

JESSE MOUNTJOY

Calle Matamoros

Roosters fill my dreams. The mute birds
Taste flowers that open only at night.
Geckos wait, glued to blue ceramic tiles,
For the dry breath of insects.
The ocean plays
On this morning's lone chunk of dawn.
Its breeze pushes the mist
Up against the mountains.

The early dogs on Calle Matamoros
May be apparitions, or artists mixing paints,
Standing and barking
In multiple versions of sounds and colors.
The roosters crow, without memory,
Adapting their lives once again to incoherence.

Under the pre-Galilean sun,
Their combs are in splendid red lines.
The broken shutters are of old wood,
With so much superstition
As to make every religion true,
Or at least believed, at once.

I walk in search of paintings
Brushed in the dark
(Those showing the silence of thought,
The music of sight) and pass startled doors
Of blue and yellow.
The eager dogs sit in front,
Bringing to the doors
Another, stranger yellow and blue.
But it is red (defining the color orange),
That stirs and brushes me
On to the street and down
Along the Malecon where the statues gather

As if for a photo opportunity,
Surprised by their reflections
In someone else's mirror.

The ocean, appearing as the Bahia de Banderas,
Repeats to his sculptures
All that Alejandro Colunga has said.
I sit on his bench, the one with histrionic ears,
Like a penitent thinking
Of hard lime soil and the depth of blue.
I speculate on the exchange rates
For the roosters' beliefs and mine.

That close to the ocean
The barometer remains at half-past noon.
The sun is bright,
Burning details into my shadow.
Later in a bar with rotting trellises,
Across Rio Cuale, I drink beers with limes

And watch a caged pigeon stand on its head.
The taxi driver tells me
That the Devil lives in cornfields
Behind the mountains,
His eyes leather-tooled
By the sun's reflection from the bay.

The driver's teeth
Are as big and white as new corn.
I think of magic counterspells
And the changing light.
Across the water there is fire
on the edge of a religious kiss.
Puerto Vallarta has no sunsets.
The clouds gather and shift
Into some pianist's tangelo-colored gloves,
Playing the white, and later
Only the black, keys, while waiting
For the vulnerability of darkness.

The small losses, like blue dogs on yellow doors,
Are the irretrievable ones.
The five senses left me some time ago.

The sixth one stayed,
As Fuentes said,
But it is only pure memory.

The night drips with dreams of blue-green rain
And Rousseau's vegetation.
In the morning, with the weather confused,
I will open my journal
And describe yesterday,
Knocking these words on their small heads
(oblivious of their discomfort,
And their damaged legs and arms
Dangling from the page)
Until they rest, quiet and exhausted,
Maybe unconscious, maybe as a poem.

Diary Entry—April 12, 1945

Concert Thursday evening.
Electricity unrationed, maybe for
The last time. The footlights and
Chandeliers consume the shadows in
The Hall. Rumors are the musicians'
Cards have been pulled for now
From the Berlin draft board's files.
Maestro Fürtwangler and the orchestra
Perform Beethoven's Violin Concerto,
The finale from the Gotterdammerung
And Bruckner's Romantic Symphony.
Such music! So pure and . . . (what word?) . . .
"Uncrippled." The craters outside are
Lamentable, but our sanctuary draped
With camouflage, is a miracle intact!
And the lights. So honest! And the
Bright children in uniform, lined along
Our way to the bomb-proof doors, offer
Us small Easter baskets with flowers,
Chocolates and a few cyanide capsules.

[This poem is based on passages in Gitta Serney's
Albert Speer: His Battle with Truth (Alfred A. Knopf, 1995)]

A Small Idea of Russia

— for *R.E. Palmore, Jr.*

I oblige you uncle, with some
Small idea of Russia.
There is no Russia, except
Your vision affixed, not to time,
Like memory, but to place.
On your cattle and tobacco farm
In Barren County, Kentucky,
Robust with winter hands,
You doused for your soul over
Closed books by Tolstoy
And Chekhov. You made
Some singular, tender foray
Into imagination once, mixing
The shadows and barns and silos
With the blue domes of Novgorad,
And the evening windrows
With the Neva River.
Your vision, assayed now,
Shows malachite and a black
Salt of absolution. Your fields,
As if an afterthought of light,
Show the perfect view of Rublev's
Icons six hundred years ago.
Our small idea rests in a cabal
Of such visions and place.
There is no other Russia.

