

SERIALIZED

[UNFINISHED MANUSCRIPT]

MORE LIGHT IN DEFILES

POETRY

by

Homer Kizer

no money down—

bought an acre forty years overgrown
by lilacs & twin berries, sour cherries & plums

had to chainsaw a path to the cabin
needing shingles but structurally sound

behind it were three apricots, entangled
in hops & a vine I didn't recognize
a chicken house half fallen down
& a garage with woodrange & bathtub
& buckets of bent nails

took another week to find the sheep shed
& outhouse, a year to find the white currents
I was told were there

I burned brush, more brush & still more
till neighbors complained
about me working on Sundays—

but what they complained most about was
me buying the property
for its asking price
twice its probable value:

an acre lot with city water & services
for \$25,000. I thought about the price,
but found it hard to believe I, when broke,
could buy land
with no money down.

a slipped hock—

living became too difficult
so it died this morning
me never knowing
whether it a tom or a hen

wife said a month ago
I should knock it in the head
I shouldn't let it suffer
with its sprattled legs
perhaps

so while neighbors prepare
for church in the foggy chill
of this All Saints Day
I watch my young peacock
drive my one-eyed rooster
away from salvaged screenings
scattered under the grafted
apple as I, standing as I do
favoring a useless knee
throw another handful
of scrap field peas & lentils
to his hens, noticing
the young one no longer limps
after my hearing her leg snap
last August, noticing
the tumor behind the left eye
of the old one might have shrunk

& I shiver a little
knowing how little
was known
about all who die

Ft. Smith—

for 80 turbulent years, Law from here
parted middle waters & displaced principals
before outlaws hung peacefully
along a partitioned strip
adjoining states & estates & rescued boats
to a future centered in America

Logging—

if I'm to plant an orchard—
the ground's steep
but two, maybe three
useable acres lie behind the house—
the hillside will have to be logged...

a poet at LCSC* was appalled
when I mentioned cutting trees.
I'm sure I've inspired eloquence
but he has a job
& I have bills
so a few acres of summer apples
grown organic of course
(that's where the money is)
will pay taxes
& maybe make a payment or two.

My investment will be low:
I'll graft my own trees,
cut my own posts for trellising—
I'll have to buy wire & rootstock
& figure how to keep deer away

but the pines have to go
before I can plant my first apple
and there might be logs enough
just enough
to make this year's land payment.

So I stand before you here
with saw in hand
idling
and challenge you to hire me
if that timber means so damn much to you.

* Lewis-Clark State College

UFF DA

When she called from Minnesota
to say she & Dave looked at land
Sabbath afternoon
a prick of disappointment
slipped like a Teflon bullet
through my pride
in her accomplishments—

the banker said they could buy
any place in town
with her salary as Chemistry chair
& Dave's as a CAD draftsman—

they looked at thirty acres
for ten thousand...
not enough trees.

She said she'd order another text
for Environmental Chemistry—
the text was wrong;
it didn't have any chemistry in it.
Carbon dioxide can't cause global warming,
the absorption rate curves over,
and she related the figures at what point
Beer's Law describes the curve.
I don't remember all she said—
this is her area of expertise.
She is the cutting edge yet

I still feel that prick
of disappointment
in her turning loose
of the Sabbath
that's been around since Creation.

She said when things happen
her students say *uff da*—

so it will be *uff da*
as she remains the daughter
who tested smart as her father.

taboo—

you are a subject avoided
you who haven't heard
a word I've said
for what, now thirty-five years
your age when you lost
a child & husband
on successive Saturdays
pushing you into flight
restrained but not resisted—

you are a subject avoided
but one I must confront
if I am ever read—
what should I say about
memories
of a routinely inspected
circumcision?
what did you hope to find
in those stitches
healed but not entirely?
what did you hope to avoid
when you leaned over my rifle
& splattered your heart
all over a bedroom ceiling?

it took reaching your age
before I understood
the depth of your fear—
before I made peace
with the madness
you had seen in aunts
& great-aunts, in your own
mother—

it remains hard to remember
the sweet smell of baking bread
without also wishing you hadn't
laced my baby bottles with half
Karo syrup till I weighed 32 pounds
when ten months old. Why
follow doctor's orders then, and not
when there were five of us counting on you?

