

## FIVE POEMS



*Wendy Rose*

### SEPTEMBER MEADOW NEAR COARSEGOLD

Miwok meadow  
at the southern tip  
of Grandmother's gold veins;  
incense cedar, black oak,  
with the tip of my finger  
to your pulse, I learn  
who I am.

These are my history,  
these my hiding places,  
these my mother  
when there is no mother  
but the Mother of us all.  
Fathers come, go,  
just late winter snow.  
These are my pedigree.

Is it that touch  
from my forefinger tip  
or is it just a single cell of you  
awake or the trembling  
electric pain of Joseph  
or Margaret, Elizabeth  
or Maurice, or another of the miners  
who broke your bones  
to build their homes?

Where you touch me now  
with the moisture of your rain,  
the spark jumps  
from skin to skin. I think of that other woman  
who never remembers  
her name.

ITCH LIKE CRAZY

Where I am from  
desert spreads its turquoise sky  
over magenta sandstone,  
between the bubbling brown mud  
of the old woman's memory  
and over myself,  
daughter of the flashflood  
and the frightened moth.

Another desert was carried in the wind  
where coal smoke blackened  
the home and the heart,  
the moth was forced  
into deep camouflage  
and they were all too young to know  
that wisdom emerges  
from under the stones,  
The moist underbelly  
of all that is holy.

These, too, are a part of me.  
Oh my arm, backlit by the setting sun  
driving home into the hills,  
Henrietta's red hair stands on end.  
In the dance of how  
my black hair billows  
and tangles is the web of secrets  
Betty built. The great bulk of breast and belly,  
the heavy fat of thigh,  
this great load I always carry  
is where Grandma Rachel lives.

It is not enough to listen  
for their whispers—  
I must know them, understand,  
must have the right words  
tumble from my tongue.

There was  
this itch.  
What was it, this thing?

Here and now, never satisfied,  
the fear always present,  
some parasite in your skin?  
The terror that if you bend  
in just the wrong way  
a great umbilical cord  
will search you out,  
jerk you across  
the rolling ocean?

Some carry their homes on their backs,  
others just leave home, still others  
pick up what sticks and twine  
from the ground they can find  
and begin to build.

As kingsnake sheds his gleaming skin,  
you shed your home, your country.  
The ocean was but a cocoon for you  
and these words what is left  
of that soft moist wing  
you achingly pull  
erect on your back.

O Elders of the world.  
O Red Gold Ebony Elders.  
Tell them  
that if they break open their roots,  
expose tender white flesh  
to the blowing sand, the searing heat,  
the moist dark earth of other lands,  
they will never be at home again.

#### ALIEN SEEDS

All this—the wild African oats, succulents who hold  
the secret of rain, even the tumbleweed—  
a wagon train for every seed or rhizome  
colonizing underground; taproots cross the nations  
like barbed wire, suck the dew from the sky  
no matter how dry the desert;

on the backs of cattle or the wool of sheep,  
invaders rode and fell as early spring rain swelled,  
germinated there and there, pushed the natives aside.  
I feel the massacre that cleared this valley,  
the foothills' great basket coming unraveled.  
Where Grandmother suffered the deepest wounds,  
Russian thistle sucks water from ground;  
where hydraulic cannons toppled the trees,  
eucalyptus has come to set seed.

Our baskets are so thin; their ribs stick out;  
embroidery flakes away  
when beargrass and willow  
are kept in jail. There is no word  
for "weed", no word for "vermin"; there is no word  
for "colonial imperative",  
no word for restlessness and want.  
We have become the rock hard place  
where bones rattle down.  
We pray and sing, we make the shape  
of just one more, one  
more basket.

#### GENEALOGICAL RESEARCH

She carries a small pouch.  
Into this she puts names  
And no more. She collects names  
like pretty leaves or shells  
swept into her hand  
by receding tides or picked  
like peaches from the tree.  
She collects names  
and puts them into a pouch.  
One hand shades her eyes  
in case the sun should see  
the glistening tear  
that trembles and slides;  
from the other hangs  
her pouch of names.  
There is no direction

to how she walks.  
She walks alone  
because she is  
alone.  
One eyes turns outward,  
the other turns in.  
But what is there to see  
but the speed of names  
racing away.  
She holds the pouch close  
and it seems to suckle;  
she strokes it and hears the small sound  
of a baby laughing or a brook  
tumbling over the rocks.  
Names rattle at the bottom  
where bruises remember;  
ghosts glow and seethe  
against each other.  
Names float to the top  
where the future should perch  
but when they see  
how very light or dark she is,  
how fat, how lost,  
they get confused and slip  
below the surface again.

Why should anyone  
ever have asked  
why she rolls those garnets  
around in her mouth?  
Only certain light  
will reach them,  
set the embers within  
on fire with magic.  
This is the prayer  
of dissolving homes;  
this is the pouch of names  
flying away.  
This is the spinning moon  
and its dark disappearance  
from earth.

THE ARTIFACT TALKS BACK

*Only when lions have historians  
Will hunters stop being heroes.*

(West African proverb)

Such an interest you take in my death!  
Whether I be the slender bone you defile  
in the lab or just what the wind has taken  
and the sun has blessed from a scaffold,  
or the faces underground that never were born  
on which the boot falls with its terrible spurs—  
I did not die but watched you  
count each heart beat with your tricky tongue.  
I stretched along your highway,  
moaned in your hospital, brought up my green hands  
from under the lake with which  
to blast apart your dams.  
Yes you meant to kill me.  
Bones lay next to bullets  
and bullets nestle in my joints.  
All this you took,  
then hung each corpse  
on the page of a book,  
planted them  
at the base of your flag.  
When you were done  
you wrote the story  
of how your women, your children, and you  
plodded west in a struggle for freedom,  
built your cabins, settled the land.  
Was this bone of my hand,  
this small shred of lung,  
the perfect villain?  
Your fierce temper was cooled  
by your re-arranged history;  
we only grew hungry.  
As you speak them  
your very words run from you  
and come to us like frightened pups.  
As you stand on the ground,  
it trembles and opens.  
As you huddle before the slot machine

and put your money in,  
you will not stop  
your incessant mythology  
til every last one of us is dead.

Grandmother,  
thank you for the muscle  
and fiber that endured.  
Pahana does not know  
at which point  
to take my pulse,  
cannot find  
a vital enough organ  
to shoot his bullets through.  
Thank you, Grandmother.  
All My Relations.

NOTE: "Pahana" = Hopi for "White Man"