Wind

She is a busybody this morning,
Roaring on about my alleged bad habits
And philosophic misdirections.
The old bitch mutters and gossips
With the trees in strident whines,
Like some matron of respectability
Passing by a liquor store.
She wears December's chill like a corset,
The snow-laced collar
Buttoned high on her neck,
With that wagging tongue
Still rattling the window,
As if the comfort of my kitchen,
And the hot coffee,
And the South American novel
I'm reading,
Were a betrayal of some glacial virtues.

Gene Meadows

a sketch

Short, stocky, no-necked farmhand, fanatic for
Firearms and forearms, throwing cusswords like
Punches, with a smile expensive with so many
Gold caps, showing, as the weekend gets closer,
A frail gleam of something sentimental falling
Just short of his eyes. And ready to tear off his
Tee-shirt and fight for the least of his opinions,
Even those he don't believe in. And on Sunday
Evenings while dry lot feeding the steers, he
Talks of the Saturday night fight as if it is the only
Thing that has happened—ever—in this great, god-
Awful world, and so forth endlessly, forever after.

One Century

— for Irene Sutherland Reeves

The functions of bones so fragile
Are almost impossible.
She moves
About her daughter's rooms

From table to chair and so forth,
Dragging her walker

Like fortune behind her,
Looking for things
She cannot lose.

This year she is one century old.
She is from time to time,
A scratch of dawn,
A crease in reality.

In splendid isolation
The seasons become problems
Only of optics.

And words are poor relatives
Hoping to stay and rest for awhile.
At night the darkness moves
And steers her heart's eye,
Her face forceful of light,
To the worn years' trinkets.

She sits wrapped
Under her crocheted, challised shawl,
Midrashic and warm with delusion,
And barter heaven for memory.

Vernon's Tractor

This hand-clutched 1953 John Deere
Model "A" is a spiteful mule
And mud turtle and a goddamned alcoholic
For gasoline. It has no moving parts.
It shivers with fortunes,
With two, maybe three angels
Sweating and cursing,
Chained in the radiator,
Making the water boil, the oil pulse.
Steering this thing makes my eyes water
And takes my breath away.
And cranking it is a visit with a fatal moment.

Farm Cats

Their lives are somewhere
Between some generous moments
Of presence and absence,
Or a parody of one or the other.
For cats, what does not happen,
Astonishes, and ends in
Ambiguity. While they supply us
With alibis, they are not parts
Of our lives. They are additions.
Think of spontaneous
Ornaments in unwarranted
Places at unprivileged times.
Think of consanguinity
Of the real and imagined.
Think in Rilke's terms
Of 'life plus a cat.'
Place two mirrors in a yard.
One facing squarely the other.
Somewhere between them are cats.

Wagonride with Mules

— for David Boeyink

Two brown mules in harness, tattered
Delusions in a winter field, pull our
Wagon along to some excitement
Of failure. It is Christmas day.
The neighbors' dogs bark answers
At the wheels and hooves. High
On the driver's seat I tell my friend
From Iowa about Kentucky mules—
How they love the word
“Goddamn” (and know no hysterics),
And how we must whisper to mules,
Resisting polite commonalities.
We jar along in winter fields
And mix resilient myths
With bourbon whiskey—
How one mule can define any world,
And how two mules can destroy it,
And how the one-eyed mule carried
Faulkner's bear from the wilderness.
While below us these old shriftfathers
And afterthinkers split some silent
Dialogue and conjure up a maelstrom
Of confessions, as they pull our wagon
Farther still from the roads, disedging
The furrows and our grasp of prayer.

Vernon Loads Some Hay

Light from tufted windrows
Catches hay dust on his neck.
Vaulted time
Works its stress
On the alfalfa bales.
Vernon gathers wonder
About them and loads secrets
Onto the flatbed wagon.
The thatch of the combine
Of imagination
Covers his senses.
The sun eats dust,
And re-uses his emotions.
Vernon could take belief,
His hand in its face,
And push it off,
If he had half a mind to.
Over there a dung beetle
Rolls Vernon's shadow down the road.

