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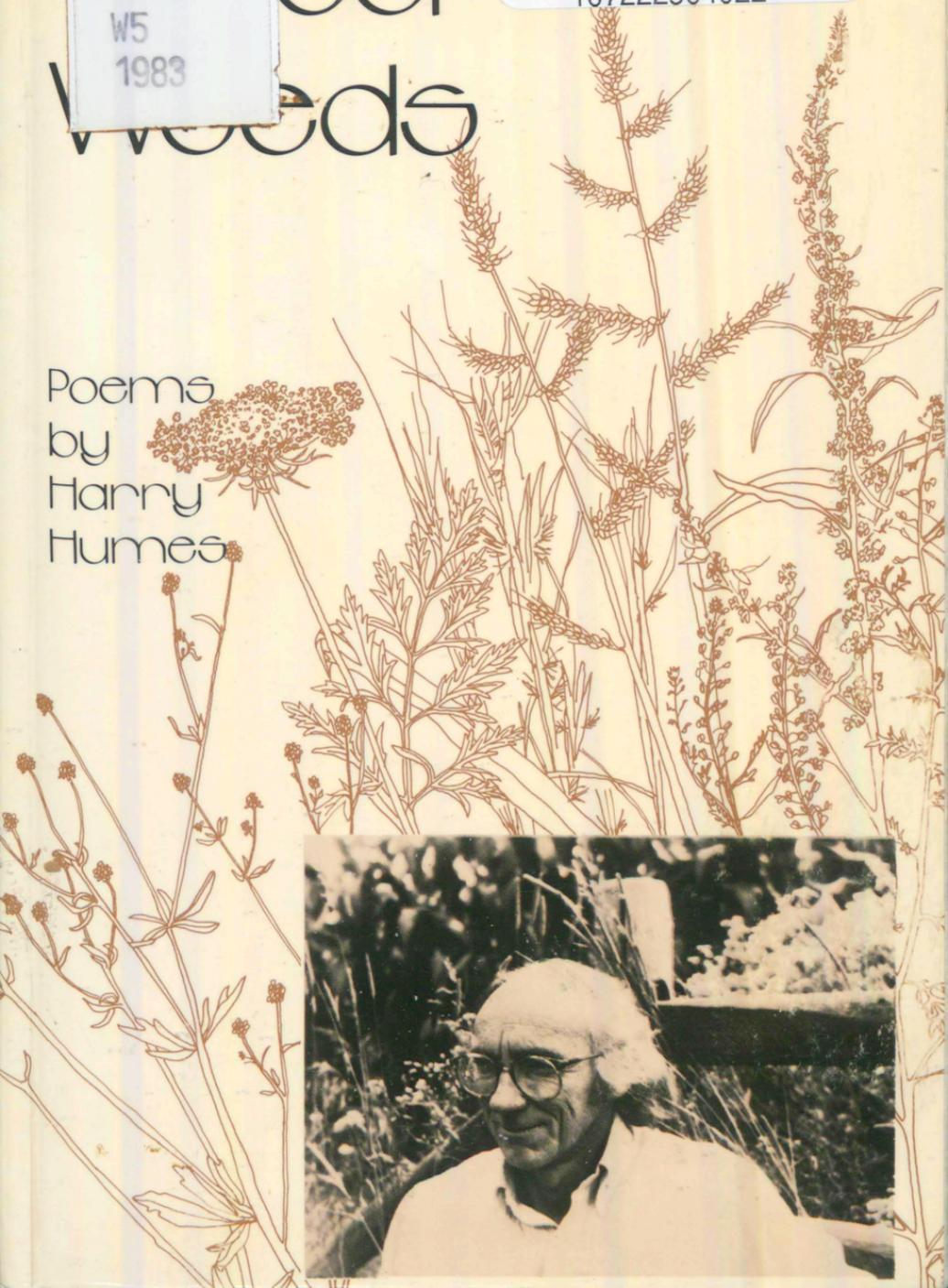
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Water Weeds

Poems
by
Harry
Humes



Winter Weeds

A Breakthrough Book
Number 41



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Winter Weeds /
Poems by Harry Humes
//

University of Missouri Press
Columbia & London
1983

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"Air Burial" is based on a description in Peter Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard*. I would like to acknowledge this debt and express my appreciation.

Some of the poems in this collection have been published in the following magazines: "It Could Be," "The Rain Walkers," *Poetry Northwest*; "Flocking," *The Beloit Poetry Journal*; "Ballade for a Canoeist," "Hole in the Stream's Ice," "Conversation with the Giver of Names," *Sou'wester*; "The Man Who Carves Whales," "Whales," *Kayak*; "The Garden in Ruins," "Reading Late by a Simple Light," "Safety Zone," *Kansas Quarterly*; "Savage Remembers a Horse," "Dead Animals," "Targets," "Bird Feeder," *Yankee*; "Stalling for Time," "The Coyote in the Orchard," "The Owl in the Refrigerator," *Hiram Poetry Review*; "The Spheres of October," *Whetstone*; "The Muskellunge," *Virginia Quarterly Review*; "Hunters Keep Out," *Wind*; "Einstein in the Orchard," *The Smith*; "Studying the Light," "Gun Dream," "Winter Stream," *Panache*; "He Dreams of a Hawk," *Greensboro Review*; "Through the Ice Tree," *Commonweal*; "The New Site of Calvary Temple," *Graham House Review*; "The Ice Fisherman's Dream," "Canoe Beneath the Trees," *Chowder Review*; "Hawk Mountain in the Fog," *Huron Review*; "A Dream of Spring Horses," *Nation*.

