Iceberg two-step| Poems

Lee Bassett

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ICEBERG TWO-STEP

poems

By

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Master of Fine Arts

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THE ESKIMOS LOOK AT MAPS FOR THE FIRST TIME THEN TALK AMONGST THEMSELVES .......................... 29
MOVING TO ORIENT, WASHINGTON .......................... 31
For Dudley, Jim & George
and Blue & Crazy & Kind.
In our lives we have to pass lots of places along a road. Moving along the road, passing those places, is what we can't avoid. People are always shouting, banging their drum, "It's starting, it's all starting, the show's beginning!" Well, that's just the way they move along the road, that's how they do it.

--Yokomitsu Riichi

When I see a stream I like to say; Exactly.
Where else could it run? Trace it back to ice.
Try to find a photo of your cradle.

--Richard Hugo
Workers follow wild ducks
north and south in a chance
search for jobs and bar-tenders
are busy. One farmer has followed
the vegetable harvest right to this
bar on the ocean. Say you have days
to spare.

Seagulls look cold
in their nervous poke for food.
They can't find anything
that was born here. Sometimes they
peer into the window when you
hold your beer. They remember
your harvest for you.

Women in the bars want some
thing too. It's fine because
not even the sea is satisfied.
One girl hauls out cards and tea-leaves
and in the late autumn roar she stirs
up the long trails of stars and men.
THE ESKIMO GROWS UP
IN KINGSTON, NEW HAMPSHIRE

In this town the land mass
seems to be at ease
but is really humming.
There are motorcycles
everywhere, and the world
drives around.

They park the motorcycles
next to their gardens. They
go as far as they can
but not as far as they wish.
People here yell
at their cucumbers
people here are hungry.

At night, squash crawl out
secretly and keep busy. They
eat up bits of noise left over
from the day's traffic.
Pumpkins keep company with
encouraging words. The words
are from a slow dark language.
YOUNG AMUNDSEN FEELS ALONE

At midnight the seventh grade,
dressed for a storm,
visits the town jail. Unshaven men
poke through bars of moon
and grin at you. You are sleepy
but these are your new teachers.

Your guide points at the imprint
a beggar's face once made
when he died, deep and clear
in the mud. The leaves all around
smell as if they just fell off trees.
You've got somebody who loves you.

Out-side the moon comes out
and puts everyone to sleep.
The day lilies snore and look
like the heads of famous people.
CHIEF OSHKOSH KEEPS WARM!

To keep warm in Galena
you hop a train. Like the old
bums, you get a fire going.
Nobody here wants the town
to change, and all the bars
have muskets on the wall. Kids
wear Union caps to school.

The river is too dirty
to freeze up. You tried everything
here and puked up years of loss.
Some things never go away
so you leave. The girl who helped
you pack, folded your life carefully
and hauled it out to the car. Grant
lived here but left early. Occasionally
they rebuild his house.

One way to stay warm
is to go to the railroad bridge.
There you hop a livestock car
passing through. You go all the way
to Chicago, listening to the poems
that sheep and cattle pass around.
LOST INDIANS IN CHICAGO

In summer, the mid-west
nighthawks scare the bored
and the sun goes down.
People walk fast and are always
surprised to see an Indian. It's evening
and we are all going home.

Folks just call you cloudy. Everyone
liked you right away but left.
Even the zoo is closing. Everytime
you pet a monkey, you're the loser.
A squirrel crawls on your leg
and dies. You watch the giraffes
lie down and yawn at you.

Some Indians, shifting nowhere
in particular, are safe
in the black of bars. Some Indians
sit with the pigeons on a church roof.
In St. Ignatius the swallows hit
the dead-end of the sky
then turn on themselves. Indians
thanked the church long ago
and changed into trees. Boys are tired
of fishing and throw a dog off the bridge.

This loving is bothersome,
the dust of this town
sleeping in the clothes on a chair.
Twice a day you wash your hair
so you won't feel lonely, trusting
the faint wind at the window. Here
a moan all the way from the river
asks you out of town.

A girl takes her hand off and gives
it to you. You set it on the bed
and mumble. On the tip of every finger
are friends who never come to visit.
She puts all her fingers in your mouth,
they taste like trout
dropping their eggs
and making for the sea to die.
DANIEL BOONE HAD A DOG NAMED BLAKE

Daniel read quietly in the hammock, 
Blake on his lap. That mutt's eyes 
were in the book. The book said: 
When language loses touch with silence 
you get noise. Daniel fell asleep 
with his shirt on.