Late Autumn

The ground loses its composure.
The plants scarcely breathe.
The wind has the swift chill of
Narrowed eyes, and love's terror.
The maples enter some infinite
Realm of the unimaginable. Their
Roots become incompetent fairy-tale
Creatures. And the leaves, the many
Leaves. The light steps of dreams.
Each of them Mandelstam's Turkish
Woman, his 'seamstress of bewitching
Glances.' All of them, the rondeaus,
Ghazals and sonnets, fall, flaunting
Branches like rich platitudes, and
Settle with a crimson tint of aged
Gaiety, or wait above like calm,
Cold-limbed ballerinas in the wings.

**Driving to a Tax Seminar,
Notre Dame, Indiana**

The dry gold of late September corn.
Stalks stiff-backed, moral.
Fields of soybeans, alfalfa, fescue.
The off-white, light grey of silos and grainbins.
Dusk the color of molten lead.
All in transition from one shade,
One tonality, to another.
Flat, straight Highway 31
With no margin of error granted to explorers,
Up through and out of Kokomo,
Safe behind my windshield,
On to towns to the north with
South American names—
Peru, Mexico, LaPaz—Indiana.
The farmhouses are asleep,
With fitful dreams of lying awake
And watching my Jeep drive past,
And of listening for the fields.
For there are words buried in them,
As deep as last century's plow bits.
Lost solemn words, grey bearded words,
Shaken and fallen from ancient books
With ivory covers
And tarnished metal clasps,
Kept and fondled by great-aunts of the Midwest.
The words wait to heal the new silences,
To be repeated endlessly
By Alzheimer patients
Or teenagers racing to the varsity game.
The words wait to surface
After a late harvest.
They wait for me to drive south
Through these heartland counties
Where the innocence of habit
Wrestles daily with the malicious divinities
Of law and passion
Behind the shadows of barns,
Where the darkening horizon
Enters the earth and gives birth
To a posthumous world.

Vernon's Tractor Meditations

Vernon daydreams on his tractor
Pulling the 'Emptiness' Sutra
Across his field, watching his thoughts
Arrive and depart in windrows
And furrows behind him.

Some thoughts linger in the dust
And fumes. To free his mind
(To purify the water, to polish the tile,
So to speak) he invites them to sit
With him and bump along
On the John Deere seat.

He dresses some thoughts
With caps and gowns, gives
A short, wordless commencement
Address, and sends them out
Into the world to find success.

Other more difficult ones he hangs
Away like targets, at twenty paces,
Assumes the Weschler stance,
The two-handed grip, and squeezes
Off a few hollow point rounds.

With some lonely ideas he waits
For their friends or lovers to arrive
(Those that poets marry) and herds
Them together over into his sinkhole
(Straight ahead and to the left).

The crazy ones he seats with a case
Of cold Budweiser in his 1954 Ford
Driving south on zigzag
Highway 31 E from New Haven to Uno
And watches how fast they go.

Vernon takes his last impetuous
Thought by the arm, walks her
To the last plane out and tells her
That they will always have Paris.

His meditations go on toward
Evening until Vernon's mind rests
In the palms of his hands
That rest on the steering wheel.

Homeland Security: Durango Airport

My genial hostess is quite polite
And considerate, fully aware
 Of our respective responsibilities.
 I am honored in fact to be searched,
 And she seems honored to search me.

We are a parenthesis
Around some experience
 Yet to be described, between what is
 And what should be in a sentence.

Together we could open
A joint checking account
 At the local bank
 (Here, let me get the door)

Or laugh at nuances
 (small table, two straws, a coke).

Needless to say I am not offended
Or slighted in the least
 By her hand-held metal detector,
 Or the myopic device
 That searches for 'residue'
 (which she refuses, smiling,
 To define for security reasons).

We agree that this instrument
Is unlikely to extract
The marvelous from my life.

We talk briefly of things,
Like the ghosts of passenger jets,
 Conjugating French subjunctives,
 The passion of monists,
 The tragedies of air and weight
 And metaphors worth fighting for.

She repacks my luggage,
Noting the absence
Of defenceless weapons,

But curious about Milan Kundera
And his novel *Life is Elsewhere*
Lying under my long underwear.

I sit inhabited by the white mountainous
Landscape, and remove my shoes.
She takes them away like a geisha.

She cannot talk further.
With the delicacy
Of an ex-girlfriend she whispers
That her job with me must be concluded,
And reminds me of my obligations
As a detained fabulist.
There is an imminent risk, she says,
Of talking too much and disclosing
Unavoidable coincidences.