For the memory of my father,
my mother, and the memory
of my sister Alice, and for
my great teacher Richard Savage.

And for my daughter, Rachel.

N28701

The Devins Award for Poetry

Winter Weeds is the 1983 winner of The Devins Award for Poetry, an annual award originally made possible by the generosity of Dr. and Mrs. Edward A. Devins of Kansas City, Missouri. Dr. Devins was President of the Kansas City Jewish Community Center and a patron of the Center's American Poets Series. Upon the death of Dr. Devins in 1974, his son, Dr. George Devins, acted to continue the Award.

Nomination for the Award is made by the University of Missouri Press from those poetry manuscripts selected by the Press for publication in a given year.

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Winter Weeds

Winter Weeds

To identify them is not easy.
There's no green, no red or blue flowers.
It's like looking for lost faces,
the dead of fields and roadside,
endings in the raw November night.
They carry calyx and pod, whole or cracked
by wind or animal, they are ways past snow,
structures of umbels and barb,
a waiting you carry with you into your house
on shoelace or sleeve.

When I tell you this, do your eyes fill
with hardhack and meadowsweet?
I tell you more, that they are dry bracts
of seasons already gone, yet coming on,
the barest language rattling even here
in this room with its hangings of dry yarrow.

The solstice comes close.
Walk past frozen pond, sharps of briar and cocklebur,
notice collapse of star thistle and tansy.
There's the flush of pheasants, the circling hawk.
And at night, lie awake listening,
thinking of friends, old towns, the smell of mint.
Knowing is not easy in such light as this,
the earth with its chilly hand on us,
the ignorance of stem, unbearable decay,
and always the dream of root ends,
the uncoiling thigh.

Flocking

For weeks I had felt their coming.
Even in August there were spirals of bugs,
a few leaves swirling by cornfield or wheat.
Now they are here, part of the blue
above Kittatinny or Schuylkill.
All week long they gather,
rise and fall by bare walnut and hickory,
or land abruptly in the weeds.
When they stream past at evening,
there's the innuendo of ice in the small hearts.

In this morning of wet grass and fog,
a friend is dead, his machine still,
the tree that struck him
slightly bowed and swaying in the breeze.

I can see v's of minnows, late turnips.
I try to enter such precise wheeling
of brown honeysuckle and aster,
though when I stand close to them,
there's only the year whipping near my face.

It's like this always
when I think of the fractures
of season after season,
the telephone calls at dawn,
the ancient words,
and then one evening,
a warm room, stiffness of face
and collar, stiffness of love,
stiffness of brass and dark wood.

And in a week or two,
a few soft zucchini on the porch, an empty jar,
the roadside bare.

And everywhere,
the hard nights coming on,
all the darkneses flocking near the chilly windows.

Ballade for a Canoeist

"We're always thinking of eternity as an idea that cannot be understood, something immense . . . What if, instead of all this, you suddenly find just a little room there, something like a village bath-house, grimy, and spiders in every corner, and that's all eternity is."

Svidrigaylov,
in *Crime and Punishment*

When I launch my canoe
at midnight, my eye drifts
always shoreward where old wood
slaps against slick rocks
and night birds hunch for flight.
My arm for half its length
enters the water, and even
the old bathhouse has its lovers.

There are shooting stars,
a slow grief rising, and flaws
of deep sky; the old dark father
falters, and the moon like Roman ruins
hangs around high places.
The canoe drifts toward shore,
toward trees covered with stories of fish.
The old bathhouse has its lovers.

And behind me the planets glisten,
the mountain stretches and shudders.
You can see all of it flashing.
Oh love, our hands rattle with failure,
the ladies of belief are dead,
the heads are bowed; I listen
to this moment full of centuries.
The old bathhouse has its lovers.

Oh angels, spiders wander through
your hair and gay, bright webs appear,
but nothing opens the old grave,
and nothing surfaces as an ending.

It Could Be

What is it about sitting in a canoe in late August,
with the small bass and fat water snakes rippling the calm,
and the geese honking from the just-cut field of wheat?
The boat's bottom is cool against your bare feet,
and the woman in blue turns gracefully from the waist
to tell you something she'd forgotten to say at lunch. . . .

It could be the small whirlpools blossoming around paddles
or the kingfisher on its limb above the bluegills.
Or the red sky just above the corn, and the moon coming on.