I haven't met a doctor yet who wants to believe
my pulse & blood pressure so my heart is healthy.
I just wish you'd left yours where it was.

SKELETOS

I AM said, Prove me.
Shall we?
With bent knee,
mind free,
can we
absolutely
know if He
is mightily
proved by Land, Sea,
flowering tree,
bird, bee,
before we
scientifically
see
three coffins?
Ghostly
readers be
we
faith snowy,
reason icy
who weakly
flee
answering the
challenging deity.
Wintry sea
of bony
philosophy
carnally
shuns authority
who prophetically
hung on the tree.
So sorrowfully,
we
mockingly
thrust godly
"I AM said, Prove me,"
into deadly
parody.

AM I?

Am I a heretic for suggesting
we die until resurrected
to work correcting
the mess we've made . . .

for the consensus of Believers
Christianity is escapism

but if you were all-powerful
where would you have humanity
spend eternity,
here or in heaven?

I ONCED ROOMED WITH A FINN

from Massachusetts
who told of his father
& grandfather rowing
across the Baltic
after shooting
a couple of Russians
after the War
a story that kept alive
his roots
& a tradition of hatred
pruned to bear
fruit for another season
in the shadow of freedom

VOICES...

Crouched lynx slinkin head swayin
surplus parka snowsuit fur hat like a helmet
frosted beard
Kris, look at the, whats he doin
screamin at the driver
Yuhre messin with my head quit fuckin with me
He wont stop
driver cant drive
nobodys movin
just sittin
Theres fellas closer
Bus crowds the centerline, goin across
the ditch!

One time before on a flight to Seattle
you intervened
a stewardess being choked
nearby passengers looked the other way
you were younger then, a logger
He sees you
turns from the driver
eyes wild fists cat quick

Yuh lookin to die

Sit down

What the fuck business is this of yours

Sit down

Yuh are lookin to die

Sit down

He steps past you raises his elbow
Youre ready want to stuff him into a seat
pinch his mouth shut
Every nerve every cell says Go
do it take care of this bastard
he almost crashed the bus

Hes talkin to himself

Whats he sayin

cant hear, hes mumbling

hears voices, hes answerin em

shakin his head arguin

You look past his shoulder

four six eight men watch

two three women, your daughter

they just sit there

Yuh wanta die, youre too big to be fast

The voices, shakin his head, he argues with demons
what are they sayin

you dont want to know
Sit down

Carries himself like hes still at war
Vietnam vet
like your brotherinlaw before he OD'd
A saltin of curly white hairs among the black
elbow raised poised
Hes big enough a little taller than you
two hundred maybe twotwenty
Wonder if hes got anythin in his left hand

Yuh wanta die, you hear me, yuhre too big to be fast
The voices, theyre talkin to him
hes afraid of em
they know
know you
You he stand there
on the balls of your feet
your open hand behind his elbow
You hear the driver radio Security
another mile, itll be all over

Yuh in a hurry to die, yuh hear
You wish you could see his left hand
hes listenin to those voices
yes they know you
Everyones silent
watchin
waitin

Fella in the first seat worries hell be asked to help
fella behind him would maybe
Woman knows this guy, talks to him
he slings his hat at her
She cringes
you move
he spins to face you, left hand empty
Hes lookin to use his feet
bunny boots will slow him
youll be quick enough
Voices are talkin to him again
his eyes, theyre afraid of you
he believes the voices
good

Sit down

(Fairbanks 1989)

KORI'S LEECH

My daughters wade in Dark Lake, herding
coho fry as if the schools were cattle
when they see a black leech swimming.
Kori screams, but Kris, having studied
leeches, chides her for being a sissy:
You're warm blooded. It won't suck
your blood--it has both ends on you
to do that. But Kori doesn't care.

A leech isn't what I expected daughters
to bring home. It isn't pink & furry
cuddly. It is, as Kris tells me, an annelid
a segmented worm like an earthworm,
so I'm unsure of what to say when they
ask, Dad, can we keep it?