Through the geometry of gazes
And seat assignments I thank her
For this rare opportunity to depart.

Winter

Outside — Park City, Utah

The vacancy of white, the moving trees,
The trail's edge a beginning
Of an endless past. I listen in the snow
To the secrets of the secret of
This fatherless mountain.
My leg muscles argue with each other.
A flurry of wet snowflakes.
A sightless life in the clouds.
The cold slices each sound
Down to silence.
What music can separate us from this?
The wind blows free and easy.
Through my sparrow's bones,
As I push downward,
The universe forever collapsing
At the touch of the tips of my skis.

Inside — Browns Valley, Kentucky

The snowdrifts, sleepless, have moved,
As the world has moved, through
Moonlight's dim shadows, to morning's
Immaculate shades, exceeding anyone's
Dream of any day. I sit in the kitchen
Drinking coffee. Each hot swallow
Is a thought caught unaware.
Banks of heat push solitude to the ceiling.
Curtains converge at the top
Of the window through another time,
Nudging the veil and its dance
To the dawn outside.
Snow light rests on the oak grain,
The clay mug, and illumines a lost domain
Near my hands, where winter
Is a mandolin playing Vivaldi.
The snow falls, the music plays.
The snowfall sighs one melody.
The notes are frozen and white.
There is nothing else in this world.

Theories of Snow

The early months of winter,
November and December, bring only
Premature adolescent philosophies.
February's and March's snows
Come too late, like dying confessions.

Only in January can I believe
In the theories of snow,
When it falls
With such constancy and depth.

There is a certain brilliance
In unused colors of white
Settling into cloistered drifts,
And visible music
Of counterpoints and chords in white.

I see snow as Nature's mimic
Of the calyxes and corollas of flowers,
And snowfalls as her latest
Market product of animate form,
And symmetrical patterns of snowflakes
As featured in her new Kabbalah.

The snow moves to the earth,
Sleepless and unexpected, and so slowly,
As if following the Julian Calendar.
It has deft exchanges
With the wind,
Delicately shimmering
With left-over, late-night dialogue.

And when it finally,
In a whim of memory, touches down,
The snow surrounds and covers
The one late sparrow in the field.
A lastingness to the moment,
Even on a clearing, thawing day.

Vernon's Road

a story in haiku

Vernon's road goes both
 Ways but not at the same time—
A calabash of

Lost directions, cold
 And pious lanes of shadows
And old mysteries,

Calm, definitive,
 Detached from time, like ragged
Wool long-johns, Vernon's

Road is kept in check
 By honeysuckle and barbed
Wire. At the top of

The first rise the road
 Is half-revealed, half-concealed
By sky. His only

God is the god of
 Walkers, who laughs at Vernon's
Plans for departure.

Burlap brown, auburn
 Leaves, the permanence of earth,
Embroidered dirt road

Where Vernon can round
 Awkward corners of his mind
And cull his emotions.

Vernon lives only
 At one end of his road since
He needs to know where

He is and where he
 Goes. The surface of his road
Shows transparent waves.

It rises or falls
 Depending on whether he's
Coming or going.

Over the second
 Rise, his road becomes smaller,
Drawing final notes

And phrases from a
 Song. Its whimseys of potholes
And ridges carry

Him off to become
 Another and bring him back
as yet another

He is a stray dog,
 A sleepwalker, refugee
On the dusty way.

The old trees along
 The road gossip with malice,
Calling it a thief

Stealing distances.
 The raucous crows are sunstruck
And bite at pebbles.

With a guilt sense of
 Trespass Vernon's road narrows.
Weeds nibble at it.

The two paths of his
 Road are loose ends that someone
Sometime will gather

And tie in a bow,
 But between here and there are
Untold amazements

And destinations.
 In the rain beneath the thin
Gruel of mud, and

In the snow beneath
 The light downy quilt he sees
Its body's contours.

Somewhere on or in
 His road is something that wants
Vernon to find it.

Taking leave he trades
 His image of the road for
Its image of him.

Vernon turns up some-
 Where along the road, never
Asking where he is.

The road converges
 Around him, a hermit sage
In an old painting.

He sits and stares down
 The road now abandoned by
Land falling away.