What is it suddenly in the air
that gathers your skin in heavy folds, tilts the boat
toward the years of leaves and muddy bubbles
or the quarry rocks near the small clearing?

It could be the white bellies of dead catfish along shore
or the sun pouring too violently through the trees.
Or someone on the far bank with his arms raised
and his voice green as choking weeds over the water.

Even as you turn to watch the red and blue running lights
of the small sailboat coming in, you remember the way your
dog
floats on the holes he digs beneath the star Canicula,
and the young cat floating over its string.

What is it you feel when you reach the grassy point
just at dusk and think ahead to the long drive back,
with the slash of canoe above you, and the precise fire
of piston and planet ahead of you in the darkness?

Even tomorrow or next week when you turn a corner
or enter a store, you will drift noiselessly past faces
toward whatever it is you hear in the far corners.
You will feel near your wrist the bass and water snakes,
and always the bottom cold against your feet.

The Man Who Carves Whales

All summer long out of pine
and birch the great whales flow
from my knife, blue and finback,
sperm whale, right, and sei
with flukes easy as smooth runs
of deep water. I work hours
on the strange heads, the mouths
full of baleen plates or ivory teeth

Other days when my knife
goes dull or quiet with loss,
I read of their convoluted brains
and half-ton hearts, can hear the songs
deep in the latitudes
of scrimshaw and krill.

I keep them close to my hands,
polish them, and all around me
the season moves toward Scammon Lagoon,
the Chuckchi and Bering Seas.
I think of them there
running out of breath, drowning
with the New World, with cities and faces
that have no need for the breach of mystery.

When I open my knife again
I see in the wood a moment,
the end of shapes I must carve my way into
over and over

The Garden in Ruins

Early October, the maples yellow
and three days ago some snow.
From every row, decay rises.
I stop by the shagbark hickory
and watch the geese against a gray sky.

The season flows like slug trails
through tomatoes and peppers,
through coriander and mint,
flows through my wrist . . .

and etc.,

there's the pulse of skull and rattling weed,
the young spaniel barking at the wind.

And all of it seems smaller in the flat light,
as if seen suddenly from a great distance,
row after row of small histories
feeding now on chilly time,
like Macchu Picchu or Pompeii.

Something More

It is dawn. He has been all night
in the blue chair by the window,
by the pale trees, the moon . . .
by the first morning gray, autumnal,
somber as a man by winter seas.

It is the light, the half-held
half-light, low in the furthest fields
that stirs his fear of the flats
of the world, those woven places
full of the barest weeds and seasons
turning on the edge of speech.

Nothing moves within the house.
An old uneasiness comes across
the fields. It is like a cat
crossing, full of the sense
of its own gray motion,
of its own sleek vocabulary arched
against the arc of sky. But what he hears
is not a sound like music
softly rising in his ear;
it is not his wife, moving
through her deepest dreams, nor the sound
of the orange sun, orange and easy
on his tired eye. It is like a cry
above the morning where he sits:
of October aching to be tragic,
of geese like ideas caught
in a polar glide to bluest gulfs.
It is something like that,
and beyond his chair, bright morning
lay like sprinkled silk upon the fields.

Savage Remembers a Horse

All is not well. . . .
This evening in the upper fields,
a pheasant drummed the air. . . .

I was thinking of the way
the night came flowing down
between the antlers of the deer.

I was standing up to my waist
in the rattling weeds, tired
of being civilized. It was autumn,
and I could see how it would end:
the return of the blazing horse,
the imagined ride across the world,

the sparks flung star-profusely
out of order, into wildness, flowing
from the great chest, muscled, racing,
huge against the smallness of the world.
And my hand, light on the reins,
purely in touch with moves

remembered by my deepest parts.
Such wild companionship controls
the flaming failure of the leaves.

I know how the self is lost in air,
so I will have it this way always:
at the heart of the world is a beast.

There's a field, noisy with weeds;
there's my blood, that rider, primitive,
freer than anything ever before.

Stalling for Time

Months of it, miles of it coming at me, a grind of air
and gray dawns, the stars chillier but in their places.

Yesterday I live-trapped a squirrel, set him adrift
in the abandoned orchard; today he's back.

And three evenings now, by the walnut tree, I have remembered
the precise fall of light, the warmth of it, across a
child's face.

Sometimes the fields flare-up with the early sun. . . .

It's not enough I do against the patchwork season
sewn like ice along the stream's edge, not enough
as I turn the shed's corner and suddenly there's the wind
full of bending limbs, trunks, grass moaning, and the roof
of my house like a beast, crazy for flight.

Not enough as I roam all the margins of ruin
and want it to go no further to ground, want water
softer, the woman naked in the grass, and the dog
asleep on its paws.

I say, Wait, wait, I've a story
of snakeroot to tell you, of trout and purple grackles,
the way the ridges look in May, and the wind-bell quiet.

