

Irving Downstream, 1846

Old negro steward scolding young negro for lying—He aims at a monopoly.
—Washington Irving, *Western Journals*

Louisville's quay supplied a motley scene,
as if night had engraved the half-built huts,
ranked steamboats by ungainly heaps of iron,
and men like refugees from Lilliput.

On deck a negress bore a tray of peaches,
holding her salver like a minor goddess
despite the headlong swarm of blood-filled leeches—
mosquitoes!—that filled the skin above her bodice.

A straggling road through butternut and oak
stiffened in shadow beneath the ragged moon,
while grapevines wove the branches out of smoke
beyond a rusted gateway built in stone.

Before the furnace, negroes stood their ground,
raising their voices in unearthly chorus,
dancing like madmen there, as all around
the moonlight veiled the forest—forest—forest.

Troy

Days we coasted the flood plain of the Platte,
storms rolling out of the west, rank curtains
of rain drawn across the horizon. Limelights
of lightning scarred the ink-ridden clouds.

How anxious we were, heading into the black—
overjoyed by privacies, life behind
and death unmeasured ahead. Love brings
a taste for ambition, the courage to risk all

and fail. The land unspooled, our oases
the cheap motels stippled along the highway.
One sunset, traffic slowed, stuttered ahead.
The police waved us by the wreck

with flashlights, the ambulance pulled athwart
the verge, like the chariot hauling Achilles—
empty now, blue lights flashing, the hero
off to murder Trojans, or whatever came to hand.

Bethel

But Faith, like a jackal, feeds among the tombs.

Moby-Dick, chapter 7

That gilt-faced whispering across the aisles—
what was the end of such magnificence?
Each gold leaf burned a soul condemned to Hell,
though Catholic and French-Canadian.
Compare the Seaman's Bethel of New Bedford,
rust-decked, ice-bound, trim in its clapboard hull,
faux ship's-prow pulpit, four-square Quaker lines.
The bosun-pastor Enoch thundered out
the frost-spume mysteries of the Trinity,
her angels armed with try pots and harpoons,
their bull's-eye lanterns canting the light of grace.
He dragged the ladder's man-ropes after him,
that will-o'-wisp theology of swamp fire,
no Jacob wanted to anoint the stone.

Ephesians 4:1

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.

Fearing the eye of God upon us all,
and that not in kindness, surely, but in outrage,
the broken man of broken glasses, Saul,
nerved his flayed body to this latest outrage.

The blunted eyeball like a block of stone
long consecrates convenience in the grave.
In the rude obsequies of the slide trombone,
the rapture is no better than a rave.

The dead lie collared by the hangman's rope,
or ripening like cheese, the taste of solder,
old legions picketed in the hail of hope,
cold weather in the promise of still colder.

The dead have been airlifted by their Christian god,
if that were not an accident of mood.

Summer Rental

The walls were lined with dune photographs.
Life magazine lay on the coffee table,
like a navy pistol ready for use.
The Mercury launch filled a tv screen

no larger than a soup plate. The landlord's boy
kept a tightly wrapped slice of cake in his closet
and dolls beneath his bed. The Mercury shot?
Probably Grissom in '61, trailing clouds of glory,
not Satan falling but rising again.