I brought home life in glass jars
when young: frogs, newts, salamanders,
grasshoppers, moths, butterflies,
even lightning bugs from Indiana.
I have, I admit, kept nightcrawlers,
kelp worms, sand shrimp, crawdads,
salmon eggs in first my mother's,
then my wife's refrigerator. But never
did I keep a leech, nor am I sure I now
want to . . . however, both Kathy & I
tie flies & a good leech imitation belongs
in every flybox: If you two can convince
your mother it's okay, I suppose.

They rush to greet their mother, tired
& frustrated from dealing with equally
frustrated customers (she's a drivers'
license examiner), with mayonnaise jar in hand:
Look what we caught, & Dad said we can keep it
in the kitchen. Nothing I say undoes the damage.

Dinner's not the same with the leech where Kori's
water glass belongs—she's mesmerized
by the leech's gyrations: it stretches, then contracts
as it clings, swings, swims from one glass side
to the other. One minute it's licorice candy sucked
limp & soft, the next a length of living rubber.

After dinner Kris digs worms—she isn't certain leeches eat worms, but worms are cold blooded so she dumps the smallest ones I could find on the counter. I know what their mother will say if she sees worms crawling across where we eat, but both girls' interest fascinates me... rather gingerly, Kori picks up a worm, drops it into the jar—a third the diameter of the leech & half as long, the worm wiggles slowly down through the water. Within minutes, the leech grabs one end & sucks it into itself like a child does spaghetti, slowly becoming fatter as the worm grows shorter.

One worm becomes many as Kori faithfully changes water daily. She now digs worms herself. Kris is surprised by how fast the leech grows—it triples in size & outgrows its glass house, & I tell Kori, Get rid of it [she has named it, but I never remember what] before you even think about asking for a bigger jar.

Tears form in the corners of her eyes. Her hands tremble, & Kris volunteers to go with her to release it back into Dark Lake, but that merely makes the situation worse...I almost have them get a gallon jar from the basement.

What if it doesn't want to be free? Kris asks.

Don't make a big deal outta this. Just dump it in & come back.

They go together, Kris leading, Kori carrying the jar, but Kris returns without her sister.

What happened?

We waded out & turned the jar over. It swam out, then turned around & swam back in. Can we keep it?

It was probably confused.

But, Dad, it likes being in the jar. Leeches only eat once or twice a year in the wild, & something's always trying to eat them. It really likes being in the jar, really.

Although I say, You're doing more thinking than it is,
she might be right. Regardless, her mother has
humored us for as long as she will; she doesn't
even want this story told. So feeling hardnosed,
very Republican, I add, If it gets eaten,
it gets eaten.

CROWING—

my roosters crow at the rising moon
calling from high on the hill
coyotes & 'cats that circle
a buck intent upon breeding
the doe that ducks behind
downed chittims & cherries
there by my spring
(I'll read in the morning
tracks of success)
while I lie beside a sleeping wife
wishing those roosters would sleep

BEACHCOMBING—

between a faded orange crab shell
& bleached white razor clam shells
a brown saki bottle
with molded characters
in protruding calligraphy
lies half buried
beside a yellow JOY bottle
full of seawater life—

she shakes sand from one
brushes it off the other
discards the dish detergent
& carries the other by its long neck.

BLACKTAG ALDER—

a foot of snow & more falling,
falling from bumped alders
none big enough for a mask
or a bowl
though they're older
than the iron
of my adze
once a spring on a DeSoto—

perhaps I can carve
a spoon from this little one—

the People promised
trees
they'd use all of them

but I make no promises
I can't keep:
I don't need twigs for kindling.
I have electric heat.
I don't need small limbs for pegs.
I have steel nails.
I don't need all of this thin trunk
but I will, I promise, cut with an axe
as many blanks the size of my arm
each time catching snow
that melts on my sleeve
as I possibly can
before I turn & follow
my webbed footprints uphill
where this century waits.