For a moment, the leaves listen, the chilly bark waits,
the wind falls off some, the horizon comes close, moves off.
Wait, I say again, there's more, there's the motion of turtles,
the green syllables, the red evenings, the velvet of antlers.

But it begins again, comes out of the zeroes of North,
comes relentlessly to windows, to eyes and neck,
a wandering clarity, constant as pain and tears,
that will not be stalled nor listen to any endings but its own.

The Rain Walkers

One day soon from out of the fevers of brown lips
and the cracked mud of ponds they will come
suddenly around corners up blacktop roads
into the dirt lanes of farms they will see only rivers
and hear near their wrists and temples the tap tap of rain
on windows and spouts against the hollows of shagbark
and walnut they will remember the parched rooms
the inches of thirst the sun turning their blood
into the rattle of yellow corn leaves

One day soon
they will come to the meadows the old orchards
to the round wooden tables of breakfast the breasts
of their women will shine through damp blouses
Even at midnight as they walk past the white marks
of old floods and driftwood near pilings of bridges
you will hear the drizzling syllables
falling everywhere around them the sweet dust
rising like light like mint leaves as you sleep then
as you wake in the predawn sorrow as you wonder
at such puddles near faces at what they are saying
at the way your own voice your own hands suddenly fill
with them the softness beneath them the earth at last wet

The Spheres of October

What do I remember here in October,
having gone out after dark for carrots
and then to have cut the potatoes and bread?
The fire cracks with rounds of hickory and locust,
the night with starscape of ridge and field.
All day long there was a steady rain.
Now there's most of a moon and the smell
of beasts. . . .

Is it a way of sleeping
I have forgotten, or the laws of motion,
of grass and light bending off their lines?
Newton knew it well, this memory
that comes to the skin like ground fog,
this nostalgia of all things to become spheres.

Dead Animals

Driving home, I see them:
on the berm, on the road itself,
where the surface holds their claws,

antlers, feathers, fur.

Maybe their forms are round,
blazing with flies; maybe

flat and crisp as old leaves.

It is easy to drive by,
easily held by tubes, bones,

skin, all easily held on the road
where blue is lashing itself
to steering wheel, windshield, eyes.

But I remember the old tale,
of how at night they will rise
in pale and powdered light,

taking again their lives, renewing
their holds on earth and air
with antlers, feathers, claw,

with their knowing moves. And will rise
from the dark and secret roads
like godheads following wildness,

living all night on the white heat
of their slow decay. At dawn,
the air is heavy with musk. . . .

Their purest forms are silent,
while something soft as light
falls across me as I cross

my life with gears, tires, tales,
and hold more fiercely heart's wild pulse
and cry against the endless variations
of my own slow, smoking form.

Reading Late by a Simple Light

All day long there'd been windows to fix,
the shed to clean, last tomatoes to pick.
Toward dusk, he walked the fields
to the abandoned orchard and pond.
A neighbor's dog howled at the passing geese.
The green heron hunched on a dead limb.
Near the small stream he stopped
and watched the water whirl around roots,
past the muskrat's hole, and past his sight.
He thought of fishing line and lures,
a rod arced along an April sky.
But here, here were the yellows
of evening primrose and cornfields. . . .

He would think about it all later,
as he sat reading by a simple light,
of how it had entered his eye quietly,
of how, by the water and the heron's dark hunch,
he had felt the first chilly edge,
the first snowflake touch his cheek,
and felt again the steady puzzle
of all the old planet's motions.

Targets

Yesterday, people were gathering leaves
and sighting in deer rifles.

Now this gray, Thanksgiving dawn
I hear geese, and think of gray trees,
a small fire, rocks lined with feldspar,
and want the season backward on its sun,
want the bells empty of their dead,
and the prayer flags down their strings.

But these late geese above my roof,
above the storm-webbed woods,
nothing comes to them but south.

In the small room, light gathers like bullets
on table and rug; outside, the piles of leaves
rattle like the season's targets.

The Muskellunge

I'd walked past the store, stopped, then drifted back
to where the window bulged with reels,
tapered fishing line, lures, and hooks.
And since it was November, shotgun shells,
red hunting hats, gloves, and one stuffed owl.
So having seen that old familiar country
rising up, I went in with some veiled hope
of finding there some object, something
apart from the wind and the threat of snow.

I moved between the glassed-in shelves,
inspecting this or that device, and once
considered buying a knife with twenty blades
(to slash, punch, scale, or open cans of beer),
but I said no, and left it, moving among
the fathers, sons, salesmen, feeling somehow
out of place, as if they knew I'd come
with no good reason, making moves
I'd made too long ago, forgetting all
except the blood-deep feel of them.
And so it was I came to where the muskellunge lay,
its heart drowned in some cold play.

There I stopped and felt its river wetness
on my face; saw its belly white as sleet;
and eyes unfathomable, as though a stone
would sink in them in spirals out of time.
Even lying dead it seemed to move,
weaving with the river, muscular and tough,
beyond the dirty floor, the store, the stares.