When he wakes it's unbuttoned, 
half off. Blake did it. Blake grabs 
a stick and runs Daniel the whole yard. 
Daniel chases after, laughing like a horse. 
He slips in the roaring grass and giggles 
himself up. Blake died, he dead.

* * *

Not one cigarette tastes good 
in this bar, not one. There's a mosquito 
in this dark room and people are loud. 
It's beast-time, friend, and I chew 
my nails down to the reptile.

Look buddy, if you move that ash-tray 
the room is messed. I'm on the verge 
of discovering another country. Look, 
there's Carol, she knew Blake. She got 
frozen once before her birth. There's
her bad leg now, bouncing on the stool
to a strange music. And that is a napkin
stuck to her dead shoe.
I remember fog bending over

to pat the tiny head of our boat,

the fish hawk that missed,

the blue trees far off, coming out when they wanted.

The girl in secret cove gave us bait forty miles

from the bridge where a man fought everyone and jumped.

We saw his face roll slow in the water,

his hands,

the last two friends,

turn toward the sky.

The girl in secret cove bent low in her nets

and grabbed herring the size of her hands,

shiny children spilling out with no names.

She said she was born in a hurricane and last year

she lost her shoes off the dock.

We saw them on the bottom, murky, fish swimming inside

and mating.

Near the shore we saw two beavers laughing and clapping

their famous hands.
HUDSON'S NEIGHBORS IN JERSEY

Eddie Sperry and his hand went home confused that day, the time Enoch found him fooling with a snake.

The snake went electric and grabbed Eddie, the river behind his house went mad and flooded the graveyard.

Enoch told the cows and Eddie to stop hollering. "Take the mouth off carefully so you don't hurt his teeth," he said. That was the summer Eddie sliced off his sister's nose.

*   *   *   *

That was the year you, sister, drove west. You raced your car around the clouds of Butte and wrote home.

Everyone out there said you had no face. You dreamed of fishermen
hauling up a strange object
in their nets,

the nets always breaking,
the unknown thing going out
of sight. You said you ran
into Enoch, somewhere in Idaho.
The two of you walked the ponds
near the freeway. You surprised
some ducks and they scattered.
Enoch said they'd pair up again.
DIANA OF THE DUNES

There is a man who has it
for Diana and she weeps
for the wilderness. The wilderness
he knows, has a smile like a flower
bursting open, literally bursting
with a real sound; early in the morning.
Each day he comes down into the city,
Oh Diana, he says, Drink up and weep
into the sand and sea.

He burns leaves for the rich.
They are too rich, he knows,
to see the geese he sees, always leaving.
The smell of dead leaves lets him forget
the world for a little while.
I promise to meet you, he says,
when it's too dark to distinguish
people's faces.

All night he watches the rain.
The night should have a little animal
in it, he says, not much can begin
til you laugh. His nipples get hard
and itch, like a teenage girl's.
He falls asleep and his dreams
go bare-foot. Above him in the wet trees
a cardinal tries to hide and stays all year.
PONCE DE LEON TEACHES THE MENTALLY RETARDED TO SWIM!

And when it's over, go with the child
to the dressing hut. Make sure he takes
his friend washcloth with him. If someone
is there to help him you need not stay
but if no one in the hut is able to help
then dress him. Then take him to the person
in charge of transportation.

After, I drag in the heat. All around
there are fine trees. This is a willow
and that is a beech. I go upstream
the way I did years ago, when the jailer's
niece ran away with me. She carried the
local beer.

We laughed when fish spat bubbles
in the loud butter of the frying pan,
we said they were not our ancestors.
We fooled in the blackberries and dreamed
up a story: the stains on our hands
were jokes, and different from the shadow
a face leaves on flesh.

I sit down in the water. The animal
screams of delight are gone, the kid
who learned to dive is gone, the girl who
asked the kitty in the water is home asleep.
Roaring Lion Creek comes in right here,
as always.

