

## The Poet at Seventeen

My youth? I hear it mostly in the long, volleying  
Echoes of billiards in the pool halls where  
I spent it all, extravagantly, believing  
My delicate touch on a cue would last for years.

Outside the vineyards vanished under rain,  
And the trees held still or seemed to hold their breath  
When the men I worked with, pruning orchards, sang  
Their lost songs: *Amapola*; *La Paloma*;

*Jalisco*, *No Te Rajes*—the corny tunes  
Their sons would just as soon forget, at recess,  
Where they lounged apart in small groups of their own.  
Still, even when they laughed, they laughed in Spanish.

I hated high school then, & on weekends drove  
A tractor through the widowed fields. It was so boring  
I memorized poems above the engine's monotone.  
Sometimes whole days slipped past without my noticing,

And birds of all kinds flew in front of me then.  
I learned to tell them apart by their empty squabbings,  
The slightest change in plumage, or the inflection  
Of a call. And why not admit it? I was happy

Then. I believed in no one. I had the kind  
Of solitude the world usually allows

Only to kings & criminals who are extinct,  
Who disdain this world, & who rot, corrupt & shallow

As fields I disced: I turned up the same gray  
Earth for years. Still, the land made a glum raisin  
Each autumn, & made that little hell of days—  
The vines must have seemed like cages to the Mexicans

Who were paid seven cents a tray for the grapes  
They picked. Inside the vines it was hot, & spiders  
Strummed their emptiness. Black Widow, Daddy Longlegs.  
The vine canes whipped our faces. None of us cared.

And the girls I tried to talk to after class  
Sailed by, then each night lay enthroned in my bed,  
With nothing on but the jewels of their embarrassment.  
Eyes, lips, dreams. No one. The sky & the road.

A life like that? It seemed to go on forever—  
Reading poems in school, then driving a stuttering tractor  
Warm afternoons, then billiards on blue October  
Nights. The thick stars. But mostly now I remember

The trees, wearing their mysterious yellow sullenness  
Like party dresses. And parties I didn't attend.  
And then the first ice hung like spider lattices  
Or the embroideries of Great Aunt No One,

And then the first dark entering the trees—  
And inside, the adults with their cocktails before dinner,  
The way they always seemed afraid of something,  
And sat so rigidly, although the land was theirs.

## Adolescence

—for Sharon and Earl

Our babysitter lives across from the Dodge Street cemetery,  
And behind her broad, untroubled face.  
Her sons play touch football all afternoon  
Among the graves of clerks & Norwegian settlers.  
At night, these huge trees, rooted in such quiet,  
Arch over the tombstones as if in exultation,  
As if they inhaled starlight.  
Their limbs reach  
Toward each other & their roots must touch the dead.

When I was fifteen,  
There was a girl who loved me; whom I did not love, & she  
Died, that year, of spinal meningitis. By then she  
Had already left home, & was working in a carnival—  
One of those booths where you are supposed  
To toss a dime onto a small dish. Finally,  
In Laredo, Texas, someone anonymous, & too late, bought her  
A bus ticket back. . . .  
Her father, a gambler & horse dealer, wept  
Openly the day she was buried. I remember looking off  
In embarrassment at the woods behind his house.  
The woods were gray, vagrant, the color of smoke  
Or sky. I remember thinking then that  
If I had loved her, or even slept with her once,  
She might still be alive.  
And if, instead, we had gone away together  
On two bay horses that farted when they began to gallop,

And if, later, we had let them  
Graze at their leisure on the small tufts of spring grass  
In those woods, & if the disintegrating print of the ferns  
Had been a lullaby there against the dry stones & the trunks  
Of fallen trees, then maybe nothing would have happened. . . .  
There are times, hiking with my wife past  
Abandoned orchards of freckled apples & patches of sunlight  
In New Hampshire, or holding her closely against me at night  
Until she sleeps, when nothing else matters, when  
The trees shine without meaning more than they are, in moonlight,  
And when it seems possible to disappear wholly into someone  
Else, as into a wish on a birthday, the candles trembling . . .

Maybe nothing would have happened, but I heard that  
Her father died, a year later, in a Sierra lumber camp.  
He had been drinking steadily all week,  
And was dealing cards  
When the muscle of his own heart  
Kicked him back into his chair so hard its wood snapped.  
He must have thought there was something  
Suddenly very young inside his body,  
If he had time to think. . . .  
And if death is an adolescent, closing his eyes to the music  
On the radio of that passing car,  
I think he does not know his own strength.  
If I stand here long enough in this stillness I can feel  
His silence involve, somehow, the silence of these trees,

The sky, the little squawking toy my son lost  
When it slipped into the river today. . . .  
Today, I am thirty-four years old. I know  
That horse dealer with a limp loved his plain, & crazy daughter.  
I know, also, that it did no good.  
Soon, the snows will come again & cover that place  
Where he sat at a wobbling card table underneath  
A Ponderosa pine, & cover  
Even the three cards he dropped there, three silent diamonds,  
And cover everything in the Sierras, & make my meaning plain.