And I thought of that great river,
Susquehanna, like a dark vein
flowing through this afternoon of grief;
past the fishermen by fires huddled
on gray banks; past the faded patchwork farms;
and by the deer-and-fox-quick forest.

And for a time I saw that fish rage,
with its violent cargo of teeth,
across the tangled waters of the world,
prepared to rip the right whale of the flesh
to shreds, the minnow of the bone to dust.

Ah muskellunge,
if you could tell what water weaves itself
around you now, or what dark hunger drove
you to embed yourself on a barbed world,
or why in death your lines precisely
arch like sky down to the river's edge,
then I could tell why, on a bitter day,
I felt your dead heart like the April sun
break up the jam of sorrow's ice.

Outside in the air, as I left the store,
some rhythm picked up and carried
through the flakes inexorable waves
that broke down this long afternoon
like heavy swirls that some great fish
would cause in shallows, just before
it turns and glides inevitably away.

Hunters Keep Out

For these woods fill up at sunset
with beasts of dreams the dark
wolverine the black-footed ferret
the woodland bison dusting
in the crumble of a century's leaves

I hear the howling wolves
My feet touch extinction
the bones or empty shells
of peregrine or osprey eggs
the high nests of eagles
dry with seasons of old fish

But in the night the blue pike swim
the deer stand like stars
at their crossing I walk between
the bottom mud and hardwood ridge
where trees have grown around
barbed wire

Someday I will wake
I will remember the darkness
the eyes deep in the silence
It has happened before and then
the ribs white against morning
the memory of paws falling everywhere
the last breath beneath a rock

Hunting for North in the Fog

Nothing rustles or slides away.
Gun clicks, stream curves out of sight.
No sun can fix the air for hours,
the woods change from tree to tree.
The dog vanishes, comes back,
noses the edge of the orchard
where pheasants turn to mist.
Wherever I step is new.
The leaves are inventions of loss.
I listen for wings and blood beat,
think of blue jay or thrush.
No squirrel or deer breaks
suddenly from brush pile or high grass.
I have been to this place before.
I taste air for direction, cross the field
of corn spikes, recognize a rock,
a stump, an old nest, a place
where the ground has fallen in.
The high woods have secrets of grouse.
So the day flutters, flashes upward.
When I squeeze the trigger,
I am in charge of my breath and beating wrist.
The warm brown thing on the ground
settles like a small compass
on the dead calm of the blood's true North.

Einstein in the Orchard

Now November's evening streams beneath my step,
streams with flat light across the caved-in skins of
apples.

The western edge of sky turns blue as old ice,
and lower down, falls in darker patterns
beyond the horizon's hanging curve.

I walk between the tracks of planets and deer
or birds quiet as stars.

I can almost hear the heartbeats
and soft eyes in brush piles waiting out my passing.

Last night I thought, what if I moved as light
full of the motion of faces or dying suns,
always a carrier of familiar rooms and fallen limbs,
or information of mornings when first crows,
first snow arrive together on the fields.

But now I move down regular trails,
back and forth by trees emptied of direction,
puzzled by some place in me,
some territory that needs continuum
of God or quantum, or needs the rough-legged hawk
of the galaxy screaming its hunger, its wings
bruising my mind.

There's an idea like dampness sticks to my bones
as I walk back toward windows, the lamp by the blue
chair . . .

that the world's a theory, words from a star
that's already history, bright enough
to hold later tonight in notebook or dream.

Studying the Light

See there, how it enters the morning mist
on fields, then turns back along maple,
climbs the window to roof, to shimmering crow.
They've taken my neighbor off in a blue suit,
hard faced as January air; not a word
near the edge of anything; no light
on his pale ankle, no speed in his eye.
Beneath the snow, far down, a buoyant
phosphorescence on the way. Just last week
we talked of generating our own light.
Now, the back up current's all leaked out.
What troubles me is light that bores to bone,
leaves white piles like faces deep in cars.

He Dreams of a Hawk

Often at night he has fallen
out of sleep to deeper flight,
and has taken for his own
the heart of a hawk.

He has felt his face grow hooked
as it turned on its marvelous eye,
in the currents of ice of a dream air,
to the richness of blood catching fire,
pumping a terrible love to wings,
to the throat where a scream tears loose,
changing the air.

Heavens are lost in the muscular sides,
as the legs in a thrust of yellow
drop to the whiteness of talons,
opening, opening,
ready to hook the flesh of the world.

In the deepest moves of sleep, he hears
the cries of the fallen; all night they rise
in talons that lock without knowledge
on life, on death, and will not quit.

Lord, let him be pulled downward,
at last, from the secret of ice,
down from the great rage and hunting cry
of the hawk that is always the world,
down to his own waking, his own blood.

Through the Ice Tree

An old apple tree over on its side,
ice covered by last night's storm.
I enter its outer limbs.
Ice brushes my face,
breaks against my legs,
clicks of secret places.
Zero's precision coats the day.
Near the center,
the air's a hawk's eye.
The season's grain stiffens.
I listen for what's there:
a freeze of blue syllables,
a hiss like deep water.
Through the rest of the tree
I reckon by smaller
and smaller North.
On the other side
I need not look back
to know my eyes
have left no marks,
nor that the day
smolders with heartwood.

