

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"