ON MY WAY TO THE HOTEL'S DINING ROOM

I passed photos of Katmai ash
a foot deep, blanketing Kodiak—
a layer of death that forced
even the mission school
to be evacuated...

seventy years later, I found
that layer of ash under
a stand of cottonwoods
toppled by a willawaw—

three feet of black top soil
hid the moonscape gray
that buried port
harbor
plowed meadows
where generations of priests
& missionaries taught
Aleut & Yupik children to husband
land that puked their ploughshares
into the sea—they rust quietly
beside gunbarrels
from shore batteries aimed at Japan.

I once heard a professor explain
how long it takes top soil to form
a few inches a millennium—
I remembered what he taught
long enough to pass a test
& I might have believed him
if I hadn't dug a cubby set
under those cottonwoods
even then decaying & dirty.

Fate—

mayhaws hang quiet
where turkeys whelp among thorns
that snag breast feathers

fat on star thistle
wild turkeys call to mine who
hear my grain bucket

coyote dung & blue
feathers—my peacock strutted
till an apple fell

raccoon tracks & two
feathers—the old rooster sang
to the moon often

my barred rooster
flares grizzled hackle feathers
when trout slurp hoppers

meadowlarks flutter
around old apples hanging
lonely on bare boughs

the kitten stretches
reaches for the dog's new bone
then chases a bird

the ruffed grouse cocks
her head, flinches onetwothree
times, then flops, flops dead

a hawk scream forces
a vole from thick cover—swift
talons pierce movement

MIDNIGHT IN MAY

The drum of a grouse, a distant siren, drips
from a faucet—the twilight sounds I hear as
Fairbanks, a gold rush town burping oil, falls
awake after a sleep of winter walking
on the edge of tomorrow.

The city passed a sales tax.

The state is out of money.

The university wants to shut down

Yak Estate, where faucets will still drip come
September & a siren will again pierce a still
night. Only the cock grouse will not drum.

I BOUGHT A PEPSI

from a storekeeper
in Ninilchik
who with a man
she didn't then know
escaped a Soviet
labor camp on the Amur
& rowed towards the Aleutians
thirteen days
with only a litre of water
before crossing
shipping lanes
I wanted details
but her story
of freedom
was hers
not to be told here
where she had no
ancient connection

THE OPENING

Pink bouquets of buoys sprout
from gunwales, salmon seines disappear
levelwind reels appear—
crews hastily nail together baiting tables
& hook racks as converted seiners
from Homer, Seldovia, Seward
raft four, five abreast
along Kodiak's transit floats

schooners arrive
white
fishing fixed gear
from Seattle, Ketchikan, Juneau
they pass down the channel
with neither bow nor stern wake

only a handful of derelicts
remain in Fuller's boatyard—
derelicts & Angela
a narrow seiner with a cramped cabin
& a translucent patch
just above her waterline
she's really a decked-over skiff
that's too big to fish as a skiff
& too small to weather much of a sea
her engine compartment steals
half of her hold
her low bulwarks are without railings
she has no davit—

when Dave said, "50-50 split
I put up the boat, you the gear"
I agreed although I knew better
I wanted to fish halibut this year
wanted to remain in the fishery
wanted to feel a bow plow into a sea
to smell the salt air
hear the gulls
see puffins
seals
the hold full of iced fish
one minor snag though: Dave didn't have a boat
he didn't locate Angela for a week
"How much repair does it need?"
"The engine changed, that's about it."

with only a week remaining before the opening

Angela got her new engine, a six cylinder 'Suzi
that required a shorter prop shaft
which required a new shaftlog & Cutlass bearing
the larger engine swung a bigger wheel—
a prop with more pitch had to be ordered
the larger engine was considerably heavier
so heavier engine stringers
had to be scabbed onto the keelson
the mast had to be raised
brackets & guards had to be welded
for the new muffler
but the welding shop was running days behind
the keelcooler needed to be replaced
but was only flushed
and the evening before the opening
almost as an afterthought
Fuller's mobile crane lifted Angela
off the oil drums on which she had set three years

after worrying the air from fuel lines
the 'Suzi started—
exhaust manifold heated
I smelled scorched paint
man against time
he won this time

the bulk plant would've closed hours ago
if it weren't for rafts of boats still waiting
for fuel...appearing naked
(other boats bristle with gear)
Angela joined the waiting
while one longliner
after another
chugged out
the channel
heading for their fishing grounds