The New Site of the Calvary Temple

A year ago, cornfields; in winter
a snowy owl; older now, the season's
finished in stucco, the interstate
sparks and rattles with trucks. O God,
more parking, more bright vestibules
to crack against our cracks.
In the chilly rooms, wives and children
huddle in exact rows. What I breathe tonight
hurts beyond the church, the choir,
the remembered handshake. I think of everything
inside like a zigzag of trotlines
hooking the dead with the dead.
What place is better, hotter than the owl's kill?
What darkness preyed on more gracefully?

Bird Feeder

This is a day that rises to snow.
In the small swirls of frost
on my window I already feel
the need to scatter sunflower seeds
like small correspondences
against the season.

In another room the new child,
easy and warm, curls in the first roundness
of safe places, effortless sleep.
My eyes scatter like sparrows
above the empty fields; the old hickory
cradles its life in its roots.

Now there is one flake, another,
and another on the feeder,
falling, melting on wings, beaks.
All around I hear the small hearts beating,
the many bloods preparing for whiteness,
the morning suddenly filled with soft hungers.

Safety Zone

Here are the high weeds
near the orchard,
the soybean field
and spikes of the old cornfield.
My eye travels the out-of-season
skeletons of yarrow and campion.

Near dusk the pheasants gather
in the old apple trees.
The rough-legged hawk moves
like a trance
through the skin of rabbits.

An hour, then two . . . then evening. . . .
Some far-off switchback of cloud
or mountain ridge troubles my mind.
No sign of safety
in the darkness coming on,
no direction but hickory and oak,
the unsliced bread,
and all the zones of terror and love.

Hole in the Stream's Ice

When I walked out at morning it was there,
though everything around it was frozen blue.
Trees cracked in January's hard way.
It was near the bridge as if something had fallen
last night and punched ice from only there.
I thought maybe a blowhole for the year
or a hiding place for last night's moon.
When I looked down the sides, was it something I really
heard,
a word slipping up and out like a seal?
And my stomach fluttering,
fear like a cliff everywhere, a mouth full of terror.
I turned sideways with only water
and gravel tumbling like galaxies,
light bending as always toward darkness upstream or
down.
I remembered a dream:
the dream-fisher knocking at the sides of winter trout,
his eyes like chisels, his hunger greater than freezing.
Did he pull from the midnight water more than words?
I imagined an arctic dying place,
explorers entering the white bears or growing warmer,
warmer, hands and feet first, then eyes,
the mind at last drowsy, then asleep on the ice
a bone's throw from the tin hut.
It mattered little that the air filled
with faces like crystals of snow,
that I shook deeper than my flesh, then drifted back,
back to the window, the woman's face there, watching me,
her mouth shaping the soft questions,
asking me to come in, come in from what she could not see.

The Ice Fisherman's Dream

Somewhere beneath me the pike
and muskellunge swim away
through dark, baited waters.
Ice sends downward a hint of cracking,
late winter's burn heats the world
to disaster, the woods deepen
with late afternoon crows,
and cats hide in the upper fields.
They must sense something more than mice
rattling the air beyond my neck.

A breeze surfaces, years of sunlight fall.
Slowly in the narrows of air
a season comes apart.
Minnows flash with melting.
A shifting of old currents
begins to tear new dying
out of the day.

So the kingfisher
circles high in the blue
of new waters opening in my eye.
And all around me the cold stones,
the blood of fish, the bottom near as dawn.

Fish Kill in January

An afternoon of sun like tin foil on the river
and spray rising from the icy falls.
Miles behind you float the dark rooms of the solstice,
and yellow weeds, and snow drifts near your porch.

But here by the dreamt-of river of perch
and crappy bass and bluegill, here by your feet
are soft, caved-in bellies and heads with no eyes.
Notice the copper ornaments above the city, the brass
stuck to rocks and small birds leaving the low limbs.

Cast out your line anyway past the stink and drift
of an old season, out past the rattle of pulse,
and then lean against the great blotched sycamore,
slowly winding the handle through the long afternoon.
Think of the corrosion of motion,
the day out of balance with acid and vapor trail,
tangles of old gears,
traffic on the bypass like a scythe.

And then at evening when the geese funnel
toward the lee waters of Ontalawnee,
walk back to the rooms and yellow weeds.
There will be dark cups of tea, slices of bread,
someone will be taking a bath and humming.

So a day goes by, an evening.

Tomorrow morning
just before you wake, immaculate fish will rise
one after another from the shallows of your hands.
All day long, though it is just behind your sleeve,
you will not look toward the river and its snags and bones,
nor even once imagine the world soft bellied or eyeless.