Turtles are back to normal. I put my ears
under water, to wash out years of wandering.
I hear a song frogs no longer hide
about how they want children to pick them up.
And I see a stable fire walking down the road
to church. No one home, the lord went swimming.
LETTER TO THE WELFARE OFFICE, BUFFALO MILLS, PENNSYLVANIA

Since your letter I've been generally speaking on the move. My husband's last known address was at a campground in the White Mountains. The week before that, he got his project cut off and I haven't had any relief since. I personally like him but he isn't a nice guy. He's got several lives going.

I want money quick as I can get it. I have been in bed with the doctor for two weeks, and he doesn't do me no good. If things don't improve I will have to send for another doctor. I asked my mother for some help but she got awkward.

I have not had any clothes for a year and have been visited regularly by the clergy. Maybe I should go again to another state. I am very much annoyed to find that you have branded my girl as illiterate, as this is a dirty lie. I was married to her father a week before she was born.
LETTER FROM NEBRASKA

for Steve

Friend, it has been dry here
for so many days now.
I don't see too well
and my ducks are hissing.

We farmers watch our fields on the news
then sweat out the stars. Our kids got out
by visiting their ocean friends. Raccoons
I've known for years pant at night. They say:
Don't talk, it's too hot.

My wife's face is melting. Lately she's been
looking in the yellow pages under Beauty.
Peggy's still around and has a job at the bakery.
She hasn't forgotten Red's death yet.
Roger is fine as usual, says he needs some loving
and could I please water his pigs. I'm trying
to work on the poems again. I guess I'm still
forgiving, still on fire.

Oh yes, the cat's in heat.
If there was an aquarium in this town,
we'd all be there. We wouldn't talk.
The quiet fish, the damp smells
and the invitations to lust. Friend,
this is it: I wish you were here.
My friend the local historian
is out for a stroll. He says
mammoths continue to roam
the interior, and, believe it
or not, ice will dance.
We're american, we move.

When I was younger we wintered
on the ice shelf. One morning
the whole area became detached
and we drifted into the South Pacific.
Dogs were the key to everything. They
tasted excellent, absolutely excellent.

Are you still soft, my porcupine.
Do you still collect coins like beer
and wine? My eyes have been stolen
by a bluejay who drops them in a river.
No more tossing and no dreaming.
It's beginning to snow and I'm paying
attention. I forgot my coat.
WATCHING A TORNADO WHILE DRIVING
THROUGH BLUE EARTH, MINNESOTA

One by one rivers move east
the noise in the frog's ear runs south,
the wind to the door of our car.
One by one the headlights of cars swoop across fields
of restless corn and onions crying
and reach on out to meet their cousin the dawn.

The night-watchman is in the cramped office
of the American Bridge Company.
His skin is black sometimes yet today
is as gray as the wasp nest
he forgot to have someone do something about,
the one that whispers to him
and flies around his coffee cup.
THE TOWN THE KICKAPOO INDIANS VISITED

After the dust and black throat
of the journey, you can enter
a suburb and say it is not
half-savage. You can get a meal
and bath, both hot. With neighbors
so close, you can pretend nothing
will happen.

If you say your name is "Make-a-Face-at-Death," they will search us all.
They'll take a fresh knife
and cut from ear to ear
our suitcases filled with charts,
our life-studies of the heavens.

They will kick open boxes smaller
and smaller, and say we do not have
a name. Try to name things for them
that can be found: Earthquake, ice-berg,
passion. Watch carefully while they wrap
their fish in the thin sacred map
of our hometown.
AUDUBON GOES BACK

Each time you tell yourself the house
is easy to know, you remember its cough.
You sleep in your bed and it falls apart.
Your old room smells like parrot crap,
remember that parrot who died from shouting?

Outside, the Mormon house is now a bar,
and someone shut the dairy down. People see
you and mistake your name for someone dead.
The river is too smart to freeze up.

Since you've been home, the lice have found you
and whispered about your heart. Your grandmother
told you beggars marked the houses that give.
You've tried everything, even old girlfriends.

You walk all around the house. The dead plants
are quieter than usual. The ugliest man in town
still wants out. Don't give your heart
to anyone, you say. Not even animals.
Friends go to the ocean
to gain back a little honesty,
friends you have not seen
for a long time. You dream
everything boring and let the light
of the aquarium rub your white belly.

The town you are staying in
is beyond, and beyond is forever.
There is no one here to tip your boots
over and spill the day out. No one
to talk to, not even the fish.