I paid for the fuel, a hundred gallons
a hundred dollar bill
plus the ones in my front pocket
I charged ten cases of frozen herring
at sixteen dollars a case
(there was no ice till morning)
my wife handed me the change
from the hundred dollars
she spent on boat groceries
& Dave tried to reason with the hydraulic pump
that wouldn't pump. "It's backwards, Dave."
he disagreed

but I hadn't time to argue
I had to bolt a jerryrigged hook rack to the bulwarks
had to wedge a plywood baiting table between the reel
& the stern, had to stash gear anchors, snap buoys
to the handrail atop the cabin, throw groundlines
into the hold (I couldn't wind them onto the reel
till we had hydraulics) & I hung our open-faced blocks
clipped coils of buoy line to the reel's framework
stowed extra V-belts & a spare roller chain
beneath the cabin steps

"I know this pump's okay," he's been twisting
wrenches without a break the past forty hours
wants to take a sledgehammer to the pump
"I told you, the pump's running backwards."
"It's the same place it was . . .
this 'Suzi doesn't turn the same direction"

turning the pump around required cutting a notch
in the engine stringer—
he went for a saw while I hunted extension cords
fishing is determination
welded to ingenuity by sleeplessness
it was dawn when we got the hydraulic pump working
season opened in six hours & we were still in port
with radios we hadn't checked out
but Dave worked on the radios
while I ran the boat to the cannery
I didn't like buying "green" ice
but hadn't a choice
schooners emptied cannery icehouses days earlier

we took on three tons
then plowed down the channel
as steam whistles started canneries working
we were joined by skiffs & jitneys
dayboats mostly
that planned to lay gear near Buoy Four
but we were headed for Afognak's Izhut Bay
where leaning spruce
look at themselves
& whiffs of fog cling like moss to boughs
only dollar-size jelly fish
remind a person that the bay is salt water

WENT TO AN ARTISTS MEETING

an association I might want to join

might still
but for now I'm content
to send work to out-of-state galleries

when I went to their meeting
thought they might want to form
an Arts & Craft drive
here along the Clearwater

but I didn't bring up the idea
to do so would've meant scheduling
new business
a month or more in advance

have never been that organized
maybe that's why my poverty
has always been of my pocket

AFTER FIFTY SECONDS

the mosquito hammers through.
I wait
till blood flows
clench my fist
harden my forearm
and watch many feet
dance snout-locked before
I crush
that fevered
wing buzzing
in this place
called Armageddon.

the road I followed had no fork

no detour
it should have been
the way of love
leading to peace
but when I quit
running, she was gone
I backtracked to a stile
over a rubble stone fence
& found footprints
 crumbling into dust

A TRADING POST—

my wife wants a trading post
wants bicentennial profits
after all I'm a muzzleloader
a gunmaker, a trader
sometimes a trapper
a little Native
a lot scoundrel
knowing a little history
knowing a lot about adzing canoes

okay, I say, I'll build a redoubt
she doesn't recognize the word
but insists it's French
she's French & a French wannabe
when rendezvousing—
I tell her it's Russian
& she searches the dictionary
to prove me wrong...

she finds her "redoubt"
but it's not mine—
mine are one man stations
lonely outposts
in hostile country
maybe along the Yukon
maybe on the Kuskokwim
maybe at Kotzebue
or maybe here
where Lewis & Clark
discovered America

that's not too large a claim
assuming America needed discovering
not altogether self-evident
it might be history books
have it wrong
it wasn't Columbus
but Jefferson's Corps of Discovery
that discovered this great land
when they crossed the Rockies
it is, though, hard to explain
how an axe forged by the Corps'
blacksmith at the Mandan village
found its way to the Nez Perce
seven months before the Corps
stumbled over the Bitterroots
tourists—

if I add a log addition in front
enough logs for the shop
to lose its tin cricket look
it'd make a redoubt
& I've already been asked
by a dealer in Pocatello
to sell "indian trade goods"
all manufactured somewhere
dyed chicken feathers
rabbit fur
a few safety pins
a handful of beads—
spirit catchers