The Coyote in the Orchard

Now in the year's cold closing
with the trees emptied of everything,
my blood leans to moonlight
on deep fur, to the pointed face
already wet with mice.
I can almost hear it moving
along the slippery margins of towns.
Maybe a twig snaps beneath a paw
as it passes on legs steady as old trails
along the Kittatinny Ridge
to Owl's Head, the North Lookout.
It must move with the slow burn
of winter pushing up the land.
As the night glitters high on its stars,
I lean to the passing shape,
to the tight hold of the dark,
to the eyes flashing like small dawns,
to a way of remembering
here in the year's cold closing
the clear spoor across the air,
the shadowy skin of edges and frost.

Whales

Trying near dawn to hear them
though I am inland of the broad backs
and cannot see the spouts

nor the fast boats closing
I am kept awake by interiors
close to my own bones lungs heart

I return to songs
to an idea of migrations
by rocky coasts through rich latitudes

of krill currents releasing direction
to flukes and irresistible skin
I can hear all around them

propellers detonations
dominion of harpoons shapes
thrashing the seas and history

bloating near equators
of finback humpback or blue
All morning long I imagine

white bellies bobbing in high seas
or sounding far below sadness
their soft human eyes filling up

with surprise impossible such a life
and I know that nothing grows redder
than a surface where they've died

Gun Dream

Twice now in two weeks, cylinders click
against my fingers; there's a dark street;
nothing seems sighted . . . someone passes,
then two faces, reassuring language.
But a block or two further on,
there comes hands deep in a jacket,
eyes, irregular steps . . . I look back
as he passes, turns toward me; the icy stars
fill my palms, streets turn leaden
near dark windows, no reaching arms to wake
with warm fingers or unload terror
from the chambered blood . . . I squeeze the triggered air,
turn a corner, find a river, my father there
in his boat, teaching me the dying sun.

Air Burial

—after Peter Matthiessen

Carry the body to a high place.
Set it down near wind and sky with few words.
Let the griffons come, and ravens,
the great lammergeier, and leopard.
Wait by prayer flag and bell.
Think of all the ways the light devours
the red kites over Kathmandu.
Return when only the bones are left,
and sit for a day by them.
Consider such whiteness, the skull's hollows,
listen for nighttime and morning
around you on the peaks.
At noon, take the bones one by one
and grind them to powder.
Notice the smoking fires
of friends in the valley,
and the way snow enshrouds the rocks.
At the last, place the lumps of dough
on the ground again for circling birds,
and return to your house.
In a week there will be nothing,
only a rush of air over your flesh,
the blue tin cup warm against your hand.

Hawk Mountain in the Fog

The year has come down to these rocks.
Not even the trees can make it out of the fog.
Last night my dog turned wolf and howled
with the wind in his blood,
but here all is silent.
The trails clog with the unseen.
Over there somewhere is Owl's Head,
the North Lookout; a month ago the mountain
turned buoyant with migration.
Now the hawk of the mind holds its limb,
steels its eye, steadies its hunger
in dark places where it waits out the fog.
Resisting this lonely afternoon,
or even loving it, our hands part everything
slowly, one lost season after another.

Signs

Along the stream's bank a hieroglyphic of lines and furrows
and near midnight something under the maple
or in the spaniel's growl

Two nights ago
a curl of moonlight in the leaves then a crashing away

Here in the small rooms of the house air swirls
behind a woman who has turned sharply away
from the table set for supper

I stand by a window trying to read between the weeds
What is it beneath the brushpile what is it
in the dead spruce in the spiraling hawk
in corner cupboards in letters from friends
or in the abandoned orchard where paws are falling
where shallow trails wind up through the white birch hills

At dawn a track of pink rises off the west rim
star thistle rattles in the crystals of wrist and breath
There's the rub of absence beneath the pile of feathers
by the field's edge

My fingers touch cairns my neighbor's
fence
zigzag of shagbark and hickory and fox skull

Shall I see in it all at last
signs of wife or daughter long life or just a random
root work
of atoms and light until even the trail
of the face at the kitchen window grows hard to see
and turns to nothing at all and everywhere
the sharp bones ringing on the earth the hard words following

The Woman Who Loved Wool

These are the textures she dreams of
in the rooms where the walls spin
with skein after skein

These are the colors near her fingernails
swirling rust and yellow and cochineal

At first light
her fingers move like spindles back and forth

Days become thick sweaters
Afternoons of scarves rise in kitchen and parlor

Always there's the weave of earth
against her south window
and the animal trails up the pasture
There's the sheen of her braided hair
and eyes like gardens of Scotch broom
or lichen

At evening when she walks to the pond
the sky loops softly around her
You can see veins like fibers in her face
Patiently as her hands move shyly through the air
fields and cliffs begin to fit the stars

Winter Stream

Not when I think of ice or of wind,
or the way the sky turns purple,
or the way last sparrows leave the feeder,
but later, halfway across the field,
when I remember the way you stretched
near warm rocks, pregnant that last month,
and water spilling near our blistered feet . . .
then I think of warmer syllables,
a thawing near the muskrat's hole,
and hope to enter evening with new words;
or find my daughter past her fever;
or say to you, I've lasted through
the temperature of darkness
falling steadily again, all day long.

