-reet."
And I
would come up to the well and draw the bucket down
deep into the cold place where red and white marbled
clay oozed the purest water, water celebrated
throughout the county:
"Grits all gone?"
"Jo-reet."
Throw a dipper of cold water on him. Reddish-black
flutter.
"Reet, reet, reet!"

Better turn him loose before
cold weather comes on.
Doom caving in
inside
any pleasure, pure
attachment
of love.

Beyond the wild myrtle away from cats I turned him loose
and his eye asked me what to do, where to go;
he hopped around, scratched a little, but looked up at me.
Don't look at me. Winter is coming.
Disappear in the bushes. I'm tired of you and will
be alone hereafter. I will go dry in my well.
I will turn still.
Go south. Grits is not available in any natural form.
Look under leaves, try mushy logs, the floors of pinywoods.
South into the dominion of bugs.

They're good woods.
But lay me out if a mourning-dove far off in the dusky pines
starts.

Down the hardweed path going,
leaning, balancing, away from the bucket, to
Sparkle, my favorite hog, sparse, fine black hair,
grunted while feeding, if rubbed,
scratched against the hair, or if talked to gently:
got the bottom of the slop bucket:
"Sparkle . . ."
"grunt, grunt . . ."
"You hungry?"
"grunt, grunt . . ."
"Hungry, girly?"
"grunt, grunt, grunt . . ."
blowing, bubbling in the trough.

Waiting for the first freeze:
"Think it's going to freeze tonight?" say the neighbors,
the neighbors, going by.

Hog-killing.

Oh, Sparkle, when the axe tomorrow morning falls
and the rush is made to open your throat,
I will sing, watching dry-eyed as a man, sing my
love for you in the tender feedings.

She's nothing but a hog, boy.

Bleed out, Sparkle, the moon-chilled bleaches
of your body hanging upside-down
hardening through the mind and night of the first freeze.

Canto 10:

the soul is a region without definite boundaries:
it is not certain a prairie
can exhaust it
or a range enclose it:
it floats (self-adjusting) like the continental mass,
where it towers most
extending its deepest mantling base
(exactly proportional):
does not flow all one way: there is a divide:
river systems thrown like winter tree-shadows
against the hills: branches, runs, high lakes:
stagnant lily-marshes:

is variable, has weather: floods unbalancing
gut it, silt altering the
distribution of weight, the nature of content:
whirlwinds move through it
or stand spinning like separate orders: the moon comes:
there are barren spots: bogs, rising
by self-attrition from themselves, a growth into
destruction of growth,
change of character,
invasion of peat by poplar and oak: semi-precious
stones and precious metals drop from muddy water into mud:

it is an area of poise, really, held from tipping,
dark wild water, fierce eels, countercurrents:
a habitat, precise ecology, of forms
mutually to some extent
tolerable, not entirely self-destroying: a crust afloat:
a scum, foam to the deep and other-natured:
but deeper than depth, too: a vacancy and swirl:

it may be spherical; light and knowledge merely
the iris and opening
to the dark methods of its sight: how it comes and
goes, ruptures and heals,
whirls and stands still: the moon comes: terrain:

Canto 12:

a tea-garden shows you how:
you sit in rhododendron shade
at table
on a pavilion-like lawn
the sun midafternoon through the blooms
and you
watch lovers and single people
go over the steep moonbridge at the pond's narrows
where flies nip circles
in the glass
and vanish in the widening sight except for an uncertain
gauze memory of wings

and as you sip from the small thick cup
held bird-warm
in the hands
you watch
the people
rising on the bridge
descend into the pond,
where bridge and mirrorbridge merge
at the bank
returning their images to themselves:
a grove
of pepper trees (sgraffito)
screens them into isolations of love or loneliness:

it is enough from this to think in the green tea scent
and turn to farther things:

when the spirit comes to the bridge of consciousness
and climbs higher and higher
toward the peak no one reaches live
but where ascension
and descension meet

completing the idea of a bridge

think where the body is,
that going too deep

it may lose touch,
wander a ghost in hell
sing irretrievably in gloom,
and think

how the spirit silvery with vision may
break loose in high wind

and go off weightless

body never to rise or spirit fall again to unity,
to lovers strolling through pepper-tree shade:

paradise was when
Dante
regathered from height and depth
came out onto the soft, green, level earth

into the natural light, come, sweat, bloodblessings,
and thinning sheaf of days:

Canto 17:

I shall
go down
to the deep river, to the moonwaters,
where the silver
willows are and the bay blossoms,

to the songs
of dark birds,
to the great wooded silence
of flowing
forever down the dark river

silvered at the moon-singing of hidden birds:

27 March

the forsythia is out,
sprawling like
yellow amoebae, the long
uneven branches—pseudo-
podia—
angling on the bottom
of a pool of spring-clear wind:

shall I
go down
to the deep river, to the moonwaters,
where the silver
willows are and the bay blossoms,

to the songs
of dark birds,
to the great wooded silence
of flowing
forever down the dark river

silvered at the moon-singing of hidden birds:

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