The fish roll over and over
in their bed. The maps on the floor
are waiting to leave, and the Indian
with the different language is snoring.
You pretend the bed you are in
is empty, but there you are. You and the fish
who hum their way out.
IN THIS NEW COUNTRY

The legs of the spider feel
a storm, and leaves fall
on the foreheads of cabbage.
Here in this fresh graveyard
you bend quiet and mad
toward friends who will not
inquire further. That churchbell
has an insincere ring.

Right now a bird asks how old
you are, and you say late.
Right now is not far from where
they were caught in a wreck
on the Union Pacific. All they
found to bury were two left arms.

They were good harvest-hands
when the field was gold, and tramps
when it was stubble. Like you,
they brought the right tools: eyes,
hands, the poor genitals. Now in some
corner of the heart which has no
doorway, you walk back to town.
Restaurants, men carrying birds,
pigeons looking for mates. Harbor boats at rest.
I have known you one hundred
years going mad
your father his father
walking along the sea, pants wet,
fiddler crabs pale at night with love,
the sea dizzies your toes
and ten thousand lives.
Near the ocean on a Seattle street
the chinaman who is related to you
is dead asleep in a chinese newspaper
dreaming oriental, dreaming revenge,
his mouth red and open
to early morning bees.
In a parking lot some girls
stand in cold wind and stare
at a mechanic's long eye-lashes.
He changes their tire. Up the beach
plovers work between the moon
and its lonely tide.
In Ohio as a child
you ate yourself up
with the bitterness of acorns
and threw rocks at squirrels
on their invisible highways
far into trees.
You squeezed fish with bodies
the length of women's fingers
and in a loud rage
you learned to stick a straw
up a frog's ass, blow in air
and watch it scoot across
a dull summer pond.
I see you now, sitting
on a small porch near the ocean,
holding a skin magazine on your lap.
Inside it, the pink round girls
are ignorant of cancer and bunions,
indifferent to tornados. Here comes
your cat, to jump in your lap,
interrupting. You let him bite your arm,
the mark looks like a red stone. And here,
when you turn the page, is the girl
who will drive you mad.
BALBOA'S FISHING SONG

Vaguely I remember Aprils
and the accidents. Men held
their balls and women
covered their faces. At the lake
the fish curled our toes while my dog
Happy snapped the air out of turtles.

It's winter now, freezing.
I'm in the bathroom with fishing maps
on my knees. California is small
and Montana is a tiny country
to step over. Idaho so thin and cold
the lovemaking of neighbors tells
more than I want to know.

Every slow evening between seasons
my friends go crazy and change
my name. They say: How you gettin it,
daddy long guilt? Having fun
desperate one? They say: Eat the huge
worms caught in a can,
and wait for love.
Maps go from here to here.
Down this hanging rock cliff
where years ago
the largest rock of all
sighed and slid into the river,
it woke the sleepy people.
Everyone lives alone.

Settlers once heard old footsteps
and dug for gold in this bluff.
Indians left love in the river
and notes: Gold isn't out-doors
like you feel.

On top of the cliff
leaves touch your face and fall.
They feel like a dog's nose you bend over
to love. A storm walks up the backbone
of the forest, and you hope it will fly
out the top. It stumbles into the river.

You think someone dead colored the map.
Here's the place where you found
the dead raccoon. Remember, the fur
swelled toward you? You took the guts
and broken hair to your house and cried.

You drink, friend, for the wrong reasons,

I've never seen you dance.
MOVING TO ORIENT, WASHINGTON

The house quiet now where yesterday
someone moved it, on two trucks
or three trucks, moved it slow
and careful from another state.
Quiet now with birds chattering
and the trees leaning away, not sure.

Here is a chance, with the cartons
still roped up, the dishes, quiet clothes
and books. To write you this letter.
I must do it before the oranges find
their right place on the kitchen table,
before our neighbors come over
and ask to see our worm-eaten maps.
Before they poke at our children,
who are part animal.

Dear Nancy, life is hard. For all my
topographical errors, my bootless retreats
and wrong addresses, I am moved to consider
something large and happy. We are ordinary,
you and I, with our foliage underground.
Thank God for discovery and thank you
for the hollow metal globe of the world.
The one, you said, cut in two, would make
two fine camp kettles for an invading army.