Conversation with the Giver of Names

The truth must dazzle gradually.

Like a day with January in it,
or midnight and a moon with snow,
or the delicate pressure of starlight
on perch swimming under ice.

Light bends?

True.

The snapping turtle sleeps in mud?

True.

The way I touch a tree
bends the world to beginnings again?

True.

Then think of weasel tracks leading to blood,
the goshawk true as shadows,
or skaters seen through trees,
the flash of their faces
as you approach the pond.

You tell me later
that nothing is so lonely as the distance
one travels from window to window
with dusk caught in the hickory,
and the brush pile lumpy with sparrows,
and darkness like dazzling fear
crowding one's eyes.

There's something else there, too,
deeper than roots,
but it will take years of crystals,
rain, or winds off the cold ridges
to shine it,
make it visible,
to make it stand, at last,
perfect in one's blood.

A Dream of Spring Horses

They were loose in the near field,
in the first heat of the year.
We were standing by the fence,
when they must have felt the air
touch something in their deepest blood.
And they broke from their winter spaces,
broke from stables heavy on their shapes.
We could hardly believe the sound of hoofs
in the sun-flooded mud, or the wild
unwinding of the shoulders, legs. . . .
The day reached further after that
great heaving. Later, they slowed,
approached the fence, rubbed against us
their great heads, their sweating love.

The Owl in the Refrigerator

Listen, it's in there now,
tearing the ice to shreds.
Listen to the rasp of its bones.
It wants thawing, its wings high again,
eyes fast to the fleshiest light
of rabbits, mice.

Listen to its frosty breath
until you understand how it dove
for a furry edge by the roadside,
but met instead the metal,
the puddle of oily water.

As I love you here,
hear its last clatter of beak,
the last muddy cry
of talons locked on death,
this ravager, mated at last
with the dark light we have hated
all February long,
this tidy killer
unable even to see
the warm days rising from all its chilly blood.

Canoe Beneath the Trees

Under the shagbark hickory
in a new snowfall, the canoe
holds its keel upwards
against a season of cracking and sinking.
My window is partly frozen
and swirls like white water.
Light comes at me flatter now, dimmer,
exhausted by a world's turning over,
and curves to fields, woods,
washes like deep currents
against the boat's round sides.
The only place life floats
is in roots or near the skins of worms.
I think of the Delaware moving south
through the rapids of Foul Rift,
Mongaup, Great Standing Wave,
all loud with dreams of losing everything,
canoes tumbling, bending on rocks,
then drifting like new snow
into the deeps of shad pools.
My eyes, flesh, arms relax,
will not, for now, capsize
beneath this white day's complications,
nor turn from the emptiness of trees.
But I think of lupine, columbine, furze,
and listen for small movements
already beginning to rise
in the year slowly turning on its crystals.

February Woods

I cross the frozen stream, climb a low hill,
and suddenly there it is.

The trees lie helter-skelter, root works stick up
like wheels at the end of ripped-loose axles. . . .

I remember last summer's two great winds
that knocked a neighbor's maple to pieces,
and sent the dog's house rolling toylike across the grass.

I walk it round, duck under one great limb,
balance myself on another.

I think of my daughter
telling a story she partly remembers.

I think of my father, once expert with his dynamite,
deep in the Pennsylvania coal pits.

I think,
as I sit with my back to the rest of the woods,
of this place with its lack of answers
and a new season rising through rock and dens
up to my wrists and eyes,
to the torn limbs and shattered trunks.

I stay an hour, then two, have tea, an apple.
A wind begins in the woods across the stream's ice,
reaches my throat, rattles the clusters of oak leaves.

When I leave, I take the ridge trail,
and come down a different way, by the River of Rocks,
past the place where last season a friend found a dead doe
with a back leg shattered, where every spring
the pileated woodpeckers blast the mating air,
where, strangely, I begin to feel like a person
who has walked through a rip in the world.

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"*Winter Weeds* is a volume of brilliant, hard-edged lyrics, full of poignance and strength of spirit, remarkable both for its steadiness of vision and its steady mastery of a chaste idiom. In poems at once lean and rich, Humes maps a landscape that is all of a piece, and yet capable of showing forth wonders. His is a craftsman's book, a book of austere sentiment and honest eloquence. No recent first book with which I am familiar demonstrates so mature a grasp of what it wants to accomplish and how it can best do the job. A wonderful book."—Robert Boyers, Editor-in-Chief, *Salmagundi*

About the author. Harry Humes is the winner of the 1983 Devins Award for Poetry. A resident of Breinigsville, Pennsylvania, his poetry has appeared in *Poetry Northwest*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Greensboro Review*, *Commonweal*, *Chowder Review*, *The Nation*, *Shenandoah*, *Yankee*, *Whetstone*, among others.

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