(selling trinkets
seems repulsive
but it's been done before)

but what will they feed
the spirits they catch
as they hurry along
the highway
wondering whether they should've
stopped at Weippe--
if they would've stopped
they wouldn't have made
their motel reservations
at Walla Walla
& isn't one Indian town
just like another

that seems cruel
afterall, to catch a spirit
is why they're coming
& they are coming
I just wish they would
bring more to trade
than VISA or Mastercard

two poles—

intended to have cedar logs
delivered for the two totems
I'll carve one of my mother's
lineage, one my wife's mother

intend to place them where
they're easily visible
from the highway
coming or going
all the advertizing
a redoubt should need

but I can afford only pine
that grows around the house
pitch pine won't weather
as well as cedar so the story
of who I am won't endure

only need the poles to last
through the bicentennial

the third most asked question
of the visitor center at Lolo
is where can they see Indians
so if my totems are tall enough
ornate enough
tell my history since arriving
on the Mayflower
my wife's since fleeing Charles
the poles should be a good draw
we'll have to stock film
so photos can be taken
of whole families posed
around personal histories
they can't read

errant shots—

found the blown patch
for the ball that killed
something sharp still
cuts deep
inside the barrel

thought the rough crown
was cutting the fabric—
cut patches cause missed
shots but I polished away
that roughness so now
I need to cast a lead slug
lap the bore
(I have some jewelers rouge)
but to do so I'll have to
unbreach the barrel
leaving me without a rifle

that'll be when the bear comes
for the hanging haunches
of the buck intended
to feed us deep into winter

that'll be when a coyote
emboldened by approaching snow
will show herself
as turkeys leave roosts at dawn

that'll be when my neighbor calls
saying he's located the herd
if I want an elk
I need to come quick

so I'll only wrap steel wool
around the jag
scour the bore
& hope I can pay the pawn
to get another rifle back

hunters—

burdened by red or green ATVs
orange men in four-by pickups
as if drawn by primordial instinct
swarm towards high mountain passes
where another season begins

K-I-N-Z-E-R

opened the newspaper to find
our name spelled wrong
again
this time
it's harder to understand
the reporter has an exhibit circular
but by now I'm used to
misspellings
that go back farther than I remember
I didn't buy a high school yearbook
our name was spelled differently
in each section
I've had to keep my admissions ID
to Anchorage Community College
so I'll remember who they thought
I was
even forefathers couldn't agree
so Keyser became Kiser
or Kizer
or some other spelling
however the insertion
of a "t" or a "n"
is difficult to accept
it's almost as if they don't
want to remember Caesar
descends through a name

STIFF LEGGED

the old barred rooster—
his spurs two inches long—
leads a parade
across the garden
a meat scrap hanging
from his beak—
once again he's everyone's favorite
as younger roosters
hens & turkey poults
vie for who'll be first
to pull the half swallowed
trimming from his craw
& I remember an old Swede
widowed
who returned from the old country
with two younger women
who thought his home
in America
was wonderfully built
he wasn't a fool
he'd borrowed against his equity
to recapture a little of his youth
& for awhile was once again
that rooster
with a scrap of fat

VALUES—

out of pillow ticking
I ask my wife for linen
fine cotton
dress fabrics she hordes
even after I explain
I need patching
for the morning hunt
a reason I must justify
to get a skinny strip
intended for something
at some future time
I did less
to get her to say, *Yes*
but this she bought
on some closeout sale
& if I want more...
well I'd rather work
a week carving & order
a bolt of thin ticking
from downriver

there're plenty of trees

to keep me working
if home weren't a battlefield
for entrenched attorneys—
am I not a part of the public
that owns these resources—
the concept is faulty
Chief Seattle had it right
the land isn't owned
it's held in trust
by those who live on it
& we who live here
have as much right
to damage trees
as deer & elk do
of course there aren't many
deer in an old-growth forest

COMMON SENSE DIED YESTERDAY—

graveside services are this afternoon
but the preacher paid to deliver
the eulogy is still in traffic court
so no good words will be said
before the first shovel of dirt
covers ideas self-evident but extinct
as Dodo birds, flightless
defenseless against new predators
their penises & pussies cluttering the Net

"of making many books there is no end"